

Guilty Pleasures

by

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Book 1 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Chapter 1

Willie McCoy had been a jerk before he died. His being dead didn't change that. He sat across from me, wearing a loud plaid sport jacket. The polyester pants were primary Crayola green. His short, black hair was slicked back from a thin, triangular face. He had always reminded me of a bit player in a gangster movie. The kind that sells information, runs errands, and is expendable.

Of course now that Willie was a vampire, the expendable part didn't count anymore. But he was still selling information and running errands. No, death hadn't changed him much. But just in case, I avoided looking directly into his eyes. It was standard policy for dealing with vampires. He was a slime bucket, but now he was an undead slime bucket. It was a new category for me.

We sat in the quiet air-conditioned hush of my office. The powder blue walls, which Bert, my boss, thought would be soothing, made the room feel cold.

"Mind if I smoke?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, "I do."

"Damn, you aren't gonna make this easy, are you?"

I looked directly at him for a moment. His eyes were still brown. He caught me looking, and I looked down at my desk.

Willie laughed, a wheezing snicker of a sound. The laugh hadn't changed. "Geez, I love it. You're afraid of me."

"Not afraid, just cautious."

"You don't have to admit it. I can smell the fear on you, almost like somethin' touching my face, my brain. You're afraid of me, 'cause I'm a vampire."

I shrugged; what could I say? How do you lie to someone who can smell your fear? "Why are you here, Willie?"

"Geez, I wish I had a smoke." The skin began to jump at the corner of his mouth.

"I didn't think vampires had nervous twitches."

His hand went up, almost touched it. He smiled, flashing fangs. "Some things don't change."

I wanted to ask him, what does change? How does it feel to be dead? I knew other vampires, but Willie was the first I had known before and after death. It was a peculiar feeling. "What do you want?"

"Hey, I'm here to give you money. To become a client."

I glanced up at him, avoiding his eyes. His tie tack caught the overhead lights. Real gold. Willie had never had anything like that before. He was doing all right for a dead man. "I raise the dead for a living, no pun intended. Why would a vampire need a zombie raised?"

He shook his head, two quick jerks to either side. "No, no voodoo stuff. I wanna hire you to investigate some murderers."

"I am not a private investigator."

"But you got one of 'em on retainer to your outfit."

I nodded. "You could just hire Ms. Sims directly. You don't have to go through me for that."

Again that jerky head shake. "But she don't know about vampires the way you do."

I sighed. "Can we cut to the chase here, Willie? I have to leave" - I glanced at the wall clock - "in fifteen minutes. I don't like to leave a client waiting alone in a cemetery. They tend to get jumpy."

He laughed. I found the snickery laugh comforting, even with the fangs. Surely vampires should have rich, melodious laughs. "I'll bet they do. I'll just bet they do." His face sobered suddenly, as if a hand had wiped his laughter away.

I felt fear like a jerk in the pit of my stomach. Vampires could change movements like clicking a switch. If he could do that, what else could he do?

"You know about the vampires that are getting wasted over in the District?"

He made it a question, so I answered. "I'm familiar with them." Four vampires had been slaughtered in the new vampire club district. Their hearts had been torn out, their heads cut off.

"You still working with the cops?"

"I am still on retainer with the new task force."

He laughed again. "Yeah, the spook squad. Underbudgeted and undermanned, right."

"You've described most of the police work in this town."

"Maybe, but the cops feel like you do, Anita. What's one more dead vampire? New laws don't change that."

It had only been two years since Addison v. Clark. The court case gave us a revised version of what life was, and what death wasn't. Vampirism was legal in the good of U. S. of A. We were one of the few countries to acknowledge them. The immigration people were having fits trying to keep foreign vampires from immigrating in, well, flocks.

All sorts of questions were being fought out in court. Did heirs have to give back their inheritance? Were you widowed if your spouse became undead? Was it murder to slay a vampire? There was even a movement to give them the vote. Times were a-changing.

I stared at the vampire in front of me and shrugged. Did I really believe what was one more dead vampire? Maybe. "If you believe I feel that way, why come to me at all?"

"Because you're the best at what you do. We need the best."

It was the first time he had said "we." "Who are you working for, Willie?"

He smiled then, a close secretive smile, like he knew something I should know. "Never you mind that. Money's real good. We want somebody who knows the night life to be looking into these murders."

"I've seen the bodies, Willie. I gave my opinions to the police."

"What'd you think?" He leaned forward in the chair, small hands flat on my desk. His fingernails were pale, almost white, bloodless.

"I gave a full report to the police." I stared up at him, almost looking him in the eye.

"Won't even give me that, will ya?"

"I am not at liberty to discuss police business with you."

"I told 'em you wouldn't go for this."

"Go for what? You haven't told me a damn thing."

"We want you to investigate the vampire killings, find out who's, or what's, doing it. We'll pay you three times your normal fee."

I shook my head. That explained why Bert, the greedy son of a gun, had set up this meeting. He knew how I felt about vampires, but my contract forced me to at least meet with any client that had given Bert a retainer. My boss would do anything for money. Problem was he thought I should, too. Bert and I would be having a "talk" very soon.

I stood. "The police are looking into it. I am already giving them all the help I can. In a way I am already working on the case. Save your money."

He sat staring up at me, very still. It was not that lifeless immobility of the long dead, but it was a shadow of it.

Fear ran up in my spine and into my throat. I fought an urge to draw my crucifix out of my shirt and drive him from my office. Somehow throwing a

client out using a holy item seemed less than professional. So I just stood there, waiting for him to move.

"Why won't you help us?"

"I have clients to meet, Willie. I'm sorry that I can't help you."

"Won't help, you mean."

I nodded. "Have it your way." I walked around the desk to show him to the door.

He moved with a liquid quickness that Willie had never had, but I saw him move and was one step back from his reaching hand. "I'm not just another pretty face to fall for mind tricks."

"You saw me move."

"I heard you move. You're the new dead, Willie. Vampire or not, you've got a lot to learn."

He was frowning at me, hand still half-extended towards me. "Maybe, but no human could a stepped outta reach like that." He stepped up close to me, plaid jacket nearly brushing against me. Pressed together like that, we were nearly the same height, short. His eyes were on a perfect level with mine. I stared as hard as I could at his shoulder.

It took everything I had not to step back from him. But dammit, undead or not, he was Willie McCoy. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

He said, "You ain't human, any more than I am."

I moved to open the door. I hadn't stepped away from him. I had stepped away to open the door. I tried convincing the sweat along my spine that there was a difference. The cold feeling in my stomach wasn't fooled either.

"I really have to be going now. Thank you for thinking of Animators, Inc." I gave him my best professional smile, empty of meaning as a light bulb, but dazzling.

He paused in the open doorway. "Why won't you work for us? I gotta tell 'em something when I go back."

I wasn't sure, but there was something like fear in his voice. Would he get in trouble for failing? I felt sorry for him and knew it was stupid. He was the undead, for heaven's sake, but he stood looking at me, and he was still Willie, with his funny coats and small nervous hands.

"Tell them, whoever they are, that I don't work for vampires."

"A firm rule?" Again he made it sound like a question.

"Concrete."

There was a flash of something on his face, the old Willie peeking through. It was almost pity. "I wish you hadn't said that, Anita. These people don't like anybody telling 'em no."

"I think you've overstayed your welcome. I don't like to be threatened."

"It ain't a threat, Anita. It's the truth." He straightened his tie, fondling the new gold tie tack, squared his thin shoulders and walked out.

I closed the door behind him and leaned against it. My knees felt weak. But there wasn't time for me to sit here and shake. Mrs. Grundick was probably already at the cemetery. She would be standing there with her little black purse and her grown sons, waiting for me to raise her husband from the dead. There

was a mystery of two very different wills. It was either years of court costs and arguments, or raise Albert Grundick from the dead and ask.

Everything I needed was in my car, even the chickens. I drew the silver crucifix free of my blouse and let it hang in full view. I have several guns, and I know how to use them. I keep a 9 mm Browning Hi-Power in my desk. The gun weighed a little over two pounds, silver-plated bullets and all. Silver won't kill a vampire, but it can discourage them. It forces them to have to heal the wounds, almost human slow. I wiped my sweaty palms on my skirt and went out.

Craig our night secretary, was typing furiously at the computer keyboard. His eyes widened as I walked over the thick carpeting. Maybe it was the cross swinging on its long chain. Maybe it was the shoulder rig tight across my back, and the gun out in plain sight. He didn't mention either. Smart man.

I put my nice little corduroy jacket over it all. The jacket didn't lie flat over the gun, but that was okay. I doubted the Grundicks and their lawyers would notice.

Chapter 2

I had gotten to see the sun rise as I drove home that morning. I hate sunrises. They mean I've overscheduled myself and worked all bloody night. St. Louis has more trees edging its highways than any other city I have driven through. I could almost admit the trees looked nice in the first light of dawn, almost. My apartment always looks depressingly white and cheerful in morning sunlight. The walls are the same vanilla ice cream white as every apartment I've ever seen. The carpeting is a nice shade of grey, preferable to that dog poop brown that is more common.

The apartment is a roomy one-bedroom. I am told it has a nice view of the park next door. You couldn't prove it by me. If I had my choice, there would be no windows. I get by with heavy drapes that turn the brightest day to cool twilight.

I switched the radio on low to drown the small noises of my day-living neighbors. Sleep sucked me under to the soft music of Chopin. A minute later the phone rang.

I lay there for a minute, cursing myself for forgetting to turn on the answering machine. Maybe if I ignored it? Five rings later I gave in. "Hello."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

It was a woman I didn't know. If it was a salesperson I was going to become violent. "Who is this?" I blinked at the bedside clock. It was eight. I'd had nearly two hours of sleep. Yippee.

"I'm Monica Vespucci." She said it like it should explain everything. It didn't.

"Yes." I tried to sound helpful, encouraging. I think it came out as a growl.

"Oh, my, uh. I'm the Monica that works with Catherine Maison."

I huddled around the receiver and tried to think. I don't think really well on two hours of sleep. Catherine was a good friend, a name I knew. She had probably mentioned this woman to me, but for the life of me, I couldn't place her. "Sure, Monica, yes. What do you want?" It sounded rude, even to me. "I'm sorry if I don't sound too good. I got off work at six."

"My god, you mean you've only had two hours of sleep. Do you want to shoot me, or what?"

I didn't answer the question. I'm not that rude. "Did you want something, Monica?"

"Sure, yes. I'm throwing a surprise bachelorette party for Catherine. You know she gets married next month."

I nodded, remembered she couldn't see me, and mumbled, "I'm in the wedding."

"Oh, sure, I knew that. Pretty dresses for the bridesmaids, don't you think?"

Actually, the last thing I wanted to spend a hundred and twenty dollars on was a long pink formal with puffy sleeves, but it was Catherine's wedding. "What about the bachelorette party?"

"Oh. I'm rambling, aren't I? And you just desperate for sleep."

I wondered if screaming at her would make her go away any her. Naw, she'd probably cry. "What do you want, please, Monica?"

"Well, I know it's short notice, but everything just sort of slipped up on me. I meant to call you a week ago, but I just never got around to it."

This I believed. "Go on."

"The bachelorette party is tonight. Catherine says you don't drink, so I was wondering if you could be designated driver."

I just lay there for a minute, wondering how mad to get, and if it would do me any good. Maybe if I'd been more awake, I wouldn't have said what I was thinking. "Don't you think this is awfully short notice, since you want me to drive?"

"I know. I'm so sorry. I'm just so scattered lately. Catherine told me you usually have either Friday or Saturday night off. Is Friday not your night off this week?"

As a matter of fact it was, but I didn't really want to give up my only night off to this airhead on the other end of the phone. "I do have the night off."

"Great! I'll give you directions, and you can pick us up after work. Is that okay?"

It wasn't, but what else could I say. "That's fine."

"Pencil and paper?"

"You said you worked with Catherine, right?" I was actually beginning to remember Monica.

"Why, yes."

"I know where Catherine works. I don't need directions."

"Oh, how silly of me, of course. Then we'll see you about five. Dress up, but no heels. We may be dancing tonight."

I hate to dance. "Sure, see you then."

"See you tonight."

The phone went dead in my ear. I turned on the answering machine and cuddled back under the sheets. Monica worked with Catherine, that made her a lawyer. That was a frightening thought. Maybe she was one of those people who was only organized at work. Naw.

It occurred to me then, when it was too late, that I could just have refused the invitation. Damn. I was quick today. Oh, well, how bad could it be? Watching strangers get blitzed out of their minds. If I was lucky, maybe someone would throw up in my car.

I had the strangest dreams once I got back to sleep. All about this woman I didn't know, a coconut cream pie, and Willie McCoy's funeral.

Chapter 3

Monica Vespucci was wearing a button that said, "Vampires are People, too." It was not a promising beginning to the evening. Her white blouse was silk with a high, flared collar framing a dark, health-club tan. Her hair was short and expertly cut; her makeup perfect.

The button should have tipped me off to what kind of bachelorette party she'd planned. Some days I'm just slow to catch on.

I was wearing black jeans, knee-high boots, and a crimson blouse. My hair was made to order for the outfit, black curling just over the shoulders of the red blouse. The solid, nearly black-brown of my eyes matches the hair. Only the skin stands out, too pale, Germanic against the Latin darkness. A very ex-boyfriend once described me as a little china doll. He meant it as a compliment. I didn't take it that way. There are reasons why I don't date much.

The blouse was long-sleeved to hide the knife sheath on my right wrist and the scars on my left arm. I had left my gun locked in the trunk of my car. I didn't think the bachelorette party would get that out of hand.

"I'm so sorry that I put off planning this to the last minute, Catherine. That's why there's only three of us. Everybody else had plans," Monica said.

"Imagine that, people having plans for Friday night," I said.

Monica stared at me as if trying to decide whether I was joking or not.

Catherine gave me a warning glare. I gave them both my best angelic smile. Monica smiled back. Catherine wasn't fooled.

Monica began dancing down the sidewalk, happy as a drunken clam. She had had only two drinks with dinner. It was a bad sign.

"Be nice," Catherine whispered.

"What did I say?"

"Anita." Her voice sounded like my father's used to sound when I'd stayed out too late.

I sighed. "You're just no fun tonight."

"I plan to be a lot of fun tonight." She stretched her arms skyward. She still wore the crumpled remains of her business suit. The wind blew her long, copper-colored hair. I've never been able to decide if Catherine would be prettier if she cut her hair, so you'd notice the face first, or if the hair was what made her pretty.

"If I have to give up one of my few free nights, then I am going to enjoy myself - immensely," she said.

There was a kind of fierceness to the last word. I stared up at her. "You are not planning to get falling-down drunk, are you?"

"Maybe." She looked smug.

Catherine knew I didn't approve of, or rather, didn't understand drinking. I didn't like having my inhibitions lowered. If I was going to cut loose, I wanted to be in control of just how loose I got.

We had left my car in a parking lot two blocks back. The one with the wrought-iron fence around it. There wasn't much parking down by the river. The narrow brick roads and ancient sidewalks had been designed for horses, not automobiles. The streets had been fresh-washed by a summer thunderstorm that had come and gone while we ate dinner. The first stars glittered overhead, like diamonds trapped in velvet.

Monica yelled, "Hurry up, slowpokes."

Catherine looked at me and grinned. The next thing I knew, she was running towards Monica.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," I muttered. Maybe if I'd had drinks with dinner, I'd have run, too, but I doubted it.

"Don't be an old stick in the mud," Catherine called back.

Stick in the mud? I caught up to them walking. Monica was giggling. Somehow I had known she would be. Catherine and she were leaning against each other laughing. I suspected they might be laughing at me.

Monica calmed enough to fake an ominous stage whisper. "Do you know what lies around this corner?"

As a matter of fact, I did. The last vampire killing had been only four blocks from here. We were in what the vampires called "the District." Humans called it the Riverfront, or Blood Square, depending on if they were being rude or not.

"Guilty Pleasures," I said.

"Oh, pooh, you spoiled the surprise."

"What's Guilty Pleasures?" Catherine asked.

Monica giggled. "Oh, goodie, the surprise isn't spoiled after all." She put her arm through Catherine's. "You are going to love this, I promise you."

Maybe Catherine would; I knew I wouldn't, but I followed them around the corner anyway. The sign was a wonderful swirling neon the color of heart blood. The symbolism was not lost on me.

We went up three broad steps, and there was a vampire standing in front of the propped-open door. He had a black crew cut and small, pale eyes. His massive shoulders threatened to rip the tight black t-shirt he wore. Wasn't pumping iron redundant after you died?

Even standing on the threshold I could hear the busy hum of voices, laughter, music. That rich, murmurous sound of many people in a small space, determined to have a good time.

The vampire stood beside the door, very still. There was still a movement to him, an aliveness, for lack of a better term. He couldn't have been dead more than twenty years, if that. In the dark he looked almost human, even to me. He had fed already tonight. His skin was flushed and healthy. He looked damn near rosy-cheeked. A meal of fresh blood will do that to you.

Monica squeezed his arm. "Ooo, feel that muscle."

He grinned, flashing fangs. Catherine gasped. He grinned wider.

"Buzz here is an old friend, aren't you, Buzz?"

Buzz the vampire? Surely not.

But he nodded. "Go on in, Monica. Your table is waiting."

Table? What kind of clout did Monica have? Guilty Pleasures was one of the hottest clubs in the District, and they did not take reservations.

There was a large sign on the door. "No crosses, crucifixes, or other holy items allowed inside." I read the sign and walked past it. I had no intention of getting rid of my cross.

A rich, melodious voice floated around us. "Anita, how good of of you to come."

The voice belonged to Jean-Claude, club owner and master vampire. He looked like a vampire was supposed to look. Softly curling hair tangled with the high white lace of an antique shirt. Lace spilled over pale, long-fingered hands. The shirt hung open, giving a glimpse of lean bare chest framed by more frothy lace. Most men couldn't have worn a shirt like that. The vampire made it seem utterly masculine.

"You two know each other?" Monica sounded surprised.

"Oh, yes," Jean-Claude said. "Ms. Blake and I have met before."

"I've been helping the police work cases on the Riverfront."

"She is their vampire expert." He made the last word soft and warm and vaguely obscene.

Monica giggled. Catherine was staring at Jean-Claude, eyes wide and innocent. I touched her arm, and she jerked as if waking from a dream. I didn't bother to whisper because I knew he would have heard me anyway. "Important safety tip - never look a vampire in the eye."

She nodded. The first hint of fear showed in her face.

"I would never harm such a lovely young woman." He took Catherine's hand and raised it to his mouth. A mere brush of lips. Catherine blushed.

He kissed Monica's hand as well. He looked at me and laughed. "Do not worry, my little animator. I will not touch you. That would be cheating."

He moved to stand next to me. I stared fixedly at his chest. There was a burn scar almost hidden in the lace. The burn was in the shape of a cross. How many decades ago had someone shoved a cross into his flesh?

"Just as you having a cross would be an unfair advantage."

What could I say? In a way he was right.

It was a shame that it wasn't merely the shape of a cross that hurt a vampire. Jean-Claude would have been in deep shit. Unfortunately, the cross had to be blessed, and backed up by faith. An atheist waving a cross at a vampire was a truly pitiful sight.

He breathed my name like a whisper against my skin. "Anita, what are you thinking?"

The voice was so damn soothing. I wanted to look up and see what face went with such words. Jean-Claude had been intrigued by my partial immunity to him. That and the cross-shaped burn scar on my arm. He found the scar amusing. Every time we met, he did his best to bespell me, and I did my best to ignore him. I had won up until now.

"You never objected to me carrying a cross before."

"You were on police business then; now you are not."

I stared at his chest and wondered if the lace was as soft as it looked; probably not.

"Are you so insecure in your own powers, little animator? Do you believe that all your resistance to me resides in that piece of silver around your neck?"

I didn't believe that, but I knew it helped. Jean-Claude was a self-admitted two hundred and five years old. A vampire gains a lot of power in two centuries. He was suggesting I was a coward. I was not.

I reached up to unfasten the chain. He stepped away from me and turned his back. The cross spilled silver into my hands. A blonde human woman appeared beside me. She handed me a check stub and took the cross. Nice, a holy item check girl.

I felt suddenly underdressed without my cross. I slept and showered in it.

Jean-Claude stepped close again. "You will not resist the show tonight, Anita. Someone will enthrall you."

"No," I said. But it's hard to be tough when you're staring at someone's chest. You really need eye contact to play tough, but that was a no-no.

He laughed. The sound seemed to rub over my skin, like the brush of fur. Warm and feeling ever so slightly of death.

Monica grabbed my arm. "You're going to love this, I promise you."

"Yes," Jean-Claude said. "It will be a night you will never forget."

"Is that a threat?"

He laughed again, that warm awful sound. "This is a place of pleasure, Anita, not violence."

Monica was pulling at my arm. "Hurry, the entertainment's about to begin."

"Entertainment?" Catherine asked

I had to smile. "Welcome to the world's only vampire strip club, Catherine."

"You are joking."

"Scout's honor." I glanced back at the door; I don't know why. Jean-Claude stood utterly still, no sense of anything, as if he were not there at all. Then he moved, one pale hand raised to his lips. He blew me a kiss across the room. The night's entertainment had begun.

Chapter 4

Our table was nearly bumping up against the stage. The room was full of liquor and laughter, and a few faked screams as the vampire waiters moved around the tables. There was an undercurrent of fear. That peculiar terror that you get on roller coasters and at horror movies. Safe terror.

The lights went out. Screams echoed through the room, high and shrill. Real fear for an instant. Jean-Claude's voice came out of the darkness. "Welcome to Guilty Pleasures. We are here to serve you. To make your most evil thought come true."

His voice was silken whispers in the small hours of night. Damn, he was good.

"Have you ever wondered what it would be like to feel my breath upon your skin? My lips along your neck. The hard brush of teeth. The sweet, sharp pain of fangs. Your heart beating frantically against my chest. Your blood flowing into my veins. Sharing yourself. Giving me life. Knowing that I truly could not live without you, all of you."

Perhaps it was the intimacy of darkness; whatever, I felt as if his voice was speaking just for me, to me. I was his chosen, his special one. No, that wasn't right. Every woman in the club felt the same. We were all his chosen. And perhaps there was more truth in that than in anything else.

"Our first gentleman tonight shares your fantasy. He wanted to know how the sweetest of kisses would feel. He has gone before you to tell you that it is wondrous." He let silence fill the darkness, until my own heartbeat sounded loud. "Phillip is with us tonight."

Monica whispered, "Phillip!" A collective gasp ran through the audience, then a soft chanting began. "Phillip, Phillip . . ." The sound rose around us in the dark like a prayer.

The lights began to come up like at the end of a movie. A figure stood in the center of the stage. A white t-shirt hugged his upper body; not a muscleman, but well built. Not too much of a good thing. A black leather jacket, tight jeans and boots completed the outfit. He could have walked off any street. His thick, brown hair was long enough to sweep his shoulders.

Music drifted into the twilight silence. The man swayed to the sounds, hips rotating ever so slightly. He began to slip out of leather jacket, moving almost in slow motion. The soft music seemed to have a pulse. A pulse that his body moved with, swaying. The jacket slid to the stage. He stared out at the audience for a minute letting us see what there was to see. Scars hugged the bend of each arm, until the skin had formed white mounds of tissue.

I swallowed hard. I wasn't sure what was about to happen, but was betting I wasn't going to like it.

He swept back his long hair from his face with both hands. He swayed and strutted around the edge of the stage. He stood near table, looking down at us. His neck looked like a junkie's.

I had to look away. All those neat little bite marks, neat little scars. I glanced up and found Catherine staring at her lap. Monica leaning forward in her chair, lips half-parted.

He grabbed the t-shirt with strong hands and pulled. It peeled away from his chest, ripping. Screams from the audience. A few of them called his name. He smiled. The smile was dazzling, brilliant melt-in-your-mouth sexy.

There was scar tissue on his smooth, bare chest: white scars, pinkish scars, new scars, old scars. I just sat staring with my mouth open.

Catherine whispered, "Dear God!"

"He's wonderful, isn't he?" Monica asked.

I glanced at her. Her flared collar had slipped, exposing two neat puncture wounds, fairly old, almost scars. Sweet Jesus.

The music burst into a pulsing violence. He danced, swaying, gyrating, throwing the strength of his body into every move. There a white mass of scars over his left collarbone, ragged and vicious. My stomach tightened. A vampire had torn through his collarbone, ripped at him like a dog with a piece of meat. I knew, because I had a similar scar. I had a lot of similar scars.

Dollar bills appeared in hands like mushrooms after a rain. Monica was waving her money like a flag. I didn't want Phillip at our table. I had to lean into Monica to be heard over the noise.

"Monica, please, don't bring him over here."

Even as she turned to look at me, I knew it was too late. Phillip of the many scars was standing on the stage, looking down at us. I stared up into his very human eyes.

I could see the pulse in Monica's throat. She licked her lips; her eyes were enormous. She stuffed the money down the front of his pants.

Her hands traced his scars like nervous butterflies. She leaned her face close to his stomach and began kissing his scars, leaving red lipstick prints behind. He knelt as she kissed him, forcing her mouth higher and higher up his chest.

He knelt, and she pressed lips to his face. He brushed his hair back from his neck, as if he knew what she wanted. She licked the newest bite scar, tongue small and pink, like a cat. I heard her breath go out in a trembling sigh. She bit him, mouth locking over the wound. Phillip jerked with pain, or just surprise. Her jaws tightened, her throat worked. She was sucking the wound.

I looked across the table at Catherine. She was staring at them, face blank with astonishment.

The crowd was going wild, screaming and waving money. Phillip pulled away from Monica and moved on to another table. Monica slumped forward, head collapsing into her lap, arms limp at her side.

Had she fainted? I reached out to touch her shoulder and realized I didn't want to touch her. I gripped her shoulder gently. She moved, turning her head to look at me. Her eyes held that lazy fullness that sex gives. Her mouth looked pale with most of the lipstick worn away. She hadn't fainted; she was basking in the afterglow.

I drew back from her, rubbing my hand against my jeans. My palms were sweating.

Phillip was back on the stage. He had stopped dancing. He was just standing there. Monica had left a small round mark on his neck.

I felt the first stirrings of an old mind, flowing over the crowd. Catherine asked, "What's happening?"

"It's all right," Monica said. She was sitting upright in her chair, eyes still half-closed. She licked her lips and stretched, hands over her head.

Catherine turned to me. "Anita, what is it?"

"Vampire," I said.

Fear flashed on her face, but it didn't last. I watched the fear fade under the weight of the vampire's mind. She turned slowly to stare at Phillip as he waited on the stage. Catherine was in no danger. This mass hypnosis was not personal, and not permanent.

The vampire wasn't as old as Jean-Claude, nor as good. I sat there feeling the press and flow of over a hundred years of power, and it wasn't enough. I felt him move up through the tables. He had gone to a lot of trouble to make sure the poor humans wouldn't see him come. He would simply appear in their midst, like magic.

You don't get to surprise vampires often. I turned to watch the vampire walk towards the stage. Every human face I saw was enraptured, turned blindly to the stage, waiting. The vampire was tall with high cheekbones, model-perfect, sculpted. He was too masculine to be beautiful, and too perfect to be real.

He strode through the tables wearing a proverbial vampire outfit, black tux and white gloves. He stopped one table away from me, to stare. He held the audience in the palm of his mind, helpless and waiting. But there I sat staring at him, though not at his eyes.

His body stiffened, surprised. There's nothing like ruining the calm of a hundred-year-old vampire to boost a girl's morale.

I looked past him to see Jean-Claude. He was staring at me. I saluted him with my drink. He acknowledged it with a nod of his head.

The tall vampire was standing beside Phillip. Phillip's eyes were as blank as any human's. The spell or whatever drifted away. With a thought he awoke the audience, and they gasped. Magic.

Jean-Claude's voice filled the sudden silence. "This is Robert. Welcome him to our stage."

The crowd went wild, applauding and screaming. Catherine was applauding along with everyone else. Apparently, she was impressed.

The music changed again, pulsing and throbbing in the air, almost painfully loud. Robert the vampire began to dance. He moved with a careful violence, pumping to the music. He threw his white gloves into the audience. One landed at my feet. I left it there.

Monica said, "Pick it up."

I shook my head.

Another woman leaned over from another table. Her breath smelled like whiskey. "You don't want it?"

I shook my head.

She got up, I suppose to get the glove. Monica beat her to it. The woman sat down, looking unhappy.

The vampire had stripped, showing a smooth expanse of chest. He dropped to the stage and did fingertip push-ups. The audience went wild. I wasn't impressed. I knew he could bench press a car, if he wanted to. What's a few pushups compared to that?

He began to dance around Phillip. Phillip turned to face him, arms outspread, slightly crouched, as if he were ready for an attack. They began circling each other. The music softened until it was only a soft underscoring to the movements on stage.

The vampire began to move closer to Phillip. Phillip moved as if trying to run from the stage. The vampire was suddenly there, blocking his escape.

I hadn't seen him move. The vampire had just appeared in front of the man. I hadn't seen him move. Fear drove all the air from my body in an icy rush. I hadn't felt the mind trick, but it had happened.

Jean-Claude was standing only two tables away. He raised one pale hand in a salute to me. The bastard had been in my mind, and I hadn't known it. The audience gasped, and I looked back to the stage.

They were both kneeling; the vampire had one of Phillip's arms pinned behind his back. One hand gripped Phillip's long hair, pulling his neck back at a painful angle.

Phillip's eyes were wide and terrified. The vampire hadn't put him under. He wasn't under! He was aware and scared. Dear God. He was panting, his chest rising and falling in short gasps.

The vampire looked out at the audience and hissed, fangs flashing in the lights. The hiss turned the beautiful face to something bestial. His hunger rode out over the crowd. His need so intense, it made my stomach cramp.

No, I would not feel this with him. I dug fingernails into the palm of my hand and concentrated. The feeling faded. Pain helped. I opened my shaking fingers and found four half-moons that slowly filled with blood. The hunger beat around me, filling the crowd, but not me, not me.

I pressed a napkin to my hand and tried to look inconspicuous.

The vampire drew back his head.

"No," I whispered.

The vampire struck, teeth sinking into flesh. Phillip shrieked, and it echoed in the club. The music died abruptly. No one moved. You could have dropped a pin.

Soft, moist sucking sounds filled the silence. Phillip began to moan, high in his throat. Over and over again, small helpless sounds.

I looked out at the crowd. They were with the vampire, feeling his hunger, his need, feeling him feed. Maybe sharing Phillip's terror, I didn't know. I was apart from it, and glad.

The vampire stood, letting Phillip fall to the stage, limp, unmoving. I stood without meaning to. The man's scarred back convulsed in a deep, shattering breath, as if he were fighting back from death. And maybe he was.

He was alive. I sat back down. My knees felt weak. Sweat covered my palms and stung the cuts on my hand. He was alive, and he enjoyed it. I wouldn't have believed it if someone had told me. I would have called them a liar.

A vampire junkie. Surely to God, I'd seen everything now.

Jean-Claude whispered, "Who wants a kiss?"

No one moved for a heartbeat; then hands, holding money, raised here and there. Not many, but a few. Most people looked confused, as if they had woken from a bad dream. Monica was holding money up.

Phillip lay where he had been dropped, chest rising and falling.

Robert the vampire came to Monica. She tucked money down his pants. He pressed his bloody, fanged mouth to her lips. The kiss was long and deep, full of probing tongues. They were tasting each other.

The vampire drew away from Monica. Her hands at his neck tried to draw him back, but he pulled away. He turned to me. I shook my head and showed him empty hands. No money here, folks.

He grabbed for me, snake-quick. No time to think. My chair crashed to the floor. I was standing, just out of reach. No ordinary human could have seen him coming. The jig, as they say, was up.

A buzz of voices raised through the audience as they tried to figure out what had happened. Just your friendly neighborhood animator, folks, nothing to get excited about. The vampire was still staring at me.

Jean-Claude was suddenly beside me, and I hadn't seen him come. "Are you all right, Anita?"

His voice held things that the words didn't even hint at. Promises whispered in darkened rooms, under cool sheets. He sucked me under, rolled my mind like a wino after money, and it felt good. Crash - Shriek - Noise thundered through my mind, chased the vampire out, held him at bay.

My beeper had gone off. I blinked and staggered against our table. He reached out to steady me. "Don't touch me," I said.

He smiled. "Of course."

I pushed the button on my beeper to silence it. Thank you God, that I hung the beeper on my waistband instead of stuffing it in a purse. I might never have heard it otherwise. I called from the phone at the bar. The police wanted my

expertise at the Hillcrest Cemetery. I had to work on my night off. Yippee, and I meant it.

I offered to take Catherine with me, but she wanted to stay. Whatever else you can say about vampires, they are fascinating. It went with the job description, like drinking blood and working nights. It was her choice.

I promised to come back in time to drive them home. Then I picked up my cross from the holy item check girl and slipped it inside my shirt.

Jean-Claude was standing by the door. He said, "I almost had you, my little animator."

I glanced at his face and quickly down. "Almost doesn't count, you blood-sucking bastard."

Jean-Claude threw back his head and laughed. His laughter followed me out into the night, like velvet rubbing along my spine.

Chapter 5

The coffin lay on its side. A white scar of claw marks ran down the dark varnish. The pale blue lining, imitation silk, was sliced and gouged. One bloody handprint showed plainly; it could almost have been human. All that was left of the older corpse was a shredded brown suit, a finger bone gnawed clean and a scrap of scalp. The man had been blond.

A second body lay perhaps five feet away. The man's clothes were shredded. His chest had been ripped open, ribs cracked like eggshells. Most of his internal organs were gone, leaving his body cavity like a hollowed-out log. Only his face was untouched. Pale eyes stared impossibly wide up into the summer stars.

I was glad it was dark. My night vision is good, but darkness steals color. All the blood was black. The man's body was lost in the shadows of the trees. I didn't have to see him, unless I walked up to him. I had done that. I had measured the bite marks with my trusty tape measure. With my little plastic gloves I had searched the corpse over, looking for clues. There weren't any.

I could do anything I wanted to the scene of the crime. It had already been videotaped and snapped from every possible angle. I was always the last "expert" called in. The ambulance was waiting to take the bodies away, once I was finished.

I was about finished. I knew what had killed the man. Ghouls. I had narrowed the search down to a particular kind of undead. Bully for me. The coroner could have told them that.

I was beginning to sweat inside the coverall I had put on to protect my clothes. The coverall was originally for vampire stakings, but I had started using it at crime scenes. There were black stains at the knees and down the

legs. There had been so much blood in the grass. Thank you, dear God, that I didn't have to see this in broad daylight.

I don't know why seeing something like this in daylight makes it worse, but I'm more likely to dream about a daylight scene. The blood is always so red and brown and thick.

Night softens it, makes it less real. I appreciated that.

I unzipped the front of my coverall, letting it gape open around my clothes. The wind blew against me, amazingly cool. The air smelled of rain. Another thunderstorm was moving this way.

The yellow police tape was wrapped around tree trunks, strung through bushes. One yellow loop went around the stone feet of an angel. The tape flapped and cracked in the growing wind. Sergeant Rudolf Storr lifted the tape and walked towards me.

He was six-eight and built like a wrestler. He had a brisk, striding walk. His close-cropped black hair left his ears bare. Dolph was the head of the newest task force, the spook squad. Officially, it was the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team, R-P-I-T, pronounced rip it. It handled all supernatural-related crime. It wasn't exactly a step up for his career. Willie McCoy had been right; the task force was a half-hearted effort to placate the press and the liberals.

Dolph had pissed somebody off, or he wouldn't have been here. But Dolph, being Dolph, was determined to do the best job he could. He was like a force of nature. He didn't yell, he was just there, and things got done because of it.

"Well," he said.

That's Dolph, a man of many words. "It was a ghoulish attack."

"And."

I shrugged. "And there are no ghouls in this cemetery."

He stared down at me, face carefully neutral. He was good at that, didn't like to influence his people. "You just said it was a ghoulish attack."

"Yes, but they came from somewhere outside the cemetery."

"So?"

"I have never known of any ghouls to travel this far outside their own cemetery." I stared at him, trying to see if he understood what I was saying.

"Tell me about ghouls, Anita." He had his trusty little notebook out, pen poised and ready.

"This cemetery is still holy ground. Cemeteries that have ghoulish infestations are usually very old or have satanic or certain voodoo rites performed in them. The evil sort of uses up the blessing, until the ground becomes unholy. Once that happens, ghouls either move in or rise from the graves. No one's sure exactly which."

"Wait, what do you mean, that no one knows?"

"Basically."

He shook his head, staring at the notes he'd made, frowning. "Explain."

"Vampires are made by other vampires. Zombies are raised from the grave by an animator or voodoo priest. Ghouls, as far as we know, just crawl out of

their graves on their own. There are theories that very evil people become ghouls. I don't buy that. There was a theory for a while that people bitten by a supernatural being, wereanimal, vampire, whatever, would become a ghoul. But I've seen whole cemeteries emptied, every corpse a ghoul. No way they were all attacked by supernatural forces while alive."

"All right, we don't know where ghouls come from. What do we know?"

"Ghouls don't rot like zombies. They retain their form more like vampires. They are more than animal intelligent, but not by much. They are cowards and won't attack a person unless she is hurt or unconscious."

"They sure as hell attacked the groundskeeper."

"He could have been knocked unconscious somehow."

"How?"

"Someone would have had to knock him out."

"Is that likely?"

"No, ghouls don't work with humans, or any other undead. A zombie will obey orders, vampires have their own thoughts. Ghouls are like pack animals, wolves maybe, but a lot more dangerous. They wouldn't be able to understand working with someone. If you're not a ghoul, you're either meat or something to hide from."

"Then what happened here?"

"Dolph, these ghouls traveled quite a distance to reach this cemetery. There isn't another one for miles. Ghouls don't travel like that. So maybe, just maybe, they attacked the caretaker when he came to scare them off. They should have run from him; maybe they didn't."

"Could it be something, or someone, pretending to be ghouls?"

"Maybe, but I doubt it. Whoever it was, they ate that man. A human might do that, but a human couldn't tear the body apart like that. They just don't have the strength."

"Vampire?"

"Vampires don't eat meat."

"Zombies?"

"Maybe. There are rare cases where zombies go a little crazy and start attacking people. They seem to crave flesh. If they don't get it, they'll start to decay."

"I thought zombies always decayed."

"Flesh-eating zombies last a lot longer than normal. There's one case of a woman who is still human-looking after three years."

"They let her go around eating people?"

I smiled. "They feed her raw meat. I believe the article said lamb was preferred."

"Article?"

"Every career has its professional journal, Dolph."

"What's it called?"

I shrugged. "*The Animator*; what else?"

He actually smiled. "Okay. How likely is it that it's zombies?"

"Not very. Zombies don't run in packs unless they're ordered to."

"Even" - he checked his notes - "flesh-eating zombies?"

"There have only been three documented cases. All of them were solitary hunters."

"So, flesh-eating zombies, or a new kind of ghoul. That sum it up?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay, thanks. Sorry to interrupt your night off." He closed his notebook and looked at me. He was almost grinning. ""The secretary said you were at a bachelorette party." He wiggled his eyebrows. "Hoochie coochie."

"Don't give me a hard time, Dolph."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Riiight," I said. "If you don't need me anymore, I'll be getting back."

"We're finished, for now. Call me if you think of anything else."

"Will do." I walked back to my car. The bloody plastic gloves were shoved into a garbage sack in the trunk. I debated on the coveralls and finally folded them on top of the garbage sack. I might be able to wear them one more time.

Dolph called out, "You be careful tonight, Anita. Wouldn't want you picking up anything."

I glared back at him. The rest of the men waved at me and called in unison, "We loove you."

"Gimme a break."

One called, "If I'd known you liked to see naked men, we could have worked something out."

"The stuff you got, Zerbrowski, I don't want to see."

Laughter, and someone grabbed him around the neck. "She got you, man . . . Give it up, she gets you every time."

I got into my car to the sound of masculine laughter, and one offer to be my "luv" slave. It was probably Zerbrowski.

Chapter 6

I arrived back at Guilty Pleasures a little after midnight. Jean Claude was standing at the bottom of the steps. He was leaning against the wall, utterly still. If he was breathing, I couldn't see it. The wind blew the lace on his shirt. A lock of black hair trailed across the smooth paleness of his cheek.

"You smell of other people's blood, ma petite."

I smiled at him, sweetly. "It was no one you knew."

His voice when it came was low and dark, full of a quiet rage. It slithered across my skin, like a cold wind. "Have you been killing vampires, my little animator?"

"No." I whispered it, my voice suddenly hoarse. I had never heard his voice like that.

"They call you The Executioner, did you know that?"

"Yes." He had done nothing to threaten me, yet nothing at that moment would have forced me to pass him. They might as well have barred the door.

"How many kills do you have to your credit?"

I didn't like this conversation. It wasn't going to end anywhere I wanted to be. I knew one master vampire who could smell lies. I didn't understand Jean-Claude's mood, but I wasn't about to lie to him. "Fourteen."

"And you call us murderers."

I just stared at him, not sure what he wanted me to say.

Buzz the vampire came down the steps. He stared from Jean Claude to me, then took up his post by the door, huge arms crossed over his chest.

Jean-Claude asked, "Did you have a nice break?"

"Yes, thank you, master."

The master vampire smiled. "I've told you before, Buzz, don't call me master."

"Yes, M-M . . . Jean-Claude."

The vampire gave his wondrous, nearly touchable laugh. "Come, Anita, let us go inside where it is warmer."

It was over eighty degrees on the sidewalk. I didn't know what in the world he was talking about. I didn't know what we'd been talking about for the last few minutes.

Jean-Claude walked up the steps. I watched him disappear inside. I stood staring at the door, not wanting to go inside. Something was wrong, and I didn't know what.

"You going inside?" Buzz asked.

"I don't suppose you'd go inside, and ask Monica and the redhaired woman she's with to come outside?"

He smiled, flashing fang. It's the mark of the new dead that they flash their fangs around. They like the shock effect. "Can't leave my post. I just had a break."

"Thought you'd say something like that."

He grinned at me.

I went into the twilit dark of the club. The holy item check girl was waiting for me at the door. I gave her my cross. She gave me a check stub. It wasn't a fair trade. Jean-Claude was nowhere in sight.

Catherine was on the stage. She was standing motionless, eyes wide. Her face had that open, fragile look that faces get when they sleep, like a child's face. Her long, copper-colored hair glistened in the lights. I knew a deep trance when I saw it.

"Catherine." I breathed her name and ran towards her. Monica was sitting at our table, watching me come. There was an awful, knowing smile on her face.

I was almost to the stage when a vampire appeared behind Catherine. He didn't walk out from behind the curtain, he just bloody appeared behind her. For the first time I understood what humans must see. Magic.

The vampire stared at me. His hair was golden silk, his skin ivory, eyes like drowning pools. I closed my eyes and shook my head. This couldn't be happening. No one was that beautiful.

His voice was almost ordinary after the face, but it was a command. "Call her."

I opened my eyes to find the audience staring at me. I glanced at Catherine's blank face and knew what would happen, but like any ignorant client I had to try. "Catherine, Catherine, can you hear me?"

She never moved; only the faintest of movements showed her breathing. She was alive, but for how long? The vampire had gotten to her, deep trance. That meant he could call her anytime, anywhere, and she would come. From this moment on, her life belonged to him. Whenever he wanted it.

"Catherine, please!" There was nothing I could do, the damage was done. Dammit, I should never have left her here, never!

The vampire touched her shoulder. She blinked and stared around, surprised, scared. She gave a nervous laugh. "What happened?"

The vampire raised her hand to his lips. "You are now under my power, my lovely one."

She laughed again, not understanding that he had told her the absolute truth. He led her to the edge of the stage, and two waiters helped her back to her seat. "I feel fuzzy," she said.

Monica patted her hand. "You were great."

"What did I do?"

"I'll tell you later. The show's not over yet." She stared at me when she said the last.

I already knew I was in trouble. The vampire on the stage was staring at me. It was like weight against my skin. His will, force, personality, whatever it was, beat against me. I could feel it like a pulsing wind. The skin on my arms crawled with it.

"I am Aubrey," the vampire said. "Give me your name."

My mouth was suddenly dry, but my name was not important. He could have that. "Anita."

"Anita. How pretty."

My knees sort of buckled and spilled me into a chair. Monica was staring at me, eyes enormous and eager.

"Come, Anita, join me on the stage." His voice wasn't as good as Jean-Claude's, it just wasn't. There was no texture to it, but the mind behind the voice was like nothing I had ever felt. It was ancient, terribly ancient. The force of his mind made my bones ache.

"Come."

I kept shaking my head, over and over. It was all I could do. No words, no real thoughts, but I knew I could not get out of this chair. If I came to him now,

he would have power over me just as he did Catherine. Sweat soaked through the back of my blouse.

"Come to me, now!"

I was standing, and I didn't remember doing it. Dear God, help me! "No!" I dug my fingernails into the palm of my hand. I tore my own skin and welcomed the pain. I could breathe again.

His mind receded like the ocean pulling back. I felt lightheaded, empty. I slumped against the table. One of the vampire waiters was at my side. "Don't fight him. He gets angry if you fight him."

I pushed him away. "If I don't fight him, he'll own me!"

The waiter looked almost human, one of the new dead. There was a look on his face. It was fear.

I called to the thing on the stage, "I'll come to the stage if you don't force me."

Monica gasped. I ignored her. Nothing mattered but getting through the next few moments.

"Then by all means, come," the vampire said.

I stood away from the table and found I could stand without falling. Point for me. I could even walk. Two points for me. I stared at the hard, polished floor. If I concentrated just on walking I would be all right. The first step of the stage came into view. I glanced up.

Aubrey was standing in the center of the stage. He wasn't trying to call me. He stood perfectly still. It was like he wasn't there at all; he was a terrible nothingness. I could feel his stillness like a pulse in my head. I think he could have stood in plain sight, and unless he wanted me to, I would never have seen him.

"Come." Not a voice, but a sound inside my head. "Come to me. "

I tried to move back and couldn't. My pulse thundered into my throat. I couldn't breathe. I was choking! I stood with the force of his mind twisting against me.

"Don't fight me!" He screamed in my head.

Someone was screaming, wordlessly, and it was me. If I stopped fighting, it would be so easy, like drowning after you stop struggling. A peaceful way to die. No, no. "No." My voice sounded strange, even to me.

"What?" he asked. His voice held surprise.

"No," I said, and I looked up at him. I met his eyes with the weight of all those centuries pulsing down. Whatever it was that made me an animator, that helped me raise the dead, it was there now. I met his eyes and stood still.

He smiled then, a slow spreading of lips. "Then I will come to you."

"Please, please, don't." I could not step back. His mind held me like velvet steel. It was everything I could do not to move forward. Not to run to meet him.

He stopped, with our bodies almost touching. His eyes were a solid, perfect brown, bottomless, endless. I looked away from his face. Sweat trickled down my forehead.

"You smell of fear, Anita."

His cool hand traced the edge of my cheek. I started to shake and couldn't stop. His fingers pulled gently through the waves of my hair. "How can you face me this way?"

He breathed along my face, warm as silk. His breath slid to my neck, warm and close. He drew a deep, shuddering breath. His hunger pulsed against my skin. My stomach cramped with his need. He hissed at the audience, and they squealed in terror. He was going to do it.

Terror came in a blinding rush of adrenaline. I pushed away from him. I fell to the stage and scrambled away on hands and knees.

An arm grabbed me around the waist, lifting. I screamed, striking backwards with my elbow. It thudded home, and I heard him gasp, but the arm tightened. Tightened until it was crushing me.

I tore at my sleeve. Cloth ripped. He threw me onto my back. He was crouched over me, face twisted with hunger. His lips curled back from his teeth, fangs glistening.

Someone moved onto the stage, one of the waiters. The vampire hissed at him, spittle running down his chin. There was nothing human left.

It came for me in a blinding rush of speed and hunger. I pressed the silver knife over his heart. A trickle of blood glistened down his chest. He snarled at me, fangs gnashing like a dog on the end of a chain. I screamed.

Terror had washed his power away. There was nothing left but fear. He lunged for me and drove the point of the knife into his skin. Blood began to drip over my hand and onto my blouse. His blood.

Jean-Claude was suddenly there. "Aubrey, let her go."

The vampire growled deep and low in his throat. It was an animal sound.

My voice was high and thin with fear; I sounded like a little girl. "Get him off me, or I'll kill him!"

The vampire reared back, fangs slashing his own lips. "Get him off me!"

Jean-Claude began to speak softly in French. Even when I couldn't understand the language his voice was like velvet, soothing. Jean-Claude knelt by us, speaking softly. The vampire growled and lashed out, grabbing Jean-Claude's wrist.

He gasped, and it sounded like pain.

Should I kill him? Could I plunge the knife home before he tore out my throat? How fast was he? My mind seemed to be working incredibly fast. There was an illusion that I had all the time in the world to decide and act.

I felt the vampire's weight heavier against my legs. His voice sounded hoarse, but calm. "May I get up now?"

His face was human again, pleasant, handsome, but the illusion didn't work anymore. I had seen him unmasked, and that image would always stay with me. "Get off me, slowly."

He smiled then, a slow confident spread of lips. He moved off me, human-slow. Jean-Claude waved him back until he stood near the curtain.

"Are you all right, ma petite?"

I stared at the bloody silver knife and shook my head. "I don't know."

"I did not mean for this to happen." He helped me sit up, and I let him. The room had fallen silent. The audience knew something had gone wrong. They had seen the truth behind the charming mask. There were a lot of pale, frightened faces out there.

My right sleeve hung torn where I ripped it to get the knife.

"Please, put away the knife," Jean-Claude said.

I stared at him, and for the first time I looked him in the eyes and felt nothing. Nothing but emptiness.

"My word of honor that you will leave this place in safety. Put the knife away."

It took me three tries to slide the knife into its sheath, my hands were trembling so badly. Jean-Claude smiled at me, tight-lipped. "Now, we will get off this stage." He helped me stand. I would have fallen if his arm hadn't caught me. He kept a tight grip on my left hand; the lace on his sleeve brushed my skin. The lace wasn't soft at all.

Jean-Claude held his other hand out to Aubrey. I tried to pull away, and he whispered, "No fear, I will protect you, I swear it."

I believed him, I don't know why, maybe because I had no one else to believe. He led Aubrey and me to the front of the stage. His rich voice caressed the crowd. "We hope you enjoyed our little melodrama. It was very realistic, wasn't it?"

The audience shifted uncomfortably, fear plain in their faces.

He smiled out at them and dropped Aubrey's hand. He unbuttoned my sleeve and pushed it back, exposing the burn scar. The cross was dark against my skin. The audience was silent, still not understanding. Jean-Claude pulled the lace away from his chest, exposing his own cross-shaped burn.

There was a moment of stunned silence, then applause thundered around the room. Screams and shouts, and whistles roared around us.

They thought I was a vampire, and it had all been an act. I stared at Jean-Claude's smiling face and the matching scars: his chest, my arm.

Jean-Claude's hand pulled me down into a bow. As the applause finally began to fade, Jean-Claude whispered, "We need to talk, Anita. Your friend Catherine's life depends on your actions."

I met his eyes and said, "I killed the things that gave me this scar."

He smiled broadly, showing just a hint of fang. "What a lovely coincidence. So did I."

Chapter 7

Jean-Claude led us through the curtains at the back of the stage. Another vampire stripper was waiting to go on. He was dressed like a gladiator,

complete with metal breastplate and short sword. "Talk about an act that's hard to follow. Shit." He jerked the curtain open and stalked through.

Catherine came through, her face so pale her freckles stood out like brown ink spots. I wondered if I looked as pale? Naw. I didn't have the skin tone for it.

"My God, are you all right?" she asked.

I stepped carefully over a line of cables that snaked across the backstage floor and leaned against the wall. I began to relearn how to breathe. "I'm fine," I lied.

"Anita, what is going on? What was that stuff on stage? You aren't a vampire any more than I am."

Aubrey made a silent hiss behind her back, fangs straining, making his lips bleed. His shoulders shook with silent laughter.

Catherine gripped my arm. "Anita?"

I hugged her, and she hugged me back. I would not let her die like this. I would not let it happen. She pulled away from me and stared into my face.

"Talk to me."

"Shall we talk in my office?" Jean-Claude asked.

"Catherine doesn't need to come."

Aubrey strolled closer. He seemed to glimmer in the twilight dark, like a jewel. "I think she should come. It does concern her intimately." He licked his bloody lips, tongue pink and quick as a cat's.

"No, I want her out of this, any way I can get her out of it."

"Out of what? What are you talking about?"

Jean-Claude asked, "Is she likely to go to the police?"

"Go to the police about what?" Catherine asked, her voice getting louder with each question.

"If she did?"

"She would die," Jean-Claude said.

"Wait just a minute," Catherine said. "Are you threatening me?"

Catherine's face was gaining a lot of color. Anger did that to her. "She'll go to the police," I said.

"It is your choice."

"I'm sorry, Catherine, but it would be better for us all if you didn't remember any of this."

"That's it! We are leaving, now." She grabbed my hand, and I didn't stop her.

Aubrey moved up behind her. "Look at me, Catherine."

She stiffened. Her fingers dug into my hand; incredible tension vibrated down her muscles. She was fighting it. God, help her. But she didn't have any magic, or crucifixes. Strength of will was not enough, not against something like Aubrey.

Her hand fell away from my arm, fingers going limp all at once. Breath went out of her in a long, shuddering sigh. She stared at something just a little over my head, something I couldn't see.

I whispered, "Catherine, I'm sorry."

"Aubrey can wipe her memory of this night. She will think she drank too much, but that will not undo the damage."

"I know. The only thing that can break Aubrey's hold on her is his death."

"She will be dust in her grave before that happens."

I stared at him, at the blood stain on his shirt. I smiled a very careful smile.

"This little wound was luck and nothing more. Do not let it make you overconfident," Aubrey said.

Overconfident; now that was funny. I barely managed not to laugh. "I understand the threat, Jean-Claude. Either I do what you want or Aubrey finishes what he started with Catherine."

"You have grasped the situation, ma petite."

"Stop calling me that. What is it exactly that you want from me?"

"I believe Willie McCoy told you what we wanted."

"You want to hire me to check into the vampire murders?"

"Exactly."

"This," I motioned to Catherine's blank face, "was hardly necessary. You could have beaten me up, threatened my life, offered me more money. You could have done a lot of things before you did this."

He smiled, lips tight. "All that would have taken time. And let us be truthful. In the end you would still have refused us."

"Maybe."

"This way, you have no choice."

He had a point. "Okay, I'm on the case. Satisfied?"

"Very," Jean-Claude said, his voice very soft. "What of your friend?"

"I want her to go home in a cab. And I want some guarantees that old long-fang isn't going to kill her anyway."

Aubrey laughed, a rich sound that ended in a hysterical hissing. He was bent over, shaking with laughter. "Long-fang, I like that."

Jean-Claude glanced at the laughing vampire and said, "I will give you my word that she will not be harmed if you help us."

"No offense, but that's not enough."

"You doubt my word." His voice growled low and warm, angry.

"No, but you don't hold Aubrey's leash. Unless he answers to you you can't guarantee his behavior."

Aubrey's laughter had softened to a few faint giggles. I had never heard a vampire giggle before. It wasn't a pleasant sound. The laughter died completely, and he straightened. "No one holds my leash, girl. I am my own master."

"Oh, get real. If you were over five hundred years old, and a master vampire, you'd have cleaned up the stage with me. As it was" - I flattened my hands palms up - "you didn't, which means you're very old but not your own master."

He growled low in his throat, face darkening with anger. "How dare you?"

"Think, Aubrey, she judged your age within fifty years. You are not a master vampire, and she knew that. We need her."

"She needs to learn some humility." He stalked towards me, body rigid with anger, hands clenching and unclenching in the air.

Jean-Claude stepped between us. "Nikolaos is expecting us to bring her, unharmed."

Aubrey hesitated. He snarled; his jaws snapped on empty air. The smack of his teeth biting together was a dull, angry sound.

They stared at each other. I could feel their wills straining through the air, like a distant wind. It made the skin at the back of my neck crawl. It was Aubrey who looked away, with an angry graceful blink. "I will not anger, my master." He emphasized "my," making it clear that Jean-Claude was not "his" master.

I swallowed hard twice, and it sounded loud. If they wanted me scared, they were doing a hell of a job. "Who is Nikolaos?"

Jean-Claude turned to look at me, his face calm and beautiful. "That question is not ours to answer."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

He smiled, lips curling carefully so no fang showed. "Let us put your friend in a cab, out of harm's way."

"What of Monica?"

He grinned then, fangs showing; he looked genuinely amused. "Are you worried for her safety?"

It hit me then - the impromptu bachelorette party, there only being the three of us. "She was the lure to get Catherine and me down here."

He nodded, once down, once up.

I wanted to go back out and smash Monica's face in. The more I thought about the idea, the better it sounded. As if by magic, she parted the curtains and came back. I smiled at her, and it felt good.

She hesitated, glancing from me to Jean-Claude and back. "Is everything going according to plan?"

I walked towards her. Jean-Claude grabbed my arm. "Do not harm her, Anita. She is under our protection."

"I swear to you that I will not lay a finger on her tonight. I just want to tell her something."

He released my arm, slowly, like he wasn't sure it was a good idea. I stepped next to Monica, until our bodies almost touched. I whispered into her face, "If anything happens to Catherine, I will see you dead."

She smirked at me, confident in her protectors. "They will bring me back as one of them."

I felt my head shake, a little to the right, a little to the left, a slow precise movement. "I will cut out your heart." I was still smiling, I couldn't seem to stop. "Then I will burn it and scatter the ashes in the river. Do you understand me?"

She swallowed audibly. Her health-club tan looked a little green. She nodded, staring at me like I was the bogey man.

I think she believed I'd do it. Peachy keen. I hate to waste a really good threat.

Chapter 8

I watched Catherine's cab vanish around the corner. She never turned, or waved, or spoke. She would wake tomorrow with vague memories. Just a night out with the girls.

I would like to have thought she was out of it, safe, but I knew better. The air smelled thickly of rain. The street lights glistened off the sidewalk. The air was almost too thick to breathe. St. Louis in the summer. Peachy.

"Shall we go?" Jean-Claude asked.

He stood, white shirt gleaming in the dark. If the humidity bothered him, it didn't show. Aubrey stood in the shadows near the door. The only light on him was the crimson neon of the club sign. He grinned at me, face painted red, body lost in shadows.

"It's a little too contrived, Aubrey," I said.

His grin wavered. "What do you mean?"

"You look like a B-movie Dracula."

He flowed down the steps, with that easy perfection that only the really old ones have. The street light showed his face tight, hands balled into fists.

Jean-Claude stepped in front of him and spoke low, voice a soothing whisper. Aubrey turned away with a jerky shrug and began to glide up the street.

Jean-Claude turned to me. "If you continue to taunt him, there will come a point from which I cannot bring him back. And you will die."

"I thought your job was to keep me alive for this Nikolaos."

He frowned. "It is, but I will not die to defend you. Do you understand that?"

"I do now."

"Good. Shall we go?" He gestured down the sidewalk, in the direction Aubrey had gone.

"We're going to walk?"

"It is not far." He held his hand out to me.

I stared at it and shook my head.

"It is necessary, Anita. I would not ask it otherwise."

"How is it necessary?"

"This night must remain secret from the police, Anita. Hold my hand, play the besotted human with her vampire lover. It will explain the blood on your blouse. It will explain where we are going, and why."

His hand hung there, pale and slender. There was no tremor to the fingers, no movement, as if he could stand there offering me his hand forever. And maybe he could.

I took his hand. His long fingers curved over the back of my hand. We began walking, his hand very still in mine. I could feel the pulse in my hand against his skin. His pulse began to speed up to match mine. I could feel his blood flow like a second heart.

"Have you fed tonight?" my voice sounded soft.

"Can you not tell?"

"I can never tell with you."

I saw him smile out of the corner of my eye. "I am flattered."

"You never answered my question."

"No," he said.

"No, you haven't answered me, or no, you haven't fed?"

He turned his head to me, as we walked. Sweat gleamed on his upper lip. "What do you think, ma petite?" His voice was the softest of whispers.

I jerked my hand, tried to get away, even though I knew it was silly, and wouldn't work. His hand convulsed around mine, squeezed until I gasped. He wasn't even trying hard.

"Do not struggle against me, Anita." His tongue slid across his upper lip. "Struggling is - exciting."

"Why didn't you feed earlier?"

"I was ordered not to."

"Why?"

He didn't answer me. Rain began to patter down. Light and cool.

"Why?" I repeated.

"I don't know." His voice was nearly lost in the soft fall of rain. If it had been anyone else I would have said he was afraid.

The hotel was tall and thin, and made of real brick. The sign out front glowed blue and said, "Vacancy." There was no other sign. Nothing to tell you what the place was called, or even what it was. Just vacancy.

Rain glistened in Jean-Claude's hair, like black diamonds. My top was sticking to my body. The blood had begun to wash away. Cold water was just the thing for a fresh blood stain.

A police car eased around the corner. I tensed. Jean-Claude jerked me against him. I put my palm against his chest to keep our bodies from touching. His heart thudded under my hand.

The police car was going very slowly. A spotlight began to search the shadows. They swept the District regularly. It was bad for tourism if the tourists got wasted by our biggest attractions.

Jean-Claude grabbed my chin and turned me to look at him. I tried to pull away, but his fingers dug into my chin. "Don't fight me!"

"I won't look in your eyes!"

"My word that I will not try to bespell you. For this night you may look into my eyes with safety. I swear it." He glanced at the police car, still moving towards us. "If the police are brought into this, I cannot promise what will happen to your friend."

I forced myself to relax in his arms, letting my body ease against his. My heartbeat sounded loud, as if I had been running. Then I realized it wasn't my heart I was hearing. Jean-Claude's pulse was throbbing through my body. I could hear it, feel it, almost squeeze it in my hand. I stared up at his face. His eyes were the darkest blue I had ever seen, perfect as a midnight sky. They were dark and alive, but there was no sense of drowning, no pull. They were just eyes.

His face leaned towards me. He whispered, "I swear."

He was going to kiss me. I didn't want him to. But I didn't want the police to stop and question us. I didn't want to explain the blood stains, the torn blouse. His lips hesitated over my mouth. His heartbeat was loud in my head, his pulse was racing, and my breathing was ragged with his need.

His lips were silk, his tongue a quick wetness. I tried to pull back and found his hand at the back of my neck, pressing my mouth against his.

The police spotlight swept over us. I relaxed against Jean-Claude, letting him kiss me. Our mouths pressed together. My tongue found the smooth hardness of fangs. I pulled away, and he let me. He pressed my face against his chest, one arm like steel against my back, pressing me against him. He was trembling, and it wasn't from the rain.

His breathing was ragged, his heart jumping under his skin against my cheek. The slick roughness of his burn scar touched my face.

His hunger poured over me in a violent wave, like heat. He had been sheltering me from it, until now. "Jean-Claude!" I didn't try to keep the fear out of my voice.

"Hush." A shudder ran through his body. His breath escaped in a loud sigh. He released me so abruptly, I stumbled.

He walked away from me to lean against a parked car. He raised his face up into the rain. I could still feel his heartbeat. I had never been so aware of my own pulse, the blood flowing through my veins. I hugged myself, shivering in the hot rain.

The police car had vanished into the streetlight darkness. After perhaps five minutes Jean-Claude stood. I could no longer feel his heartbeat. My own pulse was slow and regular. Whatever had happened was over.

He walked past me and called over his shoulder. "Come, Nikolaos awaits us inside."

I followed him through the door. He did not try to take my hand. In fact he stayed out of reach, and I trailed after him through a small square lobby. A human man sat behind the front desk. He glanced up from the magazine he was reading. His eyes flicked to Jean-Claude and back to me. He leered at me.

I glared back. He shrugged and turned back to his magazine. Jean-Claude moved swiftly up the stairs, not waiting for me. He didn't even look back. Maybe he could hear me walking behind him, or maybe he didn't care if I followed.

I guess we weren't pretending to be lovers anymore. Fancy that. I would almost have said the master vampire didn't trust himself around me.

There was a long hallway with doors on either side. Jean-Claude was halfway through one of those doors. I walked towards it. I refused to hurry. They could damn well wait.

The room held a bed, a nightstand with a lamp, and three vampires: Aubrey, Jean-Claude, and a strange female vampire. Aubrey was standing in the far corner, near the window. He was smiling at me. Jean-Claude stood near the door. The female vampire reclined on the bed. She looked like a vampire should. Long, straight, black hair fell around her shoulders. Her dress was full-skirted and black. She wore high black boots with three-inch heels.

"Look into my eyes," she said.

I glanced at her, before I could stop myself, then stared down at the floor.

She laughed, and it had the same quality of touch that Jean-Claude's did. A sound that you could feel with your hands.

"Close the door, Aubrey," she said. Her r's were thick with some accent that I couldn't place.

Aubrey brushed past me as he closed the door. He stayed in back of me, where I couldn't see him. I moved to stand with my back to the only empty wall, so I could see all of them, for what good it would do me.

"Afraid?" Aubrey asked.

"Still bleeding?" I asked.

He crossed his arms over the blood stain on his shirt. "We shall see who is bleeding come dawn."

"Aubrey, do not be childish." The vampire on the bed stood. Her heels clicked against the bare floor. She stalked around me, and I fought an urge to turn and keep her in sight. She laughed again, as if she knew it.

"You wish me to guarantee your friend's safety?" she asked. She had gone back to sink gracefully onto the bed. The bare, dingy room seemed somehow worse with her sitting there in her two-hundred-dollar leather boots.

"No," I said.

"That is what you asked, Anita," Jean-Claude said.

"I said that I wanted guarantees from Aubrey's master."

"You are speaking with my master, girl."

"No, I am not." The room was suddenly very still. I could hear something scrambling inside the wall. I had to look up to make sure the vampires were still in the room. They were all utterly still, like statues, no sense of movement or breathing, or life. They were all so damn old, but none of them were old enough to be Nikolaos.

"I am Nikolaos," the female said, her voice coaxing and breathing through the room. I wanted to believe her, but I didn't.

"No," I said. "You are not Aubrey's master." I risked a glance into her eyes. They were black and widened in surprise when I looked at them. "You are very old, and very good, but you are not old enough or strong enough to be Aubrey's master."

Jean-Claude said, "I told you she would see through it."

"Silence!"

"The game is over, Theresa. She knows."

"Only because you have told her."

"Tell them how you knew, Anita."

I shrugged. "She feels wrong. She just isn't old enough. There is more of a sense of power from Aubrey than from her. That isn't right."

"Do you still insist on speaking with our master?" the woman asked.

"I still want guarantees on my friend's safety." I glanced through the room, at each of them. "And I am getting tired of stupid little games."

Aubrey was suddenly moving towards me. The world slowed. There was no time for fear. I tried to back away, knowing there was nowhere to go.

Jean-Claude rushed him, hands reaching. He wouldn't make it in time.

Aubrey's hand came out of nowhere and caught me in the shoulder. The blow knocked all the air from my body and sent me flying backwards. My back slammed into the wall. My head hit a moment later, hard. The world went grey. I slid down the wall. I couldn't breathe. Tiny white shapes danced over the greyness. The world began to go black. I slid to the floor. It didn't hurt; nothing hurt. I struggled to breathe until my chest burned, and darkness took everything away.

Chapter 9

Voices floated through the darkness. Dreams. "We shouldn't have moved her."

"Did you want to disobey Nikolaos?"

"I helped bring her here, did I not?" It was a man's voice.

"Yes," a woman said.

I lay there with my eyes closed. I wasn't dreaming. I remembered Aubrey's hand coming from nowhere. It had been an open backhand slap. If he had closed his fist . . . but he hadn't. I was alive.

"Anita, are you awake?"

I opened my eyes. Light speared into my head. I closed my eyes against the light and the pain, but the pain stayed. I turned my head, and that was a mistake. The pain was a nauseating ache. It felt like the bones in my head were trying to slide off. I raised hands to cover my eyes and groaned.

"Anita, are you all right?"

Why do people always ask you that when the answer is obviously no? I spoke in a whisper, not sure how it would feel to talk. It didn't feel too bad.

"Just peachy keen."

"What?" This from the woman.

"I think she is being sarcastic," Jean-Claude said. He sounded relieved. "She can't be hurt too badly if she is making jokes."

I wasn't sure about the hurt too badly part. Nausea flowed in waves, from head to stomach, instead of the other way around. I was betting I had a concussion. The question was, how bad?

"Can you move, Anita?"

"No," I whispered.

"Let me rephrase. If I help you, can you sit up?"

I swallowed, trying to breathe through the pain and nausea. "Maybe."

Hands curved under my shoulders. The bones in my head started sliding forward as he lifted. I gasped and swallowed. "I'm going to be sick."

I rolled over on all fours. The movement was too rapid. The pan was a whirl of light and darkness. My stomach heaved. Vomit burned up my throat. My head was exploding.

Jean-Claude held me around the waist, one cool hand on my forehead, holding the bones of my head in place. His voice held me, a soothing sheet against my skin. He was speaking French, very softly. I didn't understand a word of it, and didn't need to. His voice held me, rocked me, took some of the pain.

He cradled me against his chest, and I was too weak to protest. The pain had been screaming through my head; now it was distant, a throbbing ache. It still felt obscene to turn my head, as if my head were sliding apart, but the pain was different, bearable.

He wiped my face and mouth with a damp cloth. "Do you feel better now?" he asked.

"Yes." I didn't understand where the pain had gone.

Theresa said, "Jean-Claude, what have you done?"

"Nikolaos wishes her to be aware and well for this visit. You saw her. She needs a hospital, not more tormenting."

"So you helped her." The vampire's voice sounded amused. "Nikolaos will not be pleased."

I felt him shrug. "I did what was necessary."

I could open my eyes without squinting or increasing the pain. We were in a dungeon; there was no other word for it. Thick stone walls enclosed a square room, perhaps twenty by twenty feet. Steps led up to a barred, wooden door. There were even chains set in the walls. Torches guttered along the walls. The only thing missing was a rack and a black-hooded torturer, one with big, beefy arms, and a tattoo that said "I love Mom." Yeah, that would have made it perfect.

I was feeling better, much better. I shouldn't have been recovering this quickly. I had been hurt before, badly. It didn't just fade, not like this.

"Can you sit unaided?" Jean-Claude asked.

Surprisingly, the answer was yes. I sat with my back to the wall. The pain was still there, but it just didn't hurt as much. Jean-Claude got a bucket from near the stairs and washed it over the floor. There was a very modern drain in the middle of the floor.

Theresa stood staring at me, hands on hips. "You certainly are recovering quickly." Her voice held amusement, and something else I couldn't define.

"The pain, the nausea, it's almost gone. How?"

She smirked, lips curling. "You'll have to ask Jean-Claude that. It's his doing, not mine."

"Because you could not have done it." There was a warm edge of anger to his voice.

Her face paled. "I would not have, regardless."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Jean-Claude looked at me, beautiful face unreadable. His dark eyes stared into mine. They were still just eyes.

"Go on, master vampire, tell her. See how grateful she is."

Jean-Claude stared at me, watching my face. "You are badly hurt, a concussion. But Nikolaos will not let us take you to a hospital until this . . . interview is over with. I feared you would die or be unable to . . . function." I had never heard his voice so uncertain. "So I shared my life-force with you."

I started to shake my head. Big mistake. I pressed hands to my forehead. "I don't understand."

He spread his hands wide. "I do not have the words."

"Oh, allow me," Theresa said. "He has taken the first step to making you a human servant."

"No." I was still having trouble thinking clearly, but I knew that wasn't right. "He didn't try to trick me with his mind, or eyes. He didn't bite me."

"I don't mean one of those pathetic half-creatures that have a few bites and do our bidding. I mean a permanent human servant, one that will never be bitten, never be hurt. One that will age almost as slowly as we do."

I still didn't understand. Perhaps it showed in my face because Jean-Claude said, "I took your pain and gave you some of my . . . stamina."

"Are you experiencing my pain, then?"

"No, the pain is gone. I have made you a little harder to hurt."

I still wasn't taking it all in, or maybe it was just beyond me. "I don't understand."

"Listen, woman, he has shared with you what we consider a great gift to be given only to people who have proven themselves invaluable."

I stared at Jean-Claude. "Does this mean I am in your power somehow?"

"Just the opposite," Theresa said, "you are now immune to his glance, his voice, his mind. You will serve him out of willingness, nothing more. You see what he has done."

I stared into her black eyes. They were just eyes.

She nodded. "Now you begin to understand. As an animator you had partial immunity to our gaze. Now you have almost complete immunity." She gave an abrupt barking laugh. "Nikolaos is going to destroy you both." With that she stalked up the stairs, the heels of her boots smacking against the stone. She left the door open behind her.

Jean-Claude had come to stand over me. His face was unreadable.

"Why?" I asked.

He just stared down at me. His hair had dried in unruly curls around his face. He was still beautiful, but the hair made him seem more real.

"Why?"

He smiled then, and there were tired lines near his eyes. "If you died, our master would have punished us. Aubrey is already suffering for his . . . indiscretion."

He turned and walked up the stairs. He moved up the steps like a cat, all boneless, liquid grace.

He paused at the door and glanced back at me. "Someone will come for you when Nikolaos decides it is time." He closed the door, and I heard it latch and lock. His voice floated through the bars, rich, almost bubbling with laughter, "And perhaps, because I liked you." His laughter was bitter, like broken glass.

Chapter 10

I had to check the locked door. Rattle it, poke at the lock, as if I knew how to pick locks. See if any bars were loose, though I could never have squeezed through the small window anyway.

I checked the door because I could not resist it. It was the same urge that made you rattle your trunk after you locked your keys inside.

I have been on the wrong side of a lot of locked doors. Not a one of them had just opened for me, but there was always a first time. Yeah, I should live so long. Scratch that; bad phrase.

A sound brought me back to the cell and its seeping, damp walls. A rat scurried against the far wall. Another peered around the edge of the steps, whiskers twitching. I guess you can't have a dungeon without rats, but I would have been willing to give it a try.

Something else pattered around the edge of the steps; in the torchlight I thought it was a dog. It wasn't. A rat the size of a German shepherd sat up on its sleek black haunches. It stared at me, huge paws tucked close to its furry chest. It cocked one large, black button eye at me. Lips drew back from yellowed teeth. The incisors were five inches long, blunt-edged daggers.

I yelled, "Jean-Claude!"

The air filled with high-pitched squeals, echoing, as if they were running up a tunnel. I stepped to the far edge of the stairs. And I saw it. A tunnel cut into the wall, almost man-high. Rats poured out of the tunnel in a thick, furry wave, squealing and biting. They flowed out and began to cover the floor.

"Jean-Claude!" I beat on the door, jerked at the bars, everything I had done before. It was useless. I wasn't getting out. I kicked the door and screamed, "Dammit!" The sound echoed against the stone walls and almost drowned out the sound of thousands of scrambling claws.

"They will not come for you until we are finished."

I froze, hands still on the door. I turned, slowly. The voice had come from inside the cell. The floor writhed and twisted with furry little bodies. High-pitched squeals, the thick brush of fur, the clatter of thousands of tiny claws filled the room. Thousands of them, thousands.

Four giant rats sat like mountains in the writhing furry tide. One of them stared at me with black button eyes. There was nothing ratlike in the stare. I had never seen wererats before, but I was betting that I was seeing them now.

One figure stood, legs half-bent. It was man-size, with a narrow, ratlike face. A huge naked tail curved around its bent legs like thick fleshy rope. It - no, he, definitely he - extended a clawed hand. "Come down and join us, human." The voice sounded thick, almost furry, with an edge of whine to it. Each word precise and a little wrong. Rats' lips are not made for talking.

I was not coming down the steps. No way. I could taste my heart in my throat. I knew a man who survived a werewolf attack, nearly died, and didn't become a werewolf. I know another man who was barely scratched and became a weretiger. Odds were, if I was so much as scratched, in a month's time I would be playing fur-face, complete with black button eyes and yellowish fangs. Dear God.

"Come down, human. Come down and play."

I swallowed hard. It felt like I was trying to swallow my heart. "I don't think so."

It gave a hissing laugh. "We could come up and fetch you." He strode through the lesser rats, and they parted for him frantically, leaping on top of each other to avoid his touch. He stood at the edge of the steps, looking up at me. His fur was almost a honey-brown color, streaked with blond. "If we force you off the steps, you won't like it much."

I swallowed hard. I believed him. I went for my knife and found the sheath empty. Of course, the vampires had taken it. Dammit.

"Come down, human, come down and play."

"If you want me, you're going to have to come get me."

He curled his tail through his hands, stroking it. One clawed hand ran through the fur of his belly, and stroked lower. I stared very hard at his face, and he laughed at me.

"Fetch her."

Two of the dog-size rats moved towards the stairs. A small rat squealed and rolled under their feet. It gave a high, piteous shriek, then nothing. It twitched until the other rats covered it. Tiny bones snapped. Nothing would go to waste.

I pressed against the door, as if I could sink through it. The two rats crept up the steps, sleek well-fed animals. But there was no animal in the eyes. Whatever was there was human, intelligent.

"Wait, wait."

The rats hesitated.

The ratman said, "Yes?"

I swallowed audibly. "What do you want?"

"Nikolaos asked that we entertain you while you wait."

"That doesn't answer my question. What do you want me to do? What do you want?"

Lips curled back from yellowed teeth. It looked like a snarl, but I think it was a smile. "Come down to us, human. Touch us, let us touch you. Let us teach you the joys of fur and teeth." He rubbed claws through the fur of his thighs. It drew my attention to him, between his legs. I looked away, and heat rushed up my skin. I was blushing. Dammit!

My voice came out almost steady. "Is that supposed to be impressive?" I asked.

He froze for an instant, then snarled, "Get her down here!"

Great, Anita, antagonize him. Imply that his equipment is a little undersized.

His hissing laugh ran up my skin in cold waves. "We are going to have fun tonight. I can tell."

The giant rats came up the steps, muscles working under fur, whiskers thick as wire, wriggling furiously. I pressed my back against the door and began to slide down the wood. "Please, please don't." My voice sounded high and frightened, and I hated it.

"We've broken you so soon; how very sad," the ratman said.

The two giant rats were almost on me. I braced my back against the door, knees tucked up, heels planted, the rest of the foot slightly raised. A claw touched my leg, I flinched, but I waited. It had to be right. Please, God, don't let them draw blood. Whiskers scraped along my face, the weight of fur on top of me.

I kicked out, both feet hitting solidly in the rat. It raised onto its hind legs and toppled backwards. It tittered, tail lashing. I threw myself forward and smashed it in the chest. The rat tumbled over the edge.

The second rat crouched, making a sound low in its throat. I watched its muscles bunch, and I went down to one knee and braced. If it leaped on me standing, I'd go over the edge. I was only inches from the drop.

It leaped. I dropped flat to the floor and rolled. I shoved feet and one hand into the warmth of its body and helped it along. The rat plummeted over me and out of sight. I heard the frightened shrieks as it fell. The sound was a thick "thumpth." Satisfying. I doubted either of them were dead. But it was the best I could do.

I stood, putting my back to the door again. The ratman wasn't smiling anymore. I smiled at him sweetly, my best angelic smile. He didn't seem impressed.

He made a motion like parting air, smooth. The lesser rats flowed forward with his hand. A creeping brown tide of furry little bodies began to boil up the steps.

I might be able to get a few of them, but not all of them. If he wanted them to, they'd eat me alive, one tiny crimson bite at a time.

Rats flowed around my feet, scrambling and arguing. Tiny bodies bumped against my boots. One stretched itself thin, reaching up to grab the edge of my boot. I kicked it off. It fell squealing over the edge.

The giant rats had dragged one of their injured friends off to one side. The rat wasn't moving. The other I had thrown off was limping.

A rat leaped upward, claws hooked in my blouse. It hung there, claws trapped in the cloth. I could feel its weight over my breast. I grabbed it around its middle. Teeth sank into my hand until they met, grinding skin, missing bone. I screamed, jerking the rat away from me. It dangled from my hand like an obscene earring. Blood ran down its fur. Another rat leaped on my blouse.

The ratman was smiling.

A rat was climbing for my face. I grabbed it by the tail and pulled it away. I yelled, "Are you afraid to come yourself? Are you afraid of me?" My voice was thin with panic, but I said it. "Your friends are injured doing something you're afraid to do. Is that it? Is it?"

The giant rats were staring from me to the ratman. He glanced at them. "I am not afraid of a human."

"Then come up, take me yourself, if you can." The rat on my hand dropped away in a spout of blood. The skin between thumb and forefinger was ripped apart.

The lesser rats hesitated, staring wildly around. One was halfway up my jeans. It dropped to the floor.

"I am not afraid."

"Prove it." My voice sounded a little steadier, maybe about nine years old instead of five.

The giant rats were staring at him, intent, judging, waiting. He made that same cutting-air motion in reverse. The rats squeaked and stood on hind legs staring around, as if they couldn't believe it, but they began to pour down the stairs the way they had come.

I leaned into the door, knees weak, cradling the bitten hand against my chest. The ratman began to creep up the stairs. He moved easily on the balls of his elongated feet, strong clawed toes digging into the stone.

Lycanthropes are stronger and faster than humans. No mind tricks, no sleight of hand, they are just better. I would not be able to surprise the wererat, as I had the first. I doubted he would grow angry enough to be stupid, but one could always hope. I was hurt, unarmed, and outmatched. If I couldn't get him to make a mistake, I was in deep shit.

A long, pink tongue curved over his teeth. "Fresh blood," he said. He drew in a loud breath of air. "You stink of fear, human. Blood and fear, smells like dinner to me." The tongue flicked out and he laughed at me.

I slid my uninjured hand behind my back, as if reaching for something. "Come closer, ratman, and we'll see how you like silver."

The ratman hesitated, frozen, half-crouched on the top step. "You have no silver."

"Want to bet your life on it?"

His clawed hands clutched each other. One of the large rats squeaked something. He snarled down at it. "I am not afraid!"

If they egged him on, my bluff wasn't going to work. "You saw what I did to your friends. That was without a weapon." My voice sounded low and sure of itself. Good for me.

He eyed me out of one large patent-leather eye. His fur glistened in the torchlight as if freshly washed. He gave a small jump and was on the landing, just out of reach.

"I've never seen a blond rat before," I said. Anything to fill the silence, anything to keep him from taking that one last step. Surely Jean-Claude would come back for me soon. I laughed then, abrupt and half-choked.

The ratman froze, staring at me. "Why are you laughing?" His voice held just a hint of unease. Good.

"I was hoping that the vampires would come for me soon and save me. You've got to admit that's funny."

He didn't seem to think it was funny. A lot of people don't get my jokes. If I was less secure, I'd think my jokes weren't funny. Naw.

I moved my hand behind my back, still pretending that there was a knife in it. One of the giant rats squealed, and even to me it sounded derisive. He would never live it down if I bluffed him. I might not live it down if I didn't.

Most people, when confronted with a wererat, freeze or panic. I'd had time to get used to the idea. I wasn't going to fade away if he touched me. There was one possible solution where I could save myself. If I was wrong, he was going to kill me. My stomach turned a sharp flip-flop, and I had to swallow hard. Better dead than furry. If he attacked me, I'd just as soon he killed me. Rats were not my top choice for being a lycanthrope. If your luck was bad, the smallest scratch could infect you.

If I was quick and lucky, I could go to a hospital and be treated. Sort of like rabies. Of course sometimes the inoculations worked, and sometimes they gave you lycanthropy.

He wrapped his long, naked tail through his clawed hands. "You ever been had by a were?"

I wasn't sure if he was talking sex or as a meal. Neither sounded pleasant. He was going to work up to it, get himself brave, then he'd come for me, when he was ready. I wanted him to come when I was ready.

I chose sex and said, "You haven't got what it takes, ratman."

He stiffened, hand sliding down his body, claws combing fur. "We'll see who has what, human."

"Is this the only way you get any sex, forcing yourself on someone? Are you as ugly in human form as you are right now?"

He hissed at me, mouth wide, teeth bared. A sound rose out of his body, deep and high, a whining growl. I'd never heard a sound like it before. It rose up and down and filled the room with violent, hissing echoes. His shoulders crouched.

I held my breath. I had pissed him off. Now we would see if my plan worked, or if he killed me. He leaped forward. I dropped to the floor, but he was ready for it. Incredible speed and he was on me, snarling, claws reaching, screaming in my face.

I bunched my legs against my chest, or he would have been on top of me. He put one claw-hand on my knees and began to push. I tucked arms over my knees, fighting him. It was like fighting steel that moved. He screamed again, high and hissing, spittle raining on me. He went up on his knees to get a better angle at forcing my legs down. I kicked outward, everything I had. He saw it coming and tried to move back, but both feet hit him square between the legs. The impact lifted him off his knees, and he collapsed to the landing, claws scrambling on the stone. He was making a high, whining, breathy sound. He couldn't seem to get enough air.

A second ratman came scrambling through the tunnel, and rats ran everywhere, squeaking and squealing. I just sat there on the landing as far away from the writhing blond ratman as I could get. I stared at the new ratman, feeling tired and angry.

Dammit, it should have worked. The bad guys weren't allowed reinforcements when I was already outnumbered. This one's fur was black, jet absolute black. He wore a pair of jean cutoffs over his slightly bent legs. He motioned, smooth and out from his body.

I swallowed my heart, pulse thudding. My skin crawled with the memory of small bodies sliding over me. My hand throbbed where the rat had bitten me. They'd tear me apart. "Jean-Claude!"

The rats moved, a flowing brownish tide, away from the stairs. The rats ran squeaking and shrilling into the tunnel. All I could do was stare.

The giant rats hissed at him, gesturing with noses and paws at the fallen giant rat. "She was defending herself. What were you doing?" The ratman's voice was low and deep, slurred only around the edges. If I had closed my eyes, I might have said it was human.

I didn't close my eyes. The giant rats left, crouch-dragging their still unconscious friend. He wasn't dead, but he was hurt. One giant rat glanced up at me as the others vanished into the tunnel. Its empty black eye glared at me, promised me painful things if we ever met again.

The blond ratman had stopped writhing and was lying very still, panting, hands cradling himself. The new ratman said, "I told you never to come here."

The first ratman struggled to sit up. The movement seemed to hurt. "The master called and I obeyed."

"I am your king. You obey me." The black-furred rat began to stride up the stairs, tail lashing angrily, almost catlike.

I stood and put the cell door at my back for the umpteenth time that night.

The hurt ratman said, "You are only our king until you die. If you stand against the master, that will be soon. She is powerful, more powerful than you." His voice still sounded weak, thready, but he was recovering. Anger will do that to you.

The rat king leaped, a black blur in motion. He jerked the ratman off his feet, holding him with slightly bent elbows, feet dangling off the ground. He held him close to his face. "I am your king, and you will obey me or I will kill you." Clawed hands dug into the blond ratman's throat, until he scrambled for

air. The rat king tossed the ratman down the stairs. He fell tumbling and nearly boneless.

He glared up from the bottom in a painful, gasping heap. The hatred in his eyes would have lit a bonfire.

"Are you all right?" the new ratman asked.

It took me a minute to realize he was speaking to me. I nodded.

Apparently I was being rescued, not that I had need of it. Of course not. "Thank you."

"I did not come to save you," he said. "I have forbidden my people to hunt for the vampire. That is why I came."

"Well, I know where I rate, somewhere above a flea. Thank you anyway. Whatever your motives."

He nodded. "You are welcome."

I noticed a burn scar on his left forearm. It was the shape of a crude crown. Someone had branded him. "Wouldn't it be easier just to carry around a crown and scepter?"

He glanced down at his arm, then gave that rat smile, teeth bare. "This leaves my hands free."

I looked up into his eyes to see if he was teasing me, and I couldn't tell. You try reading rat faces.

"What do the vampires want with you?" he asked.

"They want me to work for them."

"Do it. They'll hurt you if you don't."

"Like they'll hurt you if you keep the rats away?"

He shrugged, an awkward motion. "Nikolaos thinks she is queen of the rats because that is her animal to call. We are not merely rats, but men, and we have a choice. I have a choice."

"Do what she wants, and she won't hurt you," I said.

Again that smile. "I give good advice. I do not always take it."

"Me either," I said.

He stared at me out of one black eye, then turned towards the door. "They are coming."

I knew who "they" were. The party was over. The vampires were coming. The rat king sprang down the stairs and scooped up the fallen ratman. He tossed him over his shoulder as if it were no effort, then he was gone, running for the tunnel, fast, fast as a mouse surprised by the kitchen light. A dark blur.

I heard heels clicking down the hallway, and I stepped away from the door. It opened, and Theresa stood on the landing. She stared down at me and the empty room, hands on hips, mouth squeezed tight. "Where are they?"

I held up my wounded hand. "They did their part, then they left."

"They weren't supposed to leave," she said. Theresa made an exasperated sound low in her throat. "It was that rat king of theirs, wasn't it?"

I shrugged. "They left; I don't know why."

"So calm, so unafraid. Didn't the rats frighten you?"

I shrugged again. When something works, stay with it.

"They were not supposed to draw blood." She stared at me. "Are you going to shape shift next full moon?" Her voice held a hint of curiosity. Curiosity killed the vampire. One could always hope.

"No," I said, and I left it at that. No explanation. If she really wanted one, she could just beat me against the wall until I told her what she wanted to hear. She wouldn't even break a sweat. Of course, Aubrey was being punished for hurting me.

Her eyes narrowed as she studied me. "The rats were supposed to frighten you, animator. They don't seem to have done their job."

"Maybe I don't frighten that easily." I met her eyes without any effort. They were just eyes.

Theresa grinned at me suddenly, flashing fang. "Nikolaos will find something that frightens you, animator. For fear is power." She whispered the last as if afraid to say it too loud.

What did vampires fear? Did visions of sharpened stakes and garlic haunt them, or were there worse things? How do you frighten the dead?

"Walk in front of me, animator. Go meet your master."

"Isn't Nikolaos your master as well, Theresa?"

She stared at me, face blank, as if the laughter had been an illusion. Her eyes were cold and dark. The rats' eyes had held more personality. "Before the night is out, animator, Nikolaos will be everyone's master."

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Jean-Claude's power has made you foolish."

"No," I said, "it isn't that."

"Then what, mortal?"

"I would rather die than be a vampire's flunky."

Theresa never blinked, only nodded, very slowly. "You may get your wish."

The hair at the back of my neck crawled. I could meet her gaze, but evil has a certain feel to it. A neck-ruffling, throat-tightening feeling that tightens your gut. I have felt it around humans as well. You don't have to be undead to be evil. But it helps.

I walked in front of her. Theresa's boots clicked sharp echoes from the hallway. Maybe it was only my fear talking, but I felt her staring at me, like an ice cube sliding down my spine.

Chapter 11

The room was huge, like a warehouse, but the walls were solid, massive stone. I kept waiting for Bela Lugosi to sweep around the corner in his cape. What was sitting against one wall was almost as good.

She had been about twelve or thirteen when she died. Small, half-formed breasts showed under a long flimsy dress. It was pale blue and looked warm against the total whiteness of her skin. She had been pale when alive; as a vampire she was ghostly. Her hair was that shining white-blond that some children have before their hair darkens to brown. This hair would never grow dark.

Nikolaos sat in a carved wooden chair. Her feet did not quite touch the floor.

A male vampire moved to lean on the chair arm. His skin was a strange shade of brownish ivory. He leaned over and whispered in Nikolaos's ear.

She laughed, and it was the sound of chimes or bells. A lovely, calculated sound. Theresa went to the girl in the chair, and stood behind it, hands trailing in the long white-blond hair.

A human male came to stand to the right of her chair. Back against the wall, hands clasped at his side. He stared straight ahead, face blank, spine rigid. He was nearly perfectly bald, face narrow, eyes dark. Most men don't look good without hair. This one did. He was handsome but had the air of a man who didn't care much about that. I wanted to call him a soldier, though I didn't know why.

Another man came to lean against Theresa. His hair was a sandy blond, cut short. His face was strange, not good looking, but not ugly, a face you would remember. A face that might become lovely if you looked at it long enough. His eyes were a pale greenish color.

He wasn't a vampire, but I might have been hasty calling him human.

Jean-Claude came last to stand to the left of the chair. He touched no one, and even standing with them, he was apart from them.

"Well," I said, "all we need is the theme from *Dracula, Prince of Darkness*, and we'll be all set."

Her voice was like her laugh, high and harmless. Planned innocence. "You think you are funny, don't you?"

I shrugged. "It comes and goes."

She smiled at me. No fang showed. She looked so human, eyes sparkling with humor, face rounded and pleasant. See how harmless I am, just a pretty child. Right.

The black vampire whispered in her ear again. She laughed, so high and clear you could have bottled it.

"Do you practice the laugh, or is it natural talent? Naw, I'm betting you practice."

Jean-Claude's face twisted. I wasn't sure if he was trying not to laugh, or not to frown. Maybe both. I affected some people that way.

The laughter seeped out of her face, very human, until only her eyes sparkled. There was nothing funny about the look in those twinkling eyes. It was the sort of look that cats give small birds.

Her voice lilted at the end of each word, a Shirley Temple affectation. "You are either very brave, or very stupid."

"You really need at least one dimple to go with the voice."

Jean-Claude said softly, "I'm betting on stupid."

I glanced at him and then back at the ghoulie pack. "What I am is tired, hurt, angry, and scared. I would very much like to get the show over with, and get down to business."

"I am beginning to see why Aubrey lost his temper." Her voice was dry, humorless. The lilting sing-song was dripping away like melting ice.

"Do you know how old I am?"

I stared at her and shook my head.

"I thought you said she was good, Jean-Claude." She said his name like she was angry with him.

"She is good."

"Tell me how old I am." Her voice was cold, an angry grownup's voice.

"I can't. I don't know why, but I can't."

"How old is Theresa?"

I stared at the dark-haired vampire, remembering the weight of her in my mind. She was laughing at me. "A hundred, maybe hundred and fifty, no more."

Her face was unreadable, carved marble, as she asked, "Why, no more?"

"That's how old she feels."

"Feels?"

"In my head, she feels a certain . . . degree of power." I always hated to explain this part aloud. It always sounded mystical. It wasn't. I knew vampires the way some people knew horses, or cars. It was a knack. It was practice. I didn't think Nikolaos would enjoy being compared to a horse, or car, so I kept my mouth shut. See, not stupid after all.

"Look at me, human. Look into my eyes." Her voice was still bland, with none of that commanding power that Jean-Claude had.

Geez, look into my eyes. You'd think the city's master vampire could be more original. But I didn't say it out loud. Her eyes were blue, or grey, or both. Her gaze was like a weight pressing against my skin. If I put my hands up, I almost expected to be able to push something away. I had never felt any vampire's gaze like that.

But I could meet her eyes. Somehow, I knew that wasn't supposed to happen.

The soldier standing to her right was looking at me, as if I'd finally done something interesting.

Nikolaos stood. She moved a little in front of her entourage. She would only come to my collarbone, which made her short. She stood there for a moment, looking ethereal and lovely like a painting. No sense of life but a thing of lovely lines and careful color.

She stood there without moving and opened her mind to me. It felt like she had opened a door that had been locked. Her mind crashed against mine, and I staggered. Thoughts ripped into me like knives, steel-edged dreams. Fleeting bits of her mind danced in my head; where they touched I was numbed, hurt.

I was on my knees, and I didn't remember falling. I was cold, so cold. There was nothing for me. I was an insignificant thing, beside that mind. How

could I think to call myself an equal? How could I do anything but crawl to her and beg to be forgiven? My insolence was intolerable.

I began to crawl to her, on hands and knees. It seemed like the right thing to do. I had to beg her forgiveness. I needed to be forgiven. How else did you approach a goddess but on bended knee?

No. Something was wrong. But what? I should ask the goddess to forgive me. I should worship her, do anything she asked. No. No.

"No." I whispered it. "No."

"Come to me, my child." Her voice was like spring after a long winter. It opened me up inside. It made me feel warm and welcome.

She held out pale arms to me. The goddess would let me embrace her.

Wondrous. Why was I cowering on the floor? Why didn't I run to her?

"No." I slammed my hands into the stone. It stung, but not enough. "No!" I smashed my fist into the floor. My whole arm tingled and went numb. "NO!" I pounded my fists into the rock over and over until they bled. Pain was sharp, real, mine. I screamed, "Get out of my mind! You bitch!"

I crouched on the floor, panting, cradling my hands against my stomach. My pulse was jumping in my throat. I couldn't breathe past it. Anger washed through me, clean and sharp-edged. It chased the last shadow of Nikolaos's mind away.

I glared up at her. Anger, and behind that terror. Nikolaos had washed over my mind like the ocean in a seashell, filled me up and emptied me out. She might have to drive me crazy to break me, but she could do it if she wanted to. And there wasn't a damn thing I could do to protect myself.

She stared down at me and laughed, that wondrous wind chime of a laugh. "Oh, we have found something the animator fears. Yes, we have." Her voice was lilting and pleasant. A child bride again.

Nikolaos knelt in front of me, sweeping the sky-blue dress under her knees. Ladylike. She bent at the waist so she could look me in the eyes. "How old am I, animator?"

I was starting to shake with reaction, shock. My teeth chattered like I was freezing to death, and maybe I was. My voice squeezed out between my teeth and the tight jerk of my jaw. "A thousand," I said. "Maybe more."

"You were right, Jean-Claude. She is good." She pressed her face nearly into mine. I wanted to push her away, but more than anything, I didn't want her to touch me.

She laughed again, high and wild, heartrendingly pure. If I hadn't been hurting so badly, I might have cried, or spit in her face.

"Good, animator, we understand each other. You do what we want, or I will peel your mind away like the layers of an onion." She breathed against my face, voice dropping to a whisper. A child's whisper with an edge of giggling to it. "You do believe I can do that, don't you?"

I believed.

Chapter 12

I wanted to spit in that smooth, pale face, but I was afraid of what she would do to me. A drop of sweat ran slowly down my face. I wanted to promise her anything, anything, if she would never touch me again. Nikolaos didn't have to bespell me; all she had had to do was terrify me. The fear would control me. It was what she was counting on. I could not let that happen.

"Get . . . out . . . of . . . my . . . face," I said.

She laughed. Her breath was warm and smelled like peppermint. Breath mints. But underneath the clean, modern smell, very faint, was the scent of fresh blood. Old death. Recent murder.

I wasn't shivering anymore. I said, "Your breath smells like blood."

She jerked back, a hand going to her lips. It was such a human gesture that I laughed. Her dress brushed my face as she stood. One small, slipped foot kicked me in the chest.

The force tumbled me backwards, sharp pain, no air. For the second time that night, I couldn't breathe. I lay flat on my stomach, gasping, swallowing past the pain. I hadn't heard anything break. Something should have broken.

The voice thudded over me, hot enough to scald. "Get her out of here before I kill her myself."

The pain faded to a sharp ache. Air burned going down. My chest was tight, like I'd swallowed lead.

"Stay where you are, Jean."

Jean-Claude was standing away from the wall, halfway to me. Nikolaos commanded him to stillness with one small, pale hand.

"Can you hear me, animator?"

"Yes." My voice was strangled. I couldn't get enough air to talk.

"Did I break something?" Her voice rose upward like a small bird.

I coughed, trying to clear my throat, but it hurt. I huddled around my chest while the ache faded. "No."

"Pity. But I suppose that would have slowed things down, or made you useless to us." She seemed to think about the last as if that had had possibilities. What would they have done to me if something had been broken? I didn't want to know.

"The police are aware of only four vampire murders. There have been six more."

I breathed in carefully. "Why not tell the police?"

"My dear animator, there are many among us who do not trust the human laws. We know how equal human justice is for the undead." She smiled, and again there should have been a dimple. "Jean-Claude was the fifth most powerful vampire in this city. Now he is the third."

I stared up at her, waiting for her to laugh, to say it was a joke. She continued to smile, the same exact smile, like a piece of wax. Were they playing me for a fool? "Something has killed two master vampires? Stronger than" - I had to swallow before continuing - "Jean-Claude?"

Her smile widened, flashing a distinct glimpse of fang. "You do grasp the situation quickly. I will give you that. And perhaps that will make Jean-Claude's punishment less - severe. He recommended you to us, did you know that?"

I shook my head and glanced at him. He had not moved, not even to breathe. Only his eyes looked at me. Dark blue like midnight skies, almost fever-bright. He hadn't fed yet. Why wouldn't she let him feed?

"Why is he being punished?"

"Are you worried about him?" Her voice held a mockery of surprise. "My, my, my, aren't you angry that he brought you into this?"

I stared at him for a moment. I knew then what I saw in his eyes. It was fear. He was afraid of Nikolaos. And I knew if I had any ally in this room, it was him. Fear will bind you closer than love, or hate, and it works a hell of a lot quicker. "No," I said.

"No, no." She minced the word, crying it up and down, a child's imitation. "Fine." Her voice was suddenly lower, grownup, shimmering with heat, angry. "We will give you a gift, animator. We have a witness to the second murder. He saw Lucas die. He will tell you everything he saw, won't he, Zachary?" She smiled at the sandy-haired man.

Zachary nodded. He stepped from around the chair and swept a low bow towards me. His lips were too thin for his face, his smile crooked. Yet, the ice-green eyes stayed with me. I had seen that face before, but where?

He strode to a small door. I hadn't seen it before. It was hidden in the flickering shadows of the torches, but still I should have noticed. I glanced at Nikolaos, and she nodded at me, a smile curving her lips.

She had hidden the door from me without me knowing it. I tried to stand, pushing myself up with my hands. Mistake. I gasped and stood as quickly as I dared. The hands were already stiff with bruises and scrapes. If I lived until morning, I was going to be one sore puppy.

Zachary opened the door with a flourish, like a magician drawing a curtain. A man stood in the door. He was dressed in the remains of a business suit. A slender figure, a little thick around the middle, too many beers, too little exercise. He was maybe thirty.

"Come," Zachary said.

The man moved out into the room. His eyes were round with fear. A pinkie ring winked in the firelight. He stank of fear and death.

He was still tanned, eyes still full. He could pass for human better than any vampire in the room, but he was more a corpse than any of them. It was just a matter of time. I raised the dead for a living. I knew a zombie when I saw one.

"Do you remember Nikolaos?" Zachary asked.

The zombie's human eyes grew large, and the color drained from his face. Damn, he looked human. "Yes."

"You will answer Nikolaos's questions, do you understand that?"

"I understand." His forehead wrinkled as if he were concentrating on something, something he couldn't quite remember.

"He would not answer our questions before. Would you?" Nikolaos said.

The zombie shook its head, eyes staring at her with a sort of fearful fascination. Birds must look at snakes that way.

"We tortured him, but he was most stubborn. Then before we could continue our work, he hung himself. We really should have taken his belt away." She sounded wistful, pouty. The zombie was staring at her. "I . . . hung myself. I don't understand. I . . ."

"He doesn't know?" I asked.

Zachary smiled. "No, he doesn't. Isn't it fabulous? You know how hard it is to make one so human, that he forgets he has died."

I knew. It meant somebody had a lot of power. Zachary was staring at the confused undead like he was a work of art. Precious. "You raised him?" I asked.

Nikolaos said, "Did you not recognize a fellow animator?" She laughed, lightly, a breeze of far-off bells.

I glanced at Zachary's face. He was staring at me, eyes memorizing me. Face blank, with a thread of something making the skin under one eye jump. Anger, fear? Then he smiled at me, brilliant, echoing. Again there was that shock of recognition.

"Ask your question, Nikolaos. He has to answer now."

"Is that true?" she asked me.

I hesitated, surprised that she had turned to me. "Yes."

"Who killed the vampire, Lucas?"

He stared at her, face crumbling. His breathing was shallow and too fast.

"Why doesn't he answer me?"

"The question is too complex," Zachary explained. "He may not remember who Lucas is."

"Then you ask him the questions, and I expect him to answer." Her voice was warm with threat.

Zachary turned with a flourish, spreading arms wide. "Ladies and gentlemen, behold, the undead." He grinned at his own joke. No one else even smiled. I didn't get it either.

"Did you see a vampire murdered?"

The zombie nodded. "Yes."

"How was he murdered?"

"Heart torn out, head cut off." His voice was paper-thin with fear.

"Who tore out his heart?"

The zombie started to shake his head over and over, quick, jerky movements. "Don't know, don't know."

"Ask him what killed the vampire," I said.

Zachary shot me a look. His eyes were green glass. Bones stood out in his face. Rage sculpted him into a skeleton with canvas skin.

"This is my zombie, my business!"

"Zachary," Nikolaos said.

He turned to her, movements stiff.

"It is a good question. A reasonable question." Her voice was low, calm. No one was fooled. Hell must be full of voices like that. Deadly, but oh so reasonable.

"Ask her question, Zachary."

He turned back to the zombie, hands balled into fists. I didn't understand where the anger was coming from. "What killed the vampire?"

"Don't understand." The voice held a knife's edge of panic.

"What sort of creature tore out the heart? Was it a human?"

"No."

"Was it another vampire?"

"No."

This was why zombies still didn't do well in court. You had to lead them by the hand, so to speak, to get answers. Lawyers accused you of leading the witness. Which was true, but it didn't mean the zombie was lying.

"Then what killed the vampire?"

Again that head shaking, back and forth, back and forth. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He seemed to be choking on the words, as if someone had stuffed paper down his throat. "Can't!"

"What do you mean, can't?" Zachary screamed it at him and slapped him across the face. The zombie threw up its arms to cover its head. "You . . . will . . . answer . . . me." Each word was punctuated with a slap.

The zombie fell to its knees and started to cry. "Can't!"

"Answer me, damn you!" He kicked the zombie, and it collapsed to the ground, rolling into a tight ball.

"Stop it." I walked towards them. "Stop it!"

He kicked the zombie one last time and turned on me. "It's my zombie! I can do what I want with him."

"That used to be a human being. It deserves more respect than this." I knelt by the crying zombie. I felt Zachary looming over me.

Nikolaos said, "Leave her alone, for now."

He stood there like an angry shadow pressing over my back. I touched the zombie's arm. It flinched. "It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you." Not going to hurt you. He had killed himself to escape. But not even the grave was sanctuary enough. Before tonight I would have said no animator would have raised the dead for such a purpose. Sometimes the world is a worse place than I want to know about.

I had to peel the zombie's hands from his face, then turn the face up to stare at me. One look was enough. Dark eyes were incredibly wide, fear, such fear. A thin line of spittle oozed from his mouth.

I shook my head and stood. "You've broken him."

"Damn right. No damn zombie is going to make a fool of me. He'll answer the questions."

I whirled to stare at the man's angry eyes. "Don't you understand? You've broken his mind."

"Zombies don't have minds."

"That's right, they don't. All they have, and for a very short time, is the memory of what they were. If you treat them well, they can retain their personalities for maybe a week, a little more, but this . . ." I pointed at the zombie, then spoke to Nikolaos. "Ill treatment will speed the process. Shock will destroy it."

"What are you saying, animator?"

"This sadist" - I jabbed a thumb at Zachary - "has destroyed the zombie's mind. It won't be answering any more questions. Not for anyone, not ever."

Nikolaos turned like a pale storm. Her eyes were blue glass. Her words filled the room with a soft burning. "You arrogant. . ." A tremor ran through her body, from small, slippered feet to long white-blond hair. I waited for the wooden chair to catch fire and blaze from the fine heat of her anger.

The anger stripped away the child puppet. Bones stood out against white paper skin. Hands grabbed at the air, clawed and straining. One hand dug into the arm of her chair. The wood whined, then cracked. The sound echoed against the stone walls. Her voice burned along our skin. "Get out of here before I kill you. Take the woman and see her safely back to her car. If you fail me again, large or small, I will tear your throat out, and my children will bathe in a shower of your blood."

Nicely graphic; a little melodramatic, but nicely graphic. I didn't say it out loud. Hell, I wasn't even breathing. Any movement might attract her. All she needed was an excuse.

Zachary seemed to sense it as well. He bowed, eyes never leaving her face. Then without a word he turned and began to walk towards the small door. His movements were unhurried, as if death wasn't staring holes in his back. He paused at the open door and made a motion as if to escort me through the door. I glanced at Jean-Claude, still standing where she had left him. I had not asked about Catherine's safety; there had been no opportunity. Things were happening too fast. I opened my mouth; maybe Jean-Claude guessed.

He silenced me with a wave of a slender, pale hand. The hand seemed as white as the lace on his shirt. His eye sockets were filled with blue flame. The long, black hair floated around his suddenly death-pale face. His humanity was folding away. His power flared across my skin, raising the hairs on my arms. I hugged myself, staring at the creature that had been Jean-Claude.

"Run!" He screamed it at me, voice slashing into me. I should have been bleeding from it. I hesitated and caught sight of Nikolaos. She was levitating, ever so slowly, upward. Milkweed hair danced around her skeleton head. She raised a clawed hand. Bones and veins were caught in the amber of her skin.

Jean-Claude whirled, claw-hand slashing out at me. Something slammed me into the wall and half out the door. Zachary caught my arm and pulled me through.

I twisted free of him. The door thudded closed in my face. I whispered, "Sweet Jesus."

Zachary was at the foot of a narrow stairway, leading up. He held his hand out to me. His face was slick with sweat. "Please!" He fluttered his hand at me like a trapped bird.

A smell oozed from under the door. It was the smell of rotting corpses. The smell of bloated bodies, of skin cracked and ripening in the sun, of blood slowed and rotting in quiet veins. I gagged and backed away.

"Oh, God," Zachary whispered. He put one hand over his mouth and nose, the other still held out to me.

I ignored his hand but stood beside him on the stairs. He opened his mouth to say something, but the door creaked. The wood shook and hammered, like a giant wind was beating against it. Wind whooshed from under the door. My hair streamed in a tornado wind. We backed up a few steps while the heavy wooden door fluttered and kicked against a wind that couldn't be there. A storm indoors? The sick smell of rotting flesh bled into the wind. We looked at each other. There was that moment of recognition of us against them, or it. We turned and started running like we were attached by wires.

There couldn't be a storm behind that door. There couldn't be a wind chasing us up the narrow stone stairs. There were no rotting corpses in that room. Or were there? God, I didn't want to know. I did not want to know.

Chapter 13

An explosion ripped up the stairs. The wind smashed us down like toys. The door had blown. I scrambled on all fours trying to get away, just get away. Zachary got to his feet, dragging me up by one arm. We ran.

There was a howling from behind us, out of sight. The wind roared up behind us. My hair streamed over my face, blinding me. Zachary's hand grabbed mine and held on. The walls were smooth, the stairs slick stone, there was nothing to hold on to. We flattened ourselves against the stairs and hung onto each other.

"Anita." Jean-Claude's velvet voice whispered. "Anita." I fought to look up into the wind, blinking to see. There was nothing there. "Anita." The wind was calling my name. "Anita." Something glimmered, blue fire. Two points of blue flame, hung on the wind. Eyes - were those Jean-Claude's eyes? Was he dead?

The blue flames began to float downward. The wind didn't touch them. I screamed, "Zachary!" But the sound was swallowed in the roar of the wind. Did he see it, too, or was I going crazy?

The blue flames came lower and lower, and suddenly I didn't want it to touch me, just as suddenly I knew that was what it was going to do. Something told me that that would be a very bad thing.

I tore loose from Zachary. He screamed something at me, but the wind roared and screeched between the narrow walls like a roller coaster gone mad. There was no other sound. I started to crawl up the stairs, wind beating against me, trying to crush me down. There was one other sound, Jean-Claude's voice in my head. "Forgive me."

The blue lights were suddenly in front of my face. I flattened myself against a wall, hitting at the fire. My hands passed through the burning. It wasn't there.

I screamed, "Leave me alone!"

The fire melted through my hands like they weren't there, and into my eyes. The world was blue glass, silent, nothing, blue ice. A whisper: "Run, run." I was sitting on the stairs again, blinking into the wind. Zachary was staring at me.

The wind stopped like someone had turned a switch. The silence was deafening. My breath was coming in short gasps. I had no pulse. I couldn't feel my heartbeat. All I could hear was my breathing, too loud, too shallow. I finally knew what they meant by breathless with fear.

Zachary's voice was hoarse and too loud in the silence. I think he was whispering, but it came out like a shout. "Your eyes, they glowed blue!"

I whispered, "Hush, shhh." I didn't understand why, but someone must not hear what he had just said, must not know what had happened. My life depended on it. There was no more whispering in my head, but the last bit of advice had been good. Run. Running sounded very good.

The silence was dangerous. It meant the fight was over, and the winner could turn its attention to other things. I did not want to be one of those things.

I stood and offered a hand to Zachary. He looked puzzled but took it, standing. I pulled him up the steps and started running. I had to get away, had to, or I would die in this place, tonight, now. I knew that with a surety that left no room for questions, no time for hesitation. I was running for my life. I would die, if Nikolaos saw me now. I would die.

And I would never know why.

Either Zachary felt the panic too, or he thought I knew something he didn't, because he ran with me. When one of us stumbled, the other pulled him, or her, to their feet, and we ran. We ran until acid burned the muscles in my legs, and my chest squeezed into a hard ache for lack of air.

This was why I jogged, so I could run like hell when something was chasing me. Thinner thighs was not incentive enough. But this was, running when you had to, running for your life. The silence was heavy, almost touchable. It seemed to flow up the stairs, as if searching for something. The silence chased us as surely as the wind had.

The trouble with running up stairs, if you've ever had a knee injury, is that you can't do it forever. Give me a flat surface, and I can run for hours. Put me on an incline, and my knees give me fits. It started as an ache, but it didn't take long to become a sharp, grinding pain. Each step began to scream up my leg, until the entire leg pulsed with it.

The knee began to pop as it moved, an audible sound. That was a bad sign. The knee was threatening to go out on me. If it popped out of joint, I'd be crippled here on the stairs with the silence breathing around me. Nikolaos would find me and kill me. Why was I so sure of that? No answer, but I knew it, knew it with every pull of air. I didn't argue with the feeling.

I slowed and rested on the steps, stretching out the muscles in my legs. Refusing to gasp as the muscles on my bad leg twitched. I would stretch it out and feel better. The pain wouldn't go away, I'd abused it too much for that, but I would be able to walk without the knee betraying me.

Zachary collapsed on the stairs, obviously not a jogger. His muscles would tighten up if he didn't keep moving. Maybe he knew that. Maybe he didn't care.

I stretched my arms against the wall until my shoulders stretched out. Just something familiar to do while I waited for the knee to calm down. Something to do, while I listened for - what? Something heavy and sliding, something ancient, long dead.

Sounds from above, higher up the stairs. I froze pressed against the wall, palms flat against the cool stone. What now? What more? Surely, to God, it would be dawn soon.

Zachary stood and turned to face up the stairs. I stood with my back to the wall, so I could see up as well as down. I didn't want something sneaking up on me from below while I was looking upstairs. I wanted my gun. It was locked in my trunk, where it was doing me a hell of a lot of good.

We were standing just below a landing, a turn in the stairs. There have been times when I wished I could see around corners. This was one of them. The scrape of cloth against stone, the rub of shoes.

The man who walked around the corner was human, surprise, surprise. His neck was even unmarked. Cotton-white hair was shaved close to his head. The muscles in his neck bulged. His biceps were bigger around than my waist. My waist is kinda small, but his arms were still, ah, impressive. He was at least six-three, and there wasn't enough fat on him to grease a cake pan.

His eyes were the crystalline paleness of January skies, a distant, icy, blue. He was also the first bodybuilder I'd ever seen who didn't have a tan. All that rippling muscle was done in white, like Moby Dick. A black mesh tank top showed off every inch of his massive chest. Black jogging shorts flared around the swell of his legs. He had had to cut them up the sides to slip them over the rock bulge of his thighs.

I whispered, "Jesus, how much do you bench press?"

He smiled, close-lipped. He spoke with the barest movement of lips, never giving a glimpse of his incisors. "Four hundred."

I gave a low whistle. And said what he wanted me to say: "Impressive."

He smiled, careful not to show teeth. He was trying to play the vampire. Such a careful act being wasted on me. Should I tell him that he screamed human? Naw, he might break me over his thigh like kindling.

"This is Winter," Zachary said. The name was too perfect to be real, like a 1940s movie star.

"What is happening?" he asked.

"Our master and Jean-Claude are fighting," Zachary said.

He drew a deep, sighing breath. His eyes widened just a bit. "Jean-Claude?" He made it sound like a question.

Zachary nodded and smiled. "Yes, he's been holding out."

"Who are you?" he asked.

I hesitated; Zachary shrugged. "Anita Blake."

He smiled then, flashing nice normal teeth at last. "You're The Executioner?"

"Yes."

He laughed. The sound echoed between the stone walls. The silence seemed to tighten around us. The laughter stopped abruptly, a dew of sweat on his lip. Winter felt it and feared it. His voice came low, almost a whisper, as if he was afraid of being overheard. "You aren't big enough to be The Executioner."

I shrugged. "It disappoints me, too, sometimes."

He smiled, almost laughed again, but swallowed it. His eyes were shiny.

"Let's all get out of here," Zachary said.

I was with him.

"I was sent to check on Nikolaos," Winter said.

The silence pulsed with the name. A bead of sweat dripped down his face. Important safety tip: never say the name of an angry master vampire when they are within "hearing" distance.

"She can take care of herself," Zachary whispered, but the sound echoed anyway.

"Nooo," I said.

Zachary glared at me and I shrugged. Sometimes I just can't help myself.

Winter stared at me, face as impersonal as carved marble; only his eyes trembled. Mr. Macho. "Come," he said. He turned without waiting to see if we would follow. We followed.

I would have followed him anywhere as long as he went upstairs. All I knew was that nothing, absolutely nothing, could get me back down those stairs. Not willingly. Of course, there are always other options. I glanced up at Winter's broad back. Yeah, if you don't want to do it willingly, there are always other options.

Chapter 14

The stairs opened into a square chamber. An electric bulb dangled from the ceiling. I had never thought one dim electric light could be beautiful, but it was. A sign that we were leaving the underground chamber of horrors behind and approaching the real world. I was ready to go home.

There were two doors leading out of the stone room, one straight ahead and one to the right. Music floated through the one in front of us. High, bright circus music. The door opened, and the music boiled around us. There was a glimpse of bright colors and hundreds of people milling about. A sign flashed, "Fun house." A carnival midway, inside a building. I knew where I was. Circus of the Damned.

The city's most powerful vampires slept under the Circus. It was something to remember.

The door started to shut, dimming the music, cutting off the bright signs. I looked into the eyes of a teenage girl, who was straining to see around the doorway. The door clicked shut.

A man leaned against the door. He was tall and slender, dressed like a riverboat gambler. Royal purple coat, lace at the neck and down the front, straight black pants and boots. A straight-brimmed hat shaded his face, and a gold mask covered everything but his mouth and chin. Dark eyes stared at me through the gold mask.

His tongue danced over his lips and teeth: fangs, a vampire. Why didn't that surprise me?

"I was afraid I would miss you, Executioner." His voice had a Southern thickness.

Winter moved to stand between us. The vampire laughed, a rich barking sound. "The muscle man here thinks he can protect you. Shall I tear him to pieces to prove him wrong?"

"That won't be necessary," I said. Zachary moved up to stand beside me.

"Do you recognize my voice?" the vampire asked.

I shook my head.

"It has been two years. I didn't know until this business came up that you were The Executioner. I thought you died."

"Can we cut to the chase here? Who are you and what do you want?"

"So eager, so impatient, so human." He raised gloved hands and took off his hat. Short, auburn hair framed the gold mask.

"Please don't do this," Zachary said. "The master has ordered me to see the woman safely to her car."

"I don't intend to harm a hair on her head - tonight." The gloves lifted the mask away. The left side of the face was scarred, pitted, melted away. Only his brown eye was still whole and alive, rolling in a circle of pinkish-white scar tissue. Acid burns look like that. Except it hadn't been acid. It had been Holy Water.

I remembered his body pinning me to the ground. His teeth tearing at my arm while I tried to keep him off my throat. The clean sharp snap of bone where he bit through. My screams. His hand forcing my head back. Him rearing to strike. Helpless. He missed the neck; I never knew why. Teeth sank around my collarbone, snapped it. He lapped up my blood like a cat with cream. I lay under his weight listening to him lap up my blood. The broken bones didn't hurt yet; shock. I was beginning not to hurt, not to be afraid. I was beginning to die.

My right hand reached out in the grass and touched something smooth - glass. A vial of Holy Water that had been thrown out of my bag, scattered by the half-human servants. The vampire never looked at me. His face was pressed over the wound. His tongue was exploring the hole he'd made. His teeth grated along the naked bone, and I screamed.

He laughed into my shoulder, laughed while he killed me. I flicked the lid open on the vial and splashed his face. Flesh boiled. His skin popped and bubbled. He knelt over me, clutching his face and shrieking.

I thought he had been trapped in the house when it burned down. I had wanted him dead, wished him dead. I had wished that memory away, pushed it back. Now here he stood, my favorite nightmare come to life.

"What, no scream of horror? No gasp of fright? You disappoint me, Executioner. Don't you admire your own handiwork?"

My voice came out strangled, hushed. "I thought you died."

"Now ya know different. And now I know you're alive, too. How cosy."

He smiled, and the muscles on his scarred cheek pulled the smile to one side, making it a grimace. Even vampires can't heal everything. "Eternity, Executioner, eternity like this." He caressed the scars with a gloved hand.

"What do you want?"

"Be brave, little girl, be brave as you want to be. I can feel your fear. I want to see the scars I gave you, see that you remember me, like I remember you."

"I remember you."

"Scars, girl, show me the scars."

"I show you the scars, then what?"

"Then you go home, or wherever you're going. The master has given strict orders you are not be harmed until after you do your job for us."

"Then?"

He smiled, a broad glistening expanse of teeth. "Then, I hunt you down, and I pay you back for this." He touched his face. "Come, girl, don't be shy, I seen it all before. I tasted your blood. Show me the scars, and the muscle man won't have to die proving how strong he is."

I glanced at Winter. Massive fists were crossed over his chest. His spine nearly vibrated with readiness. The vampire was right; Winter would die trying. I pushed the ripped sleeve above the elbow. A mound of scar tissue decorated the bend in my arm; scars dribbled down from it, like liquid, crisscrossing and flowing down the outer edge of my arm. The cross-shaped burn took up the only clear space on the inside of my forearm.

"I didn't think you'd ever use that arm again, after the way I tore into it."

"Physical therapy is a wonderful thing."

"Ain't no physical therapy gonna help me."

"No," I said. The first button was missing on my blouse. One more and I spread my shirt back to expose the collarbone. Scars ridged it, crawled over it. It looked real attractive in a bathing suit.

"Good," the vampire said. "You smell like cold sweat when you think of me, little girl. I was hoping I haunted you the way you haunted me."

"There is a difference, you know."

"And what might that be?"

"You were trying to kill me. I was defending myself."

"And why had you come to our house? To put stakes through our hearts. You came to our house to kill us. We didn't go hunting for you."

"But you did go hunting for twenty-three other people. That's a lot of people. Your group had to be stopped."

"Who appointed you God? Who made you our executioner?"

I took a deep breath. It was steady, didn't tremble. Brownie point for me. "The police."

"Bah." He spit on the floor. Very appealing. "You work real hard, girl. You find the murderer, then we'll finish up."

"May I go now?"

"By all means. You're safe tonight, because the master says so, but that will change."

Zachary said, "Out the side door." He walked nearly backwards watching the vampire as we moved away. Winter stayed behind, guarding our backs. Idiot.

Zachary opened the door. The night was hot and sticky. Summer wind slapped against my face, humid, and close, and beautiful.

The vampire called, "Remember the name Valentine, 'cause you'll be hearing from me."

Zachary and I walked out the door. It clanged shut behind us. There was no handle on the outside, no way to open it. A one way ticket, out. Out sounded just fine.

We started to walk. "You got a gun with silver bullets in it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'd start carrying it if I were you."

"Silver bullets won't kill him."

"But it'll slow him down."

"Yeah." We walked for a few minutes in silence. The warm summer night seemed to slide around us, hold us in sticky, curious hands.

"What I need is a shotgun."

He looked at me. "You going to carry a shotgun with you day after day?"

"Sawed off, it would fit under a coat."

"In the middle of a Missouri summer, you'd melt. Why not a machine gun, or a flamethrower, while you're at it?"

"Machine gun has too wide a spread range. You may hit innocent people. Flamethrower's bulky. Messy, too."

He stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. "You've used a flamethrower on vampires before?"

"No, but I saw it used."

"My god." He stared off into space for a moment, then asked, "Did it work?"

"Like a charm; messy, though. And it burned the house down around us. I thought it was a little extreme."

"I'll bet." We started walking again. "You must hate vampires."

"I don't hate them."

"Then why do you kill them?"

"Because it's my job, and I'm good at it." We turned a corner, and I could see the parking lot where I had left my car. It seemed like I had parked my car days ago. My watch said hours. It was a little like jet lag, but instead of crossing time zones, you crossed events. So many traumatic events and your time sense screws up. Too much happening in too short a space of time.

"I'm your daytime contact. If you need anything, or want to give a message, here's my number." He shoved a matchbook into my hand.

I glanced at the matchbook. It read "Circus of the Damned" bleeding red onto a shiny black background. I shoved it in my jeans pocket.

My gun was lying there in my trunk. I slipped into the shoulder rig, not caring that I had no jacket to cover it. A gun out in plain sight attracts attention, but most people leave you alone. They often even start running, clearing a path before you. It made chases very convenient.

Zachary waited until I was sitting in my car. He leaned into the open door. "It can't just be a job, Anita. There's got to be a better reason than that."

I glanced down at my lap and started the car. I looked up into his pale eyes. "I'm afraid of them. It is a very natural human trait to destroy that which frightens us."

"Most people spend their lives avoiding things they fear. You run after them. That's crazy."

He had a point. I closed the door and left him standing in the hot dark. I raised the dead and laid the undead to rest. It was what I did. Who I was. If I ever started questioning my motives, I would stop killing vampires. Simple as that.

I wasn't questioning my motives tonight, so I was still a vampire slayer, still the name they had given me. I was The Executioner.

Chapter 15

Dawn slid across the sky like a curtain of light. The morning star glittered like a diamond chip against the easy flow of light.

I had seen two sunrises in as many days. I was beginning to feel grumpy. The trick would be to decide whom to be grumpy at, and what to do about it. Right now all I wanted was to sleep. The rest could wait, would have to wait. I had been running on fear, adrenaline, and stubbornness for hours. In the quiet hush of the car I could feel my body. It was not happy.

It hurt to grip the wheel, hurt to turn it. The bloody scrapes on my hands looked a lot worse than they were, I hoped. My whole body felt stiff.

Everybody underrates bruises. They hurt. They would hurt a lot more after I slept on them. There is nothing like waking up the morning after a good beating. It's like a hangover that covers your entire body.

The corridor of my apartment building was hushed. The whir of the air conditioner breathed in the silence. I could almost feel all the people asleep behind the doors. I had an urge to press my ear to one of the doors and see if I could hear my neighbors breathing. So quiet. The hour after dawn is the most private of all. It is a time to be alone and enjoy the silence.

The only hour more hushed is three a.m. and I am not a fan of three a.m.

I had my keys in my hand, had almost touched the door, when I realized it was ajar. A tiny crack, almost closed, but not. I moved to the right of the door and pressed my back against the wall. Had they heard the keys jingling? Who was inside? Adrenaline was flowing like fine champagne. I was alert to every shadow, the way the light fell. My body was in emergency mode, and I hoped to God I didn't need it.

I drew my gun and leaned against the wall. Now what? There was no sound from inside the apartment, nothing. It could be more vampires, but it was nearly true dawn. It wouldn't be vampires. Who else would break into my apartment? I took a deep breath and let it out. I didn't know. Didn't have the faintest idea. You'd think I'd get used to not knowing what the hell is going on, but I never do. It just makes me grumpy, and a little scared.

I had several choices. I could leave and call the police, not a bad choice. But what could they do that I couldn't, except walk in and get killed in my place? That was unacceptable. I could wait in the corridor until whoever it was got curious. That could take a while, and the apartment might be empty. I'd feel pretty stupid standing out here for hours, gun trained on an empty apartment. I was tired, and I wanted to go to bed. Dammit!

I could always just go in, gun blazing. Naw. I could push the door open and be lying on the floor and shoot anyone inside. If they had a gun. If there was anyone inside.

The smart thing would be to outwait them, but I was tired. The adrenaline rush was fading under the frustration of too many choices. There comes a point when you just get tired. I didn't think I could stand out here in the air-conditioned silence and stay alert. I wouldn't fall asleep standing up, but it was a thought. And another hour would see my neighbors up and about, maybe caught in the crossfire. Unacceptable. Whatever was going to happen needed to happen now.

Decision made. Good. Nothing like fear to wash your mind clean. I moved as far from the door as I could and crossed over, gun trained on the door. I moved along the left-hand wall towards the hinge side of the door. It opened in. Just give it a push flat against the wall; simple. Right.

I crouched down on one knee, my shoulders hunched as if I could draw my head down like a turtle. I was betting that any gun would hit above me, chest-high. Crouched down, I was a lot shorter than chest-high.

I shoved the door open with my left hand and hugged the doorsill. It worked like a charm. My gun was pointing at the bad guy's chest. Except his hands were already in the air, and he was smiling at me.

"Don't shoot," he said. "It's Edward."

I knelt there staring at him; anger rose like a warm tide. "You bastard. You knew I was out here."

He steepled his fingers. "I heard the keys."

I stood, eyes searching the room. Edward had moved my white overstuffed chair to face the door. Nothing else seemed to be moved.

"I assure you, Anita, I am quite alone."

"That I believe. Why didn't you call out to me?"

"I wanted to see if you were still good. I could have blown you away when you hesitated in front of the door, with your keys jingling so nicely."

I shut the door behind me and locked it, though truthfully with Edward inside I might have been safer locking myself out rather than in. He was not an imposing man, not frightening, if you didn't know him. He was five-eight, slender, blond, blue-eyed, charming. But if I was The Executioner, he was Death itself. He was the person I had seen use a flamethrower.

I had worked with him before, and heaven knows you felt safe with him. He carried more firepower than Rambo, but he was a little too careless of innocent bystanders. He began life as a hit man. That much the police knew. I think humans became too easy so he switched to vampires and lycanthropes. And I knew that if a time came where it was more expedient to kill me than to be my "friend," he would do it. Edward had no conscience. It made him the perfect killer.

"I've been up all bloody night, Edward. I'm not in the mood for your games."

"How hurt are you?"

I shrugged and winced. "The hands are sore, bruises mostly. I'm all right."

"Your night secretary said you were out at a bachelorette party." He grinned at me, eyes sparkling. "It must have been some party-"

"I ran into a vampire you might know."

He raised his yellow eyebrows and made a silent "Oh" with his lips.

"Remember the house you nearly roasted down around us?"

"About two years ago. We killed six vampires, and two human servants."

I walked past him and flopped onto the couch. "We missed one."

"No, we didn't." His voice was very precise. Edward at his most dangerous.

I looked at the carefully cut back of his head. "Trust me on this one, Edward. He damn near killed me tonight." Which was a partial truth, also known as a lie. If the vampires didn't want me to tell the police, they certainly didn't want Death to know. Edward was a whole lot more dangerous to them than the police.

"What one?"

"The one who nearly tore me to pieces. He calls himself Valentine. He's still wearing the acid scars I gave him."

"Holy Water?"

"Yeah."

Edward came to sit beside me on the couch. He kept to one end, a careful distance. "Tell me." His eyes were intense on my face.

I looked away. "There isn't much left to tell."

"You're lying, Anita. Why?"

I stared at him, anger coming in a rush. I hate to be caught in a lie. "There have been some vampires murdered down along the river. How long have you been in town, Edward?"

He smiled then, though at what I wasn't sure. "Not long. I heard a rumor that you got to meet the city's head vampire tonight."

I couldn't stop it. My mouth fell open; the surprise was too much to hide. "How the hell do you know that?"

He gave a graceful shrug. "I have my sources."

"No vampire would talk to you, not willingly."

Again that shrug that said everything and nothing at all.

"What have you done tonight, Edward?"

"What have you done tonight, Anita?"

Touché, Mexican standoff, whatever. "Why have you come to me then? What do you want?"

"I want the location of the master vampire. The daytime resting place."

I had recovered enough so that my face was bland, no surprise here. "How would I know that?"

"Do you know?"

"No." I stood up. "I'm tired, and I want to go to bed. If there's nothing else?"

He stood, too, still smiling, like he knew I had lied. "I'll be in touch. If you do happen to run across the information I need . . ." He let the sentence trail off and started for the door.

"Edward."

He half-turned to me.

"Do you have a sawed-off shotgun?"

His eyebrows went up again. "I could get one for you."

"I'd pay."

"No, a gift."

"I can't tell you."

"But you do know?"

"Edward . . ."

"How deep are you in, Anita?"

"Eye level and sinking fast."

"I could help you."

"I know."

"Would helping you allow me to kill more vampires?"

"Maybe."

He grinned at me, brilliant, heart-stopping. The grin was his very best harmless good ol' boy smile. I could never decide whether the smile was real or just another mask. Would the real Edward please stand up? Probably not.

"I enjoy hunting vampires. Let me in on it if you can."

"I will."

He paused with a hand on the doorknob. "I hope I have more luck with my other sources than I did with you."

"What happens if you can't find the location from someone else?"

"Why, I come back."

"And?"

"And you will tell me what I want to know. Won't you?" He was still grinning at me, charming, boyish. He was also talking about torturing me if he had to.

I swallowed, hard. "Give me a few days, Edward, and I might have your information."

"Good. I'll bring the shotgun later today. If you're not home, I'll leave it on the kitchen table."

I didn't ask how he'd get inside if I wasn't home. He would only have smiled or laughed. Locks weren't much of a deterrent to Edward. "Thank you. For the shotgun, I mean."

"My pleasure, Anita. Until tomorrow." He stepped out the door, and it closed behind him.

Great. Vampires, now Edward. The day was about fifteen minutes old. Not a very promising beginning. I locked the door, for what good it would do me, and went to bed. The Browning Hi-Power was in its second home, a modified holster strapped to the headboard of my bed. The crucifix was cool metal around my neck. I was as safe as I was going to be and almost too tired to care.

I took one more thing to bed with me, a stuffed toy penguin named Sigmund. I don't sleep with him often, just every once in a while after someone tries to kill me. Everyone has their weaknesses. Some people smoke. I collect stuffed penguins. If you won't tell, I won't.

Chapter 16

I stood in the huge stone room where Nikolaos had sat. Only the wooden chair remained, empty, alone. A coffin sat on the floor to one side. Torchlight gleamed off the polished wood. A breeze eased through the room. The torches wavered and threw huge black shadows on the walls. The shadows seemed to move independent of the light. The longer I looked at them, the more I was sure the shadows were too dark, too thick.

I could taste my heart in my throat. My pulse was hammering in my head. I couldn't breathe. Then I realized I was hearing a second heartbeat, like an echo. "Jean-Claude?" The shadows cried, "Jean-Claude," in high whining voices.

I knelt by the coffin and gripped the lid. It was all one piece, and raised on smooth oiled hinges. Blood poured down the sides of the coffin. The blood poured over my legs, splashed on my arms. I screamed and stood, covered in blood. It was still warm. "Jean-Claude!"

A pale hand raised out of the blood, spasmed, and collapsed against the side of the coffin. Jean-Claude's face floated to the top. My hand was reaching out. His heart was fluttering in my head, but he was dead. He was dead! His hand was icy wax. His eyes flew open. The dead hand grabbed my wrist.

"No!" I tried to pull my hand free. I went down on my knees in the cooling blood and screamed, "Let me go!"

He sat up. He was covered in blood. The white shirt dripped with it, like a bloody rag.

"No,"

He pulled my arm closer to him, and pulled me with it. I braced one hand on the coffin. I would not go to him. I would not go! He bent over my arm, mouth wide, fangs reaching. His heart beat against the shadows like thunder. "Jean-Claude, no!"

He looked up at me, just before he struck. "I had no choice." Blood began to drip down his face from his hair, until his face was a bloody mask. Fangs sank into my arm. I screamed, and woke sitting straight up in bed.

The doorbell was buzzing. I scrambled out of bed, forgetting. I gasped. I had moved too fast for the beating I'd had last night. I ached all over in places I couldn't possibly be bruised. My hands were stiff with dried blood. They felt arthritic.

The doorbell was buzzing continuously as if someone was leaning against it. Whoever it was, was going to get a hug for waking me up. I was sleeping in an oversized shirt. Pulling last night's jeans on was my version of a robe.

I put Sigmund the stuffed penguin back with all the rest. The stuffed toys sat on a small loveseat against the far wall, under the window. Penguins lined the floor around it like a plump fuzzy tide.

It hurt to move. It even felt tight when I breathed. I yelled, "I'm coming." It occurred to me, halfway to the door, that it might be someone unfriendly. I padded back into the bedroom and got my gun. My hand felt stiff and awkward around it. I should have cleaned and bandaged the hands last night. Oh, well.

I knelt behind the chair Edward had moved in front of the door and called, "Who is it?"

"It's Ronnie, Anita. We're supposed to work out this morning."

It was Saturday. I had forgotten. It was always amazing how ordinary life was, even while people were trying to hurt you. I felt like Ronnie should know about last night. Something so extraordinary should touch all my life, but it didn't work that way. When I'd been in the hospital with my arm in traction and tubes running all through me, my stepmother had complained that I wasn't

married yet. She's worried that I will be an old maid at the ripe age of twenty-four. Judith is not what you would call a liberated woman.

My family does not cope well with what I do, the chances I take, the injuries. So they ignore it as best they can. Except for my sixteen-year-old stepbrother. Josh thinks I'm cool, neat, whatever word they're using now.

Veronica Sims is different. She's my friend, and she understands. Ronnie is a private detective. We take turns visiting each other in the hospital.

I opened the door and let her in, gun limp at my side. She took it all in and said, "Shit, you look awful."

I smiled. "Well, at least I took like I feel."

She came in and dropped her gym bag in front of the chair. "Can you tell me what happened?" Not a demand, a question. Ronnie understood that not everything could be shared.

"Sorry that I won't be able to work out today."

"Looks like you had all the workout you can handle. Go soak those hands in the sink. I'll make coffee. Okay?"

I nodded and regretted it. Aspirins, aspirins sounded real good right now. I stopped just before I went into the bathroom. "Ronnie?"

"Yes." She stood there in my small kitchen, a measuring cup of fresh coffee beans in one hand. She was five-nine. Sometimes, I forget how tall that is. It amazes people that we can run together. The trick is I set the pace, and I push myself. It's a very good workout.

"I think I have some bagels in the fridge. Could you pop them in the microwave with some cheese?"

She stared at me. "I've known you for three years, and this is the first time I've ever heard you ask for food before ten o'clock."

"Listen, if it's too much trouble, forget it."

"It isn't that, and you know it."

"Sorry. I'm just tired."

"Go doctor yourself, then you can tell me about it. Okay"

"Yeah." Soaking the hands did not make them feel better. It felt like I was peeling the skin off my fingers. I patted them dry and rubbed Neosporin ointment over the scrapes. "A topical antibacterial," the label read. By the time I finished all the Band-Aids, I looked like a pinkish-tan version of the mummy's hand.

My back was a mass of dark bruises. My ribs were decorated in putrid purple. There wasn't much I could do about it, except hope the aspirin kicked in. Well, there was one thing I could do - move. Stretching exercises would limber the body and give me movement without pain, sort of. The stretching itself would feel like torture. I'd do it later. I needed to eat first.

I was starving. Usually, the thought of eating before ten made me nauseous. This morning I wanted food, needed food. Very weird. Maybe it was stress.

The smell of bagels and melting cheese made my stomach ripple. The smell of fresh brewed coffee made me want to chew the couch.

I scarfed down two bagels and three cups of coffee while Ronnie sat across from me, sipping her first cup. I looked up and found her watching me. Her grey eyes were staring at me. I'd seen her look at suspects like that. "What?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Nothing. Can you catch your breath and tell me about last night?"

I nodded, and it didn't hurt as much. Aspirin, nature's gift to modern man. I told her, from Monica's call to my meeting with Valentine. I didn't tell her that it all took place at the Circus of the Damned. That was very dangerous information to have right now. And I left out the blue lights on the stairs, the sound of Jean-Claude's voice in my head. Something told me that was dangerous information, too. I've learned to trust my instincts, so I left it out.

Ronnie's good, she looked at me, and said, "Is that everything?"

"Yes." An easy lie, simple, one word. I don't think Ronnie bought it.

"Okay." She took a sip of coffee. "What do you want me to do?"

"Ask around. You have access to the hate groups. Like Humans Against Vampires, The League of Human Voters, the usual. See if any of them might be involved with the murders. I can't go near them." I smiled. "After all, animators are one of the groups they hate."

"But you do kill vampires."

"Yeah, but I also raise zombies. Too weird for the hardcore bigot."

"All right. I'll check out HAV and the rest. Anything else?"

I thought about it and shook my head, almost no pain at all. "Not that I can think of. Just be very careful. I don't want to endanger you the way I did Catherine."

"That wasn't your fault."

"Right."

"It isn't your fault, none of this is."

"Tell that to Catherine and her fiancé if things go bad."

"Anita, dammit, these creatures are using you. They want you discouraged and frightened, so they can control you. If you let the guilt mess with your head, you're going to get killed."

"Well, gee, Ronnie, just what I wanted to hear. If this is your version of a pep talk, I'll skip the rally."

"You don't need cheering up. You need a good shaking."

"Thanks, I already had one last night."

"Anita, listen to me." She was staring at me, eyes intense, her face searching mine, trying to see if I was really hearing her. "You've done all you can for Catherine. I want you to concentrate on keeping yourself alive. You're ass deep in enemies. Don't get sidetracked."

She was right. Do what you can and move on. Catherine was out of it, for now. It was the best I could do. "Ass-deep in enemies, but ankle-deep in friends."

She grinned. "Maybe it'll even out."

I cradled the coffee in my bandaged hands. Warmth radiated through the cup. "I'm scared."

"Which proves you aren't as stupid as you look."

"Gee, thanks a lot."

"You're welcome." She raised her coffee cup in a salute. "To Anita Blake, animator, vampire slayer, and good friend. Watch your back."

I clinked my cup against hers. "You watch yours, too. Being my friend right now may not be the healthiest of avocations."

"Since when was that a news bulletin?"

Unfortunately, she had a point.

Chapter 17

I had two choices after Ronnie left: I could go back to sleep, not a bad idea; or I could start solving the case that everyone was so eager for me to work on. I could get by on four hours sleep, for a while. I could not last nearly as long if Aubrey tore my throat out. Guess I would go to work.

It is hard to wear a gun in St. Louis in the summertime. Shoulder or hip holster, you have the same problem. If you wear a jacket to cover the gun, you melt in the heat. If you keep the gun in your purse, you get killed, because no woman can find anything in her purse in under twelve minutes. It is a rule.

No one had been shooting at me yet; I was encouraged by that. But I had also been kidnapped and nearly killed. I did not plan on it happening again without a fight. I could bench press a hundred pounds, not bad, not bad at all. But when you only weigh a hundred and six, it puts you at a disadvantage. I would bet on me against any human bad guy my size. Trouble was, there just weren't many bad guys my size. And vampires, well, unless I could bench press trucks, I was outclassed. So a gun.

I finally settled on a less than professional look. The t-shirt was oversize, hitting me at mid-thigh. It billowed around me. The only thing that saved it was the picture on the front, penguins playing beach volleyball, complete with kiddie penguins making sand castles to one side. I like penguins. I had bought the shirt to sleep in and never planned to wear it where people could see me. As long as the fashion police didn't see me, I was safe.

I looped a belt through a pair of black shorts for my inside-the-pant holster. It was an Uncle Mike's Sidekick and I was very fond of it, but it was not for the Browning. I had a second gun for comfort and concealability: a Firestar, a compact little 9mm with a seven-shot magazine.

White jogging socks, with tasteful blue stripes that matched the blue leather piping on my white Nikes, completed the outfit. It made me look and feel about sixteen, an awkward sixteen, but when I turned to the mirror there was no hint of the gun on my belt. The shirt fell out and around it, invisible.

My upper body is slender, petite if you will, muscular and not bad to look at. Unfortunately, my legs are about five inches too short to ever be America's ideal legs. I will never have skinny thighs, nor anything short of muscular calves. The outfit emphasized my legs and hid everything else, but I had my gun and I wouldn't melt in the heat. Compromise is an imperfect art.

My crucifix hung inside my shirt, but I added a small charm bracelet to my left wrist. Three small crosses dangled from the silver chain. My scars also were in plain sight, but in the summer I try to pretend they aren't there. I cannot face the thought of wearing long sleeves in hundred-degree weather with hundred-percent humidity. My arms would fall off. The scars really aren't the first thing you notice with my arms bare. Really.

Animators, Inc., had new offices. We'd been here only three months. There was a psychologist's office across from us, nothing less than a hundred an hour; a plastic surgeon down the hall; two lawyers; one marriage counselor, and a real estate company. Four years ago Animators, Inc., had worked out of a spare room above a garage. Business was good.

Most of that good luck was due to Bert Vaughn, our boss. He was a businessman, a showman, a moneymaker, a scalawag, and a borderline cheat. Nothing illegal, not really, but . . . Most people choose to think of themselves as white hats, good guys. A few people wear black hats and enjoy it. Grey was Bert's color. Sometimes I think if you cut him, he'd bleed green, fresh-minted money.

He had turned what was an unusual talent, an embarrassing curse, or a religious experience, raising the dead, into a profitable business. We animators had the talent, but Bert knew how to make it pay. It was hard to argue with that. But I was going to try.

The reception room's wallpaper is pale, pale green with small oriental designs done in greens and browns. The carpet is thick and soft green, too pale to be grass, but it tries. Plants are everywhere.

A *Ficus benjium* grows to the right of the door, slender as a willow with small leather green leaves. It nearly curls around the chair in front of its pot. A second tree grows in the far corner, tall and straight with the stiff spiky tops of palm trees - *Dracaena marginata*. Or that's what it says on the tags tied to the spindly trunks. Both trees brush the ceiling. Dozens of smaller plants are pushed and potted in every spare corner of the soft green room.

Bert thinks the pastel green is soothing, and the plants give it that homey touch. I think it looks like an unhappy marriage between a mortuary and a plant shop.

Mary, our day secretary, is over fifty. How much over is her own business. Her hair is short and does not move in the wind. A carton of hair spray sees to that. Mary is not into the natural look. She has two grown sons and four grandchildren. She gave me her best professional smile as I came through the door. "May I help . . . Oh, Anita, I didn't think you were due in until five."

"I'm not, but I need to speak to Bert and get some things from my office."

She frowned down at her appointment book, our appointment book. "Well, Jamison is in your office right now with a client." There are only three offices

in our little area. One belongs to Bert, and the other two rotate between the rest of us. Most of our work is done in the field, or rather the graveyard, so we never really need our offices all at the same time. It worked like time-sharing a condo.

"How long will the client be?"

Mary glanced down at her notes. "It's a mother whose son is thinking about joining the Church of Eternal Life."

"Is Jamison trying to talk him into it or out of it?"

"Anita!" Mary scolded me, but it was the truth. The Church of Eternal Life was the vampire church. The first church in history that could guarantee you eternal life, and prove it. No waiting around. No mystery. Just eternity on a silver platter. Most people don't believe in their immortal souls anymore. It isn't popular to worry about Heaven and Hell, and whether you are an absolutely good person. So the Church was gaining followers all over the place. If you didn't believe that it destroyed your soul, what did you have to lose? Daylight. Food. Not much to give up.

It was the soul part that bothered me. My immortal soul is not for sale, not even for eternity. You see, I knew vampires could die. I had proved it. No one seemed curious as to what happened to a vampire's soul when it died. Could you be a good vampire and go to Heaven? Somehow that didn't quite work for me.

"Is Bert with a client, too?"

She glanced once more at the appointment book. "No, he's free." She looked up and smiled, as if she was pleased to be able to help me. Maybe she was.

It is true that Bert took the smallest of the three offices. The walls are a soft pastel blue, the carpet two colors darker. Bert thinks it soothes the clients. I think it's like standing inside a blue ice cube.

Bert didn't match the small blue office. There is nothing small about Bert. Six-foot-four, broad shoulders, a college athlete's figure getting a little soft around the middle. His white hair is close-cut over small ears. A boater's tan forces his pale eyes and hair into sharp contrast. His eyes are a nearly colorless grey, like dirty window glass. You have to work very hard to make dirty grey eyes shine, but they were shining now. Bert was practically beaming at me. It was a bad sign.

"Anita, what a pleasant surprise. Have a sit." He waved a business envelope at me. "We got the check today."

"Check?" I asked.

"For looking into the vampire murders."

I had forgotten. I had forgotten that somewhere in all this I had been promised money. It seemed ridiculous, obscene, that Nikolaos would make everything better with money. From the look on Bert's face, a lot of money.

"How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars." He stretched each word out, making it last.

"It isn't enough."

He laughed. "Anna, getting greedy in your old age. I thought that was my job."

"It isn't enough for Catherine's life, or mine."

His grin wilted slightly. His eyes looked wary, as if I was about to tell him there was no Easter Bunny. I could almost hear him wondering if he would have to return the check.

"What are you talking about, Anita?"

I told him, with a few minor revisions. No "Circus of the Damned." No blue fire. No first vampire mark.

When I got to the part about Aubrey smashing me into the wall, he said, "You are kidding."

"Want to see the bruises?"

I finished the story and watched his solemn, square face. His large, blunt-fingered hands were folded on his desk. The check was lying beside him atop his neat pile of manila folders. His face was attentive, concerned. Empathy never worked well on Bert's face. I could always see the wheels moving. The angles calculating.

"Don't worry, Bert, you can cash the check."

"Now, Anita, that wasn't..."

"Save it."

"Anita, truly I would never purposefully endanger you."

I laughed. "Bull."

"Anita!" He looked shocked, small eyes widening, one hand touching his chest. Mr. Sincerity.

"I'm not buying, so save the bullshit for clients. I know you too well."

He smiled then. It was his only genuine smile. The real Bert Vaughn please stand up. His eyes gleamed but not with warmth, more with pleasure. There is something measuring, obscenely knowledgeable, about Bert's smile. As if he knew the darkest thing you had ever done and would gladly keep silent - for a price.

There was something a little frightening about a man who knew he was not a nice person and didn't give a damn. It went against everything America holds dear. We are taught above all else to be nice, to be liked, to be popular. A person who has set aside all that is a maverick and a potentially dangerous human being.

"What can Animators, Inc., do to help?"

"I've already got Ronnie working on some things. I think the fewer people involved, the fewer people in danger."

"You always were a humanitarian."

"Unlike some people I could mention."

"I had no idea what they wanted."

"No, but you knew how I felt about vampires."

He gave me a smile that said, "I know your secret, I know your darkest dreams." That was Bert. Budding blackmailer.

I smiled back at him, friendly. "If you ever send me a vampire client again without running it by me first, I'll quit."

"And go where?"

"I'll take my client list with me, Bert. Who is the one that does the radio interviews? Who did the articles focus on? You made sure it was me, Bert. You thought I was the most marketable of all of us. The most harmless-looking, the most appealing. Like a puppy at the pound. When people call Animators, Inc., who do they ask for?"

His smile was gone, eyes like winter ice. "You wouldn't make it without me."

"The question is, would you make it without me?"

"I'd make it."

"So would I"

We stared at each other for a long space of moments. Neither of us was willing to look away, to blink first. Bert started to smile, still staring into my eyes. The edges of a smile began to tug at my mouth. We laughed together and that was that.

"All right, Anita, no more vampires."

I stood. "Thank you."

"Would you really quit?" His face was all laughing sincerity, a tasteful, pleasant mask.

"I don't believe in idle threats, Bert. You know that."

"Yes," he said, "I know that. I honestly didn't know this job would endanger your life."

"Would it have made a difference?"

He thought about it for a minute, then laughed. "No, but I would have charged more."

"You keep making money, Bert. That's what you're good at."

"Amen."

I left him so he could fondle the check in privacy. Maybe chuckle over it. It was blood money, no pun intended. Somehow, I didn't think that bothered Bert. It bothered me.

Chapter 18

The door to the other office opened. A tall, blonde woman stepped through. She was somewhere between forty and fifty. Tailored golden pants encircled a slender waist. A sleeveless blouse the color of an eggshell exposed tanned arms, a gold Rolex watch, and a wedding band encircled with diamonds. The rock in the engagement ring must have weighed a pound. I bet she hadn't even blinked when Jamison talked price.

The boy that followed her was also slender and blond. He looked about fifteen, but I knew he had to be at least eighteen. Legally, you cannot join the

Church of Eternal Life unless you are of age. He couldn't drink legally yet, but he could choose to die and live forever. Funny, how that didn't make much sense to me.

Jamison brought up the rear, smiling, solicitous. He was talking softly to the boy as he walked them towards the door.

I got a business card out of my purse. I held it out towards the woman. She looked at it, then at me. Her gaze slid over me from top to bottom. She didn't seem impressed; maybe it was the shirt. "Yes," she said.

Breeding. It takes real breeding to make a person feel like shit with one word. Of course, it didn't bother me. No, the great golden goddess did not make me feel small and grubby. Right. "The number on this card is for a man who specializes in vampire cults. He's good."

"I do not want my son brainwashed."

I managed a smile. Raymond Fields was my vampire cult expert, and he didn't do brainwashing. He did do truth, no matter how unpleasant. "Mr. Fields will give you the potential down side of vampirism," I said.

"I believe Mr. Clarke has given us all the information we need."

I raised my arm near her face. "I didn't get these scars playing touch football. Please, take the card. Call him, or not. It's up to you."

She was a little pale under her expert makeup. Her eyes were a little wide, staring at my arm. "Vampires did this?" Her voice was small and breathy, almost human.

"Yes," I said.

Jamison took her elbow. "Mrs. Franks, I see you've met our resident vampire slayer."

She looked at him, then back at me. Her careful face was beginning to crumble. She licked her lips and turned back to me. "Really." She was recovering quickly; she sounded superior again.

I shrugged. What could I say? I pressed the card into her manicured hand, and Jamison tactfully took it from her and pocketed it. But she had let him. What could I do? Nothing. I had tried. Period. Over. But I stared at her son. His face was incredibly young.

I remembered when eighteen was grown-up. I had thought I knew everything. I was about twenty-one when I figured out I knew dip-wad. I still knew nothing, but I tried real hard. Sometimes, that is the best you can do. Maybe the best anyone can do. Boy, Miss Cynical in the morning.

Jamison was ushering them towards the door. I caught a few sentences. "She was trying to kill them. They merely defended themselves."

Yeah, that's me, hit person for the undead. Scourge of the graveyard. Right. I left Jamison to his half-truths and went into the office. I still needed the files. Life goes on, at least for me. I couldn't stop seeing the boy's face, the wide eyes. His face had been all golden tan, baby smooth. Shouldn't you at least have to shave before you can kill yourself?

I shook my head as if I could shake the boy's face away. It almost worked. I was kneeling with the folders in my hands when Jamison came in the office. He shut the door behind him. I had thought he might.

His skin was the color of dark honey, his eyes pale green; long, tight curls framed his face. The hair was almost auburn. Jamison was the first green-eyed, red-haired black man I had ever met. He was slender, lean, not the thinness of exercise but of lucky genetics. Jamison's idea of a workout was lifting shot glasses at a good party.

"Don't ever do that again," he said.

"Do what?" I stood with the files clasped to my chest.

He shook his head and almost smiled, but it was an angry smile, a flash of small white teeth. "Don't be a smart ass."

"Sorry," I said.

"Bullshit, you're not sorry."

"About trying to give Fields's card to the woman, no. I'm not sorry. I'd do it again."

"I don't like to be undermined in front of my clients."

I shrugged.

"I mean it, Anita. Don't ever do that again."

I wanted to ask him, or what, but I didn't. "You aren't qualified to counsel people about whether or not they become the undead."

"Bert thinks I am."

"Bert would take money for a hit on the Pope if he thought he could get away with it."

Jamison smiled, then frowned at me, then couldn't help himself and smiled again. "You do have a way with words."

"Thanks."

"Don't undermine me with clients, okay?"

"I promise never to interfere when you are discussing raising the dead."

"That isn't good enough," he said.

"It's the best you're going to get. You are not qualified to counsel people. It's wrong."

"Little Miss Perfect. You murder people for money. You're nothing but a damned assassin."

I took a deep breath, and let it out. I would not fight with him today. "I execute criminals with the full blessing of the law."

"Yeah, but you enjoy it. You get your jollies by pounding in the stakes. You can't go a fucking week without bathing in someone's blood."

I just stared at him. "Do you really believe that?" I asked.

He wouldn't look at me but finally said, "I don't know."

"Poor little vampires, poor misunderstood creatures. Right? The one who branded me slaughtered twenty-three people before the courts would give me the go-ahead." I yanked my shirt down to expose the collarbone scar. "This vampire had killed ten people. He specialized in little boys, said their meat was most tender. He's not dead, Jamison. He got away. But he found me last night and threatened my life."

"You don't understand them."

"No!" I shoved a finger in his chest. "You don't understand them."

He glared down at me, nostrils flaring, breath coming in warm gasps. I stepped back. I shouldn't have touched him; that was against the rules. You never touch anyone in a fight unless you want violence.

"I'm sorry, Jamison." I don't know if he understood what I was apologizing for. He didn't say anything.

As I walked past him, he asked, "What are the files for?"

I hesitated, but he knew the files as well as I did. He'd know what was missing. "The vampire murders."

We turned towards each other at the same moment. Staring. "You took the money?" he asked.

That stopped me. "You knew about it?"

He nodded. "Bert tried to get them to hire me in your place. They wouldn't go for it."

"And after all the good PR you've given them."

"I told Bert you wouldn't do it. That you wouldn't work for vampires."

His slightly up-tilted eyes were studying my face, searching, trying to squeeze some truth out. I ignored him, my face a pleasant blankness. "Money talks, Jamison, even to me."

"You don't give a damn about money."

"Awful shortsighted of me, isn't it?" I said.

"I always thought so. You didn't do it for money." A statement. "What was it?"

I didn't want Jamison in on this. He thought vampires were fanged people. And they were very careful to keep him on the nice, clean fringes. He never got his hands dirty, so he could afford to pretend or ignore, or even lie to himself. I had gotten dirty once too often. Lying to yourself was a good way to die. "Look, Jamison, we don't agree on vampires, but anything that can kill vampires could make meat pies out of human beings. I want to catch the maniac before he, she, or it, does just that."

It wasn't a bad lie, as lies go. It was even plausible. He blinked at me. Whether he believed me or not would depend on how much he needed to believe me. How much he needed his world to stay safe and clean. He nodded, once, very slowly. "You think you can catch something the master vampires can't catch?"

"They seem to think so." I opened the door and he followed me out. Maybe he would have asked more questions, maybe not, but a voice interrupted.

"Anita, are you ready to go?"

We both turned, and I must have looked as puzzled as Jamison.

I wasn't meeting anyone.

There was a man sitting in one of the lobby chairs, half-lost in the jungle plants. I didn't recognize him at first. Thick brown hair, cut short, stretched back from a very nice face. Black sunglasses hid the eyes. He turned his head and spoiled the illusion of short hair. A thick ponytail curled over his collar. He was wearing a blue denim jacket with the collar up. A blood-red tank top set off his tan. He stood slowly, smiled, and removed his glasses.

It was Phillip of the many scars. I hadn't recognized him with his clothes on. There was a bandage on the side of his neck, mostly hidden by the jacket collar. "We need to talk," he said.

I closed my mouth and tried to look reasonably intelligent. "Phillip, I didn't expect to see you so soon."

Jamison was looking from one to the other of us. He was frowning. Suspicious. Mary was sitting, chin leaning on her hands, enjoying the show.

The silence was damn awkward. Phillip put a hand out to Jamison. I mumbled. "Jamison Clarke, this is Phillip . . . a friend." The moment I said it, I wanted to take it back. "Friend" is what people call their lovers. Beats the heck out of significant other.

Jamison smiled broadly. "So, you're Anita's . . . friend." He said the last word slowly, rolling it around on his tongue.

Mary made a hubba-hubba motion with one hand. Phillip saw it and flashed her a dazzling melt-your-libido smile. She blushed.

"Well, we have to go now. Come along, Phillip." I grabbed his arm and began pulling him towards the door.

"Nice to meet you, Phillip," Jamison said. "I'll be sure to mention you to all the rest of the guys who work here. I'm sure they'd love to meet you sometime."

Jamison was really enjoying himself. "We're very busy right now, Jamison. Maybe some other time," I said.

"Sure, sure," he said.

Jamison walked us to the door and held it for us. He grinned at us as we walked down the hallway, arm in arm. Fudge buckets. I had to let the smirking little creep think I had a lover. Good grief. And he would tell everyone. Phillip slid his arm around my waist, and I fought an urge to push him away. We were pretending, right, right. I felt him hesitate as his hand brushed the gun on my belt.

We met one of the real estate agents in the hall. She said hello to me but stared at Phillip. He smiled at her. When we passed her and were waiting for the elevator, I glanced back. Sure enough, she was watching his backside as we walked away.

I had to admit it was a nice backside. She caught me looking at her and hurriedly turned away.

"Defending my honor," Phillip asked.

I pushed away from him and punched the elevator button. "What are you doing here?"

"Jean-Claude didn't come back last night. Do you know why?"

"I didn't do away with him, if that's what you're implying."

The doors opened. Phillip leaned against them, holding them open with his body and one arm. The smile he flashed me was full of potential, a little evil, a lot of sex. Did I really want to be alone in an elevator with him? Probably not, but I was armed. He, as far as I could tell, was not.

I walked under his arm without having to duck. The doors hushed behind us. We were alone. He leaned into one corner, arms crossed over his chest, staring at me from behind black lenses.

"Do you always do that?" I asked.

A slight smile. "Do what?"

"Pose."

He stiffened just a little, then relaxed against the wall. "Natural talent."

I shook my head. "Uh-huh." I stared at the flickering floor numbers.

"Is Jean-Claude all right?"

I glanced at him and didn't know what to say. The elevator stopped. We got out. "You didn't answer me," he said softly.

I sighed. It was too long a story. "It's almost noon. I'll tell you what I can over lunch."

He grinned. "Trying to pick me up, Ms. Blake?"

I smiled before I could stop myself. "You wish."

"Maybe," he said.

"Flirtatious little thing, aren't you?"

"Most women like it."

"I would like it better if I didn't think you'd flirt with my ninety-year-old grandmother the same way you're flirting with me now."

He coughed back a laugh. "You don't have a very high opinion of me."

"I am a very judgmental person. It's one of my faults."

He laughed again, a nice sound. "Maybe I can hear about the rest of your faults after you've told me where Jean-Claude is."

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

I stopped just in front of the glass doors that led out into the street. "Because I saw you last night. I know what you are, and I know how you get your kicks."

His hand reached out and brushed my shoulder. "I get my kicks a lot of different ways."

I frowned at his hand, and it moved away. "Save it, Phillip. I'm not buying."

"Maybe by the end of lunch you will be."

I sighed. I had met men like Phillip before, handsome men who are accustomed to women drooling over them. He wasn't trying to seduce me; he just wanted me to admit that I found him attractive. If I didn't admit it, he would keep pestering me. "I give up; you win."

"What do I win?" he asked.

"You're wonderful, you're gorgeous. You are one of the best looking men I have ever seen. From the soles of your boots, the length of your skin-tight jeans, to the flat, rippling plains of your stomach, to the sculpted line of your jaw, you are beautiful. Now can we go to lunch and cut the nonsense?"

He lowered his sunglasses just enough to see over the top of them. He stared at me like that for several minutes, then raised the glasses back in place. "You pick the restaurant." He said it flat, no teasing.

I wondered if I had offended him. I wondered if I cared.

Chapter 19

The heat outside the doors was solid, a wall of damp warmth that melded to your skin like plastic wrap. "You're going to melt wearing that jacket," I said.

"Most people object to the scars."

I unfolded my arms from around the folders and extended my left arm. The scar glistened in the sunlight, shinier than the other skin. "I won't tell if you won't."

He slipped off his sunglasses and stared at me. I couldn't read his face. All I knew was that something was going on behind those big brown eyes. His voice was soft. "Is that your only bite scar?"

"No," I said.

His hands convulsed into fists, neck jerking, as if he'd had a jolt of electricity. A tremor ran up his arms into his shoulders, along his spine. He rotated his neck, as if to get rid of it. He slipped the black lenses back on his face, his eyes anonymous. The jacket came off. The scars at the bend of his arms were pale against his tan. The collarbone scar peeked from under the edges of the tank top. He had a nice neck, thick but not muscled, a stretch of smooth, tanned skin. I counted four sets of bites on that flawless skin. That was just the right side. The left was hidden by a bandage.

"I can put the jacket back on," he said.

I had been staring at him. "No, it's just . . ."

"What?"

"It's none of my business."

"Ask anyway."

"Why do you do what you do?"

He smiled, but it was twisted, a wry smile. "That is a very personal question."

"You did say ask anyway." I glanced across the street. "I usually go to Mabel's, but we might be seen."

"Ashamed of me?" His voice held a harsh edge to it, like sandpaper. His eyes were hidden, but his jaw muscles were clenched.

"It isn't that," I said. "You are the one who came into the office, pretending to be my 'friend'. If we go some place I'm known, we'll have to continue the charade."

"There are women who would pay to have me escort them."

"I know, I saw them last night at the club."

"True, but the point is still that you're ashamed to be seen with me. Because of this." His hand touched his neck, tentatively, delicate as a bird.

I got the distinct impression I had hurt his feelings. That didn't bother me, not really. But I knew what it was like to be different. I knew what it was like to be an embarrassment to people who should have known better. I knew better. It wasn't Phillip's feelings but the principle of the thing. "Let's go."

"Where to?"

"To Mabel's."

"Thank you," he said. He rewarded me with one of those brilliant smiles. If I had been less professional, it might have melted me into my socks. There was a tinge of evil to it, a lot of sex, but under that was a little boy peeking out, an uncertain little boy. That was it. That was the attraction. Nothing is more appealing than a handsome man who is also uncertain of himself.

It appeals not only to the woman in us all, but the mother. A dangerous combination. Luckily, I was immune. Sure. Besides, I had seen Phillip's idea of sex. He was definitely not my type.

Mabel's is a cafeteria, but the food is wonderful and reasonably priced. On weekdays the place is filled to the brim with suits and business skirts, thin little briefcases, and manila file folders. On Saturdays it was nearly deserted.

Beatrice smiled at me from behind the steaming food. She was tall and plump with brown hair and a tired face. Her pink uniform didn't fit well through the shoulders, and the hairnet made her face look too long. But she always smiled, and we always spoke.

"Hi, Beatrice." And without waiting to be asked, "This is Phillip."

"Hi, Phillip," she said.

He gave her a smile every bit as dazzling as he had given the real estate agent. She flushed, averted her eyes, and giggled. I hadn't known Beatrice could do that. Did she notice the scars? Did it matter to her?

It was too hot for meat loaf, but I ordered it anyway. It was always moist and the catsup sauce just tangy enough. I even got dessert, which I almost never do. I was starving. We managed to pay and find a table without Phillip flirting with anyone else. A major accomplishment.

"What has happened to Jean-Claude?" he asked.

"One more minute." I said grace over my food. He was staring at me when I looked up. We ate, and I told him an edited version of last night. Mostly, I told him about Jean-Claude and Nikolaos and the punishment.

He had stopped eating by the time I finished. He was staring over my head, at nothing that I could see. "Phillip?" I asked.

He shook his head and looked at me. "She could kill him."

"I got the impression she was just going to punish him. Do you know what that would be?"

He nodded, voice soft, saying, "She traps them in coffins and uses crosses to hold them inside. Aubrey disappeared for three months. When I saw him again, he was like he is now. Crazy."

I shivered. Would Jean-Claude go crazy? I picked up my fork and found myself halfway through a piece of blackberry pie. I hate blackberries. Damn, I

treat myself to pie and get the wrong kind. What was the matter with me? The taste was still warm and thick in my mouth. I took a big swig of Coke to wash it down. The Coke didn't help much.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

I pushed the half-eaten pie away and opened one of the folders. The first victim, one Maurice no last name, had lived with a woman named Rebecca Miles. They had cohabited for five years. "Cohabited" sounded better than "shacked up." "I'll talk to friends and lovers of the dead vampires."

"I might know the names."

I stared at him, debating. I didn't want to share information with him because I knew good ol' Phillip was the daytime eyes and ears of the undead. Yet, when I had talked to Rebecca Miles in the company of the police, she had told us zip. I didn't have time to wade through crap. I needed information and fast. Nikolaos wanted results. And what Nikolaos wanted, Nikolaos damn well better get.

"Rebecca Miles," I said.

"I know her. She was Maurice's property." He shrugged an apology at the word, but he let it stand. And I wondered what he meant by it. "Where do we go first?" he asked.

"Nowhere. I don't want a civilian along while I work."

"I might be able to help."

"No offense, you look strong and maybe even quick, but that isn't enough. Do you know how to fight? Do you carry a gun?"

"No gun, but I can handle myself."

I doubted that. Most people don't react well to violence. It freezes them. There are a handful of seconds where the body hesitates, the mind doesn't understand. Those few seconds can get you killed. The only way to kill the hesitation is practice. Violence has to become a part of your thinking. It makes you cautious, suspicious as hell, and lengthens your life expectancy. Phillip was familiar with violence, but only as the victim. I didn't need a professional victim tagging along. Yet, I needed information from people who wouldn't want to talk to me. They might talk to Phillip.

I didn't expect to run into a gun battle in broad daylight. Nor did I really expect anyone to jump me, at least not today. I've been wrong before but . . . If Phillip could help me, I saw no harm in it. As long as he didn't flash that smile at the wrong time and get molested by nuns, we would be safe.

"If someone threatens me, can you stay out of it and let me do my job, or would you charge in and try to save me?" I asked.

"Oh," he said. He stared down at his drink for a few minutes. "I don't know."

Brownie point for him. Most people would have lied. "Then I'd rather you didn't come."

"How are you going to convince Rebecca you work for the master vampire of this city? The Executioner working for vampires?"

It sounded ridiculous even to me. "I don't know."

He smiled. "Then it's settled. I'll come along and help calm the waters."

"I didn't agree to that."

"You didn't say no, either."

He had a point. I sipped my Coke and looked at his smug face for perhaps a minute. He said nothing, only stared back. His face was neutral, no challenge to it. There was no contest of egos as with Bert. "Let's go," I said.

We stood. I left a tip. We went off in search of clues.

Chapter 20

Rebecca Miles lived in South City's Dogtown. The streets were all named for states: Texas, Mississippi, Indiana. The building was blind, most of the windows boarded up. The grass was tall as an elephant's eye, but not half so beautiful. A block over were expensive rehabs full of yuppies and politicians. There were no yuppies on Rebecca's block.

Her apartment was on a long, narrow corridor. There was no air conditioning in the hallway, and the heat was like chest-high fur, thick and warm. One dim light bulb gleamed over the threadbare carpeting. In places the off-green walls were patched with white plaster, but it was clean. The smell of pine-scented Lysol was thick and almost nauseating in the small, dark hallway. You could probably have eaten off the carpeting if you had wanted to, but you would have gotten fuzzies in your mouth. No amount of Lysol would get rid of carpet fuzzies.

As we had discussed in the car, Phillip knocked on the door. The idea was that he would calm any misgivings she might have about The Executioner coming into her humble abode. It took fifteen minutes of knocking and waiting before we heard someone moving around behind the door.

The door opened as far as the chain would allow. I couldn't see who answered the door. A woman's voice, thick with sleep, said, "Phillip, what are you doing here?"

"Can I come in for a few minutes?" he asked. I couldn't see his face, but I would have bet everything I owned that he was flashing her one of his infamous smiles.

"Sure; sorry, you woke me up." The door closed, and the chain rattled. The door reopened, wide. I still couldn't see around Phillip. So I guess Rebecca didn't see me either.

Phillip walked in, and I followed behind him before the door could close. The apartment was ovenlike, a gasping, stranded-fish heat. The darkness should have made it cooler, but instead made it claustrophobic. Sweat trickled down my face.

Rebecca Miles stood holding onto the door. She was thin, with lifeless dark hair falling straight to her shoulders. High cheekbones clung to the skin of

her face. She was nearly overwhelmed by the white robe she wore. Delicate was the phrase, fragile. Small, dark eyes blinked at me. It was dim in the apartment, thick drapes cutting out the light. She had only seen me once, shortly after Maurice's death.

"Did you bring a friend?" she asked. She shut the door, and we were in near darkness.

"Yes," Phillip said. "This is Anita Blake . . ."

Her voice came out small and choked. "The Executioner?"

"Yes, but. . ."

She opened her small mouth and shrieked. She threw herself at me, hands clawing and slapping. I braced and covered my face with my forearms. She fought like a girl, all open-handed slaps, scratches, and flailing arms. I grabbed her wrist and used her own momentum to pull her past me. She stumbled to her knees with a little help. I had her right arm in a joint lock. It puts pressure on the elbow, it hurts, and a little extra push will snap the arm. Most people don't fight well after you break their arm at the elbow.

I didn't want to break the woman's arm. I didn't want to hurt her at all. There were two bloody scratches on my arm where she had gotten me. I guess I was lucky she hadn't had a gun.

She tried to move, and I pressed on the arm. I felt her tremble. Her breath was coming in huge gasps. "You can't kill him! You can't! Please, please don't." She started to cry, thin shoulders shaking inside the too-big robe. I stood there, holding her arm, causing her pain.

I released her arm, slowly, and stepped back out of reach. I hoped she didn't attack again. I didn't want to hurt her, and I didn't want her to hurt me. The scratches were beginning to sting.

Rebecca Miles wasn't going to try again. She huddled against the door, thin, starved hands locked around her knees. She sobbed, gasping for air, "You . . . can't . . . kill him. Please!" She started to rock back and forth, hugging herself tight as if she might shatter, like weak glass.

Jesus, some days I hate my job. "Talk to her, Phillip. Tell her we didn't come here to hurt anyone."

Phillip knelt beside her. He kept his hands at his sides as he talked to her. I didn't hear what he said. Her shuddering sobs floated after me through a right-hand doorway. It led into the bedroom.

A coffin sat beside the bed, dark wood, maybe cherry, varnished until it gleamed in the twilight dark. She thought I came to kill her lover. Jesus.

The bathroom was small and cluttered. I hit the light switch, and the harsh yellow light was not kind. Her makeup was scattered around the cracked sink like casualties. The tub was nearly rotted with rust. I found what I hoped was a clean washrag and ran cold water over it. The water that trickled out was the color of weak coffee. The pipes shuddered and clanked and whined. The water finally ran clear. It felt good on my hands, but I didn't splash any on my neck or face. It would have been cool, but the bathroom was dirty. I couldn't use the water, not if I didn't have to. I looked up as I squeezed the rag out. The mirror was shattered, a spiderweb of cracks. It gave me my face back in broken pieces.

I didn't look in the mirror again. I walked back past the coffin and hesitated. I had an urge to knock on the smooth wood. Anybody home? I didn't do it. For all I knew, someone might have knocked back.

Phillip had the woman on the couch. She was leaning against him, boneless, panting, but the crying had almost stopped. She flinched when she saw me. I tried not to look menacing, something I'm good at, and handed the rag to Phillip. "Wipe her face and put it against the back of her neck; it'll help."

He did what I asked, and she sat there with the damp rag against her neck, staring at me. Her eyes were wide, a lot of white showing. She shivered.

I found the light switch, and harsh light flooded the room. One look at the room and I wanted to turn the light off again, but I didn't. I thought Rebecca might attack me again if I sat beside her, or maybe she'd have a complete breakdown. Wouldn't that be pretty? The only chair was lopsided and had yellowed stuffing bulging out one side. I decided to stand.

Phillip looked up at me. His sunglasses were hooked over the front of his tank top. His eyes were wide and careful, as if he didn't want me to know what he was thinking. One tanned arm was wrapped around her shoulders, protective. I felt like a bully.

"I told her why we are here. I told her you wouldn't hurt Jack."

"The coffin?" I smiled. I couldn't help it. He was a "jack in the box."

"Yes," Phillip said. He stared at me as if grinning were not appropriate.

It wasn't, so I stopped, but it was something of an effort.

I nodded. If Rebecca wanted to shack up with vampires, that was her business. It certainly wasn't police business.

"Go on, Rebecca. She's trying to help us," Phillip said.

"Why?" she asked.

It was a good question. I had scared her and made her cry. I answered her question. "The master of the city made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

She stared at me, studying my face, like she was committing me to memory. "I don't believe you," she said.

I shrugged. That's what you get for telling the truth. Someone calls you a liar. Most people will accept a likely lie to an unlikely truth. In fact, they prefer it.

"How could any vampire threaten The Executioner?" she asked.

I sighed. "I'm not the bogeyman, Rebecca. Have you ever met the master of the city?"

"No."

"Then you'll have to trust me. I am scared shitless of the master. Anybody in their right mind would be."

She still looked unconvinced, but she started talking. Her small, light voice told the same story she'd told the police. Bland and useless as a new-minted penny.

"Rebecca, I am trying to catch the person, or thing, that killed your boyfriend. Please help me."

Phillip hugged her. "Tell her what you told me."

She glanced at him, then back at me. She sucked her lower lip in and scraped it with her upper teeth, thoughtful. She took a deep, shaky breath. "We were at a freak party that night."

I blinked, then tried to sound reasonably intelligent. "I know a freak is someone who likes vampires. Is a freak party what I think it is?"

Phillip was the one who nodded. "I go to them a lot." He wouldn't look at me while he said it. "You can have a vampire most any way you want it. And they can have you." He darted a glance at my face, then down again. Maybe he didn't like what he saw.

I tried to keep my face blank, but I wasn't having much luck. A freak party, dear God. But it was somewhere to start. "Did anything special happen at the party?" I asked.

She blinked at me, face blank, as if she didn't understand. I tried again. "Did anything out of the ordinary happen at the freak party?" When in doubt, change your vocabulary.

She stared down into her lap and shook her head. Long, dark hair trailed over her face like a thin curtain.

"Did Maurice have any enemies that you know of?"

Rebecca shook her head without even looking up. I glimpsed her eyes through her hair like a frightened rabbit staring out from behind a bush. Did she have more information, or had I used her up? If I pushed she'd break, shatter, and maybe a clue would come spilling out, then again, maybe not. Her hands were tangled in her lap, white-knuckled. They trembled ever so slightly. How badly did I want to know? Not that badly. I let it go. Anita Blake, humanitarian.

Phillip tucked Rebecca in bed, while I waited in the living room. I half-expected to hear giggling or some sound that said he was working his charm. There was nothing but the quiet murmur of voices and the cool rustle of sheets. When he came out of the bedroom, his face was serious, solemn. He slipped his glasses back on and hit the light switch. The room was a thick, hot darkness. I heard him move in the ovenlike blackness. A rustle of jeans, a scrape of boot. I fumbled for the doorknob, found it, flung it open.

Pale light spilled in. Phillip was standing, staring at me, eyes hidden. His body was relaxed, easy, but somehow I could feel his hostility. We were no longer playing friends. I wasn't sure if he was angry with me for some reason, or himself, or fate. When you end up with a life like Rebecca's, there should be someone to blame.

"That could have been me," he said.

I looked at him. "But it wasn't."

He spread his arms wide, flexing. "But it could be."

I didn't know what to say to that. What could I say? There but for the grace of God go you? I doubted God had much to do with Phillip's world.

Phillip made sure the door locked behind us, then said, "I know at least two other murdered vampires were regulars on the party circuit."

My stomach tightened, a little flutter of excitement. "Do you think the rest of the . . . victims could be freak aficionados?"

He shrugged. "I can find out." His face was still closed to me, blank. Something had turned off his switch. Maybe it was Rebecca Miles's small, starved hands. I know it hadn't done a lot for me.

Could I trust him to find out? Would he tell me the truth? Would it endanger him? No answers, just more questions, but at least the questions were getting better. Freak parties. A common thread, a real live clue. Hot dog.

Chapter 21

Inside my car I turned the air conditioning on full blast. Sweat chilled on my skin, jelling in place. I turned the air down before I got a headache from the temperature change.

Phillip sat as far away from me as he could get. His body was half-turned, as much as the seat belt would allow, towards the window. His eyes behind their sunglasses stared out and away. Phillip didn't want to talk about what had just happened. How did I know that? Anita the mind reader. No, just Anita the not so stupid.

His whole body was hunched in upon itself. If I hadn't known better, I'd have said he was in pain. Come to think of it, maybe he was.

I had just bullied a very fragile human being. It hadn't felt very good, but it beat the heck out of knocking her senseless. I had not hurt her physically. Why didn't I believe that? Now, I was going to question Phillip because he had given me a clue. The proverbial lead. I couldn't let it go.

"Phillip?" I asked.

His shoulders tightened, but he continued to stare out the window.

"Phillip, I need to know about the freak parties."

"Drop me at the club."

"Guilty Pleasures?" I asked. Brilliant repartee, that's me.

He nodded, still turned away.

"Don't you need to pick up your car?"

"I don't drive," he said. "Monica dropped me off at your office."

"Did she now?" I felt the anger, instantaneous and warm.

He turned then, stared at me, face blank, eyes hidden. "Why are you so angry at her? She just got you to the club, that's all."

I shrugged.

"Why?" His voice was tired, human, normal.

I wouldn't have answered the teasing flirt, but this person was real. Real people deserve answers. "She's human, and she betrayed other humans to nonhumans," I said.

"And that's a worse crime than Jean-Claude choosing you to be our champion?"

"Jean-Claude is a vampire. You expect treachery from vampires."

"You do. I do not."

"Rebecca Miles looks like a person who's been betrayed."

He flinched.

Great Anita, just great, let's emotionally abuse everyone we meet today. But it was true.

He had turned back to the window, and I had to fill the pained silence. "Vampires are not human. Their loyalty, first and foremost, must be to their own kind. I understand that. Monica betrayed her own kind. She also betrayed a friend. That is unforgivable."

He twisted to look at me. I wished I could see his eyes. "So if someone was your friend, you would do anything for them?"

I thought about that as we drove down 70 East. Anything? That was a tall order. Almost anything? Yes. "Almost anything," I said.

"So loyalty and friendship are very important to you?"

"Yes."

"Because you believe Monica betrayed both of those things, it makes it a worse crime than anything the vampires did?"

I shifted in the seat, not happy with the way the conversation was going. I am not a big one for personal analysis. I know who I am and what I do, and that's usually enough. Not always, but most of the time. "Not anything; I don't believe in many absolutes. But, if you want a short version, yes, that's why I'm angry at Monica."

He nodded, as if that were the answer he wanted. "She's afraid of you; did you know that?"

I smiled, and it wasn't a very nice smile. I could feel the edges curl up with a dark sort of satisfaction. "I hope the little bitch is sweating it out, big time."

"She is," he said. His voice was very quiet.

I glanced at him, then quickly back to the road. I had a feeling he didn't approve of my scaring Monica. Of course, that was his problem. I was quite pleased with the results.

We were getting close to the Riverfront turnoff. He had still not answered my question. In fact, he had very nicely avoided it. "Tell me about freak parties, Phillip."

"Did you really threaten to cut out Monica's heart?"

"Yes. Are you going to tell me about the parties or not?"

"Would you really do it? Cut out her heart, I mean?"

"You answer my question, I'll answer yours." I turned the car onto the narrow brick roads of the Riverfront. Two more blocks and we would be at Guilty Pleasures.

"I told you what the parties are like. I've stopped going the last few months."

I glanced at him again. I wanted to ask why. So I did. "Why?"

"Damn, you do ask personal questions, don't you?"

"I didn't mean it to be."

I thought he wasn't going to answer the question, but he did. "I got tired of being passed around. I didn't want to end up like Rebecca, or worse."

I wanted to ask what was worse, but I let it go. I try not to be cruel, just persistent. There are days when the difference is pretty damn slight. "If you find out that all the vampires went to freak parties, call me."

"Then what?" he asked.

"I need to go to a party." I parked in front of Guilty Pleasures. The neon was quiet, a dim ghost of its nighttime self. The place looked closed.

"You don't want to go to a party, Anita."

"I'm trying to solve a crime, Phillip. If I don't, my friend dies. And I have no illusions about what the master will do to me if I fail. A quick death would be the best I could hope for."

He shivered. "Yeah, yeah." He unbuckled the seat belt and rubbed his hands along his arms, as if he were cold. "You never answered my question about Monica," he said.

"You never really told me about the parties."

He looked down, staring at the tops of his thighs. "There's one tonight. If you have to go, I'll take you." He turned to me, arms still hugging his elbows. "The parties are always at a different location. When I find out where, how do I get in touch with you?"

"Leave a message on my answering machine, my home number." I got a business card out of my purse and wrote my home phone number on the back. He got his jean jacket out of the back seat and stuffed the card into a pocket. He opened the door, and the heat washed into the chill, air-conditioned car like the breath of a dragon.

He leaned into the car, one arm on the roof, one on the door. "Now, answer my question. Would you really cut out Monica's heart, so she couldn't come back as a vampire?"

I stared into the blackness of his sunglasses and said, "Yes."

"Remind me never to piss you off." He took a deep breath. "You'll need to wear something that shows off your scars tonight. Buy something if you don't have it." He hesitated, then asked, "Are you as good at being a friend as you are an enemy?"

I took a deep breath and let it out. What could I say? "You don't want me for an enemy, Phillip. I make a much better friend."

"Yeah, I'll bet you do." He closed the door and walked up to the club door. He knocked, and a few moments later the door opened. I got a glimpse of a pale figure opening the door. It couldn't be a vampire, could it? The door closed before I could see much. Vampires could not come out in daylight. That was a rule. But until last night I had known vampires could not fly. So much for what I knew.

Whoever it was had been expecting Phillip. I pulled away from the curb. Why had they sent him at his flirtatious best? Had he been sent to charm me? Or was he the only human they could get at short notice? The only daytime member of their little club. Except for Monica. And I wasn't real fond of her right now. That was just dandy with me.

I didn't think Phillip was lying about the freak parties, but what did I know about Phillip? He stripped at Guilty Pleasures, not exactly a character reference. He was a vampire junkie, better and better. Was all that pain an act? Was he luring me someplace, just as Monica had?

I didn't know. And I needed to know. There was one place I could go that might have the answers. The only place in the District where I was truly welcome. Dead Dave's, a nice bar that served a mean hamburger. The proprietor was an ex-cop who had been kicked off the force for being dead. Picky, picky. Dave liked to help out, but he resented the prejudice of his former comrades. So he talked to me. And I talked to the police. It was a nice little arrangement that let Dave be pissed off at the police and still help them.

It made me nearly invaluable to the police. Since I was on retainer, that pleased Bert to no end.

It being daytime, Dead Dave was tucked in his coffin, but Luther would be there. Luther was the daytime manager and bartender. He was one of the few people in the District who didn't have much to do with vampires, except for the fact that he worked for one. Life is never perfect.

I actually found a parking place not far from Dave's. Daytime parking is a lot more open in the District. When the Riverfront used to be human-owned businesses, there was never any parking on a weekend, day or night. It was one of the few positives of the new vampire laws. That and the tourism.

St. Louis was a real hot spot for vampire watchers. The only place better was New York, but we had a lower crime rate. There was a gang that had gone all vampire in New York. They had spread to Los Angeles and tried to spread here. The police found the first recruits chopped into bite-size pieces.

Our vampire community prides itself on being mainstream. A vampire gang would be bad publicity, so they took care of it. I admired the efficiency of it but wished they had done it differently. I had had nightmares for weeks about walls that bled and dismembered arms that crawled along the floor all by themselves. We never did find the heads.

Chapter 22

Dead Dave's is all dark glass and glowing beer signs. At night the front windows look like some sort of modern art, featuring brand names. In the daylight everything is muted. Bars are sort of like vampires; they are at their best after dark. There is something tired and wistful about a daytime bar.

The air conditioning was up full blast, like the inside of a freezer. It was almost a physical jolt after the skin-melting heat outside. I stood just inside the door and waited for my eyes to adjust to the twilight interior. Why are all bars so damn dark, like caves, places to hide? The air smelled of stale cigarettes no

matter when you came in, as if years of smoke had settled into the upholstery, like aromatic ghosts.

Two guys in business suits were settled at the farthest booth from the door. They were eating and had manila folders spread across the table top. Working on a Saturday. Just like me, well, maybe not just like me. I was betting that no one had threatened to tear their throats out. Of course, I could be wrong, but I doubted it. I was betting the worst threat they had had this week was lack of job security. Ah, the good old days.

There was a man crouched on a bar stool, nursing a tall drink. His face was already slack, his movements very slow and precise, as if he were afraid he'd spill something. Drunk at one-thirty in the afternoon; not a good sign for him. But it wasn't my business. You can't save everybody. In fact, there are days when I think you can't save anyone. Each person has to save himself first, then you can move in and help. I have found this philosophy does not work during a gun battle, or a knife fight either. Outside of that it works just fine.

Luther was polishing glasses with a very clean white towel. He looked up when I slipped up on the bar stool. He nodded, a cigarette dangling from his thick lips. Luther is large, nay, fat. There is no other word for it, but it is hard fat, rock-solid, almost a kind of muscle. His hands are huge-knuckled and as big as my face. Of course, my face is small. He is a very dark black man, nearly purplish black, like mahogany. The creamy chocolate of his eyes is yellow-edged from too much cigarette smoke. I don't think I have ever seen Luther without a cig clasped between his lips. He is overweight, chain-smokes, and the grey in his hair marks him as over fifty, yet he's never sick. Good genetics, I guess.

"What'll it be, Anita?" His voice matched his body, deep and gravelly.

"The usual."

He poured me a short glass of orange juice. Vitamins. We pretended it was a screwdriver, so my penchant for sobriety wouldn't give the bar a bad name. Who wants to get drunk when there are teetotalers in the crowd? And why in the world would I keep coming to a bar if I didn't drink?

I sipped my fake screwdriver and said, "I need some info."

"Figured that. Whatcha need?"

"I need information on a man named Phillip, dances at Guilty Pleasures."

One thick eyebrow raised. "Vamp?"

I shook my head. "Vampire junkie."

He took a big drag on his cig, making the end glow like a live coal. He blew a huge puff of smoke politely away from me. "Whatcha want to know about him?"

"Is he trustworthy?"

He stared at me for a heartbeat, then he grinned. "Trustworthy? Hell, Anita, he's a junkie. Don't matter what he's strung out on, drugs, liquor, sex, vampires, no diff. No junkie is trustworthy, you know that."

I nodded. I did know that, but what could I do? "I have to trust him, Luther. He's all I got."

"Damn, girl, you are moving in the wrong circles."

I smiled. Luther was the only person I let call me girl. All women were "girl," all men "fella." "I need to know if you've heard anything really bad about him," I said.

"What are you up to?" he asked.

"I can't say. I'd share it if I could, or if I thought it would do any good."

He studied me for a moment, cig dribbling ash onto the countertop. He wiped up the ash absentmindedly with his clean white towel. "Okay, Anita, you've earned the right to say no, this once, but next time you better have something to share."

I smiled. "Cross my heart."

He just shook his head and pulled a fresh cigarette out of the pack he always kept behind the bar. He took one last drag of the nearly burned cig, then clasped the fresh one between his lips. He put the glowing orange end of the old cig against the fresh white tip and sucked air. The paper and tobacco caught, flared orange-red, and he stubbed out the old cig in the already full ashtray he carried with him from place to place, like a teddy bear.

"I know they got a dancer down at the club that is a freak. He does the party circuit and is reeal popular with a certain sort of vamp." Luther shrugged, a massive movement like mountains hiccuping. "Don't have no dirt on him, 'cept he's a junkie, and he does the circuit. Shit, Anita, that's bad enough. Sounds like someone to stay away from."

"I would if I could." It was my turn to shrug. "But you haven't heard anything else about him?"

He thought for a moment, sucking on his new cigarette. "No, not a word. He ain't a big player in the district. He's a professional victim. Most of the talk is about the predators down here, not the sheep." He frowned. "Just a minute. I got something, an idea." He thought very carefully for a few minutes, then smiled broadly. "Yeah, got some news on a predator. Vamp calls himself Valentine, wears a mask. He been bragging that he did ol' Phillip the first time."

"So," I said.

"Not the first time he was a junkie, girl, the first time period. Valentine claims he jumped the boy when he was small, did him good. Claims ol' Phillip liked it so much that's why he's a junkie."

"Dear God." I remembered the nightmares, the reality, of Valentine. What would it have been like to have been small when it happened? What would it have done to me?

"You know Valentine?" Luther asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. He ever say how old Phillip was when the attack took place?"

He shook his head. "No, but word is anything over twelve is too old for Valentine, 'less it's revenge. He's a real big one for revenge. Word is if the master didn't keep him in line, he'd be damn dangerous."

"You bet your sweet ass he's dangerous."

"You know him." It wasn't a question.

I looked up at Luther. "I need to know where Valentine stays during the day."

"That's two bits of information for nuthin'. I don't think so."

"He wears a mask because I doused him with Holy Water about two years ago. Until last night I thought he was dead, and he thought the same about me. He's going to kill me, if he can."

"You awful hard to kill, Anita."

"There's a first time, Luther, and that's all it takes."

"I hear that." He started polishing already clean glasses. "I don't know. Word gets out we giving you daytime resting places, it could go bad for us. They could burn this place to the ground with us inside."

"You're right. I don't have a right to ask." But I sat there on the bar stool, staring at him, willing him to give me what I needed. Risk your life for me old buddy ol' pal, I'd do the same for you. Riiight.

"If you could swear you wouldn't use the info to kill him, I could tell you," Luther said.

"It'd be a lie."

"You got a warrant to kill him?" he asked.

"Not active, but I could get one."

"Would you wait for it?"

"It's illegal to kill a vampire without a court order of execution," I said.

He stared at me. "That ain't the question. Would you jump the gun to make sure of the kill?"

"Might."

He shook his head. "You gonna be up on charges one of these days, girl. Murder is a serious rap."

I shrugged. "Beats getting your throat torn out."

He blinked. "Well, now." He didn't seem to know what to say, so he polished a sparkling glass over and over in his big hands. "I'll have to ask Dave. If he says it's okay, you can have it."

I finished my orange juice and paid up, a little heavy on the tip to keep things aboveboard. Dave would never admit he helped me because of my tie with the police, so money had to exchange hands, even if it wasn't nearly what the information was worth. "Thanks, Luther."

"Word on the street is that you met the master last night. That true?"

"You know about that before or after the fact?" I asked.

He looked pained. "Anita, we woulda told you if we'd known, gratis."

I nodded. "Sorry, Luther, it's been a rough few nights."

"I'll bet. So the rumor's true?"

What could I say? Deny it? A lot of people seemed to know. I guess you can't even trust the dead to keep a secret. "Maybe." I might as well have said yes, because I didn't say no. Luther understood the game. He nodded. "What did they want with you?"

"Can't say."

"Mmm . . . uh. Okay, Anita, you be damn careful. You might wanta get some help, if there's anybody you can trust."

Trust? It wasn't lack of trust. "There may be only two ways out of this mess, Luther. Death would be my choice. A quick death would be best, but I

doubt I'll get the chance if things go bad. What friend am I supposed to drag into that?"

His round, dark face stared at me. "I don't have no answers, girl. I wish I did."

"So do I."

The phone rang. Luther answered it. He looked at me and carried the phone down on its long cord. "For you," he said.

I cradled the phone against my cheek. "Yes."

"It's Ronnie." Her voice was suppressed excitement, a kid on Christmas morning.

My stomach tightened. "You have something?"

"There is a rumor going around Humans Against Vampires. A death squad designed to wipe the vampires off the face of the earth."

"You have proof, a witness?"

"Not yet."

I sighed before I could stop myself.

"Come on, Anita, this is good news."

I cupped my hand over the phone and whispered, "I can't take a rumor about HAV to the master. The vampires would slaughter them. A lot of innocent people would get killed, and we're not even sure that HAV is really behind the murders."

"All right, all right," Ronnie said. "I'll have something more concrete by tomorrow, I promise. Bribe or threat, I'll get the information."

"Thanks, Ronnie."

"What are friends for? Besides, Bert's going to have to pay for overtime and bribes. I always love the look of pain when he has to part with money."

I grinned into the phone. "Me, too."

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Going to a party."

"What?"

I explained as briefly as I could. After a long silence she said, "That is very freaky."

I agreed with her. "You keep working your end, I'll try from this side. Maybe we'll meet in the middle."

"It'd be nice to think so." Her voice sounded warm, almost angry.

"What's wrong?"

"You're going in without backup, aren't you?" she asked.

"You're alone," I said.

"But I'm not surrounded by vampires and freakazoids."

"If you're at HAV headquarters, that last is debatable."

"Don't be cute. You know what I mean."

"Yes, Ronnie, I know what you mean. You are the only friend I have who can handle herself." I shrugged, realized she couldn't see it, and said, "Anybody else would be like Catherine, sheep among wolves, and you know it."

"What about another animator?"

"Who? Jamison thinks vampires are nifty. Bert talks a good game, but he doesn't endanger his lily white ass. Charles is a good enough corpse-raiser, but he's squeamish, and he's got a four-year-old kid. Manny doesn't hunt vampires anymore. He spent four months in the hospital being put back together after his last hunt."

"If I remember correctly, you were in the hospital, too," she said.

"A broken arm and a busted collarbone were my worst injuries, Ronnie. Manny almost died. Besides, he's got a wife and four kids."

Manny had been the animator who trained me. He taught me how to raise the dead, and how to slay vampires. Though admittedly I had expanded on Manny's teachings. He was a traditionalist, a stake-and-garlic man. He had carried a gun, but as backup, not as a primary tool. If modern technology will allow me to take out a vampire from a distance, rather than straddling its waist and pounding a stake through its heart, heh, why not?

Two years ago, Rosita, Manny's wife, had come to me and begged me not to endanger her husband anymore. Fifty-two was too old to hunt vampires, she had said. What would happen to her and the children? Somehow I had gotten all the blame, like a mother whose favorite child had been led astray by the neighborhood ruffians. She had made me swear before God that I would never again ask Manny to join me on a hunt. If she hadn't cried, I would have held out, refused. Crying was damned unfair in a fight. Once a person started to cry, you couldn't talk anymore. You suddenly just wanted them to stop crying, stop hurting, stop making you feel like the biggest scum-bucket in the world. Anything to stop the tears.

Ronnie was quiet on the other end of the phone. "All right, but you be careful."

"Careful as a virgin on her wedding night, I promise."

She laughed. "You are incorrigible."

"Everybody tells me that," I said.

"Watch your back."

"You do the same."

"I will." She hung up. The phone buzzed dead in my hands.

"Good news?" Luther asked.

"Yeah." Humans Against Vampires had a death squad. Maybe. But maybe was better than what I'd had before. Look, folks, nothing up my sleeves, nothing in my pockets, no idea in hell what I was doing. Just blundering around trying to track down a killer that has taken out two master vampires. If I was on the right track, I'd attract attention soon. Which meant someone might try to kill me. Wouldn't that be fun?

I would need clothes that showed off my vampire scars and allowed me to hide weapons. It would not be an easy combination to find.

I would have to spend the afternoon shopping. I hate to shop. I consider it one of life's necessary evils, like brussels sprouts and high-heeled shoes. Of course, it beat the heck out of having my life threatened by vampires. But wait; we could go shopping now and be threatened by vampires in the evening. A perfect way to spend a Saturday night.

Chapter 23

I transferred all the smaller bags into one big bag, to leave one hand free for my gun. You'd be amazed what a nice target you make juggling two armloads of shopping bags. First drop the bags - that is if one of the handles isn't tangled over your wrist - then reach for your gun, pull, aim, fire. By the time you do all that the bad guy has shot you twice and is walking away humming Dixie between his teeth.

I had been downright paranoid all afternoon, aware of everyone near me. Was I being followed? Had that man looked too long at me? Was that woman wearing a scarf around her neck because she had bite marks?

By the time I went for the car, my neck and shoulders were knotted into one painful ache. The most frightening thing I'd seen all afternoon had been the prices on the designer clothing.

The world was still bright blue and heat-soaked when I went for my car. It's easy to forget the passage of time in a mall. It is air conditioned, climate controlled, a private world where nothing real touches you. Disneyland for shopaholics.

I shut my packages in the trunk and watched the sky darken. I knew what fear felt like, a leaden balloon in the pit of your gut. A nice, quiet dread.

I shrugged to loosen my shoulders. Rotated my neck until it popped. Better, but still tight. I needed some aspirin. I had eaten in the mall, something I almost never did. The moment I smelled the food stalls, I had gone for them, starved.

The pizza had tasted like thin cardboard with imitation tomato paste spread over it. The cheese had been rubbery and tasteless. Yum, yum, mall food. Truth is, I love Corn Dog on a Stick and Mrs. Field's Cookies.

I got one piece of pizza with just cheese, the way I like it, but one piece with everything. I hate mushrooms and green peppers.

Sausage belongs on the breakfast table, not on pizza. I didn't know which bothered me more; that I ordered it in the first place, or that I had eaten half of it before I realized what I was doing. I was craving food that I normally hated. Why? One more question without an answer. Why did this one scare me?

My neighbor, Mrs. Pringle, was walking her dog back and forth on the grass in front of our apartment building. I parked and unloaded my one overstuffed bag from the trunk.

Mrs. Pringle is over sixty, nearly six feet tall, stretched too thin with age. Her faded blue eyes are bright and curious behind silver-rimmed glasses. Her dog Custard is a Pomeranian. He looks like a golden dandelion fluff with cat feet.

Mrs. Pringle waved at me, and I was trapped. I smiled and walked over to them. Custard began jumping up on me, like he had springs in his tiny legs. He looked like a wind-up toy. His yapping was frequent and insistent, joyous.

Custard knows I don't like him, and in his twisted doggy mind he is determined to win me over. Or maybe he just knows it irritates me. Whatever.

"Anita, you naughty girl, why didn't you tell me you had a beau?" Mrs. Pringle asked.

I frowned. "A beau?"

"A boyfriend," she said.

I didn't know what in the world she was talking about. "What do you mean?"

"Be coy if you wish, but when a young woman gives her apartment key to a man, it means something."

That lead balloon in my gut floated up a few inches. "Did you see someone going in my apartment today?" I worked very hard at keeping my face and voice casual.

"Yes, your nice young man. Very handsome."

I wanted to ask what he looked like, but if he was my boyfriend with a key to my apartment, I should know. I couldn't ask. Very handsome - could it be Phillip? But why? "When did he stop by?"

"Oh, around two this afternoon. I was just coming out to walk Custard as he was going in."

"Did you see him leave?"

She was staring at me a little too hard. "No. Anita, was he not supposed to be in your home? Did I let a burglar get away?"

"No." I managed a smile and almost a whole laugh. "I just didn't expect him today, that's all. If you see anyone going into my apartment, just let them. I'll have friends going in and out for a few days."

Her eyes had narrowed; her delicate-boned hands were very still. Even Custard was sitting in the grass, panting up at me. "Anita Blake," she said, and I was reminded that she was a retired schoolteacher, it was that kind of voice. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing, really. I've just never given my key to a man before, and I'm a little unsure about it. Jittery." I gave her my best wide-eyed innocent look. I resisted the urge to bat my eyes, but everything else was working.

She crossed her arms over her stomach. I don't think she believed me. "If you are that nervous about this young man, then he is not the right one for you. If he was, you wouldn't be jittery."

I felt light with relief. She believed. "You're probably right. Thank you for the advice. I may even take it." I felt so good, I patted Custard on top of his furry little head.

I heard Mrs. Pringle say as I walked away, "Now, Custard, do your business and let's go upstairs."

For the second time in the same day I might have an intruder in my apartment. I walked down the hushed corridor and drew my gun. A door opened. A man and two children walked out. I slipped my gun and my hand in

the shopping bag, pretending to search for something. I listened to their footsteps echo down the stairs.

I couldn't just sit out here with a gun. Someone would call the police. Everybody was home from work, eating dinner, reading the paper, playing with the kids. Suburban America was awake and alert. You could not walk through it with a gun drawn.

I carried the shopping bag in my left hand in front of me, gun and right hand still inside it. If worse came to worse, I'd shoot through the bag. I walked two doors past my apartment and dug my keys out of my purse. I sat the shopping bag against the wall and transferred the gun to my left hand. I could shoot left-handed, not as well, but it would have to do. I held the gun parallel to my thigh and hoped nobody would come the wrong way down the hall and see it. I knelt by the door, keys cupped in my right hand, quiet, not jingling this time. I learn fast.

I held the gun in front of my chest and inserted the keys. The lock clicked. I flinched and waited for gunshots or noise, or something. Nothing. I slipped the keys into my pocket and switched the gun back to my right hand. With just my wrist and part of my arm in front of the door, I turned the knob and pushed hard.

The door swung back and banged against the far wall, nobody there. No gunshots at the door. Silence.

I was crouched by the doorjamb, gun straight out, scanning the room. There was no one to see. The chair, still facing the door, was empty this time. I would almost have been relieved to see Edward.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs at the end of the hall. I had to make a decision. I reached my left hand back and got the shopping bag, never taking eyes or gun from the apartment. I scrambled inside, shoving the bag ahead of me. I shoved the door closed, still crouched by the floor.

The aquarium heater clicked, then whirred, and I jumped. Sweat was oozing down my spine. The brave vampire slayer. If they could only see me now. The apartment felt empty. There was no one here but me, but just in case, I searched in closets, under beds. Playing Dirty Harry as I slammed doors and flattened myself against walls. I felt like a fool, but I would have been a bigger fool to have trusted the apartment was empty and been wrong.

There was a shotgun on the kitchen table, along with two boxes of ammo. A sheet of white typing paper lay under it. In neat, black letters, it said, "Anita, you have twenty-four hours."

I stared at the note, reread it. Edward had been here. I don't think I breathed for a minute. I was picturing my neighbor chatting with Edward. If Mrs. Pringle had hesitated at his lie, showed fear, would he have killed her?

I didn't know. I just didn't know. Dammit! I was like a plague. Everyone around me was in danger, but what could I do?

When in doubt, take a deep breath and keep moving. A philosophy I have lived by for years. I've heard worse, really.

The note meant I had twenty-four hours before Edward came for the location of Nikolaos' daytime retreat. If I didn't give it to him, I would have to kill him. I might not be able to do that.

I told Ronnie we were professionals, but if Edward was a professional, then I was an amateur. And so was Ronnie.

Heavy damn sigh. I had to get dressed for the party. There just wasn't time to worry about Edward. I had other problems tonight.

My answering machine was blinking, and I switched it on. Ronnie's voice first, telling me what she had already told me about HAV. Evidently, she had called here first before contacting me at Dave's bar. Then, "Anita, this is Phillip. I know the location for the party. Pick me up in front of Guilty Pleasures at six-thirty. Bye."

The machine clicked, whirred, and was silent. I had two hours to dress and be there. Plenty of time. My average time for makeup is fifteen minutes. Hair takes less, because all I do is run a brush through it. Presto, I'm presentable.

I don't wear makeup often, so when I do, I always feel like it's too dark, too fake. But I always get compliments on it, like, "Why don't you wear eye shadow more often? It really brings out your eyes," or my favorite, "You look so much better in makeup." All the above implies that without makeup, you look like a candidate for the spinster farm.

One piece of makeup I don't use is base. I can't imagine smearing cake over my whole face. I own one bottle of clear nail polish, but it isn't for my fingers, it's for my panty hose. If I wear a pair of hose once without snagging them, I have had a very good day.

I stood in front of the full-length mirror in the bedroom. The top slipped over my head with one thin strap. There was no back; it tied across the small of my back in a cute little bow. I could have done without the bow, but otherwise it wasn't too bad. The top slipped into the black skirt, complete, dresslike without a break. The tan bandages on my hands clashed with the dress. Oh, well. The skirt was full and swirled when I moved. It had pockets.

Through those pockets were two thigh sheaths complete with silver knives. All I had to do was slip my hands in and come out with a weapon. Neat. Sweat is an interesting thing when you're wearing a thigh sheath. I had not been able to figure out how to hide a gun on me. I don't care how many times you've seen women carry guns on a thigh holster on television, it is damn awkward. You walk like a duck with a wet diaper on.

Hose and high-heeled black satin pumps completed the outfit. I had owned the shoes and the weapons; everything else was new.

One other new item was a cute black purse with a thin strap that would hang across my shoulders, leaving my hands free. I stuffed my smaller gun, the Firestar, into it. I know, I know, by the time I dug the gun from the depths of the purse, the bad guys would be feasting on my flesh, but it was better than not having it at all.

I slipped my cross on, and the silver looked good against the black top. Unfortunately, I doubted the vampires would let me into the party wearing a

blessed crucifix. Oh, well. I'd leave it in the car, along with the shotgun and ammo.

Edward had kindly left a box near the table. What I assumed he had brought the gun up in. What had he told Mrs. Pringle, that it was a present for me?

Edward had said twenty-four hours, but twenty-four hours from when? Would he be here at dawn, bright and early, to torture the information out of me? Naw, Edward didn't strike me as a morning person. I was safe until at least afternoon. Probably.

Chapter 24

I slid into a no-parking zone in front of Guilty Pleasures. Phillip was leaning against the building, arms loose at his sides. He wore black leather pants. The thought of leather in this heat made my knees break out in heat rash. His shirt was black fishnet, which showed off both scars and tan. I don't know if it was the leather or the fishnet, but the word "sleazy" came to mind. He had passed over some invisible line, from flirt to hustler.

I tried to picture him at twelve. It didn't work. Whatever had been done to him, he was what he was, and that was what I had to deal with. I wasn't a psychiatrist who could afford to feel sorry for the poor unfortunate. Pity is an emotion that can get you killed. The only thing more dangerous is blind hate, and maybe love.

Phillip pushed away from the wall and walked towards the car. I unlocked his door, and he slid inside. He smelled of leather, expensive cologne, and faintly of sweat.

I pulled away from the curb. "Aggressive little outfit there, Phillip."

He turned to stare at me, face immobile, eyes hidden behind the same sunglasses he had worn earlier. He lounged in the seat, one leg bent and pressed against the door, the other spread wide, knee tucked up on the seat. "Take Seventy West." His voice was rough, almost hoarse.

There is that moment when you are alone with a man and you both realize it. Alone together, there are always possibilities in that. There is a nearly painful awareness of each other. It can lead to awkwardness, to sex, or to fear, depending on the man and the situation.

Well, we weren't having sex, you could make book on that. I glanced at Phillip, and he was still turned towards me, lips slightly parted. He'd taken off the sunglasses. His eyes were very brown and very close. What the hell was going on?

We were on the highway and up to speed. I concentrated on the cars around me, on driving, and tried to ignore him. But I could feel the weight of his gaze along my skin. It was almost a warmth.

He began to slide along the seat towards me. I was suddenly very aware of the sound of leather rubbing along the upholstery. A warm, animal sound. His arm slid across my shoulders, his chest leaning into me.

"What do you think you're doing, Phillip!"

"What's wrong?" He breathed along my neck. "Isn't this aggressive enough for you?"

I laughed; I couldn't help it. He stiffened beside me. "I didn't mean to insult you, Phillip. I just didn't picture fishnet and leather for tonight."

He stayed too close to me, pressing, warm, his voice still strange and rough. "What do you like then?"

I glanced at him, but he was too close. I was suddenly staring into his eyes from two inches away. His nearness ran through me like an electric shock. I turned back to the road. "Get on your side of the car, Phillip."

"What turns you," he whispered in my ear, "on?"

I'd had enough. "How old were you the first time Valentine attacked you?"

His whole body jerked, and he scooted away from me. "Damn you!" He sounded like he meant it.

"I'll make you a deal, Phillip. You don't have to answer my question, and I won't answer yours."

His voice came out choked and breathy. "When did you see Valentine? Is he going to be here tonight? They promised me he wouldn't be here tonight." His voice held a thick edge of panic. I had never heard such instant terror.

I didn't want to see Phillip afraid. I might start feeling sorry for him, and I couldn't afford that. Anita Blake, hard as nails, sure of herself, unaffected by crying men. Right. "I did not talk to Valentine about you, Phillip, I swear."

"Then how. . ." He stopped, and I glanced at him. He'd slid the sunglasses back in place. His face looked very tight and still behind his dark glasses. Fragile. Sort of ruined the image.

I couldn't stand it. "How did I find out what he did to you?"

He nodded.

"I paid money to find out about your background. It came up. I needed to know if I could trust you."

"Can you?"

"I don't know yet," I said.

He took several deep breaths. The first two trembled, but each breath was a little more solid, until finally he had it under control, for now. I thought of Rebecca Miles and her small, starved-looking hands.

"You can trust me, Anita. I won't betray you. I won't." His voice sounded lost, a little boy with all his illusions stripped away.

I couldn't stomp all over that lost child voice. But I knew and he knew that he would do anything the vampires wanted, anything, including betraying me. A bridge was rising over the highway, a tall latticework of grey metal. Trees hugged the road on either side. The summer sky was pale watery blue, washed

out by the heat and the bright summer sun. The car bumped up on the bridge, and the Missouri River stretched away on either side. The air seemed open and distant over the rolling water. A pigeon fluttered onto the bridge, settling beside maybe a dozen others, all strutting and burring over the bridge.

I had actually seen seagulls on the river before, but you never saw one near the bridge, just pigeons. Maybe seagulls didn't like cars.

"Where are we going, Phillip?"

"What?"

I wanted to say, "Question too hard for you?" but I resisted. It would have been like picking on him. "We're across the river. What is our destination?"

"Take the Zumbahl exit and turn right."

I did what he said. Zumbahl veers to the right and spills you automatically to a turn lane. I sat at the light and turned on red when it was clear. There is a small gathering of stores to the left, then an apartment complex, then trees, almost a woods, houses tucked back in them. A nursing home is next and then a rather large cemetery. I always wondered what the people in the nursing home thought of living next door to a cemetery. Was it a ghoulish reminder, no pun intended? A convenience, just in case?

The cemetery had been there a lot longer than the nursing home. Some of the stones went back to the early 1800s. I always thought the developer must have been a closet sadist to put the windows staring out over the rolling tombstoned hills. Old age is enough of a reminder of what comes next. No visual aids are needed.

Zumbahl is lined with other things - video store, kids clothing boutique, a place that sold stained glass, gas stations, and a huge apartment complex proclaiming, "Sun Valley Lake." There actually was a lake large enough to sail on if you were very careful.

A few more blocks and we were in suburbia. Houses with tiny yards stuffed with huge trees lined the road. There was a hill that sloped downward. The speed limit was thirty. It was impossible to keep the car to thirty going down the hill without using brakes. Would there be a policeman at the bottom of the hill?

If he stopped us with Phillip in his little fishnet shirt, all nicely scarred, would he be suspicious? Where are you going miss? I'm sorry, officer, we have this illegal party to go to, and we're running late. I used my brakes going down the hill. Of course, there was no policeman. If I had been speeding, he'd have been there. Murphy's law is the only true dependable in my life most of the time.

"It's the big house on the left. Just pull into the driveway," Phillip said.

The house was dark red brick, two, maybe three stories, lots of windows, at least two porches. Victorian American does still exist. The yard was large with a private forest of tall, ancient trees. The grass was too high, giving the place a deserted look. The drive was gravel and wound through the trees to a modern garage that had been designed to match the house and almost succeeded.

There were only two other cars here. I couldn't see into the garage; maybe there were more inside.

"Don't leave the main room with anyone but me. If you do, I can't help you," he said.

"Help me how?" I asked.

"This is our cover story. You are the reason I have missed so many meetings. I left hints that not only are we lovers, but I've been . . ." He spread his hands wide as if searching for a word. ". . . cultivating you, until I felt you were ready for a party."

"Cultivating me?" I turned off the car, and the silence settled between us. He was staring at me. Even behind the glasses I felt the weight of his gaze. The skin between my shoulders crawled.

"You are a reluctant survivor of a real attack, not a freak, or a junkie, but I've talked you into a party. That's the story."

"Have you ever done this for real?" I asked.

"You mean given them someone?"

"Yes," I said.

He gave a rough snort. "You don't think much of me, do you?"

What was I supposed to say, no? "If we're lovers, that means we have to play lovers all evening."

He smiled. This smile was different, anticipatory.

"You bastard."

He shrugged and rotated his neck as if his shoulders were tight. "I'm not going to throw you down on the floor and ravish you, if that's what you're worried about."

"I knew you wouldn't be doing that tonight." I was glad he didn't know I had weapons. Maybe I could surprise him tonight.

He frowned at me. "Follow my lead. If anything I do makes you uncomfortable, we'll discuss it." He smiled, dazzling, teeth white and even against his tan.

"No discussion. You'll just stop."

He shrugged. "You might blow our cover and get us killed."

The car was filling with heat. A bead of sweat dripped down his face. I opened my door and got out. The heat was like a second skin. Cicadas droned, a high, buzzing song far up in the trees. Cicadas and heat, ah, summer.

Phillip walked around the car, his boots crunching on the gravel. "You might want to leave the cross in the car," he said.

I had expected it, but I didn't have to like it. I put the crucifix into the glove compartment, crawling over the seat to do so. When I closed the door, my hand went to my neck. I wore the chain so much it only felt odd when I wasn't wearing it.

Phillip held out his hand, and after a moment I took it. The palm of his hand was cupped heat, slightly moist in the center.

The back door was shaded by a white lattice arch. A clematis vine grew thick on one side. Flowers as big as my hand spread purple to the tree-filtered sun. A woman was standing in the shadow of the door, hidden from neighbors

and passing cars. She wore sheer black stockings held up by garter belts. A bra and matching panties, both royal purple, left most of her body pale and naked. She was wearing five-inch spikes that forced her legs to look long and slender.

"I'm overdressed," I whispered to Phillip.

"Maybe not for long," he breathed into my hair.

"Don't bet your life on it." I stared up at him as I said it and watched his face crumble into confusion. It didn't last long. The smile came, a soft curl of lips. The serpent must have smiled at Eve like that. I have this nice, shiny apple for you. Want some candy, little girl?

Whatever Phillip thought he was selling, I wasn't buying. He hugged me around the waist, one hand playing along the scars on my arm, fingers digging into the scar tissue just a little. His breath went out in a quick sigh. Jesus, what had I gotten myself into?

The woman was smiling at me, but her large brown eyes were fixed on Phillip's hand where it played with my scar. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. I saw her chest rise and fall.

"Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly."

"What did you say?" Phillip asked.

I shook my head. He probably didn't know the poem anyway. I couldn't remember how it ended. I couldn't remember if the fly got away. My stomach was tight. When Phillip's hand brushed my naked back, I jumped.

The woman laughed, high and maybe a little drunk. I whispered the fly's words as I went up the steps, "Oh, no, no, to ask me is in vain for whoever goes up your winding stairs can ne'er come down again."

Ne'er come down again. It had a bad ring to it.

Chapter 25

The woman pressed against the wall, so we could pass, and shut the door behind us. I kept waiting for her to lock it so we couldn't get away, but she didn't. I shoved Phillip's hand off my scars, and he wrapped himself around my waist and led me down a long narrow hall. The house was cool, air conditioning purring against the heat. A square archway opened into a room.

It was a living room with all that implies - a couch, love seat, two chairs, plants hanging in front of a bay window, afternoon shadows snaking across the carpeting. Homey. A man stood in the center of the room, a drink in his hand. He looked like he had just come from Leather 'R' Us. Leather bands crisscrossed his chest and arms, like Hollywood's idea of an oversexed gladiator.

I owed Phillip an apology. He'd dressed downright conservatively. The happy homemaker came up behind us in her royal purple lingerie and laid a

hand on Phillip's arm. Her fingernails were painted dark purple, almost black. The nails scratched along his arm, leaving faint reddish tracks behind.

Phillip shivered beside me, his arm tightening around my waist. Was this his idea of fun? I hoped not.

A tall, black woman rose from the couch. Her rather plentiful breasts threatened to squeeze out of a black wire bra. A crimson skirt with more holes than cloth hung from the bra and moved as she walked, giving glimpses of dark flesh. I was betting she was naked under the skirt.

There were pinkish scars on one wrist and her neck. A baby junkie, new, almost fresh. She stalked around us, like we were for sale and she wanted to get a good look. Her hand brushed my back, and I stood away from Phillip, facing the woman.

"That scar on your back; what is it? It isn't vampire bites." Her voice was low for a woman, an alto tenor maybe.

"A sharp piece of wood was slammed into my back by a human servant." I didn't add that the sharp piece of wood had been one of the stakes I brought with me, or that I had killed the human servant later that same night.

"My name's Rochelle," she said.

"Anita."

The happy homemaker stepped up next to me, hand stroking over my arm. I stepped away from her, her fingers sliding over my skin. Her nails left little red lines on my arm. I resisted the urge to rub them. I was a tough-as-nails vampire slayer; scratches didn't bother me. The look in the woman's eyes did. She looked like she wondered what flavor I was and how long I'd last. I had never been looked at that way by another woman. I didn't like it much.

"I'm Madge. That's my husband Harvey," she said, pointing to Mr. Leather, who had moved to stand beside Rochelle. "Welcome to our home. Phillip has told us so much about you, Anita."

Harvey tried to come up behind me, but I stepped back towards the couch, so I could face him. They were trying to circle like sharks. Phillip was staring at me, hard. Right; I was supposed to be enjoying myself, not acting like they all had communicable diseases.

Which was the lesser evil? A sixty-four-thousand-dollar question if ever I heard one. Madge licked her lips, slowly, suggestively. Her eyes said she was thinking naughty things about me, and her. No way. Rochelle swished her skirt, exposing far too much thigh. I had been right. She was naked under the skirt. I'd die first.

That left Harvey. His small, blunt-fingered hands were playing with the leather-and-metal studding of the little kilt he wore. Fingers rubbing over and over the leather. Shit.

I flashed him my best professional smile, not seductive, but it was better than a frown. His eyes widened and he took a step towards me, hand reaching out towards my left arm. I took a deep breath and held it, smile freezing in place.

His fingers barely traced over the bend of my arm, tickling down the skin, until I shivered. Harvey took the shiver for an invitation and moved in closer,

bodies almost touching. I put a hand on his chest to keep him from coming any closer. The hair on his chest was coarse and thick, black. I've never been a fan of hairy chests. Give me smooth any day. His arm began to encircle my back. I wasn't sure what to do. If I took a step back I was going to sit down on the couch, not a good idea. If I stepped forward I'd be stepping into him, pressed against all that leather and skin.

He smiled at me. "I've been dying to meet you."

He said "dying" like it was a dirty word, or an inside joke. The others laughed, all except Phillip. He took my arm and pulled me away from Harvey. I leaned into Phillip, even put my arms around his waist. I had never hugged anyone in a fishnet shirt before. It was an interesting sensation.

Phillip said, "Remember what I said."

"Sure, sure," Madge said. "She's yours, all yours, no sharing, no halvesies." She stalked over to him, swaying in her tight lace panties. With the heels on she could look him in the eye. "You can keep her safe from us for now, but when the big boys get here, you'll share. They'll make you share."

He stared at her until she looked away. "I brought her here, and I'll take her home," he said.

Madge raised an eyebrow. "You're going to fight them? Phillip, my boy, she must be a sweet piece of tail, but no bedwarmer is worth pissing off the big guys."

I stepped away from Phillip and put a hand flat against her stomach and pushed, just enough to make her back up. The heels made her balance bad, and she almost fell. "Let's get something straight," I said. "I am not a piece of anything, nor am I a bedwarmer."

Phillip said, "Anita. . ."

"My, my, she's got a temper. Wherever did you find her, Phillip?" Madge asked.

If there is anything I hate, it is being found amusing when I'm angry. I stepped up close to her, and she smiled down at me. "Did you know," I said, "that when you smile, you get deep wrinkles on either side of your mouth? You are over forty, aren't you?"

She drew a deep, gasping breath and stepped back from me. "You little bitch."

"Don't ever call me a piece of tail again, Madge, darling."

Rochelle was laughing silently, her considerable bosom shaking like dark brown jello. Harvey stood straight-faced. If he had so much as smiled, I think Madge would have hurt him. His eyes were very shiny, but there was no hint of a smile.

A door opened and closed down the hall, farther into the house. A woman stepped into the room. She was around fifty, or maybe a hard forty. Very blonde hair framed a plump face. Even money the blonde came out of a bottle. Plump little hands glittered with rings, real stones. A long, black negligee swept the floor, complete with an open lace robe. The flat black of the negligee was kind to her figure, but not kind enough. She was overweight and there was no hiding it. She looked like a PTA member, a Girl Scout leader, a cookie

baker, someone's mother. And there she stood in the doorway, staring at Phillip.

She let out a little squeal and came running towards him. I got out of the way before I was crushed in the stampede. Phillip had just enough time to brace himself before she flung her considerable weight into his arms. For a minute I thought he was going to fall backwards into the floor with her on top, but his back straightened, his legs tensed, and he righted them both.

Strong Phillip, able to lift overweight nymphomaniacs with both hands. Harvey said, "This is Crystal."

Crystal was kissing Phillip's chest, chubby, homey little hands trying to pull his shirt out of his pants so she could touch his bare flesh. She was like a cheerful little puppy in heat.

Phillip was trying to discourage her without much success. He gave me a long glance. And I remembered what he had said, that he had stopped coming to these parties. Was this why? Crystal and her like? Madge of the sharp fingernails? I had forced him to bring me, but in doing so, I had forced him to bring himself.

If you thought of it that way, it was my fault Phillip was here. Damn, I owed him.

I patted the woman's cheek, softly. She blinked at me, and I wondered if she was nearsighted. "Crystal," I said. I smiled my best angelic smile. "Crystal, I don't mean to be rude, but you're pawing my date."

Her mouth fell open; her pale eyes bugged out. "Date," she squeaked. "No one has dates at a party."

"Well, I'm new to the parties. I don't know the rules yet. But where I come from, one woman does not grope another woman's date. At least wait until I turn my back, okay?"

Crystal's lower lip trembled. Her eyes began to fill with tears. I had been gentle, kind even, and she was still going to cry. What was she doing here with these people?

Madge came and put her arm around Crystal and led the woman away. Madge was making soothing noises and patting her black silken arms.

Rochelle said, "Very cold." She walked away from me towards a liquor cabinet that was against one wall.

Harvey had also left, following Madge and Crystal without so much as a backwards glance.

You'd think I'd kicked a puppy. Phillip let out a long breath and set down on the couch. He clasped his hands in front of him, between his knees. I sat down next to him, tucking my skirt down over my legs.

"I don't think I can do this," he whispered.

I touched his arm. He was trembling, a constant shaking that I didn't like at all. I hadn't realized what it would cost him to come tonight, but I was beginning to find out.

"We can go," I said.

He turned very slowly and stared at me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean we can go."

"You'd leave now without finding out anything because I'm having problems?" he asked.

"Let's just say I like you better as the overconfident flirt. You keep acting like a real person, and you'll have me all confused. We can go if you can't handle it."

He took a deep breath and let it out, then shook himself like a dog coming out of water. "I can do it. If I have a choice, I can do it."

It was my turn to stare. "Why didn't you have a choice before?"

He looked away. "I just felt like I had to bring you if you wanted to come."

"No, dammit, that wasn't what you meant at all." I touched his face and forced him to look at me. "Someone gave you orders to come see me the other day, didn't they? It wasn't just to find out about Jean-Claude, was it?"

His eyes were wide, and I could feel his pulse under my fingers. "What are you afraid of, Phillip? Who's giving you orders?"

"Anita, please, I can't."

My hand dropped to my lap. "What are your orders, Phillip?"

He swallowed, and I watched his throat work. "I'm to keep you safe here, that's all." His pulse was jumping under the bruised bite in his neck. He licked his lips, not seductive, nervous. He was lying to me. The trick was, how much of a lie and what about?

I heard Madge's voice coming up the hall, all cheerful seduction. Such a good hostess. She escorted two people into the room. One was a woman with short auburn hair and too much eye makeup, like green chalk smeared above her eyes. The second was Edward, smiling, at his charming best, with his arm around Madge's bare waist. She gave a rich, throaty laugh as he whispered something to her.

I froze, for a second. It was so unexpected that I just froze. If he had pulled out a gun, he could have killed me while I sat with my mouth hanging open. What the hell was he doing here?

Madge led him and the woman towards the bar. He glanced back at me over her shoulder and gave me a delicate smile that left his blue eyes empty as a doll's.

I knew my twenty-four hours were not up. I knew that. Edward had decided to come looking for Nikolaos. Had he followed us? Had he listened to Phillip's message on my machine?

"What's wrong?" Phillip asked.

"What's wrong?" I said. "You are taking orders from somebody, probably a vampire. . ." I finished the statement silently in my head: And Death has just waltzed in the door to play freak while he searches for Nikolaos. There was only one reason Edward searched for a particular vampire. He meant to kill her, if he could.

The assassin might finally have met his match. I had thought I wanted to be around when Edward finally lost. I wanted to see what prey was too large for Death to conquer. I had seen this prey, up close and personal. If Edward and

Nikolaos met and she even suspected that I had a hand in it . . . shit. Shit, shit, shit!

I should turn Edward in. He had threatened me, and he would carry it out. He would torture me to get information. What did I owe him? But I couldn't do it, wouldn't do it. A human being does not turn another human being over to the monsters. Not for any reason.

Monica had broken that rule, and I despised her for it. I think I was the closest thing Edward had to a real friend. A person who knows who and what you are and likes you anyway. I did like him, despite or because of what he was. Even though I knew he'd kill me if it worked out that way? Yes, even though. It didn't make much sense when you looked at it that way. But I couldn't worry about Edward's morality. The only person I had to face in the mirror was me. The only moral dilemma I could solve was my own.

I watched Edward play kissy-face with Madge. He was much better at role-playing than I was. He was also a much better liar.

I would not tell, and Edward had known I would not tell. In his own way, he knew me, too. He had bet his life on my integrity, and that pissed me off. I hate to be used. My virtue had become its own punishment.

But maybe, I didn't know how yet, I could use Edward the way he was using me. Perhaps I could use his lack of honor as he used my honor now.

It had possibilities.

Chapter 26

The auburn-haired woman with Edward came over to the couch and slid into Phillip's lap. She giggled and wrapped her arms around his neck with a little kick of her feet. Her hands didn't wander lower, and she didn't try to undress him. The night was looking up. Edward followed behind the woman like a blond shadow. There was a drink in his hand and a suitably harmless smile on his face.

If I hadn't known him, I would never have looked at him and said, there, there is a dangerous man. Edward the Chameleon. He balanced on the couch arm at the woman's back, one hand rubbing her shoulder.

"Anita, this is Darlene," Phillip said.

I nodded. She giggled and kicked her little feet.

"This is Teddy. Isn't he scrumptious?"

Teddy? Scrumptious? I managed a smile, and Edward kissed the side of her neck. She snuggled against his chest, managing to wiggle in Phillip's lap at the same time. Coordination.

"Let me have a taste." Darlene sucked her lower lip under her teeth and drew it out slowly.

Phillip's breath trembled. He whispered, "Yes."

I didn't think I was going to like this.

Darlene cupped his arm in her hands and raised it to her mouth.

She bestowed a delicate kiss over one of his scars, then she slid her legs down between his until she was kneeling at his feet, still holding his arm. The full skirt of her dress was bunched up around her waist, caught on his legs. She was wearing red lace panties and matching garters. Color coordination.

Phillip's face had gone slack. He was staring at her as she brought his arm towards her mouth. A small pink tongue licked his arm, quick, out, wet, gone. She glanced up at Phillip, eyes dark and full. She must have liked what she saw because she began to lick his scars, one by one, delicate, a cat with cream. Her eyes never left his face.

Phillip shuddered; his spine spasmed. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the couch. Her hands went to his stomach. She gripped the fishnet and pulled. It slid out of his pants, and her hands stroked up bare chest.

He jerked, eyes wide, and caught her arms. He shook his head. "No, no." His voice sounded hoarse, too deep.

"You want me to stop?" Darlene asked. Her eyes were nearly closed, breath deep, lips full and waiting.

He was struggling to talk and make sense at the same time. "If we do this . . . that leaves Anita alone. Fair game. Her first party."

Darlene looked at me, maybe for the first time. "With scars like that?"

"Scars are from a real attack. I talked her into the party." He brought her hands out from under his shirt. "I can't desert her." His eyes seemed to be focusing again. "She doesn't know the rules."

Darlene leaned her head on his thigh. "Phillip, please, I've missed you."

"You know what they'd do to her."

"Teddy will keep her safe. He knows the rules."

I asked, "You've been to other parties?"

"Yes," Edward said. He held my gaze for several seconds while I tried to picture him at other parties. So this was where he got his information about the vampire world, through the freaks.

"No," Phillip said. He stood, bringing Darlene to her feet, still holding her forearms. "No," he said and his voice sounded certain, confident. He released her and held out his hand to me. I took it. What else could I do?

His hand was sweating and warm. He strode out of the room, and I was forced to half-run in my heels to catch up with my hand.

He led me down the hall to the bathroom and we went in. He locked the door and leaned against it, sweat beaded on his face, eyes closed. I took back my hand, and he didn't fight me.

I looked around at the available seating and finally chose to sit on the edge of the bathtub. It wasn't comfortable, but it seemed the lesser of two evils. Phillip drew in great gulps of air and finally turned to the sink. He ran water loud and splashing, dipped his hands in, and covered his face again and again until he stood, water dripping down his face. Droplets caught in his eyelashes

and hair. He blinked at himself in the mirror over the basin. He looked startled, wide-eyed.

The water was dripping down his neck and chest. I stood and handed him a towel from the rack. He didn't respond. I mopped up his chest with the soft, clean-smelling folds of the towel.

He finally took the towel and finished drying off. His hair was dark and wet around his face. There was no way to dry it out. "I did it," he said.

"Yes," I said, "you did it."

"I almost let her."

"But you didn't, Phillip. That's what counts."

He nodded, rapidly, head bobbing. "I guess so." He still seemed out of breath.

"We better be getting back to the party."

He nodded. But he stayed where he was, breathing too deep, like he couldn't get enough oxygen.

"Phillip, are you all right?" It was a stupid question, but I couldn't think of what else to say.

He nodded. Mr. Conversation.

"Do you want to leave?" I asked.

He looked at me then. "That's the second time you've offered that. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you offer to let me out of my promise?"

I shrugged and rubbed my hands over my arms. "Because... because you seem to be in some kind of pain. Because you're a junkie trying to kick the habit, sort of, and I don't want to screw that up for you."

"That's a very . . . decent thing to offer." He said decent like he wasn't used to the word.

"Do you want to leave?"

"Yes," he said, "but we can't."

"You said that before. Why can't we?"

"I can't, Anita, I can't."

"Yes, you can. Who are you taking orders from, Phillip? Tell me. What is going on?" I was standing nearly touching him, spitting each word into his chest, looking up at his face. It is always hard to be tough when you have to look up to see someone's eyes. But I've been short all my life, and practice makes perfect.

His hand slid around my shoulders. I pushed away from him, and his hands locked behind my back. "Phillip, stop it."

I had my hands flat on his chest to keep our bodies from pressing together. His shirt was wet and cold. His heart was hammering in his chest. I swallowed hard and said, "Your shirt's wet."

He released me so suddenly, I stumbled back from him. He drew the shirt over his head in one fluid motion. Of course, he had a lot of practice in undressing himself. It would have been such a nice chest without the scars.

He took one step towards me. "Stop, right where you are," I said. "What is this sudden change of mood?"

"I like you; isn't that enough?"

I shook my head. "No, it isn't."

He dropped the shirt to the floor. I watched it fall like it was important. Two steps and he was beside me. Bathrooms are so small. I did the only thing I could think of - I stepped into the bathtub. Not very dignified in high heels, but I wasn't pressed up against Phillip's chest. Anything was an improvement.

"Somebody is watching us," he said.

I turned, slowly, like a bad horror movie. Twilight hung against the sheer drapes, and a face peered out of the coming dark. It was Harvey, Mr. Leather. The windows were too high for him to be standing on the ground. Was he standing on a box? Or maybe they had little platforms at all the windows, so you could watch the show.

I let Phillip help me out of the bathtub. I whispered, "Could he hear us?"

Phillip shook his head. His arms slid around my back again. "We are supposed to be lovers. Do you want Harvey to stop believing that?"

"This is blackmail."

He smiled, dazzling, hold it in your hand and stroke it, sexy. My stomach tightened. He bent down, and I didn't stop him. The kiss was everything advertised, full soft lips, a press of skin, a heated weight. His hands tightened across my bare back, fingers kneading the muscles along the spine until I relaxed against him.

He kissed the lobe of my ear, breath warm. Tongue flicked along the edge of my jaw. His mouth found the pulse in my throat, his tongue searching for it, as if he were melting through the skin. Teeth scraped over the beating of my neck. Teeth clamped down, tight, hurting.

I shoved him back, away. "Shit! You bit me."

His eyes were unfocused, dazed. A crimson drop stained his lower lip.

I touched a hand to my neck and came away with blood. "Damn you!"

He licked my blood off his mouth. "I think Harvey believes the performance. Now you're marked. You've got the proof of what you are and why you came." He took a deep, shaking breath. "I won't have to touch you again tonight. I'll see that no one else does either. I swear."

My neck was throbbing; a bite, a freaking bite! "Do you know how many germs are in the human mouth?"

He smiled at me, still a little unfocused. "No," he said.

I shoved him out of the way and dabbed water on the cut. It looked like what it was, human teeth. It wasn't a perfect set of bite marks, but it was close. "Damn you."

"We need to go out so you can hunt for clues." He had picked his shirt up from the floor and stood there, holding it at his side. Bare tanned chest, leather pants, lips full like he'd been sucking on something. Me. "You look like an ad for Rent A Gigolo," I said.

He shrugged. "Ready to go out?"

I was still touching the wound. I tried to be angry and couldn't. I was scared. Scared of Phillip and what he was, or wasn't. I hadn't expected it. Was

he right? Would I be safe for the rest of the night? Or had he just wanted to see what I tasted like?

He opened the door and waited for me. I went out. As we walked back to the living room, I realized Phillip had distracted me from my question. Who was he working for? I still didn't know.

It was damn embarrassing that every time he took his shirt off, my brain went out to lunch. But no more; I had had my first and last kiss from Phillip of the many scars. From now on I would remain the tough-as-nails vampire slayer, not to be distracted by rippling muscles or nice eyes.

My fingers touched the bite mark. It hurt. No more Ms. Nice Guy. If Phillip came near me again, I was going to hurt him. Of course, knowing Phillip, he'd probably enjoy it.

Chapter 27

Madge stopped us in the hall. Her hand started to go up to my throat. I grabbed her wrist. "Touchy, touchy," she said. "Didn't you like it? Don't tell me you've been with Phillip a month and he hasn't tasted you before?"

She pulled down the silky bra to expose the upper mound of her breast. There was a perfect set of bite marks in the pale flesh. "It's Phillip's trademark, didn't you know?"

"No," I said. I pushed past her and started to turn into the living room. A man I did not know fell at my feet. Crystal was on top of him, pinning him to the floor. He looked young and a little frightened. His eyes looked up past Crystal, to me. I thought he was going to ask for help, but she kissed him, sloppy and deep, like she was drinking him from the mouth down. His hands began to lift the silk folds of her skirt. Her thighs were incredibly white, like beached whales.

I turned abruptly and went for the door. My heels made an important-sounding clack on the hardwood floor. If I hadn't known better, I would have said it sounded like I was running. I was not running. I was just walking very fast.

Phillip caught up with me at the door. His hand pressed flat against it to keep me from opening it. I took a deep, steadying breath. I would not lose my temper, not yet.

"I'm sorry, Anita, but it's better this way. You're safe now, from the humans."

I looked up at him and shook my head. "You just don't get it. I need some air, Phillip. I'm not leaving for the night, if that's what you're afraid of."

"I'll go out with you."

"No. That would defeat the purpose, Phillip. Since you are one of the things I want to get away from."

He stepped back then, hand at his side. His eyes shut down, guarded, hiding. Why had that hurt his feelings? I didn't know, and I didn't want to know.

I opened the door, and the heat fell around me like fur.

"It's dark," he said. "They'll be here soon. I can't help you if I'm not with you."

I stepped close to him and said in a near whisper, "Let's be honest, Phillip. I'm a whole lot better at protecting myself than you are. The first vampire that crooks its finger will have you for lunch."

His face started to crumble, and I didn't want to see it. "Dammit, Phillip, pull yourself together." I walked out onto the trellis-covered porch and resisted an urge to slam the door behind me. That would have been childish. I was feeling a little childish about now, but I'd save it. You never know when some childish rage may come in handy.

The cicadas and crickets filled the night. There was a wind pulling at the tops of the tall trees, but it never touched the ground. The air down here was as stale and close as plastic.

The heat felt good after the air-conditioned house. It was real and somehow cleansing. I touched the bite on my neck. I felt dirty, used, abused, angry, pissed off. I wasn't going to find anything out here. If someone or something was killing off vampires who did the freak circuit, it didn't seem to be such a bad idea.

Of course, whether I sympathized with the murderer was not the point. Nikolaos expected me to solve the crimes, and I damn well better do it.

I took a deep breath of the stiff air and felt the first stirrings of . . . power. It oozed through the trees like wind, but the touch of it didn't cool the skin. The hair at the back of my neck was trying to crawl down my spine. Whoever it was, they were powerful. And they were trying to raise the dead.

Despite the heat, we'd had a lot of rain, and my heels sank into the grass immediately. I ended up walking in a sort of tiptoe crouch, trying not to flounder in the soft earth.

The ground was littered with acorns. It was like walking on marbles. I fell against a tree trunk, catching myself painfully against the shoulder Aubrey had bruised so nicely.

A sharp bleating, high and panic-stricken, sounded. It was close. Was it a trick of the still air or was it really a goat bleating? The cry ended in a wet gurgle of sound, thick and bubbling. The trees ended, and the ground was clear and moon-silvered.

I slipped off one shoe and tried the ground. Damp, cool, but not too bad. I slipped off the other shoe, tucked them in one hand, and ran.

The back yard was huge, stretching out into the silvered dark. It spread empty, except for a wall of overgrown hedges, like small trees in the distance. I ran for the hedges. The grave had to be there; there was no other place for it to hide.

The actual ritual for raising the dead is a short one, as rituals go. The power poured out into the night and into the grave. It built in a slow, steady rise, a warm "magic." It tugged at my stomach and brought me to the hedges. They towered up, black in the moonlight, hopelessly overgrown. There was no way I was squeezing through them.

A man cried out. Then a woman: "Where is it? Where is the zombie you promised us?"

"It was too old!" The man's voice was thin with fear.

"You said chickens weren't enough, so we got you a goat to kill. But no zombie. I thought you were good at this."

I found a gate in the opposite side of the hedges. Metal, rusted, and crooked in its frame. It groaned, a metal scream, as I pushed it open. More than a dozen pairs of eyes turned to me. Pale faces, the utter stillness of the undead. Vampires. They stood among the ancient grave markers of the small family cemetery, waiting. Nothing waits as patiently as the dead.

One of the vampires nearest me was the black male from Nikolaos's lair. My pulse quickened, and I did a quick scan of the crowd. She wasn't here, Thank you, God.

The vampire smiled and said, "Did you come to watch . . . animator?" Had he almost said, "Executioner"? Was it a secret?

Whatever, he motioned the others back and let me see the show. Zachary lay on the ground. His shirt was damp with blood. You can't slit anything's throat without getting a little messy. Theresa was standing over him, hands on hips. She was dressed in black. The only skin showing was a strip of flesh down the middle, pale and almost luminous in the starlight. Theresa, Mistress of the Dark.

Her eyes flicked to me, a moment, then back to the man. "Well, Zach-a-ri, where is our zombie?"

He swallowed audibly. "It's too old. There isn't enough left."

"Only a hundred years old, animator. Are you so weak?"

He looked down at the ground. His fingers dug into the soft earth. He glanced up at me, then quickly down. I didn't know. what he was trying to tell me with that one glance. Fear? For me to run? A plea for help? What?

"What good is an animator who can't raise the dead?" Theresa asked. She dropped to her knees, suddenly beside him, hands touching his shoulders. Zachary flinched but didn't try to get away.

A ripple of almost-movement ran through the other vampires. I could feel the whole circle at my back tense. They were going to kill him. The fact that he couldn't raise the zombie was just an excuse, part of the game.

Theresa ripped his shirt down the back. It fluttered around his lower arms, still tucked into his waist. A collective sigh ran through the vampires.

There was a woven rope band around his right upper arm. Beads were worked into it. It was a gris-gris, a voodoo charm, but it wouldn't help him now. No matter what it was supposed to do, it wouldn't be enough.

Theresa did a stage whisper. "Maybe you're just fresh meat?"

The vampires began to move in, silent as wind in the grass.

I couldn't just watch. He was a fellow animator and a human being. I couldn't just let him die, not like this, not in front of me. "Wait," I said.

No one seemed to hear me. The vampires moved in, and I was losing sight of Zachary. If one bit him, the feeding frenzy would be on. I had seen that happen once. I would never get rid of the nightmares if I saw it again.

I raised my voice and hoped they listened. "Wait! Didn't he belong to Nikolaos? Didn't he call Nikolaos master?"

They hesitated, then parted for Theresa to stride through them until she faced me. "This is not your business." She stared at me, and I didn't avoid her gaze. One less thing to worry about.

"I'm making it my business," I said.

"Do you wish to join him?"

The vampires began to spread out from Zachary to encircle me as well. I let them. There wasn't much I could do about it anyway. Either I'd get us both out alive or I'd die, too, maybe, probably. Oh, well.

"I wish to speak with him, one professional to another," I said.

"Why?" she asked.

I stepped close to her, almost touching. Her anger was nearly palpable. I was making her look bad in front of the others, and I knew it, and she knew I knew it. I whispered, though some of the others would hear me, "Nikolaos gave orders for the man to die, but she wants me alive, Theresa. What would she do to you if I accidentally died here tonight?" I breathed the last words into her face. "Do you want to spend eternity locked in a cross-wrapped coffin?"

She snarled and jerked away from me as if I had scalded her. "Damn you, mortal, damn you to hell!" Her black hair crackled around her face, her hands gripped into claws. "Talk to him, for what good it will do you. He must raise this zombie, this zombie, or he is ours. So says Nikolaos."

"If he raises the zombie, then he goes free, unharmed?" I asked.

"Yes, but he cannot do it; he isn't strong enough."

"Which was what Nikolaos was counting on," I said.

Theresa smiled, a fierce tug of lips exposing fangs. "Yesss." She turned her back on me and strode through the other vampires. They parted for her like frightened pigeons. And I was standing up to her. Sometimes bravery and stupidity are almost interchangeable.

I knelt by Zachary. "Are you hurt?"

He shook his head. "I appreciate the gesture, but they're going to try to kill me tonight." He looked up at me, pale eyes searching my face. "There isn't anything you can do to stop them." He gave a thin smile. "Even you have your limits."

"We can raise this zombie if you'll trust me."

He frowned, then stared at me. I couldn't read his expression: puzzlement and something else. "Why?"

What could I say, that I couldn't just watch him die? He had watched a man be tortured and hadn't lifted a hand. I opted for the short reason. "Because I can't let them have you, if I can stop it."

"I don't understand you, Anita, I don't understand you at all."

"That makes two of us. Can you stand?"

He nodded. "What are you planning?"

"We're going to share our talent."

His eyes widened. "Shit, you can act as a focus?"

"I've done it twice before." Twice before with the same person. Twice before with someone who had trained me as an animator. Never with a stranger.

His voice dropped to a bare whisper. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Save you?" I asked.

"Share your power," he said.

Theresa strode over to us in a swish of cloth. "Enough of this, animator. He can't do it, so he pays the price. Either leave now, or join us at our . . . feast."

"Are you having rare Who-roast-beast?" I asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's from Dr. Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. You know the part, 'And they'd Feast! Feast! Feast! Feast! They would feast on Who-pudding, and rare Who-roast-beast.' "

"You are crazy."

"So I've been told."

"Do you want to die?" she asked.

I stood up, very slowly, and felt something build in me. A sureness, an absolute certainty that she was not a danger to me. Stupid, but it was there, solid and real. "Someone may kill me before all this is over, Theresa" - I stepped into her, and she gave ground - "but it won't be you."

I could almost taste her pulse in my mouth. Was she afraid of me? Was I going crazy? I had just stood up to a hundred-year-old vampire, and she had backed down. I felt disoriented, almost dizzy, as if reality had moved and no one had warned me.

Theresa turned her back on me, hands balled into fists. "Raise the dead, animators, or by all the blood ever spilled, I'll kill you both."

I think she meant it. I shook myself like a dog coming out of deep water. I had a baker's dozen worth of vampires to pacify and a one-hundred-year-old corpse to raise. I could only handle a zillion problems at a time. A zillion and one was beyond me.

"Get up, Zachary," I said. "Time to go to work."

He stood. "I've never worked with a focus before. You'll have to tell me what to do."

"No problem," I said.

Chapter 28

The goat lay on its side. The bare white of its spine glimmered in the moonlight. Blood still seeped into the ground from the gaping wound. Eyes were rolled and glazed, tongue lolling out of its mouth.

The older the zombie, the bigger the death needed. I knew that, and that was why I avoided older zombies when I could. At a hundred years the corpse was just so much dust. Maybe a few bone fragments if you were lucky. They reformed to rise from the grave. If you had the power to do it.

Problem was, most animators couldn't raise the long-dead, a century and over. I could. I just didn't want to. Bert and I had had long discussions about my preferences. The older the zombie, the more we can charge. This was at least a twenty-thousand-dollar job. I doubted I'd get paid tonight, unless living 'til morning was payment enough. Yeah, I guess it was. Here's to seeing another dawn.

Zachary came to stand beside me. He had torn the remnants of his shirt off. He stood thin and pale beside me. His face was all shadows and white flesh, high cheekbones almost cavernous. "What next?" he asked.

The goat carcass was inside the blood circle he had traced earlier; good. "Bring everything we need into the circle."

He brought a long hunting knife and a pint jar full of pale faintly luminous ointment. I preferred a machete myself, but the knife was huge, with one jagged edge and a gleaming point. The knife was clean and sharp. He took good care of his tools. Brownie point for him.

"We can't kill the goat twice," he said. "What are we going to use?"

"Us," I said.

"What are you talking about?"

"We'll cut ourselves; fresh, live blood, as much as we're willing to give."

"The blood loss would leave you too weak to go on."

I shook my head. "We already have a blood circle, Zachary. We're just going to rewalk, not redraw it."

"I don't understand."

"I don't have time to explain metaphysics to you. Every injury is a small death. We'll give the circle a lesser death, and reactivate it."

He shook his head. "I still don't get it."

I took a deep breath, and then realized I couldn't explain it to him. It was like trying to explain the mechanics of breathing. You could break it down into steps, but that didn't tell you what it felt like to breathe. "I'll show you what I mean." If he didn't feel this part of the ritual, understand it without words, the rest wouldn't work anyway.

I held out my hand for the knife. He hesitated, then handed it to me, hilt first. The thing felt top-heavy, but then it wasn't designed for throwing. I took a deep breath and pressed the blade edge against my left arm, just below the cross burn. A quick down stroke, and blood welled up, dark and dripping. It stung, sharp and immediate. I let out the breath I'd been holding and handed the knife to Zachary.

He was staring from me to the knife.

"Do it, right arm, so we'll mirror each other," I said.

He nodded and made a quick slash across his right upper arm. His breath hissed, almost a gasp.

"Kneel with me." I knelt, and he followed me down, mirroring me as I asked. A man who could follow directions; not bad.

I bent my left arm at the elbow and raised it so the fingertips were head-high, elbow shoulder-high. He did the same. "We clasp hands and press the cuts together."

He hesitated, immobile.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

He shook his head, two quick shakes, and his hand wrapped around mine. His arm was longer than mine, but we managed.

His skin felt uncomfortably cool against mine. I glanced up at his face, but I couldn't read it. I had no idea what he was thinking. I took a deep, cleansing breath and began. "We give our blood to the earth. Life for death, death for life. Raise the dead to drink our blood. Let us feed them as they obey us."

His eyes did widen then; he understood. One hurdle down. I stood and drew him with me. I led him along the blood circle. I could feel it, like an electric current up my spine. I stared straight into his eyes. They were almost silver in the moonlight. We walked the circle and ended where we had begun, by the sacrifice.

We sat in the blood-soaked grass. I dabbed my right hand in the still-oozing blood of the goat's wound. I was forced to kneel to reach Zachary's face. I smeared blood over his forehead, down his cheeks. Smooth skin, the rub of new beard. I left a dark handprint over his heart.

The woven band was like a ring of darkness on his arm. I smeared blood along the beads, fingertips finding the soft brush of feathers worked into the string. The gris-gris needed blood, I could feel that, but not goat blood. I shrugged it away. Time to worry about Zachary's personal magic later.

He smeared blood on my face. Fingertips only, as if afraid to touch me. I could feel his hand shake as he traced my cheek. The blood was a cool wetness over my breast. Heart blood.

Zachary unscrewed the jar of homemade ointment. It was a pale off-white color with flecks of greenish light in it. The glowing flecks were graveyard mold.

I rubbed ointment over the blood smears. The skin soaked it up.

He brushed the cream on my face. It felt waxy, thick. I could smell the pine scent of rosemary for memory, cinnamon and cloves for preservation, sage for wisdom, and some sharp herb, maybe thyme, to bind it all together. There was too much cinnamon in it. The night suddenly smelled like apple pie.

We went together to smear ointment and blood on the tombstone. The name was only soft grooves in the marble. I traced them with my fingertips. Estelle Hewitt. Born 18 something, died 1866. There had been more writing below the date and name, but it was gone, beyond reading. Who had she been? I had never raised a zombie that I knew nothing about. It wasn't always a good idea, but then this whole thing wasn't a good idea.

Zachary stood at the foot of the grave. I stayed by the tombstone. It felt like an invisible cord was stretched between Zachary and me. We started the chant together, no questions needed. "Hear us, Estelle Hewitt. We call you from the grave. By blood, magic, and steel, we call you. Arise, Estelle, come to us, come to us."

His eyes met mine, and I felt a tug along the invisible line that bound us. He was powerful. Why hadn't he been able to do it alone?

"Estelle, Estelle, come to us. Waken, Estelle, arise and come to us." We called her name in ever-rising voices.

The earth shuddered. The goat slid to one side as the ground erupted, and a hand clutched for air. A second hand grabbed at nothing, and the earth began to pour the dead woman out.

It was then, only then, that I realized what was wrong, why he hadn't been able to raise her on his own. I now knew where I had seen him before. I had been at his funeral. There were so few animators that if anyone died, you went, period. Professional courtesy. I had glimpsed that angular face, rouged and painted. Somebody had done a bad job of making him up, I remembered thinking that at the time.

The zombie had almost pulled itself from the grave. It sat panting, legs still trapped in the ground.

Zachary and I stared at each other over the grave. All I could do was stare at him like an idiot. He was dead, but not a zombie, not anything I'd ever heard of. I would have bet my life he was human, and I may have done just that.

The woven band on his arm. The spell that hadn't been satisfied with goat's blood. What was he doing to stay "alive"?

I had heard rumors of gris-gris that could cheat death. Rumors, legends, fairy tales. But then again, maybe not.

Estelle Hewitt may have been pretty once, but a hundred years in the grave takes a lot out of a person. Her skin was an ugly greyish white, waxy, nearly expressionless, fake-looking. White gloves hid the hands, stained with grave dirt. The dress was white and lace-covered. I was betting on wedding finery. Dear God.

Black hair clung to her head in a bun, wisps of it tracing her nearly skeletal face. All the bones showed, as if the skin were clay molded over a framework. Her eyes were wild, dark, showing too much white. At least they hadn't dried out like shriveled grapes. I hated that.

Estelle sat by her grave and tried to gather her thoughts. It would take a while. Even the recently dead took a few minutes to orient themselves. A hundred years was a damn long time to be dead.

I walked around the grave, careful to stay within the circle. Zachary watched me come without a word. He hadn't been able to raise the corpse because he was a corpse. The recently dead he could still handle, but not long-dead. The dead calling the dead from the grave; there was something really wrong with that.

I stared up at him, watching him grip the knife. I knew his secret. Did Nikolaos? Did anyone? Yes, whoever had made the gris-gris knew, but who

else? I squeezed the skin around the cut on my arm. I reached bloody fingers towards the gris-gris.

He caught my wrist, eyes wide. His breathing had quickened. "Not you."

"Then who?"

"People who won't be missed."

The zombie we had raised moved in a rustle of petticoats and hoops. It began crawling towards us.

"I should have let them kill you," I said.

He smiled then. "Can you kill the dead?"

I jerked my wrist free. "I do it all the time."

The zombie was scrambling at my legs. It felt like sticks digging at me. "Feed it yourself, you son of a bitch," I said.

He held his wrist down to it. The zombie grabbed for it, clumsy, eager. It sniffed his skin but released him untouched. "I don't think I can feed it, Anita."

Of course not; fresh, live blood was needed to close the ritual. Zachary was dead. He didn't qualify anymore. But I did.

"Damn you, Zachary, damn you."

He just stared at me.

The zombie was making a mewling sound low in her throat. Dear God. I offered her my bleeding left arm. Her stick-hands dug into my skin. Her mouth fastened over the wound, sucking. I fought the urge to jerk away. I had made the bargain, had chosen the ritual. I had no choice. I stared at Zachary while the thing fed on my blood. Our zombie, a joint venture. Dammit.

"How many people have you killed to keep yourself alive?" I asked.

"You don't want to know."

"How many!"

"Enough," he said.

I tensed, raising my arm, nearly lifting the zombie to her feet. She cried, a soft sound, like a newborn kitten. She released my arm so suddenly, she fell backwards. Blood dripped down her bony chin. Her teeth were stained with it. I couldn't look at it, any of it.

Zachary said, "The circle is open. The zombie is yours."

For a minute I thought he was talking to me; then I remembered the vampires. They had been huddled in the dark, so still and unmoving I had forgotten them. I was the only live thing in the whole damn place. I had to get out of there.

I picked up my shoes and walked out of the circle. The vampires made way for me. Theresa stopped me, blocking my path. "Why did you let it suck your blood? Zombies don't do that."

I shook my head. Why did I think it would be faster to explain than to fight about it? "The ritual had already gone wrong. We couldn't start over without another sacrifice. So I offered myself as the sacrifice."

She stared. "Yourself?"

"It was the best I could do, Theresa. Now get out of my way." I was tired and sick. I had to get out of there, now. Maybe she heard it in my voice. Maybe she was too eager to get to the zombie to mess with me. I don't know, but she

moved aside. She was just gone, like the wind had swept her away. Let them play their mind games. I was going home.

There was a small scream from behind me. A short, strangled sound, as if the voice wasn't used to talking. I kept walking. The zombie screamed, human memories still there, enough for fear. I heard a rich laugh, a faint echo of Jean-Claude's. Where are you, Jean-Claude?

I glanced back once. The vampires were closing in. The zombie was stumbling from one side to the other, trying to run. But there was nowhere to go.

I stumbled through the crooked gate. A wind had finally come down out of the trees. Another scream sounded from behind the hedges. I ran, and I didn't look back.

Chapter 29

I slipped on the damp grass. Hose are not made for running in. I sat there, breathing, trying not to think. I had raised a zombie to save another human being, who wasn't a human being. Now the zombie I had raised was being tortured by vampires. Shit. The night wasn't even half-over. I whispered, "What next?"

A voice answered, light as music. "Greetings, animator. You seem to be having a full night."

Nikolaos was standing in the shadows of the trees. Willie McCoy was with her, a little to one side, not quite beside her, like a bodyguard or a servant. I was betting on servant.

"You seem agitated. What ever is the matter?" Her voice rose in a lilting sing-song. The dangerous little girl had returned.

"Zachary raised the zombie. You can't use that as an excuse to kill him." I laughed then, and it sounded abrupt and harsh even to me. He was already dead. I didn't think she knew. She couldn't read minds, only force the truth from them. I bet Nikolaos had never thought to ask, "Are you alive, Zachary, or a walking corpse?" I laughed and couldn't seem to stop.

"Anita, you all right?" Willie's voice was like his voice had always been.

I nodded, trying to catch my breath. "I'm fine."

"I do not see the humor in the situation, animator." The child voice was slipping, like a mask sliding down. "You helped Zachary raise the zombie." She made it sound like an accusation.

"Yes."

I heard movement over the grass. Willie's footsteps, and nothing else. I glanced up and saw Nikolaos moving towards me, noiseless as a cat. She was smiling, a cute, harmless, model, beautiful child. No. Her face was a little long.

The perfect child bride wasn't perfect anymore. The closer she came, the more flaws I could pick out. Was I seeing her the way she really looked? Was I?

"You are staring at me, animator." She laughed, high and wild, wind chimes in a storm. "As if you'd seen a ghost." She knelt, smoothing her slacks over her knees, as if they were a skirt. "Have you seen a ghost, animator? Have you seen something that frightened you? Or is it something else?" Her face was only an arm's length away.

I was holding my breath, fingers digging into the ground. Fear washed over me like a cool second skin. The face was so pleasant, smiling, encouraging. She really needed a dimple to go with it all. My voice was hoarse, and I had to cough to clear it. "I raised the zombie. I don't want it hurt."

"But it is only a zombie, animator. They have no real minds."

I just stared at that thin, pleasant face, afraid to look away from her, afraid to look at her. My chest was tight with the urge to run. "It was a human being. I don't want it tortured."

"They won't hurt it much. My little vampires will be disappointed. The dead cannot feed off the dead."

"Ghouls can. They feed off the dead."

"But what is a ghoul, animator? Is it truly dead?"

"Yes."

"Am I dead?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?" She had a small scar near her upper lip. She must have gotten it before she died.

"I'm sure," I said.

She laughed then, a sound to bring a smile to your face and a song to your heart. My stomach jerked at the noise. I might never enjoy Shirley Temple movies again.

"I don't think you are sure in the least." She stood, one smooth motion. A thousand years of practice makes perfect.

"I want the zombie put back, now, tonight," I said.

"You are not in a position to want anything." The voice was cold, very adult. Children didn't know how to strip skin with their voice.

"I raised it. I don't want it tortured."

"Isn't that too bad?"

What else could I say? "Please."

She stared down at me. "Why is it so important to you?"

I didn't think I could explain it to her. "It just is."

"How important?" she asked.

"I don't know what you mean."

"What would you be willing to endure for your zombie?"

Fear settled into a cold lump in the pit of my gut. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do," she said.

I stood then, not that it would help. I was actually taller than she was. She was tiny, a delicate fairy of a child. Right. "What do you want?"

"Don't do it, Anita." Willie was standing away from us, as if afraid to come too close. He was smarter dead than he had been alive.

"Quiet, Willie." Her voice was conversational when she said it, no yelling, no threat. But Willie fell silent instantly, like a well-trained dog.

Maybe she caught my look. Whatever, she said, "I had Willie punished for failing to hire you that first time."

"Punished?"

"Surely, Phillip has told you about our methods?"

I nodded. "A cross-wrapped coffin."

She smiled, brilliant, cheery. The shadows leeching it into a leer. "Willie was very afraid that I would leave him in there for months, or even years."

"Vampires can't starve to death. I understand the principle." I added silently in my head: You bitch. I can only be terrified so long before I get angry. Anger feels better.

"You smell of fresh blood. Let me taste you, and I will see your zombie safe."

"Does taste mean bite?" I asked.

She laughed, sweet, heartrending. Bitch. "Yes, human, it means bite." She was suddenly beside me. I jerked back without thinking. She laughed again. "It seems Phillip has beaten me to it."

For a minute I couldn't think what she meant; then my hand went to the bite mark on my neck. I felt suddenly uneasy, like she'd caught me naked.

The laugh floated on the summer air. It was really beginning to get on my nerves.

"No tasting," I said.

"Then let me enter your mind again. That's a type of feeding."

I shook my head, too rapid, too many times. I'd die before I'd let her in my mind again. If I had the choice.

A scream sounded in the not so far distance. Estelle was finding her voice. I winced like I'd been slapped.

"Let me taste your blood, animator. No teeth." She flashed fang as she said the last. "You stand and make no move to stop me. I will taste the fresh wound on your neck. I won't feed on you."

"It's not bleeding anymore. It's clotted."

She smiled, oh so sweetly. "I'll lick it clean."

I swallowed hard. I didn't know if I could do it. Another scream sounded, high and lost. God.

Willie said, "Anita. . ."

"Silence, or risk my anger." Her voice growled low and dark.

Willie seemed to shrink in upon himself. His face was a white triangle under his black hair.

"It's all right, Willie. Don't get hurt on my account," I said.

He stared at me across the distance, a few yards; it might as well have been miles. Only the lost look on his face helped. Poor Willie. Poor me.

"What good is it going to do you if you're not feeding off me?" I asked.

"No good at all." She reached a small, pale hand towards me. "Of course, fear is a kind of substance." Cool fingers slid around my wrist. I flinched but didn't pull back. I was going to let her do this, wasn't I?

"Call it shadow feeding, human. Blood and fear are always precious, no matter how one obtains them." She stepped up to me. She exhaled against my skin, and I backed away. Only her hand on my wrist kept me close.

"Wait. I want the zombie freed now, first."

She just stared at me, then nodded slowly. "Very well." She stared past me, pale eyes seeing things that weren't there or that I couldn't see. I felt a tension through her hand, almost a jerk of electricity. "Theresa will chase them off and have the animator lay the zombie to rest."

"You did all that, just then?"

"Theresa is mine to command; didn't you know that?"

"Yeah, I guessed that." I had not known that any vampire could do telepathy. Of course, before last night I hadn't thought they could fly either. Oh, I was just learning all sorts of new things.

"How do I know you're not just telling me that?" I asked.

"You will just have to trust me."

Now that was almost funny. If she had a sense of humor, maybe we could work something out. Naw.

She pulled my wrist closer to her body and me with it. Her hand was like fleshy steel. I couldn't pry her hand off, not with anything short of a blowtorch. And I was all out of blowtorches.

The top of her head fitted under my chin. She had to rise on tiptoe to breathe on my neck. It should have ruined the menace. It didn't. Soft lips touched my neck. I jerked. She laughed against my skin, face pressed against me. I shivered and couldn't stop.

"I promise to be gentle." She laughed again, and I fought an urge to shove her away. I would have given almost anything to hit her, just once, hard. But I didn't want to die tonight. Besides, I'd made a deal.

"Poor darling, you're shaking." She laid a hand on my shoulder to steady herself. She brushed lips along the hollow of my neck. "Are you cold?"

"Cut the crap. Just do it!"

She stiffened against me. "Don't you want me to touch you?"

"No," I said. Was she crazy? Rhetorical question.

Her voice was very still. "Where is the scar on my face?"

I answered without thinking. "Near your mouth."

"And how," she hissed, "did you know that?"

My heart leaped into my throat. Oops. I had let her know her mind tricks weren't working, and they should have been.

Her hand dug into my shoulder. I made a small sound, but I didn't cry out. "What have you been doing, animator?"

I didn't have the faintest idea. Somehow, I doubted she'd believe that.

"Leave her alone!" Phillip came half-running through the trees. "You promised me you wouldn't hurt her tonight."

Nikolaos didn't even turn around. "Willie." Just his name, but like all good servants he knew what was wanted.

He stepped in front of Phillip, one arm straight out from his body. He was going to stiff-arm him. Phillip sidestepped the arm brushing past.

Willie never had been much of a fighter. Strength wasn't enough if you had shit for balance.

Nikolaos touched my chin and turned my face back to hers. "Do not force me to hold your attention, animator. You wouldn't like the methods I would choose."

I swallowed audibly. She was probably right. "You have my full attention, honest." My voice came out as a hoarse whisper, fear squeezing it down. If I coughed to clear it, I'd cough in her face. Not a good idea.

I heard the rush of feet swishing through the grass. I fought the urge to look up and away from the vampire.

Nikolaos spun from me to face the footsteps. I saw her move, but it was still blurring speed. She was just suddenly facing the other way. Phillip was standing in front of her. Willie caught up to him and grabbed an arm, but didn't seem to know what to do with it.

Would it occur to Willie that he could just crush the man's arm? I doubted it.

It had occurred to Nikolaos. "Release him. If he wants to keep coming, let him." Her voice promised a great deal of pain.

Willie stepped back. Phillip just stood there, staring past her at me. "Are you all right, Anita?"

"Go back inside, Phillip. I appreciate the concern, but I made a bargain. She isn't going to bite me."

He shook his head. "You promised she wouldn't be harmed. "You promised." He was talking to Nikolaos again, carefully not looking directly at her.

"And so she shall not be harmed. I keep my word, Phillip, most of the time."

"I'm all right, Phillip. Don't get hurt because of me," I said.

His face crumbled with confusion. He didn't seem to know what to do. His courage seemed to have spilled out on the grass.

But he didn't back off. Big point for him. I would have backed off, maybe. Probably. Oh, hell, Phillip was being brave, and I didn't want to see him die because of it.

"Just go back, Phillip, please!"

"No," Nikolaos said. "If the little man is feeling brave, let him try."

Phillip's hands flexed, as if trying to grab on to something.

Nikolaos was suddenly beside him. I hadn't seen her move. Phillip still hadn't. He was staring where she had been. She kicked his legs out from under him. He fell to the grass, blinking up at her like she'd just appeared.

"Don't hurt him!" I said.

A pale little hand shot out, the barest touch. His whole body jerked backwards. He rolled on one side, blood staining his face.

"Nikolaos, please!" I said. I had actually taken two steps towards her. Voluntarily. I could always try for my gun. It wouldn't kill her, but it might give Phillip time to run away. If he would run.

Screams sounded from the direction of the house. A man's voice yelled, "Perverts!"

"What is it?" I asked.

Nikolaos answered, "The Church of Eternal Life has sent its congregation." She sounded mildly amused. "I must leave this little get-together." She whirled to me, leaving Phillip dazed on the grass. "How did you see my scar?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Little liar. We will finish this later." And she was gone, running like a pale shadow under the trees. At least she hadn't flown away. I didn't think my wits could handle that tonight.

I knelt by Phillip. He was bleeding where she had hit him. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes." He managed to sit up. "We have to get out of here. The churchgoers are always armed."

I helped him to stand. "Do they invade the freak parties often?"

"Whenever they can," he said.

He seemed steady on his feet. Good, I could never have carried him far.

Willie said, "I know I don't have a right to ask, but I'll help you get to your car." He wiped his hands down his pants. "Can I catch a ride?"

I couldn't help it. I laughed. "Can't you just disappear like the rest of them?"

He shrugged. "Don't know how yet."

"Oh, Willie." I sighed. "Come on, let's get out of here."

He grinned at me. Being able to look him in the eyes made him seem almost human. Phillip didn't object to the vampire joining us. Why had I thought he would?

There were screams from the house. "Somebody's gonna call the cops," Willie said.

He was right. I'd never be able to explain it. I grabbed Phillip's hand and steadied myself while I put the high heels back on. "If I'd known we'd be running from crazed fanatics tonight, I'd have worn lower heels," I said.

I kept a grip on Phillip's arm to steady myself through the minefield of acorns. This was not the time to twist an ankle.

We were almost to the gravel drive when three figures spilled out of the house. One held a club. The others were vampires. They didn't need a weapon. I opened my purse and got my gun out, held down at my side, hidden against my skirt. I gave Phillip the car keys. "Start the car; I'll cover our backs."

"I don't know how to drive," he said.

I had forgotten. "Shit!"

"I'll do it." Willie took the keys, and I let him.

One of the vampires rushed us, arms wide, hissing. Maybe he meant to scare us; maybe he meant to do us harm. I'd had enough for one night. I clicked off the safety, chambered a round and fired into the ground at his feet.

He hesitated, almost stumbled. "Bullets can't hurt me, human."

There was more movement under the trees. I didn't know if it was friend or foe, or if it made a hell of a lot of difference. The vampire kept coming. It was a residential neighborhood. Bullets can travel a great distance before they hit something. I couldn't take the chance.

I raised my arm, aimed, and fired. The bullet took him in the stomach. He jerked and sort of crumpled over the wound. His face held astonishment.

"Silver-plated bullets, fang-face."

Willie went for the car. Phillip hesitated between helping me and going.

"Go, Phillip, now."

The second vampire was trying to circle around. "Stop right where you are," I said. The vampire froze. "Anybody makes a threatening gesture, I'm going to put a bullet in their brain."

"It won't kill us," the second vampire said.

"No, but it won't do you a hell of a lot of good, either."

The human with the club inched forward. "Don't," I told him.

The car started. I didn't dare glance back at it. I stepped backwards, hoping I wouldn't trip in the damn high heels. If I fell, they'd rush me. If they rushed me, somebody was going to die.

"Come on, Anita, get in." It was Phillip, leaning out of the passenger side door.

"Scoot over." He did, and I slid into the seat. The human rushed us.

"Drive, now!"

Willie spun gravel, and I slammed the door shut. I really didn't want to kill anyone tonight. The human was shielding his face from the gravel as we rushed down the driveway.

The car bounced wildly, nearly colliding with a tree. "Slow down; we're safe," I said.

Willie eased back on the gas. He grinned at me. "We made it."

"Yeah." I smiled back at him, but I wasn't so sure.

Blood was dripping down Phillip's face in a nice steady flow. He voiced my thoughts. "Safe, but for how long?" He sounded as tired as I felt.

I patted his arm. "Everything will be all right, Phillip."

He looked at me. His face seemed older than it had, tired. "You don't believe that any more than I do."

What could I say? He was right.

Chapter 30

I clicked on the safety of my gun and struggled into a seat belt. Phillip slumped down into the seat, long legs spreadeagled on either side of the floorboard hump. His eyes were closed.

"Where to?" Willie asked.

Good question. I wanted to go home and go to sleep, but . . . "Phillip's face needs patching up."

"You wanna take him to a hospital?"

"I'm all right," Phillip said. His voice was low and strange.

"You aren't all right," I said.

He opened his eyes and turned to look at me. The blood had run down his neck, a dark, glistening stream that shone in the flashes of the streetlights. "You were hurt a lot worse last night," he said.

I looked away from him, out the window. I didn't know what to say. "I'm all right now."

"I'll be all right, too."

I looked back at him. He was staring at me. I couldn't read the expression on his face, and wanted to. "What are you thinking, Phillip?"

He turned his head to stare straight ahead. His face was all silhouette and shadows. "That I stood up to the master. I did it. I did it!" His voice held a fierce warmth with the last. Fierce pride.

"You were very brave," I said.

"I was, wasn't I?"

I smiled and nodded. "Yes."

"I hate to interrupt you two, but I need to know where to drive this thing," Willie said.

"Drop me back at Guilty Pleasures," Phillip said.

"You should see a doc."

"They'll take care of me at the club."

"Ya sure?"

He nodded, then winced and turned to me. "You wanted to know who was giving me orders. It was Nikolaos. You were right. That first day. She wanted me to seduce you." He smiled. It didn't look right with the blood. "Guess I wasn't up to the job."

"Phillip. . ." I said.

"No, its all right. You were right about me. I'm sick. No wonder you didn't want me."

I glanced over at Willie. He was concentrating on his driving as if his life depended on it. Damn, he was smarter dead than alive.

I took a deep breath and tried to decide what to say. "Phillip . . . The kiss before you . . . bit me." God, how did I say this? "It was nice."

He glanced at me, quick, then away. "You mean that?"

"Yes."

An awkward silence stretched through the car. No sound but the rush of pavement under the wheels. The night flashes of lights, and the isolating darkness.

"Standing up to Nikolaos tonight was one of the bravest things I've ever seen anybody do. Also one of the stupidest," I said.

He laughed, abrupt and surprised.

"Don't ever do it again. I don't want your death on my hands."

"It was my choice," he said.

"No more heroics, okay?"

He glanced at me. "Would you be sorry if I died?"

"Yes."

"I guess that's something."

What did he want me to say? To confess undying love, or something silly like that? How about undying lust? Either one would be a lie. What did he want from me? I almost asked him, but I didn't. I wasn't that brave.

Chapter 31

It was nearly three by the time I walked up the stairs to my apartment. All the bruises were aching. My knees, feet, and lower back were a nearly burning grind of pain from the high heels. I wanted a long, hot shower and bed. Maybe if I were lucky I could actually get eight uninterrupted hours of sleep. Of course, I wouldn't bet on it.

I got my keys in one hand and gun in the other. I held the gun at my side, just in case a neighbor should open his or her door unexpectedly. Nothing to fear, folks, just your friendly neighborhood animator. Right.

For the first time in far too long my door was just the way I left it: locked. Thank you, God. I was not in the mood to play cops and robbers this very early morning.

I kicked off my shoes just inside the door, then stumbled to the bedroom. The message light was blinking on my answering machine. I laid my gun on the bed, hit the play button, and started undressing.

"Hi, Anita, this is Ronnie. I got a meeting set up for tomorrow with the guy from HAV. My office, eleven o'clock. If the time is bad, leave a message on my machine, and I'll get back to you. Be careful."

Click, whirr, and Edward's voice came out of the machine. "The clock is ticking, Anita." Click.

Damn. "You like your little games, don't you, you son of a bitch?" I was getting grumpy, and I didn't know what I was going to do about Edward. Or Nikolaos, or Zachary, or Valentine, or Aubrey. I did know I wanted a shower. I could start there. Maybe I'd have a brilliant idea while I was scrubbing goat blood off my skin.

I locked the door to the bathroom and laid my gun on the top of the toilet. I was beginning to get a little paranoid. Or maybe realistic was a better word.

I turned the water on until it steamed, then stepped into it. I was no closer to solving the vampire murders now than I had been twenty-four hours ago.

Even if I solved the case, I still had problems. Aubrey and Valentine were going to kill me once Nikolaos removed her protection from me. Peachy. I wasn't even sure that Nikolaos herself didn't have ideas in that direction. Now, Zachary, he was killing people to feed his voodoo charm. I had heard of charms that demanded human sacrifice. Charms that gave you a whole lot less than immortality. Wealth, power, sex - the age-old wants. It was very specific blood - children, or virgins, or preadolescent boys, or little old ladies with blue hair and one wooden leg. All right, not that specific, but there had to be a pattern to it. A string of disappearances with similar victims. If Zachary had been simply leaving the bodies to be found, the newspapers would have picked up on it by now. Maybe.

He had to be stopped. If I hadn't interfered tonight, he would have been stopped. No good deed goes unpunished.

I leaned palms against the bathroom tile, letting the water wash down my back in nearly scalding rivulets. Okay, I had to kill Valentine before he killed me. I had a warrant for his death. It had never been revoked. Of course, I had to find him first.

Aubrey was dangerous, but at least he was out of the way until Nikolaos let him out of his trapped coffin.

I could just turn Zachary over to the police. Dolph would listen to me, but I didn't have a shred of proof. Hell, the magic was even something I'd never heard of. If I couldn't understand what Zachary was, how was I going to explain it to the police?

Nikolaos. Would she let me live if I solved the case? Or not? I didn't know.

Edward was coming to get me tomorrow evening. I either gave him Nikolaos or he took a piece of my hide. Knowing Edward, it would be a painful piece to lose. Maybe I could just give him the vampire. Just tell him what he wanted to know. And he fails to kill her, and she comes and gets me. The one thing I wanted to avoid, almost more than anything else, was Nikolaos coming to get me.

I dried off, ran a brush through my hair, and had to get something to eat. I tried to tell myself I was too tired to eat. My stomach didn't believe me.

It was four before I fell into bed. My cross was safely around my neck. The gun in its holster behind the head board. And, just for pure panic's sake, I slipped a knife between the mattress and box springs. I'd never get to it in time to do any good, but . . . Well, you never know.

I dreamed about Jean-Claude again. He was sitting at a table eating blackberries.

"Vampires don't eat solid food," I said.

"Exactly." He smiled and pushed the bowl of fruit towards me.

"I hate blackberries," I said.

"They were always my favorite. I hadn't tasted them in centuries." His face looked wistful.

I picked up the bowl. It was cool, almost cold. The blackberries were floating in blood. The bowl fell from my hands, slow, spilling blood on the table, more than it could ever have held. Blood dripped down the tabletop, onto the floor.

Jean-Claude stared at me over the bleeding table. His words came like a warm wind. "Nikolaos will kill us both. We must strike first, ma petite."

"What's this 'we' crap?"

He cupped pale hands in the flowing blood and held them out to me, like a cup. Blood dripped out from between his fingers. "Drink. It will make you strong."

I woke staring up into the darkness. "Damn you, Jean-Claude," I whispered. "What have you done to me?"

There was no answer from the dark, empty room. Thank goodness for small favors. The clock read six-oh-three a.m. I rolled over and snuggled back into the covers. The whir of air conditioning couldn't hide the sounds of one of my neighbors running water. I switched on the radio. Mozart's piano concerto in E flat filled the darkened room. It was really too lively to sleep to, but I wanted noise. My choice of noise.

I don't know if it was Mozart or I was just too tired; whatever, I went back to sleep. If I dreamed, I didn't remember it.

Chapter 32

The alarm shrieked through my sleep. It sounded like a car alarm, hideously loud. I smashed my palm on the buttons. Mercifully, it shut off. I blinked at the clock through half-slit eyes. Nine a.m. Damn. I had forgotten to unset the alarm. I had time to get dressed and make church. I did not want to get up. I did not want to go to church. Surely, God would forgive me just this once.

Of course, I did need all the help I could get right now. Maybe I'd even have a revelation, and everything would fall into place. Don't laugh; it had happened before. Divine aid is not something I rely on, but every once in a while I think better at church.

When the world is full of vampires and bad guys, and a blessed cross may be all that stands between you and death, it puts church in a different light. So to speak.

I crawled out of bed, groaning. The phone rang. I sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for the answering machine to pick up. It did. "Anita, this is Sergeant Storr. We got another vampire murder."

I picked up the receiver. "Hi, Dolph."

"Good. Glad I caught you before church."

"Is it another dead vampire?"

"Mmhuh."

"Just like the others?" I asked.

"Seems to be. Need you to come down and take a look."

I nodded, realized he couldn't see it, and said, "Sure, when?"

"Right now."

I sighed. So much for church. They couldn't hold the body until noon, or after, just for little ol' me. "Give me the location. Wait, let me get a pen that works." I kept a notepad by the bed, but the pen had died without my knowing it. "Okay, shoot."

The location was only about a block from Circus of the Damned. "That's on the fringe of the District. None of the other murders have been that far away from the Riverfront."

"True," he said.

"What else is different about this one?"

"You'll see it when you get here."

Mr. Information. "Fine, I'll be there in half an hour."

"See you then." The phone went dead.

"Well, good morning to you to, Dolph," I said to the receiver. Maybe he wasn't a morning person either.

My hands were healing. I had taken the Band-Aids off last night because they were covered with goat blood. The scrapes were scabbing nicely, so I didn't bother with more Band-Aids.

One fat bandage covered the knife wound on my arm. I couldn't hurt my left arm anymore. I had run out of room. The bite mark on my neck was beginning to bruise. It looked like the world's worst hicky. If Zerbrowski saw it, I would never live it down. I put a Band-Aid on it. Now it looked like I was covering a vampire bite. Damn. I left it. Let people wonder. None of their business anyway.

I put a red polo shirt on, tucked into jeans. My Nikes, and a shoulder harness for my gun, and I was all set. My shoulder rig has a little pouch for extra ammo. I put fresh clips in it. Twenty-six bullets. Watch out, bad guys. Truth was, most firefights were finished before the first eight shots were gone. But there was always a first time.

I carried a bright yellow windbreaker over my arm. I'd put it on just in case the gun started making people nervous. I would be working with the police. They'd have their guns out in plain sight. Why couldn't I? Besides, I was tired of games. Let the bastards know I was armed and willing.

There are always too many people at a murder scene. Not the gawkers, the people who come to watch; you expect that. There is always something fascinating about someone else's death. But the place always swarms with police, mostly detectives with a sprinkling of uniforms. So many cops for one little murder.

There was even a news van, with a huge satellite antenna sticking out of its back like a giant ray gun from some 1940s science fiction movie. There

would be more news vans, I was betting on that. I don't know how the police kept it quiet this long.

Vampire murders, gee whiz, sensationalism at its best. You don't even have to add anything to make it bizarre.

I kept the crowd between myself and the cameraman. A reporter with short blond hair and a stylish business suit was shoving a microphone in Dolph's face. As long as I stayed near the gruesome remains, I was safe. They might get me on film, but they wouldn't be able to show it on television. Good taste and all, you know.

I had a little plastic-enclosed card, complete with picture, that gave me access to police areas. I always felt like a junior G-man when I clipped it to my collar.

I was stopped at the yellow police banner by a vigilant uniform. He stared at my I. D. for several seconds, as if trying to decide whether I was kosher or not. Would he let me through the line, or would he call a detective over first?

I stood, hands at my sides, trying to look harmless. I'm actually very good at that. I can look downright cute. The uniform raised the tape and let me through. I resisted an urge to say, "Atta boy." I did say, "Thank you."

The body lay near a lamp pole. Legs were spreadeagled. One arm twisted under the body, probably broken. The center of the back was missing, as if someone had shoved a hand through the body and just scooped out the center. The heart would be gone, just like all the others.

Detective Clive Perry was standing by the body. He was a tall, slender, black man, and most recent member of the spook squad. He always seemed so soft-spoken and pleasant. I could never imagine Perry doing anything rude enough to piss someone off, but you didn't get assigned to the squad without a reason.

He looked up from his notebook. "Hi, Ms. Blake."

"Hello, Detective Perry."

He smiled. "Sergeant Storr said you'd be coming down."

"Is everyone else finished with the body?"

He nodded. "It's all yours."

A dark brown puddle of blood spread out from under the body. I knelt beside it. The blood had congealed to a tacky, gluelike consistency. Rigor mortis had come and gone, if there had been rigor mortis. Vampires didn't always react to "death" the way a human body did. It made judging the time of death harder. But that was the coroner's job, not mine.

The bright summer sun pressed down over the body. From the shape and the black pants suit, I was betting it was female. It was sort of hard to tell, lying on its stomach, chest caved in, and the head missing. The spine showed white and glistening. Blood had poured out of the neck like a broken bottle of red wine. The skin was torn, twisted. It looked like somebody had ripped the freaking head off.

I swallowed very hard. I hadn't thrown up on a murder victim in months. I stood up and put a little distance between myself and the body.

Could this have been done by a human being? No; maybe. Hell. If it was a human being, then they were trying very hard to make it look otherwise. No matter what a surface look revealed, the coroner always found knife marks on the body. The question was, did the knife marks come before or after death? Was it a human trying to look like a monster, or a monster trying to look like a human?

"Where's the head?" I asked.

"You sure you feel all right?"

I looked up at him. Did I look pale? "I'll be fine." Me, big, tough vampire slayer, no throw up at the sight of decapitated heads. Right.

Perry raised his eyebrows but was too polite to push the issue. He led me about eight feet down the sidewalk. Someone had thrown a plastic cover over the head. A second smaller pool of congealing blood oozed out from under the plastic.

Perry bent over and grasped the plastic. "You ready?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice. He lifted the plastic, like a curtain backdrop to what lay on the sidewalk.

Long, black hair flowed around a pale face. The hair was matted and sticky with blood. The face had been attractive but no more. The features were slack, almost doll-like in their unreality. My eyes saw it, but it took my brain a few seconds to register. "Shit!"

"What is it?"

I stood up, fast, and took two steps out into the street. Perry came to stand beside me. "Are you all right?"

I glanced back at the plastic with its grisly little lump. Was I all right? Good question. I could identify this body.

It was Theresa.

Chapter 33

I arrived at Ronnie's office a few minutes before eleven. I paused with my hand on the doorknob. I couldn't shake the image of Theresa's head on the sidewalk. She had been cruel and had probably killed hundreds of humans. Why did I feel pity for her? Stupidity, I suppose. I took a deep breath and pushed the door inward.

Ronnie's office is full of windows. Light glares in from two sides, south and west. Which means in the afternoon the room is like a solar heater. No amount of air conditioning is going to overcome that much sunshine.

You can see the District from Ronnie's sunshiny windows. If you care to look.

Ronnie waved me through the door into the almost blinding glare of her office.

A delicate-looking woman was sitting in a chair across from the desk. She was Asian with shiny, black hair styled carefully back from her face. A royal purple jacket, which matched her tailored skirt, was folded neatly on the chair arm. A shiny, lavender blouse brought attention to the up-tilted eyes and the faint lavender shading on the lids and brow. Her ankles were crossed, hands folded in her lap. She looked cool in her lavender blouse, even in the sweltering sunshine.

It caught me off guard for a minute, seeing her like that, after all these years. Finally, I closed my gaping mouth and walked forward, hand extended. "Beverly, it has been a long time."

She stood neatly and put a cool hand in mine. "Three years." Precise, that was Beverly all over.

"You two know each other?" Ronnie asked.

I turned back to her. "Bev didn't mention that she knew me?"

Ronnie shook her head.

I stared at the new woman. "Why didn't you mention it to Ronnie?"

"I did not think it necessary." Bev had to raise her chin to look me in the eye. Not many people have to do that. It's rare enough that I always find it an odd sensation, as if I should stoop down so we can be at eye level.

"Is someone going to tell me where you two know each other from?" Ronnie asked.

Ronnie moved past us to sit behind her desk. She tilted the chair slightly back on its swivel, crossed hands over stomach, and waited. Her pure grey eyes, soft as kitten fur, stared at me.

"Do you mind if I tell her, Bev?"

Bev had sat down again, smooth and ladylike. She had real dignity and had always impressed me as being a lady, in the best sense of the word. "If you feel it necessary, I do not object," she said.

Not exactly a rousing go-ahead, but it would do. I flopped down in the other chair, very aware of my jeans and jogging shoes. Beside Bev I looked like an ill-dressed child. For just a moment I felt it; then it was gone. Remember, no one can make you feel inferior without your consent. Eleanor Roosevelt said that. It is a quote I try to live by. Most of the time I succeed.

"Bev's family were the victims of a vampire pack. Only Beverly survived. I was one of the people who helped destroy the vampires." Brief, to the point, a hell of a lot left out. Mostly the painful parts.

Bev spoke in that quiet, precise voice of hers. "What Anita has left out is that she saved my life at risk of her own." She glanced down at her hands where they lay in her lap.

I remembered my first glimpse of Beverly Chin. One pale leg thrashing against the floor. The flash of fangs as the vampire reared to strike. A glimpse of pale, screaming face, and dark hair. The pure terror as she screamed. My hand throwing a silver-bladed knife and hitting the vampire's shoulder. Not a killing blow; there had been no time. The creature had sprang to its feet, roaring

at me. I stood facing the thing with the last knife I had, gun long since emptied, alone.

And I remembered Beverly Chin beating the vampire's head in with a silver candlestick, while he crouched over me, breath warm on my neck. Her shrieks echoed through my dreams for weeks, as she beat the thing's head to pieces until blood and brain seeped out onto the floor.

All that passed between us without words. We had saved each other's lives; it is a bond that sticks with you. Friendships may fade, but there is always that obligation, that knowledge forged of terror and blood and shared violence, that never really leaves. It was there between us after three long years, straining and touchable.

Ronnie is a smart lady. She caught on to the awkward silence. "Would anybody like a drink?"

"Nonalcoholic," Bev and I said together. We laughed at each other, and the strain faded. We would never be true friends, but perhaps we could stop being ghosts to each other.

Ronnie brought us two diet Cokes. I made a face but took it anyway. I knew that was all she had in the office's little fridge. We had had discussions about diet drinks, but she swore she liked the taste. Liked the taste, garg!

Bev took hers graciously; perhaps that was what she drank at home. Give me something fattening with a little taste to it any day.

"Ronnie mentioned on the phone that there might be a death squad attached to HAV. Is that true?" I said.

Bev stared down at the can, which she held with one hand cupped underneath so it wouldn't stain her skirt. "I do not know positively that it is true, but I believe it to be."

"Tell me what you've heard?" I asked.

"There was talk for a while of forming a squad to hunt the vampires. To kill them as they have killed our . . . families. The president of course vetoed the idea. We work within the system. We are not vigilantes." She said it almost as a question, as if trying to convince herself more than us. She was shaken by what might have happened. Her neat little world collapsing again.

"But lately I have heard talk. People in our organization bragging of slaying vampires."

"How were they supposedly killed?" I asked.

She looked at me, hesitated. "I do not know."

"No hint?"

She shook her head. "I believe I could find out for you. Is it important?"

"The police have hidden certain details from the general public. Things only the murderer would know."

"I see." She glanced down at the can in her hands, then up at me. "I do not believe it is murder even if my people have done what the papers say. Killing dangerous animals should not be a crime."

In part I agreed with her. Once I had agreed with her wholeheartedly.

"Then why tell us?" I asked.

She looked directly at me, dark, nearly black eyes staring into my face. "I owe you."

"You saved my life as well. You owe me nothing."

"There will always be a debt between us, always."

I looked into her face and understood. Bev had begged me not to tell anyone that she had beaten the vampire's head in. I think it horrified her that she was capable of such violence, regardless of motive.

I had told the police that she distracted the vampire so I could kill it. She had been disproportionately grateful for that small white lie. Maybe if no one else knew, she could pretend it had never happened. Maybe.

She stood, smoothing her skirt down in back. She sat her soda can carefully on the edge of the desk. "I will leave a message with Ms. Sims when I find out more."

I nodded. "I appreciate what you're doing." She might be betraying her cause for me.

She laid her purple jacket over her arm, small purse clasped in her hands. "Violence is not the answer. We must work within the system. Humans Against Vampires stands for law and order, not vigilantism." It sounded like a prerecorded speech. But I let it go. Everyone needs something to believe in.

She shook hands with both of us. Her hand was cool and dry. She left, slender shoulders very straight. The door closed firmly but quietly behind her. To look at her you would never know that she had been touched by extreme violence. Maybe that's the way she wanted it. Who was I to argue?

Ronnie said, "Okay, now you fill me in. What have you found out?"

"How do you know I've found out anything?" I asked.

"Because you looked a little green around the gills when you came through the door."

"Great. And I thought I was hiding it."

She patted my arm. "Don't worry. I just know you too well, that's all."

I nodded, taking the explanation for what it was, comforting crap. But I took it anyway. I told her about Theresa's death. I told her everything, except the dreams with Jean-Claude in them. That was private.

She let out a low whistle. "Damn, you have been busy. Do you think a human death squad is doing it?"

"You mean HAV?"

She nodded.

I took a deep breath and let it out. "I don't know. If it's humans, I don't have the faintest idea how they're doing it. It would take superhuman strength to rip a head off."

"A very strong human?" she asked.

The image of Winter's bulging arms flashed into my mind. "Maybe, but that kind of strength. . ."

"Under pressure, little old grannies have lifted entire cars."

She had a point. "How would you like to visit the Church of Eternal Life?" I asked.

"Thinking about joining up?"

I frowned at her.

She laughed. "Okay, okay, stop glowering at me. Why are we going?"

"Last night they raided the party with clubs. I'm not saying they meant to kill anyone, but when you start beating on people" - I shrugged - "accidents happen."

"You think the Church is behind it?"

"Don't know, but if they hate the freaks enough to storm their parties, maybe they hate them enough to kill them."

"Most of the Church's members are vampires," she said.

"Exactly. Superhuman strength and the ability to get close to the victims."

Ronnie smiled. "Not bad, Blake, not bad."

I bowed my head modestly. "Now all we got to do is prove it."

Her eyes were still shiny with humor when she said, "Unless of course they didn't do it."

"Oh, shut up. It's a place to start."

She spread her hands wide. "Hey, I'm not complaining. My father always told me, 'Never criticize, unless you can do a better job.' "

"You don't know what's going on either, huh?" I asked.

Her face sobered. "Wish I did."

So did I.

Chapter 34

The Church of Eternal Life, main building, is just off Page Avenue, far from the District. The Church doesn't like to be associated with the riffraff. Vampire strip club, Circus of the Damned, tsk-tsk. How shocking. No, they think of themselves as mainstream undead.

The church itself is set in an expanse of naked ground. Small trees struggled to grow into big trees and shade the startling white of the church. It seemed to glow in the hot July sunshine, like a land-bound moon.

I pulled into the parking lot and parked on the shiny new black asphalt. Only the ground looked normal, bare reddish earth churned to mud. The grass had never had a chance.

"Pretty," Ronnie said. She nodded in the building's direction.

I shrugged. "If you say so. Frankly, I never get used to the generic effect."

"Generic effect?" she asked.

"The stained glass is all abstract color. No scenes of Christ, no saints, no holy symbols. Clean and pure as a wedding gown fresh out of plastic."

She got out of the car, sunglasses sliding into place. She stared at the church, arms crossed over her stomach. "It looks like they just unwrapped it and haven't put the trimmings on yet."

"Yeah, a church without God. What is wrong with this picture?"

She didn't laugh. "Will anybody be up this time of day?"

"Oh, yes, they recruit during the day."

"Recruit?"

"You know, go door to door, like the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses."

She stared at me. "You've got to be kidding?"

"Do I look like I'm kidding?"

She shook her head. "Door-to-door vampires. How" - she wiggled her hands back and forth - "convenient."

"Yep," I said. "Let's go see who's minding the office."

Broad white steps led up to huge double doors. One of the doors was open; the other had a sign that read, "Enter Friend and be at Peace." I fought an urge to tear down the sign and stomp on it.

They were preying on one of the most basic fears of man - death. Everyone fears death. People who don't believe in God have a hard time with death being it. Die and you cease to exist. Poof. But at the Church of Eternal Life, they promise just what the name says. And they can prove it. No leap of faith. No waiting around. No questions left unanswered. How does it feel to be dead? Just ask a fellow church member.

Oh, and you'll never grow old either. No face-lifts, no tummy tucks, just eternal youth. Not a bad deal, as long as you don't believe in the soul.

As long as you don't believe the soul becomes trapped in the vampire's body and can never reach Heaven. Or worse yet, that vampires are inherently evil and you are condemned to Hell. The Catholic Church sees voluntary vampirism as a kind of suicide. I tend to agree. Though the Pope also excommunicated all animators, unless we ceased raising the dead. Fine; I became Episcopalian.

Polished wooden pews ran in two wide rows up towards what would have been an altar. There was a pulpit, but I couldn't call it an altar. It was just a blank blue wall surrounded by more white upsweeping walls.

The windows were red and blue stained glass. The sunlight sparkled through them, making delicate colored patterns on the white floor.

"Peaceful," Ronnie said.

"So are graveyards."

She smiled at me. "I'd thought you'd say that."

I frowned at her. "No teasing; we're here on business."

"What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Just back me up; look menacing if you can manage it. Look for clues."

"Clues?" she asked.

"Yeah, you know, clues, ticket stubs, half-burned notes, leads."

"Oh, those."

"Quit grinning at me, Ronnie."

She adjusted her sunglasses and did her best "cold" look. She's pretty good at it. Thugs have been known to shrivel at twenty paces. We would see how it worked on church members.

There was a small door to one side of the "altar." It led into a carpeted hallway. The air-conditioned hush enveloped us. There were bathrooms to the left, and an open room to the right. Perhaps this is where they had . . . coffee after services. No, probably not coffee. A rousing sermon followed by a little blood, perhaps?

The offices were marked with a little sign that said "Office." How clever. There was an outer office, the proverbial secretarial desk and etc.... A young man sat behind the desk. Slender, short brown hair carefully cut. Wire-frame glasses decorated a pair of really lovely brown eyes. There was a healing bite mark on his throat.

He rose and came around the desk, hand extended, smiling at us. "Greetings, friends, I'm Bruce. How may I help you today?"

The handshake was firm but not too firm, strong but not overbearing, a friendly lingering touch, but not sexual. Really good car salesmen shake hands like that. Real estate brokers, too. I have this nice little soul, hardly used at all. The price is right. Trust me. If his big brown eyes had looked any more sincere, I would have given him a doggie biscuit and patted his head.

"I would like to set up an appointment to speak with Malcolm," I said.

He blinked once. "Have a seat."

I sat. Ronnie leaned against the wall, to one side of the door. Hands folded, looking cool and bodyguardish.

Bruce went back around his desk, after offering us coffee, and sat with folded hands. "Now, Miss. . ."

"Ms. Blake."

He didn't flinch; he hadn't heard of me. How fleeting fame. "Ms. Blake, why do you wish to meet with the head of our church? We have many competent and understanding counselors that will help you make your decision."

I smiled at him. I'll just bet you do, you little pipsqueak. "I think Malcolm will want to speak with me. I have information about the vampire murders."

His smile slipped. "If you have such information, then go to the police."

"Even if I have proof that certain members of your church are doing the murders?" A small bluff, otherwise known as a lie.

He swallowed, fingers pressing the top of his desk until the fingertips turned white. "I don't understand. I mean . . ."

I smiled at him. "Let's just face it, Bruce. You are not equipped to handle murder. It isn't in your training, now is it?"

"Well, no, but . . ."

"Then just give me a time to come back tonight and see Malcolm."

"I don't know. I . . ."

"Don't worry about it. Malcolm is the head of the church. He'll take care of it."

He was nodding, too rapidly. His eyes flicked to Ronnie, then back to me. He flipped through a leatherbound day planner on his desk. "Nine, tonight." He picked up a pen, poised and ready. "If you'll give me your full name, I'll pencil you in."

I started to point out that he wasn't using a pencil, but decided to let it slide. "Anita Blake."

He still didn't recognize the name. So much for me being the terror of vampireland. "And this is pertaining to?" He was regaining his professionalism.

I stood up. "Murder, it's pertaining to murder."

"Oh, yes, I . . ." He scribbled something down. "Nine tonight, Anita Blake, murder." He frowned down at the note as if there were something wrong with it.

I decided to help him out. "Don't frown so. You've got the message right."

He stared up at me. He looked a little pale.

"I'll be back. Make sure he gets the message."

Bruce nodded again, too fast, eyes large behind his glasses.

Ronnie opened the door, and I preceded her out. She brought up the rear like a bad-movie bodyguard. When we were out into the main church again, she laughed. "I think we scared him."

"Bruce scares easy."

She nodded, eyes shining.

The barest mention of violence, murder, and he had fallen apart. When he "grew up," he was going to be a vampire. Sure.

The sunshine was nearly blinding after the dimness of the church. I squinted, putting a hand over my eyes. I caught movement from the corner of my eye.

Ronnie screamed, "Anita!"

Everything slowed down. I had plenty of time to stare at the man and the gun in his hands. Ronnie smashed into me, carrying us both down and back through the church door. Bullets thunked into the door where I'd been.

Ronnie scrambled behind me, near the wall. I had my gun out and lay on my side pressed against the door. My heart was thundering in my ears. Yet I could hear everything. The wrinkle of my windbreaker was like static. I heard the man walk up the steps. The son of a bitch was gonna keep coming.

I inched forward. He walked up the steps. His shadow fell inside the door. He wasn't even trying to hide. Maybe he thought I wasn't armed. He was about to learn different.

Bruce called, "What's going on here?"

Ronnie yelled, "Get back inside."

I kept my eyes on the door. I would not get shot because of Bruce distracted me. Nothing was important but that shadow in the door, the halting footsteps. Nothing.

The man walked right into it. Gun in his hand, eyes searching the church. Amateur.

I could have touched him with the barrel of my gun. "Don't move." "Freeze" always sounds so melodramatic. Don't move, short, to the point. "Don't move," I said.

He turned just his head, slow, towards me. "You're The Executioner." His voice was soft, hesitant.

Was I supposed to deny it? Maybe. If he had come here to kill The Executioner, definitely. "No," I said.

He started to turn. "Then it must be her." He was turning towards Ronnie. Shit.

He raised his arm and started to point.

"Don't!" Ronnie screamed.

Too late. I fired, point-blank into his chest. Ronnie's shot echoed mine. The impact raised him off his feet and sent him staggering backwards. Blood blossomed on his shirt. He slammed into the half-opened door and fell flat on his back through it. All I could see were his legs.

I hesitated, listening. I couldn't hear any movement. I eased around the door. He wasn't moving, but the gun was still clutched in his hand. I pointed my gun at him and stalked to him. If he had so much as twitched, I would have hit him again.

I kicked the gun out of his hand and checked the pulse in his neck. Nada, zip. Dead.

I use ammunition that can take out vampires, if I get a lucky shot, and if they're not ancient. The bullet had made a small hole on the side it went in, but the other side of his chest was gone. The bullet had done what it was supposed to do; expand, and make a very big exit hole.

His neck lolled to one side. Two bite marks decorated his neck. Dammit! Bite marks or not, he was dead. There wasn't enough left of his heart to thread a needle. A lucky shot. A stupid amateur with a gun.

Ronnie was leaning in the doorway, looking pale. Her gun was pointed at the dead man. Her arms trembled ever so slightly.

She almost smiled. "I don't usually carry a gun during the day, but I knew I'd be with you."

"Is that an insult?" I asked.

"No," she said, "reality."

I couldn't argue with that. I sat down on the cool stone steps; my knees felt weak. The adrenaline was draining out of me, like water from a broken cup.

Bruce was in the doorway, ice pale. "He . . . he tried to kill you." His voice cracked with fear.

"Do you recognize him?" I asked.

He shook his head over and over again, rapid jerky movements.

"Are you sure?"

"We . . . we do not . . . condone violence." He swallowed hard, his voice a cracking whisper. "I don't know him."

The fear seemed genuine. Maybe he didn't know him, but that didn't mean the dead man wasn't a member of the church. "Call the police, Bruce."

He just stood there, staring at the corpse.

"Call the cops, okay?"

He stared at me, eyes glazed. I wasn't sure if he heard me or not, but he went back inside.

Ronnie sat down beside me, staring out at the parking lot. Blood was running down the white steps in tiny rivulets of scarlet.

"Jesus," she whispered.

"Yeah." I still held my gun loose-gripped in my hand. The danger seemed to be over. Guess I could put away the gun. "Thanks for pushing me out of the way," I said.

"You're welcome." She took a deep, shaky breath. "Thanks for shooting him before he shot me."

"Don't mention it. Besides, you got a piece of him, too."

"Don't remind me."

I stared at her. "You all right?"

"No, I'm well and truly scared."

"Yeah." Of course, all Ronnie had to do was stay away from me. I seemed to be the free-fire zone. A walking, talking menace to my friends and coworkers. Ronnie could have died today, and it would have been my fault. She had been a few seconds slower to shoot than I was. Those few seconds could have cost her her life. Of course, if she hadn't been here today, I might have died. One bullet in the chest, and my gun wouldn't have done me a hell of a lot of good.

I heard the distant whoop-whoop of police sirens. They must have been damn close, or maybe it was another killing. Possible. Would the police believe he was just a fanatic trying to kill The Executioner? Maybe. Dolph wouldn't buy it.

The sunshine pressed down around us like bright yellow plastic. Neither of us said a word. Maybe there was nothing left to say. Thank you for saving my life. You're welcome. What else was there?

I felt light and empty, almost peaceful. Numb. I must be getting close to the truth, whatever that was. People were trying to kill me. It was a good sign. Sort of. It meant I knew something important. Important enough to kill for. The trouble was, I didn't know what it was I was supposed to know.

Chapter 35

I was back at the church at 8:45 that night. The sky was a rich purple. Pink clouds were stretched across it like cotton candy pulled apart by eager kids and left to melt. True dark was only minutes away. Ghouls would already be out and about. But the vampires had a few heartbeats of waiting left.

I stood on the steps of the church, admiring the sunset. There was no blood left. The white steps were as shiny and new as if this afternoon had never happened. But I remembered. I had decided to sweat in the July heat so I could carry an arsenal. The windbreaker hid not only the shoulder rig and 9mm, plus extra ammo, but a knife on each forearm. The Firestar was snug in the inner

pant holster, set for a right-hand cross draw. There was even a knife strapped to my ankle.

Of course, nothing I was carrying would stop Malcolm. He was one of the most powerful master vampires in the city. After seeing Nikolaos and Jean-Claude, I'd say he ranked third. In the company I was judging him against, third wasn't bad. So why confront him? Because I couldn't think of what else to do.

I had left a letter detailing my suspicions about the church and everybody else in a safe deposit box. Doesn't everybody have one? Ronnie knew about it, and there was a letter on the secretary's desk at Animators, Inc. It would go out Monday morning to Dolph, unless I called up to stop it.

One attempt on my life and I was getting all paranoid. Fancy that.

The parking lot was full. People were drifting inside the church in small groups. A few had simply walked up, no cars. I stared hard at them, Vampires, before full dark? But no, just humans.

I zipped the windbreaker partway up. Didn't want to disturb services by flashing a gun.

A young woman, brown hair style-gelled into an artificial wave over one eye, was handing out pamphlets just inside the door. A guide to the service, I supposed. She smiled and said, "Welcome. Is this your first time?"

I smiled back at her, pleasant, as if I wasn't carrying enough weaponry to take out half the congregation. "I have an appointment to see Malcolm."

Her smile didn't change. If anything it deepened, flashing a dimple to one side of her lipsticked mouth. Somehow, I didn't think she knew I'd killed someone today. People don't generally smile at me when they know things like that.

"Just a minute; let me get someone to handle the door." She walked away to tap a young man on the shoulder. She whispered against his cheek and shoved the pamphlets into his hands.

She came back to me, hands smoothing along the burgundy dress she wore. "If you'll follow me?"

She made it a question. What would she do if I said no? Probably look puzzled. The young man was greeting a couple that had just entered the church. The man wore a suit; the woman the proverbial dress, hose, and sandals. They could have been coming to my church, any church. As I followed the woman down the side aisle towards the door, I glanced at a couple dressed in postmodern punk. Or whatever phrase is common now. The girl's hair looked like Frankenstein's Bride done in pink and green. A second glance and I wasn't sure; maybe the pink and green was a guy. If so, his girlfriend's hair was a buzz so close to her head, it looked like stubble.

The Church of Eternal Life attracted a wide following. Diversity, that's the ticket. They appealed to the agnostic, the atheist, the disillusioned mainstreamer, and some who had never decided what they were. The church was nearly full, and it wasn't dark yet. The vampires had yet to show. It had been a long time since I'd seen a church this full, except at Easter, or Christmas. Holiday Christians. A chill tiptoed along my spine.

This was the fullest church I'd been to in years. The vampire church. Maybe the real danger wasn't the murderer. Maybe the real danger was right here in this building.

I shook my head and followed my guide through the door, out of the church, and past the coffee klatch area. There really was coffee percolating on a white-draped table. There was also a bowl of reddish punch that looked a little too viscous to be punch at all.

The woman said, "Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thank you."

She smiled pleasantly and opened the door marked "Office" for me. I went in. No one was there.

"Malcolm will be with you as soon as he awakens. If you like, I can wait with you." She glanced at the door as she said it.

"I wouldn't want you to miss the service. I'll be fine alone."

Her smile flashed into dimple again. "Thank you; I'm sure it will be a short wait." With that she was gone, and I was alone. Alone with the secretary's desk and the leatherbound day planner for the Church of Eternal Life. Life was good.

I opened the planner to the week before the first vampire murder. Bruce, the secretary, had very neat handwriting, each entry very precise. Time, name, and a one-sentence description of the meeting. 10:00, Jason MacDonald, Magazine interview. 9:00, Meeting with Mayor, Zoning problems. Normal stuff for the Billy Graham of Vampirism. Then two days before the first murder there was a notation that was in a different handwriting. Smaller, no less neat. 3:00, Ned. That was all, no last name, no reason for the meeting. And Bruce didn't make the appointment. Methinks we have a clue. Be still, my heart.

Ned was a short form of Edward, just like Teddy. Had Malcolm had a meeting with the hit man of the undead? Maybe. Maybe not. It could be a clandestine meeting with a different Ned. Or maybe Bruce had been away from the desk and someone else had just filled in? I went through the rest of the planner as quickly as I could. Nothing else seemed out of the ordinary. Every other entry was in Bruce's large, rolling hand.

Malcolm had met with Edward, if it had been Edward, two days before the first death. If that was true, where did that leave things? With Edward a murderer and Malcolm paying him to do it. There was one problem with that. If Edward had wanted me dead, he'd have done it himself. Maybe Malcolm panicked and sent one of his followers to do it? Could be.

I was sitting in a chair against the wall, leafing through a magazine, when the door opened. Malcolm was tall and almost painfully thin, with large, bony hands that belonged to a more muscular man. His short, curly hair was the shocking yellow of goldfinch feathers. This was what blond hair looked like after nearly three hundred years in the dark.

The last time I had seen Malcolm, he had seemed beautiful, perfect. Now he was almost ordinary, like Nikolaos and her scar. Had Jean-Claude given me the ability to see master vampires' true forms?

Malcolm's presence filled the small room like invisible water, chilling and pricking along my skin, knee-deep and rising. Give him another nine hundred years, and he might rival Nikolaos. Of course, I wouldn't be around to test my little theory.

I stood, and he swept into the room. He was dressed modestly in a dark blue suit, pale blue shirt, and blue silk tie. The pale shirt made his eyes look like robin's eggs. He smiled, angular face, beaming at me. He wasn't trying to cloud my mind. Malcolm was very good at resisting the urge. His entire credibility rested on the fact that he didn't cheat.

"Miss Blake, how good to see you." He didn't offer to shake hands; he knew better. "Bruce left me a very confused message. Something about the vampire murders?" His voice was deep and soothing, like the ocean.

"I told Bruce I have proof that your church is involved with the vampire murders."

"And do you?"

"Yes." I believed it. If he had met with Edward, I had my murderer.

"Hmmm, you are telling the truth. Yet, I know that it is not true." His voice rolled around me, warm and thick, powerful.

I shook my head. "Cheating, Malcolm, using your powers to probe my mind. Tsk, tsk."

He shrugged, hands open at his sides. "I control my church, Miss Blake. They would not do what you have accused them of."

"They raided a freak party last night with clubs. They hurt people." I was guessing on that part.

He frowned. "There is a small faction of our followers who persist in violence. The freak party, as you call it, is an abomination and must be stopped, but through legal channels. I have told my followers this."

"But do you punish them when they disobey you?" I asked.

"I am not a policeman, or a priest, to mete out punishment. They are not children. They have their own minds."

"I'll bet they do."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"It means, Malcolm, that you are a master vampire. None of them can stand against you. They'll do anything you want them to."

"I do not use mind powers on my congregation."

I shook my head. His power oozed over my arms like a cold wave. He wasn't even trying. It was just spillover. Did he realize what he was doing? Could it actually be an accident?

"You had a meeting two days before the first murder."

He smiled, careful not to show fangs. "I have many meetings."

"I know, you are reeal popular, but you'll remember this meeting. You hired a hit man to kill vampires." I watched his face, but he was too good. There was a flicker in his eyes, unease maybe; then it was gone, replaced by that shining blue-eyed confidence.

"Miss Blake, why are you looking me in the eyes?"

I shrugged. "If you don't try to bespell me, it's safe."

"I have tried to convince you of that on several occasions, but you always played it . . . safe. Now you are staring at me; why?" He strode towards me, quick, nearly a blur of motion. My gun was in my hand, no thinking needed. Instinct.

"My," he said.

I just stared at him, quite willing to put a bullet through his chest if he came one step closer.

"You carry at least the first mark, Miss Blake. Some master vampire has touched you. Who?"

I let out my breath in one long sigh. I hadn't even realized I'd been holding it. "It's a long story."

"I believe you." He was suddenly standing near the door again, as if he had never moved. Damn, he was good.

"You hired a man to slay the freak vampires," I said.

"No," he said, "I did not."

It is always unnerving when a person looks so damn blasé while I point a gun at them. "You did hire an assassin."

He shrugged. Smiled. "You do not really expect me to do anything but deny that, do you?"

"Guess not." What the heck, might as well ask. "Are you or your church connected in any way to the vampire murders?"

He almost laughed. I didn't blame him. No one in their right mind would just say yes, but sometimes you can learn things from the way a person denies something. The choice of lies can be almost as helpful as the truth.

"No, Miss Blake."

"You did hire an assassin." I made it a statement.

The smile drained from his face, goof. He stared at me, his presence crawling along my skin like insects. "Miss Blake, I believe it is time for you to leave."

"A man tried to kill me today."

"That is hardly my fault."

"He had two vampire bites in his neck."

Again that flicker in the eyes. Unease? Maybe.

"He was waiting for me outside your church. I was forced to kill him on your steps." A small lie, but I didn't want Ronnie further involved.

He was frowning now, a thread of anger like heat oozing through the room. "I am unaware of this, Miss Blake. I will look into it."

I lowered my gun but didn't put it away. You can only hold a person at gunpoint so long. If they aren't afraid, and they aren't going to hurt you, and you aren't going to shoot them, it gets rather silly. "Don't be too hard on Bruce. He doesn't do well around violence."

Malcolm straightened, pulling at his suit jacket. A nervous gesture? Oh, boy. I'd hit a nerve.

"I will look into it, Miss Blake. If he was a member of our church, we owe you an extreme apology."

I stared at him for a minute. What could I say to that? Thank you? It didn't seem appropriate. "I know you hired a hit man, Malcolm. Not exactly good press for your church. I think you are behind the vampire murders. Your hands may not have spilled the blood, but it was done with your approval."

"Please, go now, Miss Blake." He opened the door as he said it.

I walked through, gun still in my hand. "Sure, I'll go, but I won't go away."

He stared down at me, eyes angry. "Do you know what it means to be marked by a master vampire?"

I thought a minute and wasn't sure how to answer it. Truth. "No."

He smiled, and it was cold enough to freeze your heart. "You will learn, Miss Blake. If it becomes too much for you, remember our church is here to help." He closed the door in my face. Softly.

I stared at the door. "And what is that supposed to mean?" I whispered. No one answered me.

I put away my gun and spotted a small door marked "Exit." I took it. The church was softly lit, candles maybe. Voices rose on the night air, singing. I didn't recognize the words. The tune was *Bringing in the Sheaves*. I caught one phrase: "We will live forever, never more to die."

I hurried to my car and tried not to listen to the song. There was something frightening about all those voices raised skyward, worshipping . . . what? Themselves? Eternal youth? Blood? What? Another question that I didn't have an answer to.

Edward was my murderer. The question was, could I turn him over to Nikolaos? Could I turn over a human being to the monsters, even to save myself? Another question that I didn't have an answer for. Two days ago I would have said no. Now I just didn't know.

Chapter 36

I didn't want to go back to my apartment. Edward would be coming tonight. Tell him where Nikolaos slept in daylight or he'd force the information from me. Complicated enough. Now, I thought he was my murderer. Very complicated.

The best thing I could think of was to avoid him. That wouldn't work forever, but maybe I'd have a brainstorm and figure it all out. All right, there wasn't much chance of that, but one could always hope.

Maybe Ronnie would have a message for me. Something helpful. God knows I needed all the help I could get. I pulled the car into a service station that had a pay phone out front. I had one of those high-tech answering machines that allowed me to read my messages without having to go home for

them. Maybe I could avoid Edward all night, if I slept in a hotel. Sigh. If I'd had any solid proof at all right that minute, I'd have called the police.

I heard the tape whir and click; then, "Anita, it's Willie, they got Phillip. The guy you was with. They're hurtin' him, bad! You gotta come-" The phone went dead, abruptly. Like he'd been cut off.

My stomach tightened. A second message came up. "This is you know who. You've heard Willie's message. Come and get it, animator. I don't really have to threaten your pretty lover, do I?" Nikolaos's laughter filled the phone, scratchy and distant with tape.

There was a loud click and Edward's voice came over the phone. "Anita, tell me where you are. I can help you."

"They'll kill Phillip," I said. "Besides, you aren't on my side, remember."

"I'm the closest thing you've got to an ally."

"God help me, then." I hung up on him, hard. Phillip had tried to defend me last night. Now he was paying for it. I yelled, "Dammit!"

A man pumping gas stared at me.

"What are you looking at?" I nearly yelled that, too. He dropped his eyes and concentrated very hard on filling his tank with gas.

I got behind the wheel of my car and sat there for a few minutes. I was so angry, I was shaking. I could feel the tension in my teeth. Dammit. Dammit! I was too angry to drive. It wouldn't help Phillip if I got in a car accident on the way.

I tried breathing deep gulps of air. It didn't help. I turned the key in the ignition. "No speeding, can't afford to get stopped by the cops. Easy does it, Anita, easy does it." I talk to myself every once in a while. Give myself very good advice. Sometimes I even take it.

I put the car in gear and drove out onto the road - carefully. Anger rode up my back and into my shoulders and neck. I gripped the steering wheel too hard and found that my hands weren't quite healed. Sharp little jabs of pain, but not enough. There wasn't enough pain in the whole world to get rid of the anger.

Phillip was being hurt because of me. Just like Catherine and Ronnie. No more. No freaking more. I was going to get Phillip, save him any way I could; then I was turning the whole blasted thing over to the police. Without proof, yeah, without anything to back it up. I was bailing out before more people got hurt.

The anger was almost enough to hide the fear behind it. If Nikolaos was tormenting Phillip for last night, she might not be too happy with me either. I was going back down those stairs into the master's lair, at night. Didn't seem real bright when you put it that way.

The anger was fading in a wash of cold, skin-shivering fear. "No!" I would not go in there afraid. I held onto my anger with everything I had. This was the closest I'd come to hate in a long time. Hatred; now there's an emotion that'll spread warmth through your body.

Most hatred is based on fear, one way or another. Yeah. I wrapped myself in anger, with a dash of hate, and at the bottom of it all was an icy center of pure terror.

Chapter 37

The Circus of the Damned is housed in an old warehouse. Its name is emblazoned across the roof in colored lights. Giant clown figurines dance around the words in frozen pantomime. If you look very closely at the clowns, you notice they have fangs. But only if you look very closely.

The sides of the building are strung with huge plastic cloth signs, like an old-fashioned sideshow. One banner showed a man being hung; "The Death Defying Count Alcourt," it said. Zombies crawled from a graveyard in one picture; "Watch the Dead Rise from the Grave." A very bad drawing showed a man halfway between wolf and man shape; Fabian, the Werewolf. There were other signs. Other attractions. None of them looked very wholesome.

Guilty Pleasures treads a thin line between entertainment and the sadistic. The Circus goes over the edge and down into the abyss.

And here I go inside. Oh, joy in the morning.

Noise hits you at the door. A blast of carnival sound, the push and shove of the crowd, the rustling of hundreds of people. The lights spill and scream in a hundred different colors, all eye-searing, all guaranteed to attract attention, or make you lose your lunch. Of course, maybe that was just my nerves.

The smell is formed of cotton candy, corn dogs, the cinnamon smell of elephant ears, snow cones, sweat, and under it all a neck-ruffling smell. Blood smells like sweet copper pennies, and that smell mingles over everything. Most people don't recognize it. But there is another scent on the air, not just blood, but violence. Of course, violence has no smell. Yet, always here, there is - something. The barest hint of long-closed rooms and rotting cloth.

I had never come here before, except on police business. What I wouldn't have given for a few uniforms right now.

The crowd parted like water in front of a ship. Winter, Mr. Muscles, moved through the people, and instinctively they moved out of his way. I'd have moved out of his way, too, but I didn't think I'd get the chance.

Winter was wearing a proverbial strongman's outfit. It had fake zebra stripes on a white background and left most of his upper body exposed. His legs in the striped leotard rippled and corded, like it was a second skin. His bicep, unflexed, was bigger around than both my arms. He stopped in front of me, towering over me, and knowing it.

"Is your entire family obscenely tall, or is it just you?" I asked.

He frowned, eyes narrowing. I don't think he got it. Oh, well. "Follow me," he said. With that he turned and walked back through the crowd.

I guess I was supposed to follow like a good little girl. Shit. A large blue tent took up one corner of the warehouse. People were lining up, showing

tickets. A man was calling out in a booming voice, "Almost show time, folks. Present your tickets and enter. See the hanging man. Count Alcourt will be executed before your very eyes."

I had paused to listen. Winter was not waiting. Luckily, his broad, white back didn't blend with the crowd. I had to trot to catch up with him. I hate having to do that. It makes me feel like a child running after an adult. If a little running was the worst thing I experienced tonight, things would be just hunky-dory.

There was a full-size Ferris wheel, its glowing top nearly brushing the ceiling. A man held a baseball out to me. "Try your luck, little lady."

I ignored him. I hate being called little lady. I glanced at the prizes to be won. It ran long on stuffed animals and ugly dolls. The stuffed toys were mostly predators: soft plush panthers, toddler-size bears, spotted snakes, and giant fuzzy-toothed bats.

There was a bald man in white clown makeup selling tickets to the mirror maze. He stared at the children as they went inside his glass house. I could almost feel the weight of his eyes on their backs, like he would memorize every line of their small bodies. Nothing would have gotten me past him into that sparkling river of glass.

The Funhouse was next, more clowns and screams, the shooting whoosh of air. The metal sidewalk leading into its depths buckled and twisted. A little boy nearly fell. His mother dragged him to his feet. Why would any parent bring their child here, to this frightening place?

There was even a haunted house; it was almost funny. Sort of redundant, if you ask me. The whole freaking place was a house of horrors.

Winter had paused before the little door leading into the back areas. He was frowning at me, massive arms almost crossed over equally massive chest. The arms didn't quite fold right, too much muscle for that, but he was trying.

He opened the door. I went inside. The tall, bald man who had been with Nikolaos that first time was standing against the wall, at attention. His handsome, narrow face, the eyes very prominent because there was no hair, nothing much else to stare at, looked at me the way elementary school teachers look at troublemaking children. You must be punished, young lady. But what had I done wrong?

The man's voice was deep, faintly British, cultured, but human. "Search her for weapons before we go down."

Winter nodded. Why talk when gestures will do? His big hands lifted my jacket and took the gun. He shoved one shoulder so that I spun around. He found the second gun, too. Had I really thought they'd let me keep the weapons? Yes, I guess I had. Stupid me.

"Check her arms for knives."

Damn.

Winter gripped my jacket sleeves like he meant to tear them. "Wait, please. I'll just take the jacket off. You can search it, too, if you like."

Winter took the knives on my arms. The bald-headed man searched the yellow windbreaker for concealed weapons. He didn't find any. Winter patted

my legs down, but not well. He missed the knife at my ankle. I had one weapon, and they didn't know it. Bully for me.

Down the long stairs and into the empty throne room. Maybe it showed on my face because the man said, "The master waits for us, with your friend."

The man led the way as he had down the stairs. Winter brought up the rear. Perhaps they thought I would make a break for it. Right. Where would I go?

They stopped at the dungeon. How had I known they would? The bald-headed man knocked on the door twice, not too hard, not too soft.

There was silence; then bright, high laughter drifted from inside. My skin crawled with the sound. I did not want to see Nikolaos again. I did not want to be in a cell again. I wanted to go home.

The door opened. Valentine made a hand-sweeping motion. "Come in, come in." He was wearing a silver mask this time. A strand of his auburn hair was stuck to the forehead of the mask, sticky with blood.

My heart thudded into my throat. Phillip, are you alive? It was all I could do not to yell out.

Valentine stepped against the door as if waiting for me to pass. I glanced at the nameless bald man. His face was unreadable. He motioned me ahead of him. What could I do? I went.

What I saw stopped me at the top of the steps. I couldn't go farther. I couldn't. Aubrey stood against the far wall, grinning at me. His hair was still golden; his face, bestial. Nikolaos stood in a dress of flowing white that made her skin look like chalk, her hair cotton-white. She was sprinkled with blood, like someone had taken a red ink pen and splattered her.

Her grey-blue eyes stared up at me. She laughed again, rich and pure and wicked. I had no other word for it. Wicked. She caressed a white, blood-spattered hand against Phillip's bare chest. She rolled her fingertip over his nipple, and laughed.

He was chained to the wall at wrist and ankle. His long, brown hair had fallen forward, hiding one eye. His muscular body was covered in bites. Blood rained down his tan skin in thin crimson lines. He stared up at me from that one brown eye, the other hidden in his hair. Despair. He knew he had been brought here to die, like this, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. But there was something I could do. There had to be. God, please let there be!

The man touched my shoulder, and I jumped. The vampires laughed. The man did not. I walked down the steps to stand a few feet in front of Phillip. He wouldn't look at me.

Nikolaos touched his naked thigh and ran her fingers up it. His body tightened, hands clenching into fists.

"Oh, we have been having a fine time with your lover here," Nikolaos said. Her voice was sweet as ever. The child bride incarnate. Bitch.

"He isn't my lover."

She pouted out her lower lip. "Now, Anita, no lying. That's no fun." She stalked towards me, slender hips swaying to some inner dance. She reached for

me, and I backed up, bumping into Winter. "Animator, animator," she said. "When will you learn that you cannot fight me?"

I don't think she wanted me to argue, so I didn't.

She reached for me again, with one bloody, dainty hand. "Winter can hold you, if you like."

Stay still, or we hold you down. Great choices. I stayed still. I watched those pale fingers glide towards my face. I ground my fingernails into the palms of my hands. I would not move away from her. I would not move. Her fingers touched my forehead, and I felt the cool wetness of blood. She brushed it down my temple to my cheek and traced her fingers over my lower lip. I think I stopped breathing.

"Lick your lips," she said.

"No," I said.

"Oh, you are a stubborn one. Has Jean-Claude given you this courage?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Her eyes darkened, face clouding over. "Don't be coy, Anita. It does not become you." Her voice was suddenly adult, hot enough to scald. "I know your little secret."

"I don't know what you are talking about," I said, and I meant it. I didn't understand the anger.

"If you like, we can play games for a little while longer." She was suddenly standing beside Phillip, and I hadn't seen her move. "Did that surprise you, Anita? I am still master of this city. I have powers that you and your master have never even dreamed of."

My master? What the hell was she talking about? I didn't have a master.

She rubbed her hands along the side of his chest, over his rib cage. Her hand wiped away the blood to show the skin smooth and untouched. She stood in front of him and didn't come to his collarbone. Phillip had closed his eyes. Her head arched backwards, a glimpse of fangs, lips drawn back in a snarl.

"No." I stepped towards them. Winter's hands descended on my shoulders. He shook his head, slow and careful. I was not to interfere.

She drove her fangs into his side. His whole body stiffened, neck arching, arms jerking at the chains.

"Leave him alone!" I drove an elbow into Winter's stomach. He grunted, and his fingers dug into my shoulders until I wanted to scream. His arms enveloped me, tight to his chest, no movement allowed.

She raised her face from Phillip's skin. Blood trickled down her chin. She licked her lips with a tiny pink tongue. "Ironic," she said in a voice years older than the body would ever be. "I sent Phillip to seduce you. Instead, you seduced him."

"We are not lovers." I felt ridiculous with Winter's arms crushing me to his chest.

"Denial will not help either of you," she said.

"What will help us?" I asked.

She motioned, and Winter released me. I stepped away from him, out of reach. It put me closer to Nikolaos, perhaps not an improvement.

"Let us discuss your future, Anita." She began to walk up the steps. "And your lover's future."

I assumed she meant Phillip, and I didn't correct her. The nameless man motioned for me to follow her up the stairs. Aubrey was moving closer to Phillip. They would be alone together. Unacceptable.

"Nikolaos, please."

Maybe it was the "please." She turned. "Yes," she said.

"May I ask two things?"

She was smiling at me, amused with me. An adult's amusement with a child who had used a new word. I didn't care what she thought of me as long as she did what I wanted. "You may ask," she said.

"That when we go, all the vampires leave this room." She was still staring at me, smiling, so far so good. "And that I be allowed to speak with Phillip privately."

She laughed, high and wild, chimes in a storm wind. "You are bold, mortal. I give you that. I begin to see what Jean-Claude sees in you."

I let the comment go because I felt like I was missing part of the meaning. "May I have what I ask, please?"

"Call me master, and you will have it."

I swallowed and it was loud in the sudden stillness. "Please. . . master." See, I didn't choke on the word after all.

"Very good, animator, very good indeed." Without her needing to say anything, Valentine and Aubrey went up the steps and out the door. They didn't even argue. That was frightening all on its own.

"I will leave Burchard at the top of the steps. He has human hearing. If you whisper, he won't be able to hear you at all."

"Burchard?" I asked.

"Yes, animator, Burchard, my human servant." She stared at me as if that was significant. My expression didn't seem to please her. She frowned. Then she turned abruptly in a swing of white skirts. Winter followed her like an obedient puppy on steroids.

Burchard, the once nameless man, took up a post in front of the closed door. He stared straight ahead, not at us. Privacy, or as close as we were getting to it.

I went to Phillip and he still wouldn't look at me. His thick, brown hair acted like a kind of curtain between us. "Phillip, what happened?"

His voice was an abused whisper; screaming will do that to you. I had to stand on tiptoe and nearly press my body against his to hear him. "Guilty Pleasures; they took me from there."

"Didn't Robert try to stop them?" For some reason that seemed important. I had only met Robert once, but part of me was angry that he had not protected Phillip. He was in charge of things while Jean-Claude was away. Phillip was one of those things.

"Wasn't strong enough."

I lost my balance and was forced to catch myself, hands flat against his ruined chest. I jerked back, hands held out from me, bloody.

Phillip closed his eyes and leaned back into the wall. His throat worked hard at swallowing. There were two fresh bites on his neck. They were going to bleed him to death if someone didn't get carried away first.

He lowered his head and tried to look at me, but his hair had spilled into both eyes. I wiped the blood on my jeans and went back to stand almost on tiptoe next to him. I brushed the hair back from his eyes, but it spilled forward again. It was beginning to bug me. I combed my fingers through his hair until it stayed out of his face. His hair was softer than it looked, thick and warm with the heat of his body.

He almost smiled. His voice breaking as he whispered, "Few months back, I'd have paid money for this."

I stared at him, then realized he was trying to make a joke. God. My throat felt tight.

Burchard said, "It is time to go."

I stared into Phillip's eyes, perfect brown, torchlight dancing in them like black mirrors. "I won't leave you here, Phillip."

His eyes flickered to the man on the stairs and back to me. Fear turned his face young, helpless. "See you later," he said.

I stepped back from him. "You can count on it."

"It is not wise to keep her waiting," Burchard said.

He was probably right. Phillip and I stared at each other for a handful of moments. The pulse in his throat jumped under his skin like it was trying to escape. My throat ached; my chest was tight. The torchlight flickered in my vision for just a second. I turned away and walked to the steps. We tough-as-nails vampire slayers don't cry. At least, never in public. At least, never when we can help it.

Burchard held the door open for me. I glanced back at Phillip and waved, like an idiot. He watches me go, his eyes too large for his face suddenly, like a child who watches its parent leave the room before all the monsters are gone.

I had to leave him like that - alone, helpless. God help me.

Chapter 38

Nikolaos sat in her carved wooden chair, tiny feet swinging off the ground. Charming.

Aubrey leaned against the wall, tongue running over his lips, getting the last bit of blood off them. Valentine stood very still beside him, staring at me.

Winter stood beside me. The prison guard.

Burchard went to stand by Nikolaos, one hand on the back of her chair.

"What, animator, no jokes?" Nikolaos asked. Her voice was still the grown-up version. It was like she had two voices and could change them with a push of a button.

I shook my head. I didn't feel very funny.

"Have we broken your spirit? Taken the fight out of you?"

I stared at her. Anger flared through me like a wave of heat. "What do you want, Nikolaos?"

"Oh, that's much better." Her voice rose and fell, a little-girl giggle at the end of each word. I might never like children again.

"Jean-Claude should be growing weak inside his coffin. Starving, but instead he is strong and well fed. How can this be?"

I didn't have the faintest idea, so I kept quiet. Maybe it was rhetorical?

It wasn't. "Answer me, A-n-i-t-a." She stretched my name out, biting off each syllable.

"I don't know."

"Oh, but you do."

I didn't, but she wasn't going to believe me. "Why are you hurting Phillip?"

"He needed to be taught a lesson, after last night."

"Because he stood up to you?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "because he stood up to me." She scooted out of the chair and pattered towards me. She did a little turn so the white dress billowed around her. She freaking skipped over to me, smiling. "And because I was angry with you. I torture your lover, and maybe I won't torture you. And perhaps, this demonstration will give you fresh incentive to find the vampire murderer." Her pretty little face was turned up to me, pale eyes gleaming with humor. She was good.

I swallowed hard, and I asked the question I had to ask, "Why were you angry with me?"

She cocked her head to one side. If she hadn't been blood-spattered, it would have been cute. "Could it be that you do not know?" She turned back to Burchard. "What think you, my friend? Is she ignorant?"

He straightened his shoulders and said, "I believe that it is possible."

"Oh, Jean-Claude has been a very naughty boy. Giving the second mark to an unsuspecting mortal."

I stood very still. I was remembering blue, fiery eyes on the stairs, and Jean-Claude's voice in my head. All right, I had suspected it, but I still didn't understand what it meant. "What does the second mark mean?"

She licked her lips, soft like a kitten. "Shall we explain, Burchard? Shall we tell her what we know?"

"If she truly does not know, mistress, we must enlighten her," he said.

"Yes," she said and glided back to the chair. "Burchard, tell her how old you are."

"I am six hundred and three years of age."

I stared at his smooth face and shook my head. "But you're human, not a vampire."

"I have been given the fourth mark and will live as long as my mistress needs me."

"No, Jean-Claude wouldn't do that to me," I said.

Nikolaos made a small shrugging motion with her hands. "I had pressed him very hard. I knew of the first mark to heal you. I suppose he was desperate to save himself."

I remembered the echo of his voice in my head. "I'm sorry. I had no choice." Damn him, there were always choices. "He's been in my dreams every night. What does that mean?"

"He is communicating with you, animator. With the third mark will come more direct mind contact."

I shook my head. "No."

"No what, animator? No third mark, or no you don't believe us?" she asked.

"I don't want to be anyone's servant."

"Have you been eating more than usual?" she asked.

The question was so odd, I just stared for a minute, then I remembered. "Yes. Is that important?"

Nikolaos frowned. "He is siphoning energy from you, Anita. He is feeding through your body. He should be growing weak by now, but you will keep him strong."

"I didn't mean to."

"I believe you," she said. "Last night when I realized what he had done, I was beside myself with anger. So I took your lover."

"Please believe me, he is not my lover."

"Then why did he risk my anger to save you last night? Friendship? Decency? I think not."

All right, let her believe it. Just get us out alive, that was the goal. Nothing else mattered. "What can Phillip and I do to make amends?"

"Oh, so polite, I like that." She put a hand on Burchard's waist, a casual gesture like petting a dog. "Shall we show her what she has to look forward to?"

His whole body tensed as if an electric current had run through it. "If my mistress wishes."

"I do," she said.

Burchard knelt in front of her, face about chest level. Nikolaos looked over his head at me. "This," she said, "is the fourth mark." Her hands went to the small pearl buttons that decorated the front of the white dress. She spread the cloth wide, baring small breasts. They were a child's breasts, small and half-formed. She drew a fingernail beside her left breast. The skin opened like earth behind a plow, spilling blood in a red line down her chest and stomach.

I could not see Burchard's face as he leaned forward. His hands slid around her waist. His face buried between her breasts. She tensed, back arching. Soft, sucking sounds filled the room's stillness.

I looked away, staring at anything but them, as if I had found them having sex but couldn't leave. Valentine was staring at me. I stared back. He tipped an imaginary hat at me and flashed fangs. I ignored him.

Burchard was sitting beside the chair, half-leaning against it. His face was slack and flushed, his chest rising and falling in deep gasps. He wiped blood from his mouth with a shaking hand. Nikolaos sat very still, head back, eyes closed. Perhaps sex wasn't such a bad analogy after all.

Nikolaos spoke with her eyes closed, head thrown back, voice thick. "Your friend, Willie, is back in a coffin. He felt sorry for Phillip. We will have to cure him of such instincts."

She raised her head abruptly, eyes bright, almost glittering, as if they had a light all their own. "Can you see my scar today?"

I shook my head. She was the beautiful child, complete and whole. No imperfections. "You look perfect again, why?"

"Because I am expending energy to make it so. I am having to work at it." Her voice was low and warm, a building heat like thunderstorms in the distance.

The hair at the back of my neck crawled. Something bad was about to happen.

"Jean-Claude has his followers, Anita. If I kill him, they will make him a martyr. But if I prove him weak, powerless, they just fall away and follow me, or follow no one."

She stood, dress buttoned to her neck once more. Her cotton-white hair seemed to move as if a wind stirred it, but there was no wind. "I will destroy something Jean-Claude has given his protection to."

How fast could I get to the knife on my leg? And what good would it do me?

"I will prove to all that Jean-Claude can protect nothing. I am master of all."

Egocentric bitch. Winter grabbed my arm before I could do anything. Too busy watching the vampires to notice the humans.

"Go," she said. "Kill him."

Aubrey and Valentine stood away from the wall and bowed. Then they were gone, as if they had vanished. I turned to Nikolaos.

She smiled. "Yes, I clouded your mind, and you did not see them go."

"Where are they going?" My stomach was tight. I think I already knew the answer.

"Jean-Claude has given Phillip his protection; thus he must die."

"No."

Nikolaos smiled. "Oh, but yes."

A scream ripped through the hallway. A man's scream. Phillip's scream.

"No!" I half-fell to my knees; only Winter's hand kept me from falling to the floor. I pretended to faint, sagging in his grip. He released me. I grabbed the knife from its ankle sheath. Winter and I were close to the hallway, far away from Nikolaos and her human. Maybe far enough.

Winter was staring at her as if waiting for orders. I came up off the ground and drove the knife into his groin. The knife sank in, and blood poured out as I drew the blade free and raced for the hallway.

I was at the door when the first trickle of wind oozed down my back. I didn't look back. I opened the door.

Phillip sagged in the chains. Blood poured in a bright red flood down his chest. It splattered onto the floor, like rain. Torchlight glittered on the wet bone of his spine. Someone had ripped his throat out.

I staggered against the wall as if someone had hit me. I couldn't get enough air. Someone kept whispering, "Oh, God, oh, God," over and over, and it was me. I walked down the steps with my back pressed against the wall. I couldn't take my eyes from him. Couldn't look away. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't cry.

The torchlight reflected in his eyes, giving the illusion of movement. A scream built in my gut and spilled out my throat. "Phillip!"

Aubrey stepped between me and Phillip. He was covered in blood. "I look forward to visiting your lovely friend, Catherine."

I wanted to run at him, screaming. Instead, I leaned against the wall, knife held down at my side, unnoticed. The goal was no longer to get out alive. The goal was to kill Aubrey. "You son of a bitch, you fucking son of a bitch." My voice sounded utterly calm, no emotion whatsoever. I wasn't afraid. I didn't feel anything.

Aubrey's face frowned at me through a mask of Phillip's blood. "Do not say such things to me."

"You ugly, stinking, mother-fucking bastard."

He glided to me, just like I wanted him to. He put a hand on my shoulder. I screamed in his face as loud as I could. He hesitated for just a heartbeat. I shoved the knife blade between his ribs. It was sharp and thin, and I shoved it hilt deep. His body stiffened, leaning into me. Eyes wide and surprised. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. He toppled to the floor, fingers grabbing at air.

Valentine was instantly there, kneeling by the body. "What have you done?" He couldn't see the knife. It was shielded by Aubrey's body.

"I killed him, you son of a bitch, just like I'm going to kill you."

Valentine jerked to his feet, started to say something, and all hell broke loose. The cell door crashed inward and smashed to bits against the far wall. A tornado wind blasted into the room.

Valentine dropped to his knees, head touching the floor. He was bowing. I flattened myself against the wall. The wind clawed at my face, tangling my hair in front of my eyes.

The noise grew less, and I squinted up at the door. Nikolaos floated just above the top step. Her hair crackled around her head, like spider silk. Her skin had shrunken against her bones, until she was skeletal. Her eyes glowed, pale blue fire. She started floating down the steps, hands outstretched.

I could see her veins like blue lights under her skin. I ran. Ran for the far wall, and the tunnel the ratmen had used.

The wind threw me against the wall, and I scrambled on hands and feet towards the tunnel. The hole was large, and black, cool air brushed my face, and something grabbed my ankle.

I screamed. The thing that was Nikolaos dragged me back. It slammed me against the wall and pinned my wrists in one clawed hand. The body leaned into my legs, bone under cloth.

The lips had receded, exposing the fangs and teeth. The skeletal head hissed, "You will learn obedience, to me!" It screamed in my face, and I screamed back. Wordlessly, an animal screaming in a trap.

My heart was thudding in my throat. I couldn't breathe. "Nooo!"

The thing shrieked, "Look at me!"

And I did. I fell into the blue fire that was her eyes. The fire burrowed into my brain, pain. Her thoughts cut me up like knives, slicing away parts of me. Her rage scalded and burned until I thought the skin was peeling away from my face. Claws scrapped the inside of my skull, grinding bone into dust.

When I could see again, I was huddled by the wall, and she was standing over me, not touching, not needing to. I was shaking, shaking so badly my teeth chattered. I was cold, so cold.

"Eventually, animator, you will call me master, and you will mean it." She was suddenly kneeling over me. She pressed her slender body over mine, hands pinning my shoulders to the floor. I couldn't move.

The beautiful little girl leaned her face against my cheek and whispered, "I am going to sink fangs into your neck, and there is nothing you can do to stop me."

Her delicate shell of an ear was brushing my lips. I sank teeth into it until I tasted blood. She shrieked and jerked away, blood running down the side of her neck.

Bright razor claws tore through my brain. Her pain, her rage, turning my brain into silly putty. I think I was screaming again, but I couldn't hear it. After a while I couldn't hear anything. Darkness came. It swallowed up Nikolaos and left me alone, floating in the dark.

Chapter 39

I woke up, which was a pleasant surprise all on its own. I was blinking up into an electric light set in a ceiling. I was alive, and I wasn't in the dungeon. Good things to know.

Why should it surprise me that I was alive? My fingers caressed the rough, knobby fabric of the couch I was lying on. There was a picture hanging over the couch. A river scene with flatboats, mules, people. Someone came to stand over me, long yellow hair, square-jawed, handsome face. Not as inhumanly

beautiful as he had been to me before, but still handsome. I guess you had to be handsome to be a stripper.

My voice came out in a harsh croak. "Robert."

He knelt beside me. "I was afraid you wouldn't wake up before dawn. Are you hurt?"

"Where . . ." I cleared my throat and that helped a little. "Where am I?"

"Jean-Claude's office at Guilty Pleasures."

"How did I get here?"

"Nikolaos brought you. She said, 'Here's your master's whore.' " I watched his throat work as he swallowed. It reminded me of something, but I couldn't think what.

"You know what Jean-Claude has done?" I asked.

Robert nodded. "My master has marked you twice. When I speak to you, I am speaking to him."

Did he mean that figuratively or literally? I really didn't want to know.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

There was something in the way he asked it that meant I shouldn't feel all right. My throat hurt. I raised a hand and touched it. Dried blood. On my neck.

I closed my eyes, but that didn't help. A small sound escaped my throat, very like a whimper. Phillip's image was burned on my mind. The blood pouring from his throat, torn pink meat. I shook my head and tried to breathe deep and slow. It was no good. "Bathroom," I said.

Robert showed me where it was. I went inside, knelt on the cool floor, and threw up in the toilet, until I was empty and nothing but bile came up. Then I walked to the sink and splashed cold water in my mouth and on my face. I stared at myself in the mirror above the sink. My eyes looked black, not brown, my skin sickly. I looked like shit and felt worse.

And there on the right side of my neck was the real thing. Not Phillip's healing bite marks, but fang marks. Tiny, diminutive, fang marks. Nikolaos had . . . contaminated me. To prove she could harm Jean-Claude's human servant. She had proved how tough she was, oh, yeah. Real tough.

Phillip was dead. Dead. Try the word over in your mind, but could I say it out loud? I decided to try. "Phillip is dead," I told my reflection.

I crumbled the brown paper towel and stuffed it in the metal trash can. It wasn't enough. I screamed, "Ahhh!" I kicked the trash can, over and over until it toppled to the floor, spilling its contents.

Robert came through the door. "Are you all right?"

"Does it look like I'm all right?" I yelled.

He hesitated in the doorway. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"You couldn't even keep them from taking Phillip!"

He winced as if I had hit him. "I did my best."

"Well, it wasn't good enough, was it?" I was still screaming like a mad person. I sank to my knees, and all that rage choked up my throat and spilled out my eyes. "Get out!"

He hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Get out of here!"

He closed the door behind him. And I sat in the floor and rocked and cried and screamed. When my heart felt as empty as my stomach, I felt leaden, used up.

Nikolaos had killed Phillip and bitten me to prove how powerful she was. I bet she thought I'd be scared absolutely shitless of her. She was right on that. But I spend most of my waking hours confronting and destroying things that I fear. A thousand-year-old master vampire was a tall order, but a girl's got to have a goal.

Chapter 40

The club was quiet and dark. There was no one there but me. It must have been after dawn. The club was hushed and full of that waiting silence that all buildings get after the people go home. As if once we leave, the building has a life of its own, if only we would leave it in peace. I shook my head and tried to concentrate. To feel something. All I wanted was to go home and try to sleep. And pray I didn't dream.

There was a yellow Post-it note on the door. It read, "Your weapons are behind the bar. The master brought those, too. Robert."

I put both guns in place and the knives. The one I had used on Winter and Aubrey was missing. Was Winter dead? Maybe. Was Aubrey dead? Hopefully. Usually it took a master vampire to survive a blow to the heart, but I'd never tried it on a five-hundred-year-old walking corpse. If they took the knife out, he might be tough enough to survive it. I had to call Catherine. And tell her what? Get out of town, a vampire is after you. Didn't sound like something she'd buy. Shit.

I walked out into the soft white light of dawn. The street was empty and awash in that gentle morning air. The heat hadn't had time to creep in. It was almost cool. Where was my car? I heard footsteps a second before the voice said, "Don't move. I have a gun pointed at your back."

I clasped my hands atop my head without being asked. "Good morning, Edward," I said.

"Good morning, Anita," he said. "Stand very still, please." He stood just behind me, gun pressing against my spine. He frisked me completely, top to bottom. Nothing haphazard about Edward; that's one of the reasons he's still alive. He stepped back from me, and said, "You may turn around now."

He had my Firestar tucked into his belt, the Browning loose in his left hand. I don't know what he did with the knives.

He smiled, boyish and charming, gun very steadily pointed at my chest. "No more hiding. Where is this Nikolaos?" he asked.

I took a deep breath and let it out. I thought about accusing him of being the vampire murderer, but now didn't seem to be a good time. Maybe later, when he wasn't pointing a gun at me. "May I lower my arms?" I asked.

He gave a slight nod.

I lowered my arms slowly. "I want one thing clear between us, Edward. I'll give you the information, but not because I'm afraid of you. I want her dead. And I want a piece of it."

His smile widened, eyes glittering with pleasure. "What happened last night?"

I glanced down at the sidewalk, then up. I stared into his blue eyes and said, "She had Phillip killed."

He was watching my face very closely. "Go on."

"She bit me. I think she plans on making me a personal servant."

He put his gun back in his shoulder holster and came to stand next to me. He turned my head to one side to see the bite mark better. "You need to clean this bite. It's going to hurt like hell."

"I know. Will you help me?"

"Sure." His smile softened. "Here I was going to cause you pain to get information. Now you ask me to help you pour acid on a wound."

"Holy Water," I said.

"It's going to feel the same," he said.

Unfortunately, he was right.

Chapter 41

I sat with my back pressed against the cool porcelain of the bathtub. The front and side of my shirt was clinging to me, water-soaked. Edward knelt beside me, a half-empty bottle of Holy Water in one hand. We were on the third bottle. I had thrown up only once. Bully for me.

We had started with me sitting on the edge of the sink. I had not stayed there long. I had jumped, yelled, and whimpered. I had also called Edward a son of a bitch. He didn't hold it against me.

"How do you feel?" he asked. His face was utterly blank. I couldn't tell if he was enjoying himself or hating it.

I glared up at him. "Like someone's been shoving a red-hot knife against my throat."

"I mean, do you want to stop and rest awhile?"

I took a deep breath. "No. I want it clean, Edward. All the way."

He shook his head, almost smiled. "It is customary to do this over a matter of days, you know."

"Yes," I said.

"But you want it all in one marathon session?" His gaze was very steady, as if the question were more important than it seemed.

I looked away from the intensity of his eyes. I didn't want to be stared at right now. "I don't have a few days. I need this wound clean before nightfall."

"Because Nikolaos will come visit you again," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"And unless this first wound is purified, she'll have a hold on you."

I took a deep breath and it trembled. "Yes."

"Even if we clean the bite, she may still be able to call you. If she's as powerful as you say she is."

"She's that powerful and more." I rubbed my hands along my jeans. "You think Nikolaos can turn me against you, even if we clean the bite?" I looked up at him then, hoping to be able to read his face.

He stared down at me. "We vampire slayers take our chances."

"That wasn't a no," I said.

He gave a flash of smile. "It wasn't a yes, either."

Oh, goody, Edward didn't know either. "Pour some more on, before I lose my nerve."

He did smile then, eyes gleaming. "You will never lose your nerve. Your life, probably, but never your nerve."

It was a compliment and meant as one. "Thank you."

He put a hand on my shoulder, and I turned my face away. My heart was thudding in my throat until all I could hear was my blood pulsing inside my head. I wanted to run, to lash out, to scream, but I had to sit there and let him hurt me. I hate that. It had always taken at least two people to give me injections when I was a child. One person to man the needle and one to hold me down.

Now I held myself down. If Nikolaos bit me twice, I would probably do anything she wanted me to. Even kill. I had seen it happen before, and that vampire had been child's play compared to the master.

The water trickled down my skin and hit the bite mark like molten gold, scalding through my body. It was eating through my skin and bone. Destroying me. Killing me.

I shrieked. I couldn't hold it. Too much pain. Couldn't run away. Had to scream.

I was lying on the floor, my cheek pressed against the coolness of it, breathing in short, hungry gasps.

"Slow your breathing, Anita. You're hyperventilating. Breathe, slow and easy, or you're going to pass out."

I opened my mouth and took in a deep breath; it wheezed and screamed down my throat. I was choking on air. I coughed and fought to breathe. I was light-headed and a little sick by the time I could take a deep breath, but I hadn't passed out. A zillion brownie points for me.

Edward almost had to lie on the floor to put his face near mine. "Can you hear me?"

I managed, "Yes."

"Good. I want to try to put the cross against the bite. Do you agree or do you think it's too soon?"

If we hadn't cleansed the wound with enough Holy Water, the cross would burn me, and I'd have a fresh scar. I had been brave above and beyond the call of duty. I didn't want to play anymore. I opened my mouth to say, "No," but it wasn't what came out. "Do it," I said. Shit. I was going to be brave.

He brushed my hair away from my neck. I lay on the floor and pressed my hands into fists, trying to prepare myself. There is no real way to prepare yourself for somebody shoving a branding iron into your neck.

The chain rustled and slithered through Edward's hands. "Are you ready?" No. "Just do it, dammit."

He did. The cross pressed against my skin, cool metal, no burning, no smoke, no seared flesh, no pain. I was pure, or as pure as I started out.

He dangled the crucifix in front of my face. I grabbed it with one hand and squeezed until my hand shook. It didn't take long. Tears seeped from the corners of my eyes. I wasn't crying, not really. I was exhausted.

"Can you sit up?" he asked.

I nodded and forced myself to sit, leaning against the bathtub.

"Can you stand up?" he asked.

I thought about it, and decided no, I didn't think I could. My whole body was weak, shaky, nauseous. "Not without help."

Edward knelt beside me, put an arm behind my shoulders and one under my knees, and lifted me in his arms. He stood in one smooth motion, no strain.

"Put me down," I said.

He looked at me. "What?"

"I am not a child. I don't want to be carried."

He drew a loud breath, then said, "All right." He lowered me to my feet and let go. I staggered against the wall and slid to the floor. The tears were back, dammit. I sat in the floor, crying, too weak to walk from my bathroom to my bed. God!

Edward just stood there, looking down at me, face neutral and unreadable as a cat.

My voice came out almost normal, no hint of crying. "I hate being helpless. I hate it!"

"You are one of the least helpless people I know," Edward said. He knelt beside me again, draped my right arm over his shoulders, grabbed my right wrist with his hand. His other arm encircled my waist. The height difference made it a little awkward, but he managed to give me the illusion that I walked to the bed.

The stuffed penguins sat against the wall. Edward hadn't said anything about them. If he wouldn't mention it, I wouldn't. Who knows, maybe Death slept with a teddy bear? Naw.

The heavy drapes were still closed, leaving the room in permanent twilight. "Rest. I'll stand guard and see that none of the bogeys sneak up on you."

I believed him.

Edward brought the white chair from the living room and sat it against the bedroom wall, near the door. He slipped his shoulder holster back on, gun ready at hand. He had brought a gym bag up from the car with us. He unzipped it and drew out what looked like a miniature machine gun. I didn't know much about machine guns, and all I could think of was an Uzi.

"What kind of gun is that?" I asked.

"A Mini-Uzi."

What do you know? I had been right. He popped the clip and showed me how to load it, where the safety was, all the finer points, like it was a new car. He sat down in the chair with the machine gun on his knees.

My eyes kept fluttering shut, but I said, "Don't shoot any of my neighbors, okay?"

I think he smiled. "I'll try not to."

I nodded. "Are you the vampire murderer?"

He smiled then, bright, charming. "Go to sleep, Anita."

I was on the edge of sleep when his voice called me back, soft and faraway. "Where is Nikolaos's daytime retreat?"

I opened my eyes and tried to focus on him. He was still sitting in the chair, motionless. "I'm tired, Edward, not stupid." His laughter bubbled up around me as I fell asleep.

Chapter 42

Jean-Claude sat in the carved throne. He smiled at me and extended one long-fingered hand. "Come," he said.

I was wearing a long, white dress that had lace of its own. I had never dreamed of myself in anything like it. I glanced up at Jean-Claude. It was his choice, not mine. Fear tightened my throat. "It's my dream," I said.

He held out both hands and said, "Come."

And I went to him. The dress whispered and scraped on the stones, a continuous rustling noise. It grated on my nerves. I was suddenly standing in front of him. I raised my hands towards his slowly. I shouldn't do it. Bad idea, but I couldn't seem to stop myself.

His hands wrapped around mine, and I knelt before him. He drew my hands to the lace that spilled down the front of his shirt, forced my fingers to take two handfuls of it.

He cupped his hands over mine, holding them tight; then he ripped his shirt open using my hands.

His chest was smooth and pale with black hair curling in a line down the middle. The hair thickened over the flatness of his stomach, incredibly black

against the white of his belly. The burn scar was firm and shiny and out of place against the perfection of his body.

He gripped my chin in one hand, raising my face towards him. His other hand touched his chest, just below his right nipple. He drew blood on his pale skin. It trickled down his chest in a bright, crimson line.

I tried to pull away, but his fingers dug into my jaw like a vise. I shouted, "No!"

I hit at him with my left hand. He caught my wrist and held it. I used my right hand to grip the floor and shoved with my knees. He held me at jaw and wrist like a butterfly on a pin. You can move, but you can't get away. I dropped to a sitting position, forcing him to strangle me or lower me to the ground. He lowered me.

I kicked out with everything I had. Both feet connected with his knee. Vampires can feel pain. He dropped my jaw so suddenly, I fell backwards. He grabbed both my wrists and jerked me to my knees, body pinned on either side by his legs. He sat in the chair, knees controlling my lower body, hands like chains on my wrists.

A high, tinkling laughter filled the room. Nikolaos stood to one side, watching us. Her laughter echoed through the room, growing louder and louder, like music gone mad.

Jean-Claude transferred both my wrists to one hand, and I could not stop him. His free hand stroked my cheek, smoothing down the line of my neck. His fingers tightened at the base of my skull and began to push.

"Jean-Claude, please, don't do this!"

He pressed my face closer and closer to the wound on his chest. I struggled, but his fingers were welded to my skull, a part of me. "NO!"

Nikolaos's laughter changed to words. "Scratch the surface, and we are all much alike, animator."

I screamed, "Jean-Claude!"

His voice came like velvet, warm and dark, sliding through my mind. "Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh, two minds with but one body, two souls wedded as one." For one bright, shining moment, I saw it, felt it. Eternity with Jean-Claude. His touch . . . forever. His lips. His blood.

I blinked and found my lips almost touching the wound in his chest. I could have reached out and licked it. "Jean-Claude, no! Jean-Claude!" I screamed it. "God help me!" I screamed that, too.

Darkness and someone gripping my shoulder. I didn't even think about it. Instinct took over. The gun from the headboard was in my hand and turning to point.

A hand trapped my arm under the pillow, pointing the gun at the wall, a body pressing against mine. "Anita, Anita, it's Edward. Look at me!"

I blinked up at Edward, who was pinning my arms. His breathing was coming a little fast.

I stared at the gun in my hand and back at Edward. He was still holding my arms. I guess I didn't blame him.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Say something, Anita."

"I had a nightmare," I said.

He shook his head. "No shit." He released me slowly.

I slid the gun back in its holster.

"Who's Jean-Claude?" he asked.

"Why?"

"You were calling his name."

I brushed a hand over my forehead, and it came away slick with sweat. The clothes I'd slept in and the sheet were drenched with it. These nightmares were beginning to get on my nerves.

"What time is it?" The room looked too dark, as if the sun had gone down. My stomach tightened. If it was near dark, Catherine wouldn't have a chance.

"Don't panic; it's just clouds. You've got about four hours until dusk."

I took a deep breath and staggered into the bathroom. I splashed cold water on my face and neck. I looked ghost-pale in the mirror. Had the dream been Jean-Claude's doing or Nikolaos's? If it had been Nikolaos, did she already control me? No answers. No answers to anything.

Edward was sitting in the white chair when I came back out. He watched me like I was an interesting species of insect that he had never seen before.

I ignored him and called Catherine's office. "Hi, Betty, this is Anita Blake. Is Catherine in?"

"Hello, Ms. Blake. I thought you knew that Ms. Maison is going to be out of town from the thirteenth until the twentieth on a deposition."

Catherine had told me, but I forgot. I finally lucked out. It was about time. "I forgot, Betty. Thanks a lot. Thanks more than you'll ever know."

"Glad to be of help. Ms. Maison has scheduled the first fitting for the bridesmaid dresses on the twenty-third." She said it like it should make me feel better. It didn't.

"I won't forget. Bye."

"Have a nice day."

I hung up and phoned Irving Griswold. He was a reporter for the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*. He was also a werewolf. Irving the werewolf. It didn't quite work, but then what did? Charles the werewolf, naw. Justin, Oliver, Wilbur, Brent? Nope.

Irving answered on the third ring.

"It's Anita Blake."

"Well, hi, what's up?" He sounded suspicious, as if I never called him unless I wanted something.

"Do you know any wererats?"

He was quiet for almost too long; then, "Why do you want to know?"

"I can't tell you."

"You mean you want my help, but I don't get a story out of it."

I sighed. "That's about it."

"Then why should I help you?"

"Don't give me a hard time, Irving. I've given you plenty of exclusives. My information is what got you your first front page byline. So don't give me grief."

"A little grouchy today, aren't you?"

"Do you know a wererat or don't you?"

"I do."

"I need to get a message to the Rat King."

He gave a low whistle that was piercing over the phone. "You don't ask for much, do you? I might be able to get you a meeting with the wererat I know, but not their king."

"Give the Rat King this message; got a pencil?"

"Always," he said.

"The vampires didn't get me, and I didn't do what they wanted."

Irving read it back to me. When I confirmed it, he said, "You're involved with vampires and wererats, and I don't get an exclusive."

"No one's going to get this one, Irving. It's going to be too messy for that."

He was silent a moment. "Okay. I'll try to set up a meeting. I should know sometime tonight."

"Thanks, Irving."

"You be careful, Blake. I'd hate to lose my best source of front page bylines."

"Me, too," I said.

I had no sooner hung up the phone when it rang again. I picked it up without thinking. A phone rings, you pick it up, years of training. I haven't had my answering machine long enough to shake it completely.

"Anita, this is Bert."

"Hi, Bert." I sighed, quietly.

"I know you are working on the vampire case, but I have something you might be interested in."

"Bert, I am way over my head already. Anything else and I may never see daylight." You'd think Bert would ask if I was all right. How I was doing. But no, not my boss.

"Thomas Jensen called today."

My spine straightened. "Jensen called?"

"That's right."

"He's going to let us do it?"

"Not us, you. He specifically asked for you. I tried to get him to take someone else, but he wouldn't do it. And it has to be tonight. He's afraid he'll chicken out."

"Damn," I said softly.

"Do I call him back and cancel, or can you give me a time to have him meet you?"

Why did everything have to come at once? One of life's rhetorical questions. "Have him meet me at full dark tonight."

"That's my girl. I knew you wouldn't let me down."

"I'm not your girl, Bert. How much is he paying you?"

"Thirty thousand dollars. The five-thousand-dollar down payment has already arrived by special messenger."

"You are an evil man, Bert."

"Yes," he said, "and it pays very well, thank you." He hung up without saying good-bye. Mr. Charm.

Edward was staring at me. "Did you just take a job raising the dead, for tonight?"

"Laying the dead to rest actually, but yes."

"Does raising the dead take it out of you?"

"It?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Energy, stamina, strength."

"Sometimes."

"How about this job? Is it an energy drain?"

I smiled. "Yes."

He shook his head. "You can't afford to be used up, Anita."

"I won't be used up," I said. I took a deep breath and tried to think how to explain things to Edward. "Thomas Jensen lost his daughter twenty years ago. Seven years ago he had her raised as a zombie."

"So?"

"She committed suicide. No one knew why at the time. It was later learned that Mr. Jensen had sexually abused his daughter and that was why she had killed herself."

"And he raised her from the dead." Edward grimaced. "You don't mean. . ."

I waved my hands as if I could erase the sudden vivid image. "No, no, not that. He felt remorseful and raised her to say he was sorry."

"And?"

"She wouldn't forgive him."

He shook his head. "I don't understand."

"He raised her to make amends, but she had died hating him, fearing him. The zombie wouldn't forgive him, so he wouldn't put her back. As her mind deteriorated and her body, too, he kept her with him as a sort of punishment."

"Jesus."

"Yeah," I said. I walked to the closet and got out my gym bag. Edward carried guns in his; I carried my animator paraphernalia in it. Sometimes, I carried my vampire-slaying kit in it. The matchbook Zachary gave me was in the bottom of the bag. I stuffed it in my pants pocket. I don't think Edward saw me. He does catch on if a clue sits up and barks. "Jensen finally agreed to put her in the ground if I'll do it. I can't say no. He's sort of a legend among animators. The closest we come to a ghost story."

"Why tonight? If it's waited seven years, why not a few more nights?"

I kept putting things in the gym bag. "He insisted. He's afraid he'll lose his nerve if he has to wait. Besides, I may not be alive a few nights from now. He might not let anybody else do it."

"That is not your problem. You didn't raise his zombie."

"No, but I am an animator first. Vampire slaying is . . . a sideline. I am an animator. It isn't just a job."

He was still staring at me. "I don't understand why, but I understand you have to do it."

"Thanks."

He smiled. "Your show. Mind if I come along to make sure no one offs you while you're gone?"

I glanced at him. "Ever see a zombie raising?"

"No."

"You're not squeamish, are you?" I smiled when I said it.

He stared at me, blue eyes gone suddenly cold. His whole face became different. There was nothing there, no expression, except that awful coldness. Emptiness. I'd had a leopard look at me like that once, through the cage bars, no emotion I understood, thoughts so alien it might as well have inhabited a different planet. Something that could kill me, skillfully, efficiently, because that was what it was meant to do, if it was hungry, or if I annoyed it.

I didn't faint from fear or run screaming from the room, but it was something of an effort. "You've proved your point, Edward. Can the perfect-killer routine, and let's go."

His eyes didn't revert to normal instantly but had to warm up, like dawn easing through the sky.

I hoped Edward never turned that look on me for real. If he did, one of us would die. Odds are it would be me.

Chapter 43

The night was almost perfectly black. Thick clouds hid the sky. A wind rushed along the ground and smelled of rain.

Iris Jensen's grave marker was smooth, white marble. It was a nearly life-size angel, wings outspread, arms open, welcoming. You could still read the lettering by flashlight: "Beloved daughter. Sadly missed." The same man who had had the angel carved, who sadly missed her, had been molesting her. She had killed herself to escape him, and he had brought her back. That was why I was out here in the dark, waiting for the Jensens, not him, but her. Even though I knew her mind was gone by now, I wanted Iris Jensen in the ground and at peace.

I couldn't explain that to Edward, so I hadn't tried. A huge oak stood sentinel over the empty grave. The wind rushed through the leaves and sent them skittering and whispering overhead. It sounded too dry, like autumn leaves instead of summer. The air felt cool and damp, rain almost upon us. It wasn't unbearably hot for once.

I had picked up a pair of chickens. They clucked softly from inside their crate where they sat near the grave. Edward leaned against my car, ankles crossed, arms loose at his sides. The gym bag was open by me on the ground. The machete I used gleamed from inside.

"Where is he?" Edward asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know." It had been almost an hour since full dark. The cemetery grounds were mostly bare; only a few trees dotted the soft roll of hills. We should have been seeing car lights on the gravel road. Where was Jensen? Had he chickened out?

Edward stepped away from the car and walked to stand beside me. "I don't like it, Anita."

I wasn't too thrilled either, but. . . "We'll give it another fifteen minutes. If he's not here by then, we'll leave."

Edward glanced around the open ground. "Not much cover around here."

"I don't think we have to worry about snipers."

"You said someone shot at you, right?"

I nodded. He had a point. Goosebumps marched up my arms. The wind blew a hole in the clouds and moonlight streamed down. Off in the distance a small building gleamed silver-grey in the light.

"What's that?" Edward asked.

"The maintenance shed," I said. "You think the grass cuts itself?"

"Never thought about it," he said.

The clouds rolled in again and plunged the cemetery into blackness. Everything became soft shapes; the white marble seemed to glow with its own light.

There was the sound of scrabbling claws on metal. I whirled. A ghoul sat on top of my car. It was naked and looked as if a human being had been stripped and dipped into silver-grey paint, almost metallic. But the teeth and claws on its hands and feet were long and black, curved talons. The eyes glowed crimson.

Edward moved up beside me, gun in his hand.

I had my gun out, too. Practice, practice, and you don't have to think about it.

"What's it doing up there?" he asked.

"Don't know." I waved my free hand at it and said, "Scat!"

It crouched, staring at me. Ghouls are cowards; they don't attack healthy human beings. I took two steps, waving my gun at it. "Go away, shoo!" Any show of force sends them scuttling away. This one just sat there. I backed away.

"Edward," I said, softly.

"Yes."

"I didn't sense any ghouls in this cemetery."

"So? You missed one."

"There's no such thing as just one ghoul. They travel in packs. And you don't miss them. They leave a sort of psychic stench behind. Evil."

"Anita." His voice was soft, normal, but not normal. I glanced where he was looking and saw two more ghouls creeping up behind us.

We stood almost back to back, guns pointing out. "I saw a ghoul attack earlier this week. Healthy man killed, a cemetery where there were no ghouls."

"Sounds familiar," he said.

"Yeah. Bullets won't kill them."

"I know. What are they waiting for?" he asked.

"Courage, I think."

"They're waiting for me," a voice said. Zachary stepped around the trunk of the tree. He was smiling.

I think my mouth dropped to the ground. Maybe that was what he was smiling at. I knew then. He wasn't killing human beings to feed his gris-gris. He was killing vampires. Theresa had tormented him, so she had been the next victim. There were still some questions though, big ones.

Edward glanced at me, then back at Zachary. "Who is this?" he asked.

"The vampire murderer, I presume," I said.

Zachary gave a little bow. A ghoul leaned against his leg, and he stroked its nearly bald head. "When did you guess?"

"Just now. I'm a little slow this year."

He frowned then. "I thought you'd figure it out eventually."

"That's why you destroyed the zombie witness's mind. To save yourself."

"It was fortunate that Nikolaos left me in charge of questioning the man." He smiled when he said it.

"I'll bet," I said. "How did you get the two-biter to shoot me at the church?"

"That was easy. I told him the orders came from Nikolaos."

Of course. "How are you getting the ghouls out of their cemetery? How come they obey your orders?"

"You know the theory that if you bury an animator in a cemetery, you get ghouls."

"Yeah."

"When I came out of the grave, they came with me, and they were mine. Mine."

I glanced at the creatures and found that there were more of them. At least twenty, a big pack. "So you're saying that's where ghouls come from." I shook my head. "There aren't enough animators in the world to account for all the ghouls."

"I've been thinking about that," he said. "I think that the more zombies you raise in a cemetery, the greater your chances for ghouls."

"You mean like a cumulative effect?"

"Exactly. I've been wanting to talk this over with another animator, but you see the problem."

"Yes," I said, "I do. Can't talk shop without admitting what you are and what you've done."

Edward fired without warning. The bullet took Zachary in the chest and twisted him around. He lay face down, the ghouls frozen; then Zachary raised

himself up on his elbows. He stood with a little help from an anxious ghoul.
"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but bullets will never hurt me."

"Great, a comedian," I said.

Edward fired again, but Zachary darted behind the tree trunk.

He called, hidden from sight. "Now, now, no hitting the head. I'm not sure what would happen if you put a bullet in my brain."

"Let's find out," Edward said.

"Good-bye, Anita. I won't stay around to watch." He walked away with a troop of ghouls surrounding him. He was crouched in the middle of them, hiding I supposed from a bullet in the brain, but for a minute I couldn't pick him out.

Two more ghouls appeared around the car, crouched low on the gravel drive. One was female with the tatters of a dress still clinging to her.

"Let's give them something to be afraid of," Edward said. I felt him move, and his gun fired twice. A high-pitched squealing filled the night. The ghoul on my car leaped to the ground and hid. But there were more of them moving in from all sides. At least fifteen of them had been left behind for us to play with.

I fired and hit one of them. It fell to its side and rolled in the gravel, making that same high-pitched noise, like a wounded rabbit. Piteous and animal.

"Is there anyplace we can run to?" Edward asked.

"The maintenance shed," I said.

"Is it wood?"

"Yes."

"It won't stop them."

"No," I said, "but it will get us out of the open."

"Okay, any advice before we start to move?"

"Don't run until we are very close to the shed. If you run, they'll chase you. They'll think you're scared."

"Anything else?" he asked.

"You don't smoke, do you?"

"No, why?"

"They're afraid of fire."

"Great; we're going to be eaten alive because neither one of us smokes."

I almost laughed. He sounded so thoroughly disgusted, but a ghoul was crouching to leap at me, and I had to shoot it between the eyes. No time for laughter.

"Let's go, slow and easy," I said.

"I wish the machine gun wasn't in the car."

"Me, too."

Edward fired three shots, and the night filled with squeals and animal screams. We started walking towards the distant shed. I'd say maybe a quarter of a mile away. It was going to be a long walk.

A ghoul charged us. I dropped it, and it spilled to the grass, but it was like shooting targets, no blood, just empty holes. It hurt, but not enough. Not nearly enough.

I was walking nearly backwards, one hand back feeling Edward's forward movement. There were too many of them. We were not going to make it to the shed. No way. One of the chickens made a soft, questioning cluck. I had an idea.

I shot one of the chickens. It flopped, and the other bird panicked, beating its wings against the wooden crate. The ghouls froze, then one put its face into the air and sniffed.

Fresh blood, boys, come and get it. Fresh meat. Two ghouls were suddenly racing for the chickens. The rest followed, scrambling over each other to crack the wood and get to the juicy morsels inside.

"Keep walking, Edward, don't run, but walk a little faster. The chickens won't hold them long."

We walked a little faster. The sounds of scrambling claws, cracking bone, the splatter of blood, the squabbling howls of the ghouls - it was an unwelcome preview.

Halfway to the shed, a howl went up through the night, long and hostile. No dog ever sounded like that. I glanced back, and the ghouls were rushing over the ground on all fours.

"Run!" I said.

We ran.

We crashed against the shed door and found the damn thing padlocked. Edward shot the lock off; no time to pick it. The ghouls were close, howling as they came.

We scrambled inside, closing the door, for what good it would do us. There was one small window high up near the ceiling; moonlight suddenly spilled through it. There was a herd of lawnmowers against one wall, some of them hanging from hooks. Gardening shears, hedge trimmers, trowels, a curl of garden hose. The whole shed smelled of gasoline and oily rags.

Edward said, "There's nothing to put against the door, Anita."

He was right. We'd blown the lock off. Where was a heavy object when you needed it? "Roll a lawnmower against it."

"That won't hold them long."

"It's better than nothing," I said. He didn't move, so I rolled a lawnmower against the door.

"I won't die, eaten alive," he said. He put a fresh clip in his gun. "I'll do you first if you want, or you can do it yourself."

I remembered then that I had shoved the matchbook Zachary had given me in my pocket. Matches, we had matches!

"Anita, they're almost here. Do you want to do it yourself?"

I pulled the matchbook out of my pocket. Thank you, God. "Save your bullets, Edward." I lifted a can of gasoline in one hand.

"What are you planning?" he asked.

The howls were crashing around us; they were almost here.

"I'm going to set the shed on fire." I splashed gasoline on the door. The smell was sharp and tugged at the back of my throat.

"With us inside?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'd rather shoot myself, if it's all the same to you."

"I don't plan to die tonight, Edward."

A claw smashed through the door, talons raking the wood, tearing it apart. I lit a match and threw it on the gasoline-soaked door. It went up with a blue-white whoosh of flame. The ghoul screamed, covered in fire, stumbling back from the ruined door.

The stench of burning flesh mingled with gasoline. Burnt hair. I coughed, putting a hand over my mouth. The fire was eating up the wood of the shed, spreading to the roof. We didn't need more gasoline; the damn thing was a fire trap. With us inside. I hadn't thought it would spread this fast.

Edward was standing near the back wall, hand over his mouth. His voice came muffled. "You did have a plan to get us out, right?"

A hand crashed through the wood, clawing at him. He backed away from it. The ghoul began to tear through the wood, leering at us. Edward shot it between the eyes, and it disappeared from sight.

I grabbed a rake from the far wall. Cinders were beginning to float down on us. If the smoke didn't get us first, the shed was going to collapse on top of us. "Take off your shirt," I said.

He didn't even ask why. Practical to the end. He stripped the shoulder rig off and pulled his shirt over his head, tossed it to me, and slipped the gun over his bare chest.

I wrapped the shirt over the tines of the rake and soaked it with gasoline. I set it on fire from the walls; no need for matches. The front of the shed was raining fire on us. Tiny burning stings like wasps on my skin.

Edward had caught on. He found an axe and started chopping at the hole the ghoul had made. I carried the improvised torch and a can of gasoline in my hands. The thought occurred to me that the heat was going to set the gasoline off. We weren't going to suffocate from smoke; we were going to blow up.

"Hurry!" I said.

Edward squeezed through the opening, and I followed, nearly burning him with the torch. There wasn't a ghoul for a hundred yards. They were smarter than they looked. We ran, and the explosion slammed into my back like a huge wind. I tumbled over into the grass, all the air knocked out of me. Bits of burning wood clattered to the ground on either side of me. I covered my head and prayed. My luck, I'd get caught by a flying nail.

Silence, or no more explosions. I raised my head cautiously. The shed was gone, nothing left. Bits of wood burned in the grass around me. Edward was lying on the ground, nearly touching distance from me. He stared at me. Did my face look as surprised as his did? Probably.

Our improvised torch was slowly setting the grass on fire. He knelt and raised it up.

I found the gasoline can unharmed and got to my feet. Edward followed, carrying the torch. The ghouls seemed to have fled, smart ghouls, but just in case . . . We didn't even have to discuss it. Paranoia, we had that in common.

We walked towards the car. The adrenaline was gone, and I was tireder than before. A person only has so much adrenaline; then you start running on numb.

The chicken crate was history; nameless bits and pieces were scattered around the grave. I didn't look any closer. I stopped to pick up my gym bag. It was untouched, just lying there. Edward moved ahead of me and tossed the torch on the gravel driveway. The wind rustled through the trees; then Edward yelled, "Anita!"

I rolled. Edward's gun fired, and something fell squealing on the grass. I stared at the ghoul while Edward pumped bullets into it. When I swallowed my heart back down into my chest, I crawled to the gasoline can and unscrewed it.

The ghoul screamed. Edward was driving the ghoul with the burning torch. I splashed gasoline on the cringing thing, dropped to my knees, and said, "Light it."

Edward shoved the torch home. Fire whooshed over the ghoul, and it started screaming. The night stank of burning meat and hair. And gasoline.

It rolled over and over on the ground trying to put out the fire, but it wouldn't go out.

I whispered, "You're next, Zachary baby. You are next."

The shirt had burned away, and Edward tossed the rake to the ground. "Let's get out of here," he said.

I agreed wholeheartedly. I unlocked the car, tossed my gym bag in the back seat, and started the car. The ghoul was lying on the grass, not moving, burning.

Edward was in the passenger seat with the machine gun in his lap. For the first time since I'd met him, Edward looked shaken. Scared, even.

"You going to sleep with that machine gun?" I asked.

He glanced at me. "You going to sleep with your gun?" he asked.

Point for Edward. I took the narrow gravel turns as quick as I dared. My Nova wasn't built for speed maneuvering. Having a wreck here in the cemetery didn't seem like a real good idea tonight. The headlights bounced over the tombstones, but nothing moved. No ghouls in sight.

I took a deep breath and let it out. This was the second attempt on my life in as many days. Frankly, I'd rather be shot at.

Chapter 44

We drove in silence for a long time. It was Edward who finally spoke into the wheel-rushing quiet. "I don't think we should go back to your apartment," he said.

"Agreed."

"I'll take you to my hotel. Unless you have someplace else you'd rather go?"

Where could I go? Ronnie's? I didn't want her endangered anymore. Who else could I endanger? No one. No one but Edward, and he could handle it. Maybe better than I could.

My beeper trembled against my waist, sending shock waves all along my rib cage. I hated putting the beeper on silent mode. The damn thing always scared me when it went off.

Edward said, "What the hell happened? You jumped like something bit you."

I hit the button on the beeper, to shut it off and see who had called. The number lit up briefly. "My beeper went off on silent mode. No noise, just vibration."

He glanced at me. "You are not going to call work." He made it sound like a statement or an order.

"Look, Edward, I'm not feeling so hot, so don't argue with me."

I heard his breath ease out, but what could he say? I was driving. Short of drawing his gun and hijacking me, he was along for the ride. I took the next exit and located a pay phone at a convenience store. The store lot was fully lit and made me a wonderful target, but after the ghouls I wanted light.

Edward watched me get out of the car with my billfold gripped in my hand. He did not get out to watch my back. Fine, I had my gun. If he wanted to pout, let him.

I called work. Craig, our night secretary, answered. "Animators, Inc. May I help you?"

"Hi, Craig, this is Anita. What's up?"

"Irving Griswold called, says to call him back ASAP or the meeting's off. He said you'd know what that meant. Do you?"

"Yes. Thanks, Craig."

"You sound awful."

"Good night, Craig." I hung up on him. I felt tired and sluggish, and my throat hurt. I wanted to curl up somewhere dark and quiet for about a week. Instead, I called Irving. "It's me," I said.

"Well, it's about time. Do you know the trouble I've gone through to set this up? You almost missed it."

"If you don't quit talking, I may still miss it. Tell me where and when."

He did. If we hurried, we'd make it. "Why is everyone so hot to do everything tonight?" I said.

"Hey, if you don't want to meet, that's fine."

"Irving, I've had a very, very long night, so stop bitching at me."

"Are you all right?"

What a stupid question. "Not really, but I'll live."

"If you're hurt, I'll try to get the meeting postponed, but I can't promise anything, Anita. It was your message that got him this far."

I leaned my forehead against the metal of the booth. "I'll be there, Irving."

"I won't be." He sounded thoroughly disgusted. "One of the conditions was no reporters and no police."

I had to smile. Poor Irving; he was getting left out of everything. He hadn't been attacked by ghouls and almost blown up, though. Maybe I should save my pity for myself.

"Thanks, Irving, I owe you one."

"You owe me several," he said. "Be careful. I don't know what you're into this time, but it sounds bad."

He was fishing, and I knew it. "Good night, Irving." I hung up before he could ask any more questions.

I called Dolph's home phone number. I don't know why it couldn't wait until morning, but I had almost died tonight. If I did die, I wanted someone to hunt Zachary down.

Dolph answered on the sixth ring. His voice sounded gruff with sleep. "Yes."

"This is Anita Blake, Dolph."

"What's wrong?" His voice sounded almost alert.

"I know who the murderer is."

"Tell me."

I told him. He took notes and asked questions. The biggest question came at the end. "Can you prove any of this?"

"I can prove he wears a gris-gris. I can testify that he confessed to me. He tried to kill me; that I witnessed personally."

"It's going to be a tough sell to a jury or a judge."

"I know."

"I'll see what I can find out."

"We've almost got a solid case on him, Dolph."

"True, but it all hinges on you being alive to testify."

"Yeah, I'll be careful."

"You come down tomorrow and get all this information recorded officially."

"I will."

"Good work."

"Thanks," I said.

"Good night, Anita."

"Good night, Dolph."

I eased back into the car. "We have a meeting with the wererats in forty-five minutes."

"Why is it so important?" he asked.

"Because I think they can show us a back way into Nikolaos's lair. If we come in the front door, we'll never make it." I started the car and pulled out into the road.

"Who else did you call?" he asked.

So he had been paying attention. "The police."

"What?"

Edward never likes dealing with the police. Fancy that. "If Zachary manages to kill me, I want someone else to be looking into it."

He was silent for a little while. Then he asked, "Tell me about Nikolaos."

I shrugged. "She's a sadistic monster, and she's over a thousand years old."

"I look forward to meeting her."

"Don't," I said.

"We've killed master vampires before, Anita. She's just one more."

"No. Nikolaos is at least a thousand years old. I don't think I've ever been so frightened of anything in my life."

He was silent, face unreadable.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"That I love a challenge." Then he smiled, a beautiful, spreading smile. Shit. Death had seen his ultimate goal. The biggest catch of all. He wasn't afraid of her, and he should have been.

There aren't that many places open at one-thirty A.M., but Denny's is. There was something wrong with meeting wererats in Denny's over coffee and donuts. Shouldn't we have been meeting in some dark alley? I wasn't complaining, mind you. It just struck me as . . . funny.

Edward went in first to make sure it wasn't another setup. If he took a table, it was safe. If he came back out, it wasn't safe. Simple. No one knew what he looked like yet. As long as he wasn't with me, he could go anywhere and no one would try to kill him. Amazing. I was beginning to feel like Typhoid Mary.

Edward took a table. Safe. I walked into the bright lights and artificial comfort of the restaurant. The waitress had dark circles under her eyes, cleverly disguised by thick base, which made the circles look sort of pinkish. I looked past her. A man was motioning to me. Hand straight up, finger crooked like he was calling the waitress, or some other subservient.

"I see my party, now. Thanks anyway," I said.

The restaurant was mostly empty in the wee hours of Monday, or rather Tuesday morning. Two men sat at a table in front of the first man. They looked normal enough, but there was a sense of contained energy that seemed to spark in the air around them. Lycanthropes. I would have bet my life on it, and maybe I was.

There was a couple, male and female, sitting catty-corner from the first two. I would have bet money they were lycanthropes, too.

Edward had taken a table near them, but not too near. He had hunted lycanthropes before; he knew what to look for as well.

As I passed the table, one of the men looked up. Pure brown eyes, so dark they were almost black, stared into mine. His face was square, body slender, small build, muscles worked in his arms as he folded his hands under his chin and looked at me. I stared back; then I was past him and to the booth where the Rat King sat.

He was tall, at least six feet, dark brown skin, with thick, shortcut black hair, brown eyes. His face was thin, arrogant, lips almost too soft for the

haughty expression he gave me. He was darkly handsome, strongly Mexican, and his suspicion rode the air like lightning.

I eased into the booth. I took a deep, steadying breath and looked across the counter at him.

"I got your message. What do you want?" His voice was soft but deep, without a trace of accent.

"I want you to lead myself and at least one man into the tunnels beneath the Circus of the Damned."

His frown deepened, forming faint wrinkles between his eyes. "Why should I do this for you?"

"Do you want your people free of the master's influence?"

He nodded. Still frowning.

I was really winning him over. "Guide us in through the dungeon entrance, and I'll take care of it"

He clasped his hands together on the table. "How can I trust you?"

"I am not a bounty hunter. I have never harmed a lycanthrope."

"We cannot fight beside you if you go against her. Even I cannot fight her. She calls to me. I don't answer, but I feel it. I can keep the small rats and my people from helping her against you, but that is all."

"Just get us inside. We'll do the rest."

"Are you so confident?"

"I'm willing to bet my life on it," I said.

He steepled his fingers against his lips, elbows on the table. The burn scar in his forearm was still there even in human form, a rough, four-pointed crown. "I'll get you inside," he said.

I smiled. "Thank you."

He stared at me. "When you come back out alive, then you can thank me."

"It's a deal." I held my hand out. After a moment's hesitation, he took it.

We shook on it.

"You wish to wait a few days?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I want to go in tomorrow."

He cocked his head to one side. "Are you sure?"

"Why? Is that a problem?"

"You are hurt. I thought you might wish to heal."

I was a little bruised, and my throat hurt, but. . . "How did you know?"

"You smell like death has brushed you close tonight"

I stared at him. Irving never does this to me, the supernatural powers bit. I'm not saying he can't, but he works hard at being human. This man did not.

I took a deep breath. "That is my business."

He nodded. "We will call you and give you the place and time."

I stood up. He remained sitting. There didn't seem to be anything else to say, so I left.

About ten minutes later Edward got into the car with me. "What now?" he asked.

"You mentioned your hotel room. I'm going to sleep while I can."

"And tomorrow?"

"You take me out and show me how the shotgun works."

"Then?" he asked.

"Then we go after Nikolaos," I said.

He gave a shaky breath, almost a laugh. "Oh, boy."

Oh, boy? "Glad to see someone is enjoying all this."

He grinned at me. "I love my work," he said.

I had to smile. Truth was, I loved my work, too.

Chapter 45

During the day I learned how to use a shotgun. That night I went caving with wererats.

The cave was dark. I stood in absolute blackness, gripping my flashlight. I touched my hand to my forehead and couldn't see a damn thing but the funny white images your eyes make when there is no light. I was wearing a hard hat with a light on it, turned off at present. The wererats had insisted on it. All around me were sounds. Cries, moans, the popping of bone, a curious sliding sound like a knife drawing out of flesh. The wererats were changing from human to animal. It sounded like it hurt - a lot. They had made me swear not to turn on a light until they told me to.

I had never wanted to see so badly in my life. It couldn't be so horrible. Could it? But a promise is a promise. I sounded like Horton the Elephant. "A person is a person no matter how small." What the hell was I doing standing in the middle of a cave, in the dark, surrounded by wererats, quoting Dr. Seuss, and trying to kill a one-thousand-year-old vampire?

It had been one of my stranger weeks.

Rafael, the Rat King, said, "You may turn on your lights."

I did, instantly. My eyes seemed to leech on the light, eager to see. The ratmen stood in small groups in the wide, flat-roofed tunnel. There were ten of them. I had counted them in human form. Now the seven males were fur-covered and wearing jean cutoffs. Two wore loose t-shirts. The three women wore loose dresses, like maternity clothes. Their black button eyes glittered in the light. Everybody was furry.

Edward came to stand near me. He was staring at the weres, face distant, unreadable. I touched his arm. I had told Rafael that I was not a bounty hunter, but Edward was, sometimes. I hoped I had not endangered these people.

"Are you ready?" Rafael asked. He was the same sleek black ratman I remembered.

"Yes," I said.

Edward nodded.

The wererats scattered to either side of us, scrambling over low, weathered flowstone. I said to no one in particular, "I thought caves were damp."

A smaller ratman in a t-shirt said, "Cherokee Caverns is dead cave."

"I don't understand."

"Live cave has water and growing formations. A dry cave where none of the formations are growing is called dead cave."

"Oh," I said.

He drew lips back from huge teeth, a smile, I think. "More than you wanted to know, huh?"

Rafael hissed back, "We are not here to give guided tours, Louie. Now be quiet, both of you."

Louie shrugged and scrambled ahead of me. He was the same human that had been with Rafael in the restaurant, the one with the dark eyes.

One of the females was nearly grey-furred. Her name was Lillian, and she was a doctor. She carried a backpack full of medical supplies. They seemed to be planning on us getting hurt. At least that meant they thought we would come out alive. I was beginning to wonder about that part myself.

Two hours later the ceiling dropped to a point where I couldn't stand upright. And I learned what the hard hats they had given Edward and me were for. I scraped my head on the rock at least a thousand times. I'd have knocked myself unconscious long before we saw Nikolaos.

The rats seemed designed for the tunnel, sliding along, flattening their bodies in a strange, scrambling grace. Edward and I could not match it. Not even close.

He cursed softly behind me. His five inches of extra height were causing him pain. My lower back was an aching burn. He had to be in worse shape. There were pockets where the ceiling opened up and we could stand. I started looking very forward to them, like air pockets to a diver.

The quality of darkness changed. Light - there was light up ahead, not much, but it was there. It flickered at the far end of the tunnel like a mirage.

Rafael crouched beside us. Edward sat flat on the dry rock. I joined him. "There is your dungeon. We will wait here until near dark. If you have not come out, we will leave. After Nikolaos is dead, if we can, we will help you."

I nodded; the light on my hard hat nodded with me. "Thank you for helping us."

He shook his narrow, ratty face. "I have delivered you to the devil's door. Do not thank me for that."

I glanced at Edward. His face was still distant, unreadable. If he was interested in what the ratman had just said, I couldn't tell it. We might as well have been talking about a grocery list.

Edward and I knelt before the opening into the dungeon. Torchlight flickered, incredibly bright after the darkness. Edward was cradling his Uzi that hung on a strap across his chest. I had the shotgun. I was also carrying my two pistols, two knives, and a derringer stuffed in the pocket of my jacket. It was a present from Edward. He had handed it to me with this advice: "It kicks like a

sonofabitch, but press it under someone's chin, and it will blow their fucking head off." Nice to know.

It was daylight outside. There shouldn't be a vampire stirring, but Burchard would be there. And if he saw us, Nikolaos would know. Somehow, she'd know. Goosebumps marched up my arms.

We scrambled inside, ready to kill and maim. The room was empty. All that adrenaline sort of sat in my body, making my breathing too quick and my heart pound for no reason. The spot where Phillip had been chained was clean. Someone had scrubbed it down real good.

I fought an urge to touch the wall where he'd been.

Edward called softly, "Anita." He was at the door.

I hurried up to him.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"She killed Phillip in here."

"Keep your mind on business. I don't want to die because you're daydreaming."

I started to get angry and swallowed it. He was right.

Edward tried the door, and it opened. No prisoners, no need to lock it. I took the left side of the door, and he took the right. The corridor was empty.

My hands were sweating on the shotgun. Edward led off down the right hand side of the corridor. I followed him into the dragon's lair. I didn't feel much like a knight. I was fresh out of shiny steeds, or was that shiny armor?

Whatever. We were here. This was it. I could taste my heart in my throat.

Chapter 46

The dragon didn't come out and eat us right away. In fact, the place was quiet. As the cliché goes, too quiet.

I stepped close to Edward and whispered, "I don't mean to complain, but where is everybody?"

He leaned his back against the wall and said, "Maybe you killed Winter. That just leaves Burchard. Maybe he's on an errand."

I shook my head. "This is too easy."

"Don't worry. Something will go wrong soon." He continued down the corridor, and I followed. It took me three steps to realize Edward had made a joke.

The corridor opened into a huge room like Nikolaos's throne room, but there was no chair here. There were coffins. Five of them spaced around the room on raised platforms, so they didn't have to sit on the floor in the draft. Tall, iron candelabra burned in the room, one at the foot and head of each coffin.

Most vampires made some effort to hide their coffins, but not Nikolaos.

"Arrogant," Edward whispered.

"Yes," I whispered back. You always whispered around the coffins, at first, as if it were a funeral and they could hear you.

There was a neck-ruffling smell to the room, stale. It caught at the back of my throat and was almost a taste, faintly metallic. It was like the smell of snakes kept in cages. You knew there was nothing warm and furry in this room just by smell. And that really doesn't do it justice. It was the smell of vampires.

The first coffin was dark, well-varnished wood, with golden handles. It was wider at the shoulder area and then narrowed, following the contour of the human body. Older coffins did that sometimes.

"We start here," I said.

Edward didn't argue. He let the machine gun hang by its strap and drew his pistol. "You're covered," he said.

I laid the shotgun on the floor in front of the coffin, gripped the edge of the lid, said a quick prayer, and lifted. Valentine lay in the coffin. His scarred face was bare. He was still dressed as a riverboat gambler but this time in black. His frilly shirt was crimson. The colors didn't look good against his auburn hair. One hand was half-curved over his thigh, a careless sleeper's gesture. A very human gesture.

Edward peered into the coffin, gun pointed ceilingward. "This the one you threw Holy Water on?"

I nodded.

"Did a bang-up job," Edward said.

Valentine never moved. I couldn't even see him breathe. I wiped my sweating palms on my jeans and felt for a pulse in his wrist. Nothing. His skin was cool to the touch. He was dead. It wasn't murder, no matter what the new laws said. You can't kill a corpse.

The wrist pulsed. I jerked back like he'd burned me.

"What's wrong?" Edward asked.

"I got a pulse."

"It happens sometimes."

I nodded. Yeah, it happened sometimes. If you waited long enough, the heart did beat, blood did flow, but so slow that it was painful to watch. Dead. I was beginning to think I didn't know what that meant.

I knew one thing. If night fell with us here, we would die, or wish we had. Valentine had helped kill over twenty people. He had nearly killed me. When Nikolaos withdrew her protection, he'd finish the job if he could. We had come to kill Nikolaos. I think she would withdraw her protection ASAP. As the old saying goes, it was him or me. I preferred him.

I shook off the shoulder straps of the backpack.

"What are you looking for?" Edward asked.

"Stake and hammer," I said without looking up.

"Not going to use the shotgun?"

I glanced up at him. "Oh, right. Why not rent a marching band while we're at it?"

"If you just want to be quiet, there is another way." He had a slight smile on his face.

I had the sharpened stake in my hand, but I was willing to listen. I've staked most of the vampires that I've killed, but it never gets easier. It is hard, messy work, though I don't throw up anymore. I am a professional, after all.

He took a small case out of his own backpack. It held syringes. He drew out an ampule of some greyish liquid. "Silver nitrate," he said.

Silver. Bane of the undead. Scourge of the supernatural. And all nicely modernized. "Does it work?" I asked.

"It works." He filled one syringe and asked, "How old is this one?"

"A little over a hundred," I said.

"Two ought to do it." He shoved the needle into the big vein in Valentine's neck. Before he had filled the syringe a second time, the body shivered. He shoved the second dose into the neck. Valentine's body arched against the walls of the coffin. His mouth opened and closed. He gasped for air as if he were drowning.

Edward filled up another syringe and handed it towards me. I stared at it.

"It isn't going to bite," he said.

I took it gingerly between my thumb and the first two fingers on my right hand.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"I'm not a big fan of needles."

He grinned. "You're afraid of needles?"

I scowled at him. "Not exactly."

Valentine's body shook and bucked, hands thumping against the wooden walls. It made a small, helpless noise. His eyes never opened. He was going to sleep through his own death.

He gave one last shuddering jump, then collapsed against the side of the coffin like a broken rag doll.

"He doesn't look very dead," I said.

"They never do."

"Stake their heart and chop off their heads, and you know they're dead."

"This isn't staking," he said.

I didn't like it. Valentine lay there looking very whole and nearly human. I wanted to see some rotting flesh and bones turning to dust. I wanted to know he was dead.

"No one has ever gotten up out of their coffin after a syringe full of silver nitrate, Anita."

I nodded but remained unconvinced.

"You check the other side. Go on."

I went, but I kept glancing back at Valentine. He had haunted my nightmares for years, nearly killed me. He just didn't look dead enough for me.

I opened the first coffin on my side, one-handed, holding the syringe carefully. An injection of silver nitrate probably wouldn't do me much good either. The coffin was empty. The white imitation silk lining had conformed to the body like a mattress, but the body wasn't there.

I flinched and stared around the room, but there was nothing there. I stared slowly upward, hoping that there was nothing floating above me. There wasn't. Thank you, God.

I remembered to breathe finally. It was probably Theresa's coffin. Yeah, that was it. I left it open and went to the next one. It was a newer model, probably fake wood, but nice and polished. The black male was in it. I had never gotten his name. Now I never would. I knew what it meant, coming in here. Not just defending yourself but taking out the vampires while they lay helpless. As far as I knew, this vampire had never hurt anyone. I laughed then; he was Nikolaos's protege. Did I really think he'd never tasted human blood? No. I pressed the needle against his neck and swallowed hard. I hated needles. No particular reason.

I shoved it in and closed my eyes while I depressed the plunger. I could have pounded a stake through his heart, but sticking a needle in him put cold chills down my spine.

Edward called, "Anita!"

I whirled and found Aubrey sitting up in his coffin. He had Edward by the throat and was slowly lifting him off his feet.

The shotgun was still by Valentine's coffin. Damn! I drew the 9mm and fired at Aubrey's forehead. The bullet tossed his head back, but he just smiled and raised Edward straight-armed, legs dangling.

I ran for the shotgun.

Edward was having to use both hands to keep himself from being strangled by his own weight. He dropped one hand, fumbling for the machine gun.

Aubrey caught his wrist.

I picked up the shotgun, took two steps towards them and fired from three feet away. Aubrey's head exploded; blood and brains splattered over the wall. The hands lowered Edward to the floor but didn't let go. Edward drew a ragged breath. The right hand convulsed around his throat, fingers digging for his windpipe.

I had to step around Edward to fire at the chest. The blast took out the heart and most of the left side of the chest. The left arm sort of hung there by strands of tissue and bone. The corpse flopped back into its coffin.

Edward dropped to his knees, breath wheezing and choking through his throat.

"Nod if you can breathe, Edward," I said. Though if Aubrey had crushed his windpipe I don't know what I could have done. Run back and gotten Lillian the doctor rat, maybe.

Edward nodded. His face was a mottled reddish purple, but he was breathing.

My ears were ringing with the sound of the shotgun inside the stone walls. So much for surprise. So much for silver nitrate. I pumped another round into the gun and went to Valentine's coffin. I blew him apart. Now, he was dead.

Edward staggered to his feet. He croaked, "How old was that thing?"

"Over five hundred," I said.

He swallowed, and it looked like it hurt. "Shit."

"I wouldn't try sticking any needles into Nikolaos."

He managed to glare at me, still half-leaning against Aubrey's coffin.

I turned to the fifth coffin. The one we had saved until last without any talk between us. It was set against the far wall. A dainty white coffin, too small for an adult. Candlelight gleamed on the carvings in the lid.

I was tempted to just blow a hole in the coffin, but I had to see her. I had to see what I was shooting at. My heart started thudding in my throat; my chest was tight. She was a master vampire. Killing them, even in daylight, is a chancy thing. Their gaze can trap you until nightfall. Their minds. Their voices. So much power. And Nikolaos was the most powerful I'd ever seen. I had my blessed cross. I would be all right. I had had too many crosses taken from me to feel completely safe. Oh, well. I tried to raise the lid one-handed, but it was heavy and not balanced for easy opening like modern coffins. "Can you back me on this, Edward? Or are you still relearning how to breathe?"

Edward came to stand beside me. His face looked almost its normal color. He took hold of the lid and I readied the shotgun.

He lifted and the whole lid slid off. It wasn't hinged on.

I said, "Shiit!"

The coffin was empty.

"Are you looking for me?" A high, musical voice called from the doorway. "Freeze; I believe that is the word. We have the drop on you."

"I wouldn't advise going for your gun," Burchard said.

I glanced at Edward and found his hands close to the machine gun but not close enough. His face was unreadable, calm, normal. Just a Sunday drive. I was so scared I could taste bile at the back of my throat. We looked at each other and raised our hands.

"Turn around slowly," Burchard said.

We did.

He was holding a semiautomatic rifle of some kind. I'm not the gun freak Edward is, so I didn't know the make and model, but I knew it'd make a big hole. There was also a sword hilt sticking over his back. A sword, an honest-to-god sword.

Zachary was standing beside him, holding a pistol. He held it two-handed, arms stiff. He didn't seem happy.

Burchard held the rifle like he was born with it. "Drop your weapons, please, and lace your fingers on top of your heads."

We did what he asked. Edward dropped the machine gun, and I lost the shotgun. We had plenty more guns.

Nikolaos stood to one side. Her face was cold, angry. Her voice, when it came, echoed through the room. "I am older than anything you have ever imagined. Did you think daylight holds me prisoner? After a thousand years?" She walked out into the room, careful not to cross in front of Burchard and Zachary. She glanced at the remains in the coffins. "You will pay for this, animator." She smiled then, and I had never seen anything more evil. "Strip

them of the rest of their weaponry, Burchard; then we will give the animator a treat."

They stood in front of us but not too close. "Up against the wall, animator," Burchard said. "If the man moves, Zachary, shoot him."

Burchard shoved me into the wall and frisked me very thoroughly. He didn't check my teeth or have me drop my pants, but that was about it. He found everything I was carrying. Even the derringer. He shoved my cross into his pocket. Maybe I could tattoo one on my arm? Probably wouldn't work.

I went out to stand with Zachary, and Edward got his turn. I stared at Zachary. "Does she know?" I asked.

"Shut up."

I smiled. "She doesn't, does she?"

"Shut up!"

Edward came back, and we stood there with our hands on top of our heads, weapons gone. It was not a pretty sight.

Adrenaline was bubbling like champagne, and my pulse was threatening to jump out of my throat. I wasn't afraid of the guns, not really. I was afraid of Nikolaos. What would she do to us? To me? If I had a choice, I'd force them to shoot me. It had to be better than anything Nikolaos had in her evil little mind.

"They are unarmed, Mistress," Burchard said.

"Good," she said. "Do you know what we were doing while you destroyed my people?"

I didn't think she wanted an answer, so I didn't give her one.

"We were preparing a friend of yours, animator."

My stomach jerked. I had a wild image of Catherine, but she was out of town. My god, Ronnie. Did they have Ronnie?

It must have showed on my face because Nikolaos laughed, high and wild, an excited tittering.

"I really hate that laugh," I said.

"Silence," Burchard said.

"Oh, Anita, you are so amusing. I will enjoy making you one of my people." Her voice started high and childlike and ended low enough to crawl down my spine.

She called out in a clear voice, "Enter this room now."

I heard shuffling footsteps; then Phillip walked into the room. The horrible wound at his throat was thick, white scar tissue. He stared around the room as if he didn't really see it.

I whispered, "Dear God."

They had raised him from the dead.

Chapter 47

Nikolaos danced around him. The skirt of her pastel pink dress swirled around her. The large, pink bow in her hair bobbed as she twirled, arms outstretched. Her slender legs were covered in white leotards. The shoes were white with pink bows.

She stopped, laughing and breathless. A healthy pink flush on her cheeks, eyes sparkling. How did she do that?

"He looks very alive, doesn't he?" She stalked around him, hand brushing his arm. He drew away from her, eyes following her every move, afraid. He remembered her. God help us. He remembered her.

"Do you want to see him put through his paces?" she asked.

I hoped I didn't understand her. I fought to keep my face blank. I must have succeeded because she stomped over to me, hands on hips.

"Well," she said, "do you want to watch your lover perform?"

I swallowed bile, hard. Maybe I should just throw up on her. That would teach her. "With you?" I asked.

She sidled up to me, hands clasped behind her back. "It could be you. Your choice."

Her face was almost touching mine. Eyes so damned wide and innocent that it seemed sacrilegious. "Neither sounds very appealing," I said.

"Pity." She half-skipped back to Phillip. He was naked, and his tanned body was still handsome. What were a few more scars?

"You didn't know I was going to be here, so why raise Phillip from the dead?" I asked.

She turned on the heels of her little shoes. "We raised him so he could try to kill Aubrey. Murdered zombies can be so much fun, while they try to kill their murderers. We thought we'd give him a chance while Aubrey was asleep. Aubrey can move if you disturb him." She glanced at Edward. "But then you know that."

"You were going to let Aubrey kill him again," I said.

She nodded, head bobbing. "Mmm-uh."

"You bitch," I said.

Burchard shoved the rifle butt into my stomach, and I dropped to my knees. I panted, trying to breathe. It didn't help much.

Edward was staring very fixedly at Zachary, who was holding the pistol square on his chest. You didn't have to be good at that range or even lucky. Just squeeze the trigger and kill someone. Poof.

"I can make you do whatever I please," Nikolaos said.

A fresh spurt of adrenaline rushed through me. It was too much. I threw up in the corner. Nerves and being hit very hard in the stomach with a rifle. Nerves I'd had before; the rifle butt was a new experience.

"Tsk, tsk," Nikolaos said. "Do I frighten you that much?"

I managed to stand up at last. "Yes," I said. Why deny it?

She clapped her hands together. "Oh, goody." Her face shifted gears, instant switch. The little girl was gone, and no amount of pink, frilly dresses

would bring her back. Nikolaos's face was thinner, alien. The eyes were great drowning pools. "Hear me, Anita. Feel my power in your veins."

I stood there, staring at the floor, fear like a cold rush on my skin. I waited for something to tug at my soul. Her power to roll me under and away. Nothing happened.

Nikolaos frowned. The little girl was back. "I bit you, animator. You should crawl if I ask it. What did you do?"

I breathed a small, heartfelt prayer, and answered her. "Holy Water."

She snarled. "This time we will keep you with us until after the third bite. You will take Theresa's place. Perhaps then you will be more eager to find out who is murdering vampires."

I fought with everything in me not to glance at Zachary. Not because I didn't want to give him away, I would do that, but I was waiting for the moment when it would help us. It might get Zachary killed, but it wouldn't take out Burchard or Nikolaos. Zachary was the least dangerous person in this whole room.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Oh, but I do, animator."

"I would rather die."

She spread her arms wide. "But I want you to die, Anita, I want you to die."

"That makes us even," I said.

She giggled. The sound made my teeth hurt. If she really wanted to torture me, all she had to do was lock me in a room and laugh at me. Now that would be hell.

"Come on, boys and girls, let's go play in the dungeon." Nikolaos led the way. Burchard motioned for us to follow. We did. Zachary and he brought up the rear, guns in hand. Phillip stood uncertainly in the middle of the room, watching us go.

Nikolaos called back, "Have him follow us, Zachary."

Zachary called, "Come, Phillip, follow me."

He turned and walked after us, his eyes still uncertain and not really focused.

"Go on," Burchard said. He half-raised the rifle, and I went.

Nikolaos called back, "Gazing at your lover; how nice."

It wasn't a long enough walk to the dungeon door. If they tried to chain me to the wall, I'd rush them. I'd force them to kill me. Which meant I'd better rush Zachary. Burchard might wound me or knock me unconscious, and that would be very, very bad.

Nikolaos led us down the steps and out into the floor. What a day for a parade. Phillip followed, but he was looking around now, really seeing things. He froze, staring at the place where Aubrey had killed him. His hand reached out to touch the wall. He flexed his hand, rubbing fingers into his palm as if he was feeling something. A hand went to his neck and found the scar. He screamed. It echoed against the walls.

"Phillip," I said.

Burchard held me back with the rifle. Phillip crouched in the corner, face hidden, arms locked around his knees. He was making a high, keening noise.

Nikolaos laughed.

"Stop it, stop it!" I walked towards Phillip, and Burchard shoved the gun against my chest. I yelled into his face, "Shoot me, shoot me, dammit! It's got to be better than this."

"Enough," Nikolaos said. She stalked over to me, and I gave ground. She kept walking, forcing me to back up until I bumped against the wall. "I don't want you shot, Anita, but I want you hurt. You killed Winter with your little knife. Let's see how good you really are." She strode away from me. "Burchard, give her back her knives."

He never even hesitated or asked why. He just walked over to me and handed them to me, hilt first. I didn't question it either. I took them.

Nikolaos was suddenly beside Edward. He started to move away. "Kill him if he moves again, Zachary."

Zachary came to stand close, gun out.

"Kneel, mortal," she said.

Edward didn't do it. He glanced at me. Nikolaos kicked him in the bend of the knee hard enough to make him grunt. He dropped to one knee, and she grabbed his right arm and tugged it behind his back. One slender hand grabbed his throat.

"I'll tear out your throat if you move, human. I can feel your pulse like a butterfly beating against my hand." She laughed and filled the room with warm, jostling horror. "Now, Burchard, show her what it means to use a knife."

Burchard went to the far wall, with the door above him at the top of the steps. He laid the rifle on the floor, and unbuckled his sword harness, and laid that beside the rifle. Then he drew a long knife with a nearly triangular blade.

He did some quick stretches to limber his muscles, and I stood staring at him.

I know how to use a knife. I can throw well; I practice that. Most people are afraid of knives. If you show yourself willing to carve someone up, they tend to be afraid of you. Burchard was not most people. He went down into a slight crouch, knife held loose but firm in his right hand.

"Fight Burchard, animator, or this one dies." She pulled his arm, sharp, but he didn't cry out. She could dislocate his shoulder, and Edward wouldn't cry out.

I put the knife back in its right wrist sheath. Fighting with a knife in each hand may look nifty, but I've never really mastered it. A lot of people don't. Hey, Burchard didn't have two knives either. "Is this to the death?" I asked.

"You will not be able to kill Burchard, Anita. So silly. Burchard is only going to cut you. Let you taste the blade, nothing too serious. I don't want you to lose too much blood." There was an undercurrent of laughter in her voice, then it was gone. Her voice crawled through the room like a fire-wind. "I want to see you bleed."

Great.

Burchard began to circle me, and I kept the wall at my back. He rushed me, knife flashing. I held my ground, dodging his blade, and slashing at him as he darted in. My knife hit empty air. He was standing out of reach, staring at me. He had had six hundred years of practice, give or take. I couldn't top that. I couldn't even come close.

He smiled. I gave him a slight nod. He nodded back. A sign of respect between two warriors, maybe. Either that, or he was playing with me. Guess which way I voted?

His knife was suddenly there, slicing my arm open. I slashed outward and caught him across the stomach. He darted into me, not away. I dodged the knife and stumbled away from the wall. He smiled. Dammit, he'd wanted to get me out in the open. His reach was twice mine.

The pain in my arm was sharp and immediate. But there was a thin line of crimson on his flat stomach. I smiled at him. His eyes flinched, just a little. Was the mighty warrior uneasy? I hoped so.

I backed away from him. This was ridiculous. We were going to die, piece by piece, both of us. What the hell. I charged Burchard, slashing. It caught him by surprise, and he backpedaled. I mirrored his crouch, and we began to circle the floor.

And I said, "I know who the murderer is."

Burchard's eyebrows raised.

Nikolaos said, "What did you say?"

"I know who is killing vampires."

Burchard was suddenly inside my arm, slicing my shirt. It didn't hurt. He was playing with me.

"Who?" Nikolaos said. "Tell me, or I will kill this human."

"Sure," I said.

Zachary screamed, "No!" He turned to fire at me. The bullet whined overhead. Burchard and I both sank to the floor.

Edward screamed. I half-rose to run to him. His arm was twisted at a funny angle, but he was alive.

Zachary's gun went off twice, and Nikolaos took it away from him, tossing it to the floor. She grabbed him and forced him against her body, bending him at the waist, cradling him. Her head darted downward. Zachary shrieked.

Burchard was on his knees, watching the show. I stabbed my knife into his back. It thunked solid and hilt-deep. His spine stiffened, one hand trying to tear out the blade. I didn't wait to see if he could do it. I drew my other knife and plunged it into the side of his throat. Blood poured down my hand when I took the knife out. I stabbed him again, and he fell slowly forward, face down on the floor.

Nikolaos let Zachary drop to the floor and turned, face bloodstained, the front of her pink dress crimson. Blood spattered on her white leotards. Zachary's throat was torn out. He lay gasping on the floor but still moving, alive.

She stared at Burchard's body, then screamed, a wild banshee sound that wailed and echoed. She rushed me, hands outstretched. I threw the knife, and

she batted it away. She hit me, the force of her body slamming me into the floor, her scrambling on top of me. She was still screaming, over and over. She held my head to one side. No mind tricks, brute strength.

I screamed, "Nooo!"

A gun fired, and Nikolaos jerked, once, twice. She rose off me, and I felt the wind. It was creeping through the room like the beginnings of a storm.

Edward leaned against the wall, holding Zachary's dropped gun.

Nikolaos went for him, and he emptied the gun into her frail body. She didn't even hesitate.

I sat up and watched her stalk towards Edward. He threw the empty gun at her. She was suddenly on him, forcing him back into the floor.

The sword lay on the floor, nearly as tall as I was. I drew it out of its sheath. Heavy, awkward, drawing my arm down. I raised it over my head, flat of the blade half resting on my shoulder, and ran for Nikolaos.

She was talking again in a high, sing-song voice. "I will make you mine, mortal. Mine!"

Edward screamed. I couldn't see why. I raised the sword, and its weight carried it down and across, like it was meant to. It bit into her neck with a great wet thunk. The sword grated on bone, and I drew it out. The tip fell to scrape on the floor.

Nikolaos turned to me and started to stand. I raised the sword, and it cut outward, swinging my body with it. Bone cracked, and I fell to the floor as Nikolaos tumbled to her knees. Her head still hung by strips of meat and skin. She blinked at me and tried to stand up.

I screamed and drove the blade upward with everything I had. It took her between the breasts, and I stood running with it, shoving it in. Blood poured. I pinned her against the wall. The blade shoved out her back, scraping along the wall as she slid downward.

I dropped to my knees beside the body. Yes, the body. She was dead!

I looked back at Edward. There was blood on his neck. "She bit me," he said.

I was gasping for air, having trouble breathing, but it was wonderful. I was alive and she wasn't. She fucking wasn't. "Don't worry, Edward, I'll help you. Plenty of Holy Water left." I smiled.

He stared at me a minute, then laughed, and I laughed with him. We were still laughing when the wererats crept in from the tunnel. Rafael, the Rat King, stared at the carnage with black-button eyes. "She is dead."

"Ding dong, the witch is dead," I said.

Edward picked it up, half-singing, "The wicked old witch."

We collapsed into laughter again, and Lillian the doctor, all covered with fur, tended our hurts, Edward first.

Zachary was still lying on the ground. The wound at his throat was beginning to close up, skin knitting together. He would live, if that was the right word.

I picked my knife up off the floor and staggered to him. The rats watched me. No one interfered. I dropped to my knees beside him and ripped the sleeve of his shirt. I laid the gris-gris bare. He still couldn't talk but his eyes widened.

"Remember when I tried to touch this with my own blood? You stopped me. You seemed afraid, and I didn't understand why." I sat beside him and watched him heal. "Every gris-gris has a thing you must do for it, vampire blood for this one, and one thing you must never do, or the magic stops. Poof." I held up my arm, dripping blood quite nicely. "Human blood, Zachary; is that bad?"

He managed a noise like, "Don't."

Blood dripped down my elbow and hung, thick and trembling over his arm. He sort of shook his head, no, no. The blood dripped down and splatted on his arm, but it didn't touch the gris-gris.

His whole body relaxed.

"I've got no patience today, Zachary." I rubbed blood along the woven band.

His eyes flared, showing white. He made a strangling noise in his throat. His hands scrabbled at the floor. His chest jerked as if he couldn't breathe. A sigh ran out of his body, a long whoosh of breath, and he was quiet.

I checked for a pulse; nothing. I cut the gris-gris off with my knife, balled it in my hand, and shoved it in my pocket. Evil piece of work.

Lillian came to bind my arm up. "This is just temporary. You'll need stitches."

I nodded and got to my feet.

Edward called, "Where are you going?"

"To get the rest of our guns." To find Jean-Claude. I didn't say that part out loud. I didn't think Edward would understand.

Two of the ratmen went with me. That was fine. They could come as long as they didn't interfere. Phillip was still huddled in the corner. I left him there.

I did get the guns. I strung the machine gun over my shoulders and kept the shotgun in my hands. Loaded for bear. I had killed a one-thousand-year-old vampire. Naw, not me. Surely not.

The ratmen and I found the punishment room. There were six coffins in it. Each had a blessed cross on its lid and silver chains to hold the lid down. The third coffin held Willie, so deeply asleep that he seemed like he would never wake. I left him like that, to wake with the night. To go on about his business. Willie wasn't a bad person. And for a vampire he was excellent.

All the other coffins were empty, only the last one still unopened. I undid the chains and laid the cross on the ground. Jean-Claude stared up at me. His eyes were midnight fire, his smile gentle. I flashed on the first dream and the coffin filled with blood, him reaching for me. I stepped back, and he rose from the coffin.

The ratmen stepped back, hissing.

"It's all right," I said. "He's sort of on our side."

He stepped from the coffin like he'd had a good nap. He smiled and extended a hand. "I knew you would do it, ma petite."

"You arrogant son of a bitch." I smashed the shotgun butt into his stomach. He doubled over just enough. I hit him in the jaw. . He rocked back. "Get out of my mind!"

He rubbed his face and came away with blood. "The marks are permanent, Anita. I cannot take them back."

I gripped the shotgun until my hands ached. Blood began to trickle down my arm from the wound. I thought about it. For one moment, I considered blowing his perfect face away. I didn't do it. I would probably regret it later.

"Can you stay out of my dreams, at least?" I asked.

"That, I can do. I am sorry, ma petite."

"Stop calling me that."

He shrugged. His black hair had nearly crimson highlights in the torchlight. Breathtaking. "Stop playing with my mind, Jean-Claude."

"Whatever do you mean?" he asked.

"I know that the otherworldly beauty is a trick. So stop it."

"I am not doing it," he said.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"When you have the answer, Anita, come back to me, and we will talk."

I was too tired for riddles. "Who do you think you are? Using people like this."

"I am the new master of the city," he said. He was suddenly next to me, fingers touching my cheek. "And you put me upon the throne."

I jerked away from him. "You stay away from me for a while, Jean-Claude, or I swear. . ."

"You'll kill me?" he said. He was smiling, laughing at me.

I didn't shoot him. And some people say I have no sense of humor.

I found a room with a dirt floor and several shallow graves. Phillip let me lead him to the room. It was only when we stood staring down at the fresh-turned earth that he turned to me. "Anita?"

"Hush," I said.

"Anita, what's happening?"

He was beginning to remember. He would become more alive in a few hours, up to a point. It would almost be the real Phillip for a day, or two.

"Anita?" His voice was high and uncertain. A little boy afraid of the dark. He grabbed my arm, and his hand felt very real. His eyes were still that perfect brown. "What's going on?"

I stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. His skin was warm. "You need to rest, Phillip. You're tired."

He nodded. "Tired," he said.

I led him to the soft dirt. He lay down on it, then sat up, eyes wild, grabbing for me. "Aubrey! He. . ."

"Aubrey's dead. He can't hurt you anymore."

"Dead?" He stared down the length of his body as if just seeing it.

"Aubrey killed me."

I nodded. "Yes, Phillip."

"I'm scared."

I held him, rubbing his back in smooth, useless circles. His arms hugged me like he would never let go.

"Anita!"

"Hush, hush. It's all right. It's all right."

"You're going to put me back, aren't you?" He drew back so he could see my face.

"Yes," I said.

"I don't want to die."

"You're already dead."

He stared down at his hands, flexing them. "Dead?" he whispered.

"Dead?" He lay down on the fresh-turned earth. "Put me back," he said.

And I did.

At the end his eyes closed and his face went slack, dead. He sank into the grave and was gone.

I dropped to my knees beside Phillip's grave, and wept.

Chapter 48

Edward had a dislocated shoulder and two broken bones in his arm, plus one vampire bite. I had fourteen stitches. We both healed. Phillip's body was moved to a local cemetery. Every time I work in it, I have to go by and say hello. Even though I know Phillip is dead and doesn't care. Graves are for the living, not the dead. It gives us something to concentrate on instead of the fact that our loved one is rotting under the ground. The dead don't care about pretty flowers and carved marble statues.

Jean-Claude sent me a dozen pure white, long-stemmed roses. The card read, "If you have answered the question truthfully, come dancing with me."

I wrote "No" on the back of the card and slipped it under the door at Guilty Pleasures, during daylight hours. I had been attracted to Jean-Claude. Maybe I still was. So what? He thought it changed things. It didn't. All I had to do was visit Phillip's grave to know that. Oh, hell, I didn't even have to go that far. I know who and what I am. I am The Executioner, and I don't date vampires. I kill them.

The Laughing Corpse

by

Laurell K. Hamilton

Book 2 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Chapter 1

Harold Gaynor's house sat in the middle of intense green lawn and the graceful sweep of trees. The house gleamed in the hot August sunshine. Bert Vaughn, my boss, parked the car on the crushed gravel of the driveway. The gravel was so white, it looked like handpicked rock salt. Somewhere out of sight the soft whir of sprinklers pattered. The grass was absolutely perfect in the middle of one of the worst droughts Missouri has had in over twenty years. Oh, well. I wasn't here to talk with Mr. Gaynor about water management. I was here to talk about raising the dead.

Not resurrection. I'm not that good. I mean zombies. The shambling dead. Rotting corpses. Night of the living dead. That kind of zombie. Though certainly less dramatic than Hollywood would ever put up on the screen. I am an animator. It's a job, that's all, like selling.

Animating had only been a licensed business for about five years. Before that it had just been an embarrassing curse, a religious experience, or a tourist attraction. It still is in parts of New Orleans, but here in St. Louis it's a business. A profitable one, thanks in large part to my boss. He's a rascal, a scalawag, a rogue, but damn if he doesn't know how to make money. It's a good trait for a business manager.

Bert was six-three, a broad-shouldered, ex-college football player with the beginnings of a beer gut. The dark blue suit he wore was tailored so that the gut didn't show. For eight hundred dollars the suit should have hidden a herd of elephants. His

white-blond hair was trimmed in a crew cut, back in style after all these years. A boater's tan made his pale hair and eyes dramatic with contrast.

Bert adjusted his blue and red striped tie, mopping a bead of sweat off his tanned forehead. "I heard on the news there's a movement there to use zombies in pesticide-contaminated fields. It would save lives."

"Zombies rot, Bert, there's no way to prevent that, and they don't stay smart enough long enough to be used as field labor."

"It was just a thought. The dead have no rights under law, Anita."

"Not yet."

It was wrong to raise the dead so they could slave for us. It was just wrong, but no one listens to me. The government finally had to get into the act. There was a nationwide committee being formed of animators and other experts. We were supposed to look into the working conditions of local zombies.

Working conditions. They didn't understand. You can't give a corpse nice working conditions. They don't appreciate it anyway. Zombies may walk, even talk, but they are very, very dead.

Bert smiled indulgently at me. I fought an urge to pop him one right in his smug face, "I know you and Charles are working on that committee," Bert said. "Going around to all the businesses and checking up on the zombies. It makes great press for Animators, Inc."

"I don't do it for good press," I said.

"I know. You believe in your little cause."

"You're a condescending bastard," I said, smiling sweetly up at him.

He grinned at me. "I know."

I just shook my head; with Bert you can't really win an insult match. He doesn't give a damn what I think of him, as long as I work for him.

My navy blue suit jacket was supposed to be summer weight but it was a lie. Sweat trickled down my spine as soon as I stepped out of the car.

Bert turned to me, small eyes narrowing. His eyes lend themselves to suspicious squints. "You're still wearing your gun," he said.

"The jacket hides it, Bert. Mr. Gaynor will never know." Sweat started collecting under the straps of my shoulder holster. I could feel the silk blouse beginning to melt. I try not to wear silk and a shoulder rig at the same time. The silk starts to look indented, wrinkling where the straps cross. The gun was a Browning Hi-Power 9mm, and I liked having it near at hand.

"Come on, Anita. I don't think you'll need a gun in the middle of the afternoon, while visiting a client." Bert's voice held that patronizing tone that people use on children. Now, little girl, you know this is for your own good.

Bert didn't care about my well-being. He just didn't want to spook Gaynor. The man had already given us a check for five thousand dollars. And that was just to drive out and talk to him. The implication was that there was more money if we agreed to take his case. A lot of money. Bert was all excited about that part. I was skeptical. After all, Bert didn't have to raise the corpse. I did.

The trouble was, Bert was probably right. I wouldn't need the gun in broad daylight. Probably. "All right, open the trunk."

Bert opened the trunk of his nearly brand-new Volvo. I was already taking off the jacket. He stood in front of me, hiding me from the house. God forbid that they should see me hiding a gun in the trunk. What would they do, lock the doors and scream for help?

I folded the holster straps around the gun and laid it in the clean trunk. It smelled like new car, plastic and faintly unreal. Bert shut the trunk, and I stared at it as if I could still see the gun.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. I didn't like leaving my gun behind, for any reason. Was that a bad sign? Bert motioned for me to come on.

I did, walking carefully over the gravel in my high-heeled black pumps. Women may get to wear lots of pretty colors, but men get the comfortable shoes.

Bert was staring at the door, smile already set on his face. It was his best professional smile, dripping with sincerity. His pale grey eyes sparkled with good cheer. It was a mask. He could put it on and off like a light switch. He'd wear the same smile if you confessed to killing your own mother. As long as you wanted to pay to have her raised from the dead.

The door opened, and I knew Bert had been wrong about me not needing a gun. The man was maybe five-eight, but the orange polo shirt he wore strained over his chest. The black sport jacket seemed too small, as if when he moved the seams would split, like an insect's skin that had been outgrown. Black acid-washed jeans showed off a small waist, so he looked like someone had pinched him in the middle while the clay was still wet. His hair was very blond. He looked at us silently. His eyes were empty, dead as a doll's. I caught a glimpse of shoulder holster under the sport jacket and resisted an urge to kick Bert in the shins.

Either my boss didn't notice the gun or he ignored it. "Hello, I'm Bert Vaughn and this is my associate, Anita Blake. I believe Mr. Gaynor is expecting us." Bert smiled at him charmingly.

The bodyguard—what else could he be—moved away from the door. Bert took that for an invitation and walked inside. I followed, not at all sure I wanted to. Harold Gaynor was a very rich man. Maybe he needed a bodyguard. Maybe people had threatened him. Or maybe he was one of those men who have enough money to keep hired muscle around whether they need it or not.

Or maybe something else was going on. Something that needed guns and muscle, and men with dead, emotionless eyes. Not a cheery thought.

The air-conditioning was on too high and the sweat gelled instantly. We followed the bodyguard down a long central hall that was paneled in dark, expensive-looking wood. The hall runner looked oriental and was probably handmade.

Heavy wooden doors were set in the right-hand wall. The bodyguard opened the doors and again stood to one side while we walked through. The room was a library, but I was betting no one ever read any of the books. The place was ceiling to floor in dark wood bookcases. There was even a second level of books and shelves reached by an elegant sweep of narrow staircase. All the books were hardcover, all the same size, colors muted and collected together like a collage. The furniture was, of course, red leather with brass buttons worked into it.

A man sat near the far wall. He smiled when we came in. He was a large man with a pleasant round face, double-chinned. He was sitting in an electric wheelchair, with a small plaid blanket over his lap, hiding his legs.

"Mr. Vaughn and Ms. Blake, how nice of you to drive out." His voice went with his face, pleasant, damn near amiable.

A slender black man sat in one of the leather chairs. He was over six feet tall, exactly how much over was hard to tell. He was slumped down, long legs stretched out in front of him with the ankles crossed. His legs were taller than I was. His brown eyes watched me as if he were trying to memorize me and would be graded later.

The blond bodyguard went to lean against the bookcases. He couldn't quite cross his arms, jacket too tight, muscles too big. You really shouldn't lean against a wall and try to look tough unless you can cross your arms. Ruins the effect.

Mr. Gaynor said, "You've met Tommy." He motioned towards the sitting bodyguard. "That's Bruno."

"Is that your real name or just a nickname?" I asked, looking straight into Bruno's eyes.

He shifted just a little in his chair. "Real name."

I smiled.

"Why?" he asked.

"I've just never met a bodyguard who was really named Bruno."

"Is that supposed to be funny?" he asked.

I shook my head. Bruno. He never had a chance. It was like naming a girl Venus. All Brunos had to be bodyguards. It was a rule. Maybe a cop? Naw, it was a bad guy's name. I smiled.

Bruno sat up in his chair, one smooth, muscular motion. He wasn't wearing a gun that I could see, but there was a presence to him. Dangerous, it said, watch out.

Guess I shouldn't have smiled.

Bert interrupted, "Anita, please. I do apologize, Mr. Gaynor . . . Mr. Bruno. Ms. Blake has a rather peculiar sense of humor."

"Don't apologize for me, Bert. I don't like it." I don't know what he was so sore about anyway. I hadn't said the really insulting stuff out loud.

"Now, now," Mr. Gaynor said. "No hard feelings. Right, Bruno?"

Bruno shook his head and frowned at me, not angry, sort of perplexed.

Bert flashed me an angry look, then turned smiling to the man in the wheelchair.

"Now, Mr. Gaynor, I know you must be a busy man. So, exactly how old is the zombie you want raised?"

"A man who gets right down to business. I like that." Gaynor hesitated, staring at the door. A woman entered.

She was tall, leggy, blond, with cornflower-blue eyes. The dress, if it was a dress, was rose-colored and silky. It clung to her body the way it was supposed to, hiding what decency demanded, but leaving very little to the imagination. Long pale legs were stuffed into pink spike heels, no hose. She stalked across the carpet, and every man in the room watched her. And she knew it.

She threw back her head and laughed, but no sound came out. Her face brightened, her lips moved, eyes sparkled, but in absolute silence, like someone had turned the sound

off. She leaned one hip against Harold Gaynor, one hand on his shoulder. He encircled her waist, and the movement raised the already short dress another inch.

Could she sit down in the dress without flashing the room? Naw.

"This is Cicely," he said. She smiled brilliantly at Bert, that little soundless laugh making her eyes sparkle. She looked at me and her eyes faltered, the smile slipped. For a second uncertainty filled her eyes. Gaynor patted her hip. The smile flamed back into place. She nodded graciously to both of us.

"I want you to raise a two-hundred-and-eighty-three-year old corpse."

I just stared at him and wondered if he understood what he was asking.

"Well," Bert said, "that is nearly three hundred years old. Very old to raise as a zombie. Most animators couldn't do it at all."

"I am aware of that," Gaynor said. "That is why I asked for Ms. Blake. She can do it."

Bert glanced at me. I had never raised anything that old. "Anita?"

"I could do it," I said.

He smiled back at Gaynor, pleased.

"But I won't do it."

Bert turned slowly back to me, smile gone.

Gaynor was still smiling. The bodyguards were immobile. Cicely looked pleasantly at me, eyes blank of any meaning.

"A million dollars, Ms. Blake," Gaynor said in his soft pleasant voice.

I saw Bert swallow. His hands convulsed on the chair arms. Bert's idea of sex was money. He probably had the biggest hard-on of his life.

"Do you understand what you're asking, Mr. Gaynor?" I asked.

He nodded. "I will supply the white goat." His voice was still pleasant as he said it, still smiling. Only his eyes had gone dark; eager, anticipatory.

I stood up. "Come on, Bert, it's time to leave."

Bert grabbed my arm. "Anita, sit down, please."

I stared at his hand until he let go of me. His charming mask slipped, showing me the anger underneath, then he was all pleasant business again. "Anita. It is a generous payment."

"The white goat is a euphemism, Bert. It means a human sacrifice."

My boss glanced at Gaynor, then back to me. He knew me well enough to believe me, but he didn't want to. "I don't understand," he said.

"The older the zombie the bigger the death needed to raise it. After a few centuries the only death 'big enough' is a human sacrifice," I said.

Gaynor wasn't smiling anymore. He was watching me out of dark eyes. Cicely was still looking pleasant, almost smiling. Was there anyone home behind those so blue eyes?

"Do you really want to talk about murder in front of Cicely?" I asked.

Gaynor beamed at me, always a bad sign. "She can't understand a word we say. Cicely's deaf."

I stared at him, and he nodded. She looked at me with pleasant eyes. We were talking of human sacrifice and she didn't even know it. If she could read lips, she was hiding it very well. I guess even the handicapped, um, physically challenged, can fall into bad company, but it seemed wrong.

"I hate a woman who talks constantly," Gaynor said.

I shook my head. "All the money in the world wouldn't be enough to get me to work for you."

"Couldn't you just kill lots of animals, instead of just one?" Bert asked. Bert is a very good business manager. He knows shit about raising the dead.

I stared down at him. "No."

Bert sat very still in his chair. The prospect of losing a million dollars must have been real physical pain for him, but he hid it. Mr. Corporate Negotiator. "There has to be a way to work this out," he said. His voice was calm. A professional smile curled his lips. He was still trying to do business. My boss did not understand what was happening.

"Do you know of another animator that could raise a zombie this old?" Gaynor asked.

Bert glanced up at me, then down at the floor, then at Gaynor. The professional smile had faded. He understood now that it was murder we were talking about. Would that make a difference?

I had always wondered where Bert drew the line. I was about to find out. The fact that I didn't know whether he would refuse the contract told you a lot about my boss.

"No," Bert said softly, "no, I guess I can't help you either, Mr. Gaynor."

"If it's the money, Ms. Blake, I can raise the offer."

A tremor ran through Bert's shoulders. Poor Bert, but he hid it well. Brownie point for him.

"I'm not an assassin, Gaynor," I said.

"That ain't what I heard," Tommy of the blond hair said.

I glanced at him. His eyes were still as empty as a doll's. "I don't kill people for money."

"You kill vampires for money," he said.

"Legal execution, and I don't do it for the money," I said.

Tommy shook his head and moved away from the wall. "I hear you like staking vampires. And you aren't too careful about who you have to kill to get to 'em."

"My informants tell me you have killed humans before, Ms. Blake," Gaynor said.

"Only in self-defense, Gaynor. I don't do murder."

Bert was standing now. "I think it is time to leave."

Bruno stood in one fluid movement, big dark hands loose and half-cupped at his sides. I was betting on some kind of martial arts.

Tommy was standing away from the wall. His sport jacket was pushed back to expose his gun, like an old-time gunfighter. It was a .357 Magnum. It would make a very big hole.

I just stood there, staring at them. What else could I do? I might be able to do something with Bruno, but Tommy had a gun. I didn't. It sort of ended the argument.

They were treating me like I was a very dangerous person. At five-three I am not imposing. Raise the dead, kill a few vampires, and people start considering you one of the monsters. Sometimes it hurt. But now . . . it had possibilities. "Do you really think I came in here unarmed?" I asked. My voice sounded very matter-of-fact.

Bruno looked at Tommy. He sort of shrugged. "I didn't pat her down."

Bruno snorted.

"She ain't wearing a gun, though," Tommy said.

"Want to bet your life on it?" I said. I smiled when I said it, and slid my hand, very slowly, towards my back. Make them think I had a hip holster at the small of my back. Tommy shifted, flexing his hand near his gun. If he went for it, we were going to die. I was going to come back and haunt Bert.

Gaynor said, "No. No need for anyone to die here today, Ms. Blake."

"No," I said, "no need at all." I swallowed my pulse back into my throat and eased my hand away from my imaginary gun. Tommy eased away from his real one. Goody for us.

Gaynor smiled again, like a pleasant beardless Santa. "You of course understand that telling the police would be useless."

I nodded. "We have no proof. You didn't even tell us who you wanted raised from the dead, or why."

"It would be your word against mine," he said.

"And I'm sure you have friends in high places." I smiled when I said it.

His smile widened, dimpling his fat little cheeks. "Of course."

I turned my back on Tommy and his gun. Bert followed. We walked outside into the blistering summer heat. Bert looked a little shaken. I felt almost friendly towards him. It was nice to know that Bert had limits, something he wouldn't do, even for a million dollars.

"Would they really have shot us?" he asked. His voice sounded matter-of-fact, firmer than the slightly glassy look in his eyes. Tough Bert. He unlocked the trunk without being asked.

"With Harold Gaynor's name in our appointment book and in the computer?" I got my gun out and slipped on the holster rig. "Not knowing who we'd mentioned this trip to?" I shook my head. "Too risky."

"Then why did you pretend to have a gun?" He looked me straight in the eyes as he asked, and for the first time I saw uncertainty in his face. Ol' money bags needed a comforting word, but I was fresh out.

"Because, Bert, I could have been wrong."

Chapter 2

The bridal shop was just off 70 West in St. Peters. It was called The Maiden Voyage. Cute. There was a pizza place on one side of it and a beauty salon on the other. It was called Full Dark Beauty Salon. The windows were blacked out, outlined in bloodred neon. You could get your hair and nails done by a vampire, if you wanted to.

Vampirism had only been legal for two years in the United States of America. We were still the only country in the world where it was legal. Don't ask me; I didn't vote for it. There was even a movement to give the vamps the vote. Taxation without representation and all that.

Two years ago if a vampire bothered someone I just went out and staked the son of a bitch. Now I had to get a court order of execution. Without it, I was up on murder charges, if I was caught. I longed for the good old days.

There was a blond mannequin in the wedding shop window wearing enough white lace to drown in. I am not a big fan of lace, or seed pearls, or sequins. Especially not sequins. I had gone out with Catherine twice to help her look for a wedding gown. It didn't take long to realize I was no help. I didn't like any of them.

Catherine was a very good friend or I wouldn't have been here at all. She told me if I ever got married I'd change my mind. Surely being in love doesn't cause you to lose your sense of good taste. If I ever buy a gown with sequins on it, someone just shoot me.

I also wouldn't have chosen the bridal dresses Catherine picked out, but it was my own fault that I hadn't been around when the vote was taken. I worked too much and I hated to shop. So, I ended up plunking down \$120 plus tax on a pink taffeta evening gown. It looked like it had run away from a junior high prom.

I walked into the air-conditioned hush of the bridal shop, high heels sinking into a carpet so pale grey it was nearly white. Mrs. Cassidy, the manager, saw me come in. Her smile faltered for just a moment before she got it under control. She smiled at me, brave Mrs. Cassidy.

I smiled back, not looking forward to the next hour.

Mrs. Cassidy was somewhere between forty and fifty, trim figure, red hair so dark it was almost brown. The hair was tied in a French knot like Grace Kelly used to wear. She pushed her gold wire-framed glasses more securely on her nose and said, "Ms. Blake, here for the final fitting, I see."

"I hope it's the final fitting," I said.

"Well, we have been working on the . . . problem. I think we've come up with something." There was a small room in back of the desk. It was filled with racks of plastic-covered dresses. Mrs. Cassidy pulled mine out from between two identical pink dresses.

She led the way to the dressing rooms with the dress draped over her arms. Her spine was very straight. She was gearing for another battle. I didn't have to gear up, I was always ready for battle. But arguing with Mrs. Cassidy about alterations to a formal beat the heck out of arguing with Tommy and Bruno. It could have gone very badly, but it hadn't. Gaynor had called them off, for today, he had said.

What did that mean exactly? It was probably self-explanatory. I had left Bert at the office still shaken from his close encounter. He didn't deal with the messy end of the business. The violent end. No, I did that, or Manny, or Jamison, or Charles. We, the animators of Animators, Inc, we did the dirty work. Bert stayed in his nice safe office and sent clients and trouble our way. Until today.

Mrs. Cassidy hung the dress on a hook inside one of the dressing stalls and went away. Before I could go inside, another stall opened, and Kasey, Catherine's flower girl, stepped out. She was eight, and she was glowering. Her mother followed behind her, still in her business suit. Elizabeth (call me Elsie) Markowitz was tall, slender, black-haired, olive skinned, and a lawyer. She worked with Catherine and was also in the wedding.

Kasey looked like a smaller, softer version of her mother.

The child spotted me first and said, "Hi, Anita. Isn't this dress dumb-looking?"

"Now, Kasey," Elsie said, "it's a beautiful dress. All those nice pink ruffles."

The dress looked like a petunia on steroids to me. I stripped off my jacket and started moving into my own dressing room before I had to give my opinion out loud.

"Is that a real gun?" Kasey asked.

I had forgotten I was still wearing it. "Yes," I said.

"Are you a policewoman?"

"No."

"Kasey Markowitz, you ask too many questions." Her mother herded her past me with a harried smile. "Sorry about that, Anita."

"I don't mind," I said. Sometime later I was standing on a little raised platform in front of a nearly perfect circle of mirrors. With the matching pink high heels the dress was the right length at least. It also had little puff sleeves and was an off-the-shoulder look. The dress showed almost every scar I had.

The newest scar was still pink and healing on my right forearm. But it was just a knife wound. They're neat, clean things compared to my other scars. My collarbone and left arm have both been broken. A vampire bit through them, tore at me like a dog with a piece of meat. There's also the cross-shaped burn mark on my left forearm. Some inventive human vampire slaves thought it was amusing. I didn't.

I looked like Frankenstein's bride goes to the prom. Okay, maybe it wasn't that bad, but Mrs. Cassidy thought it was. She thought the scars would distract people from the dress, the wedding party, the bride. But Catherine, the bride herself, didn't agree. She thought I deserved to be in the wedding, because we were such good friends. I was paying good money to be publicly humiliated. We must be good friends.

Mrs. Cassidy handed me a pair of long pink satin gloves. I pulled them on, wiggling my fingers deep into the tiny holes. I've never liked gloves. They make me feel like I'm touching the world through a curtain. But the bright pink things did hide my arms. Scars all gone. What a good girl. Right.

The woman fluffed out the satiny skirt, glancing into the mirror. "It will do, I think." She stood, tapping one long, painted fingernail against her lipsticked mouth. "I believe I have come up with something to hide that, uh . . . well . . ." She made vague hand motions towards me.

"My collarbone scar?" I said.

"Yes." She sounded relieved.

It occurred to me for the first time that Mrs. Cassidy had never once said the word "scar." As if it were dirty, or rude. I smiled at myself in the ring of mirrors. Laughter caught at the back of my throat.

Mrs. Cassidy held up something made of pink ribbon and fake orange blossoms. The laughter died. "What is that?" I asked.

"This," she said, stepping towards me, "is the solution to our problem."

"All right, but what is it?"

"Well, it is a collar, a decoration."

"It goes around my neck?"

"Yes."

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Ms. Blake, I have tried everything to hide that, that . . . mark. Hats, hairdos, simple ribbons, corsages . . ." She literally threw up her hands. "I am at my wit's end."

This I could believe. I took a deep breath. "I sympathize with you, Mrs. Cassidy, really I do. I've been a royal pain in the ass."

"I would never say such a thing."

"I know, so I said it for you. But that is the ugliest piece of fru-fru I've ever laid eyes on."

"If you, Ms. Blake, have any better suggestions, then I am all ears." She half crossed her arms over her chest. The offending piece of "decoration" trailed nearly to her waist.

"It's huge," I protested.

"It will hide your"—she set her mouth tight—"scar."

I felt like applauding. She'd said the dirty word. Did I have any better suggestions? No. I did not. I sighed. "Put it on me. The least I can do is look at it."

She smiled. "Please lift your hair."

I did as I was told. She fastened it around my neck. The lace itched, the ribbons tickled, and I didn't even want to look in the mirror. I raised my eyes, slowly, and just stared.

"Thank goodness you have long hair. I'll style it myself the day of the wedding so it helps the camouflage."

The thing around my neck looked like a cross between a dog collar and the world's biggest wrist corsage. My neck had sprouted pink ribbons like mushrooms after a rain. It was hideous, and no amount of hairstyling was going to change that. But it hid the scar completely, perfectly. Ta-da.

I just shook my head. What could I say? Mrs. Cassidy took my silence for assent. She should have known better. The phone rang and saved us both. "I'll be just a minute, Ms. Blake." She stalked off, high-heels silent on the thick carpet.

I just stared at myself in the mirrors. My hair and eyes match, black hair, eyes so dark brown they look black. They are my mother's Latin darkness. But my skin is pale, my father's Germanic blood. Put some makeup on me and I look not unlike a china doll. Put me in a puffy pink dress and I look delicate, dainty, petite. Dammit.

The rest of the women in the wedding party were all five-five or above. Maybe some of them would actually look good in the dress. I doubted it.

Insult to injury, we all had to wear hoop skirts underneath. I looked like a reject from *Gone With the Wind*.

"There, don't you look lovely." Mrs. Cassidy had returned. She was beaming at me.

"I look like I've been dipped in Pepto-Bismol," I said.

Her smile faded around the edges. She swallowed. "You don't like this last idea." Her voice was very stiff.

Elsie Markowitz came out of the dressing rooms. Kasey was trailing behind, scowling. I knew how she felt. "Oh, Anita," Elsie said, "you look adorable."

Great. Adorable, just what I wanted to hear. "Thanks."

"I especially like the ribbons at your throat. We'll all be wearing them, you know."

"Sorry about that," I said.

She frowned at me. "I think they just set off the dress."

It was my turn to frown. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Elsie looked puzzled. "Well, of course I am. Don't you like the dresses?"

I decided not to answer on the grounds that it might piss someone off. I guess, what can you expect from a woman who has a perfectly good name like Elizabeth, but prefers to be named after a cow?

"Is this the absolutely last thing we can use for camouflage, Mrs. Cassidy?" I asked. She nodded, once, very firmly.

I sighed, and she smiled. Victory was hers, and she knew it. I knew I was beaten the moment I saw the dress, but if I'm going to lose, I'm going to make someone pay for it. "All right. It's done. This is it. I'll wear it."

Mrs. Cassidy beamed at me. Elsie smiled. Kasey smirked. I hiked the hoop skirt up to my knees and stepped off the platform. The hoop swung like a bell with, me as the clapper.

The phone rang. Mrs. Cassidy went to answer it, a lift in her step, a song in her heart, and me out of her shop. Joy in the afternoon.

I was struggling to get the wide skirt through the narrow little door that led to the changing rooms when she called, "Ms. Blake, it's for you. A Detective Sergeant Storr."

"See, Mommy, I told you she was a policewoman," Kasey said.

I didn't explain because Elsie had asked me not to, weeks ago. She thought Kasey was too young to know about animators and zombies and vampire slayings. Not that any child of eight could not know what a vampire was. They were pretty much the media event of the decade.

I tried to put the phone to my left ear, but the damned flowers got in the way. Pressing the receiver in the bend of my neck and shoulder, I reached back to undo the collar. "Hi, Dolph, what's up?"

"Murder scene." His voice was pleasant, like he should sing tenor.

"What kind of murder scene?"

"Messy."

I finally pulled the collar free and dropped the phone.

"Anita, you there?"

"Yeah, having some wardrobe trouble."

"What?"

"It's not important. Why do you want me to come down to the scene?"

"Whatever did this wasn't human."

"Vampire?"

"You're the undead expert. That's why I want you to come take a look."

"Okay, give me the address, and I'll be right there." There was a notepad of pale pink paper with little hearts on it. The pen had a plastic cupid on the end of it. "St. Charles, I'm not more than fifteen minutes from you."

"Good." He hung up.

"Good-bye to you, too, Dolph." I said it to empty air just to feel superior. I went back into the little room to change.

I had been offered a million dollars today, just to kill someone and raise a zombie. Then off to the bridal shop for a final fitting. Now a murder scene. Messy, Dolph had said. It was turning out to be a very busy afternoon.

Chapter 3

Messy, Dolph had called it. A master of understatement. Blood was everywhere, splattered over the white walls like someone had taken a can of paint and thrown it. There was an off-white couch with brown and gold patterned flowers on it. Most of the couch was hidden under a sheet. The sheet was crimson. A bright square of afternoon sunlight came through the clean, sparkling windows. The sunlight made the blood cherry-red, shiny.

Fresh blood is really brighter than you see it on television and the movies. In large quantities. Real blood is screaming fire-engine red, in large quantities, but darker red shows up on the screen better. So much for realism.

Only fresh blood is red, true red. This blood was old and should have faded, but some trick of the summer sunshine kept it shiny and new.

I swallowed very hard and took a deep breath.

"You look a little green, Blake," a voice said almost at my elbow.

I jumped, and Zerbrowski laughed. "Did I scare ya?"

"No," I lied.

Detective Zerbrowski was about five-seven, curly black hair going grey, dark-rimmed glasses framed brown eyes. His brown suit was rumpled; his yellow and maroon tie had a smudge on it, probably from lunch. He was grinning at me. He was always grinning at me.

"I gotcha, Blake, admit it. Is our fierce vampire slayer gonna upchuck on the victims?"

"Putting on a little weight there, aren't you, Zerbrowski?"

"Ooh, I'm hurt," he said. He clutched hands to his chest, swaying a little. "Don't tell me you don't want my body, the way I want yours."

"Lay off, Zerbrowski. Where's Dolph?"

"In the master bedroom." Zerbrowski gazed up at the vaulted ceiling with its skylight. "Wish Katie and I could afford something like this."

"Yeah," I said. "It's nice." I glanced at the sheet-covered couch. The sheet clung to whatever was underneath, like a napkin thrown over spilled juice. There was something wrong with the way it looked. Then it hit me, there weren't enough bumps to make a whole human body. Whatever was under there was missing some parts.

The room sort of swam. I looked away, swallowing convulsively. It had been months since I had actually gotten sick at a murder scene. At least the air-conditioning was on. That was good. Heat always makes the smell worse.

"Hey, Blake, do you really need to step outside?" Zerbrowski took my arm as if to lead me towards the door.

"Thanks, but I'm fine." I looked him straight in his baby browns and lied. He knew I was lying. I wasn't all right, but I'd make it.

He released my arm, stepped back, and gave me a mock salute. "I love a tough broad."

I smiled before I could stop it. "Go away, Zerbrowski."

"End of the hall, last door on the left. You'll find Dolph there." He walked away into the crowd of men. There are always more people than you need at a murder scene, not the gawkers outside but uniforms, plainclothes, technicians, the guy with the video camera. A murder scene was like a bee swarm, full of frenzied movement and damn crowded. I threaded my way through the crowd. My plastic-coated ID badge was clipped to the collar of my navy-blue jacket. It was so the police would know I was on their side and hadn't just snuck in. It also made carrying a gun into a crowd of policemen safer.

I squeezed past a crowd that was gathered like a traffic jam beside a door in the middle of the hall. Voices came, disjointed, "Jesus, look at the blood . . . Have they found the body yet? . . . You mean what's left of it? . . . No."

I pushed between two uniforms. One said, "Hey!" I found a cleared space just in front of the last door on the left-hand side. I don't know how Dolph had done it but he was alone in the room. Maybe they were just finished in here.

He knelt in the middle of the pale brown carpet. His thick hands, encased in surgical gloves, were on his thighs. His black hair was cut so short it left his ears sort of stranded on either side of a large blunt face. He saw me and stood. He was six-eight, built big like a wrestler. The canopied bed behind him suddenly looked small.

Dolph was head of the police's newest task force, the spook squad. Official title was the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team, R-P-I-T, pronounced "rip it." It handled all supernatural crime. It was a place to dump the troublemakers. I never wondered what Zerbrowski had done to get on the spook squad. His sense of humor was too strange and absolutely merciless. But Dolph. He was the perfect policeman. I had always sort of figured he had offended someone high up, offended them by being too good at his job. Now that I could believe.

There was another sheet-covered bundle on the carpet beside him.

"Anita." He always talks like that, one word at a time.

"Dolph," I said.

He knelt between the canopy bed and the blood-soaked sheet. "You ready?"

"I know you're the silent type, Dolph, but could you tell me what I'm supposed to be looking for?"

"I want to know what you see, not what I tell you you're supposed to see."

For Dolph it was a speech. "Okay," I said, "let's do it."

He pulled back the sheet. It peeled away from the bloody thing underneath. I stood and I stared and all I could see was a lump of bloody meat. It could have been from anything: a cow, horse, deer. But human? Surely not.

My eyes saw it, but my brain refused what it was being shown. I squatted beside it, tucking my skirt under my thighs. The carpeting squeezed underfoot like rain had gotten to it, but it wasn't rain.

"Do you have a pair of gloves I can borrow? I left my crime scene gear at the office."

"Right jacket pocket." He lifted his hands in the air. There were blood marks on the gloves. "Help yourself. The wife hates me to get blood on the dry cleaning."

I smiled. Amazing. A sense of humor is mandatory at times. I had to reach across the remains. I pulled out two surgical gloves; one size fits all. The gloves always felt like

they had powder in them. They didn't feel like gloves at all, more like condoms for your hands.

"Can I touch it without damaging evidence?"

"Yes."

I poked the side of it with two fingers. It was like poking a side of fresh beef. A nice, solid feel to it. My fingers traced the bumps of bone, ribs under the flesh. Ribs. Suddenly I knew what I was looking at. Part of the rib cage of a human being. There was the shoulder, white bone sticking out where the arm had been torn away. That was all. All there was. I stood too quickly and stumbled. The carpet squeeshed underfoot.

The room was suddenly very hot. I turned away from the body and found myself staring at the bureau. Its mirror was splattered so heavily with blood, it looked like someone had covered it in layers of red fingernail polish. Cherry Blossom Red, Carnival Crimson, Candy Apple.

I closed my eyes and counted very slowly to ten. When I opened them the room seemed cooler. I noticed for the first time that a ceiling fan was slowly turning. I was fine. Heap big vampire slayer. Ri-ight.

Dolph didn't comment as I knelt by the body again. He didn't even look at me. Good man. I tried to be objective and see whatever there was to see. But it was hard. I liked the remains better when I couldn't figure out what part of the body they were. Now all I could see was the bloody remains. All I could think of was this used to be a human body. "Used to be" was the operative phrase.

"No signs of a weapon that I can see, but the coroner will be able to tell you that." I reached out to touch it again, then stopped. "Can you help me raise it up so I can see inside the chest cavity? What's left of the chest cavity?"

Dolph dropped the sheet and helped me lift the remains. It was lighter than it looked. Raised on its side there was nothing underneath. All the vital organs that the ribs protect were gone. It looked for all the world like a side of beef ribs, except for the bones where the arm should have connected. Part of the collarbone was still attached.

"Okay," I said. My voice sounded breathy. I stood, holding my blood-spattered hands out to my sides. "Cover it, please."

He did, and stood. "Impressions?"

"Violence, extreme violence. More than human strength. The body's been ripped apart by hand."

"Why by hand?"

"No knife marks." I laughed, but it choked me. "Hell, I'd think someone had used a saw on the body like butchering a cow, but the bones..." I shook my head. "Nothing mechanical was used to do this."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, where is the rest of the fucking body?"

"Down the hall, second door on the left."

"The rest of the body?" The room was getting hot again.

"Just go look. Tell me what you see."

"Dammit, Dolph, I know you don't like to influence your experts, but I don't like walking in there blind."

He just stared at me.

"At least answer one question."

"Maybe, what?"

"Is it worse than this?"

He seemed to think about that for a moment. "No, and yes."

"Damn you."

"You'll understand after you've seen it."

I didn't want to understand. Bert had been thrilled that the police wanted to put me on retainer. He had told me I would gain valuable experience working with the police. All I had gained so far was a wider variety of nightmares.

Dolph walked ahead of me to the next chamber of horrors. I didn't really want to find the rest of the body. I wanted to go home. He hesitated in front of the closed door until I stood beside him. There was a cardboard cutout of a rabbit on the door like for Easter. A needlework sign hung just below the bunny. Baby's Room.

"Dolph," my voice sounded very quiet. The noise from the living room was muted.

"Yes."

"Nothing, nothing." I took a deep breath and let it out. I could do this. I could do this. Oh, God, I didn't want to do this. I whispered a prayer under my breath as the door swung inward. There are moments in life when the only way to get through is with a little grace from on high. I was betting this was going to be one of them.

Sunlight streamed through a small window. The curtains were white with little duckies and bunnies stitched around the edges. Animal cutouts danced around the pale blue walls. There was no crib, only one of those beds with handrails halfway down. A big boy bed, wasn't that what they were called?

There wasn't as much blood in here. Thank you, dear God. Who says prayers never get answered? But in a square of bright August sunshine sat a stuffed teddy bear. The teddy bear was candy-coated with blood. One glassy eye stared round and surprised out of the spiky fake fur.

I knelt beside it. The carpet didn't squeeze, no blood soaked in. Why was the damn bear sitting here covered in congealing blood? There was no other blood in the entire room that I could see.

Did someone just set it here? I looked up and found myself staring at a small white chest of drawers with bunnies painted on it. When you have a motif, I guess you stick with it. On the white paint was one small, perfect handprint. I crawled towards it and held up my hand near it comparing size. My hands aren't big, small even for a woman's, but this handprint was tiny. Two, three, maybe four. Blue walls, probably a boy.

"How old was the child?"

"Picture in the living room has Benjamin Reynolds, age three, written on the back."

"Benjamin," I whispered it, and stared at the bloody handprint. "There's no body in this room. No one was killed here."

"No."

"Why did you want me to see it?" I looked up at him, still kneeling.

"Your opinion isn't worth anything if you don't see everything."

"That damn bear is going to haunt me."

"Me, too," he said.

I stood, resisting the urge to smooth my skirt down in back. It was amazing how many times I touched my clothing without thinking and smeared blood on myself. But not today.

"Is it the boy's body under the sheet in the living room?" As I said it, I prayed that it wasn't.

"No," he said.

Thank God. "Mother's body?"

"Yes."

"Where is the boy's body?"

"We can't find it." He hesitated, then asked, "Could the thing have eaten the child's body completely?"

"You mean so there wouldn't be anything left to find?"

"Yes," he said. His face looked just the tiniest bit pale. Mine probably did, too.

"Possible, but even the undead have a limit to what they can eat." I took a deep breath. "Did you find any signs of - regurgitation."

"Regurgitation." He smiled. "Nice word. No, the creature didn't eat and then vomit. At least we haven't found it."

"Then the boy's probably still around somewhere."

"Could he be alive?" Dolph asked.

I looked up at him. I wanted to say yes, but I knew the answer was probably no. I compromised. "I don't know."

Dolph nodded.

"The living room next?" I asked.

"No." He walked out of the room without another word. I followed. What else could I do? But I didn't hurry. If he wanted to play tough, silent policeman, he could damn well wait for me to catch up.

I followed his broad back around the corner through the living room into the kitchen. A sliding glass door led out onto a deck. Glass was everywhere. Shiny slivers of it sparkled in the light from yet another skylight. The kitchen was spotless, like a magazine ad, done in blue tile and rich light-colored wood. "Nice kitchen," I said.

I could see men moving around the yard. The party had moved outside. The privacy fence hid them from the curious neighbors, as it had hidden the killer last night. There was just one detective standing beside the shiny sink. He was scribbling something in a notebook.

Dolph motioned me to have a closer look. "Okay," I said. "Something crashed through the sliding glass door. It must have made a hell of a lot of noise. This much glass breaking even with the air-conditioning on . . . You'd hear it."

"You think so?" he asked.

"Did any of the neighbors hear anything?" I asked.

"No one will admit to it," he said.

I nodded. "Glass breaks, someone comes to check it out, probably the man. Some sexist stereotypes die hard."

"What do you mean?" Dolph asked.

"The brave hunter protecting his family," I said.

"Okay, say it was the man, what next?"

"Man comes in, sees whatever crashed through the window, yells for his wife. Probably tells her to get out. Take the kid and run."

"Why not call the police?" he asked.

"I didn't see a phone in the master bedroom." I nodded towards the phone on the kitchen wall. "This is probably the only phone. You have to get past the bogeyman to reach the phone."

"Go on."

I glanced behind me into the living room. The sheet-covered couch was just visible. "The thing, whatever it was, took out the man. Quick, disabled him, knocked him out, but didn't kill him."

"Why not kill?"

"Don't test me, Dolph. There isn't enough blood in the kitchen. He was eaten in the bedroom. Whatever did it wouldn't have dragged a dead man off to the bedroom. It chased the man into the bedroom and killed him there."

"Not bad, want to take a shot at the living room next?"

Not really, but I didn't say it out loud. There was more left of the woman, Her upper body was almost intact. Paper bags enveloped her hands. We had samples of something under her fingernails. I hoped it helped. Her wide brown eyes stared up at the ceiling. The pajama top clung wetly to where her waist used to be. I swallowed hard and used my index finger and thumb to raise the pajama top.

Her spine glistened in the hard sunshine, wet and white and dangling, like a cord that had been ripped out of its socket.

Okay. "Something tore her apart, just like the . . . man in the bedroom."

"How do you know it's a man?"

"Unless they had company, it has to be the man. They didn't have a visitor, did they?"

Dolph shook his head. "Not as far as we know."

"Then it has to be the man. Because she still has all her ribs, and both arms." I tried to swallow the anger in my voice. It wasn't Dolph's fault. "I'm not one of your cops. I wish you'd stop asking me questions that you already have the answers to."

He nodded. "Fair enough. Sometimes I forget you're not one of the boys."

"Thank you for that."

"You know what I mean."

"I do, and I even know you mean it as a compliment, but can we finish discussing this outside, please?"

"Sure." He slipped off his bloody gloves and put them in a garbage sack that was sitting open in the kitchen. I did the same.

The heat fastened round me like melting plastic, but it felt good, clean somehow. I breathed in great lungfuls of hot, sweating air. Ah, summer.

"I was right though, it wasn't human?" he asked.

There were two uniformed police officers keeping the crowd off the lawn and in the street. Children, parents, kids on bikes. It looked like a freaking circus.

"No, it wasn't human. There was no blood on the glass that it came through."

"I noticed. What's the significance?"

"Most dead don't bleed, except for vampires."

"Most?"

"Freshly dead zombies can bleed, but vampires bleed almost like a person."

"You don't think it was a vampire then?"

"If it was, then it ate human flesh. Vampires can't digest solid food."

"Ghoul?"

"Too far from a cemetery, and there'd be more destruction of the house. Ghouls would tear up furniture like wild animals."

"Zombie?"

I shook my head. "I honestly don't know. There are such things as flesh-eating zombies. They're rare, but it happens."

"You told me that there have been three reported cases. Each time the zombies stay human longer and don't rot."

I smiled. "Good memory. That's right. Flesh-eating zombies don't rot, as long as you feed them. Or at least don't rot as quickly."

"Are they violent?"

"Not so far," I said.

"Are zombies violent?" Dolph asked.

"Only if told to be."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"You can order a zombie to kill people if you're powerful enough."

"A zombie as a murder weapon?"

I nodded. "Something like that, yes."

"Who could do something like that?"

"I'm not sure that's what happened here," I said.

"I know. But who could do it?"

"Well, hell, I could, but I wouldn't. And nobody I know that could do it would do it."

"Let us decide that," he said. He had gotten his little notebook out.

"You really want me to give you names of friends so you can ask them if they happened to have raised a zombie and sent it to kill these people?"

"Please."

I sighed. "I don't believe this. All right, me, Manny Rodriguez, Peter Burke, and. . ." I stopped words already forming a third name.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I just remembered that I've got Burke's funeral to go to this week. He's dead so I don't think he's a suspect."

Dolph was looking at me hard, suspicion plain on his face. "You sure this is all the names you want to give me?"

"If I think of anyone else, I'll let you know," I said. I was at my wide-eyed most sincere. See, nothing up my sleeve.

"You do that, Anita."

"Sure thing."

He smiled and shook his head. "Who are you protecting?"

"Me," I said. He looked puzzled. "Let's just say I don't want to get someone mad at me."

"Who?"

I looked up into the clear August sky. "You think we'll get rain?"

"Dammit, Anita, I need your help."

"I've given you my help," I said.

"The name."

"Not yet. I'll check it out, and if it looks suspicious, I promise to share it with you."

"Well, isn't that just generous of you?" A flush was creeping up his neck. I had never seen Dolph angry before. I feared I was about to.

"The first death was a homeless man. We thought he'd passed out from liquor and ghouls got him. We found him right next to a cemetery. Open and shut, right?" His voice was rising just a bit with each word.

"Next we find this couple, teenagers caught necking in the boy's car. Dead, still not too far from the cemetery. We called in an exterminator and a priest. Case closed." He lowered his voice, but it was like he had swallowed the yelling. His voice was strained and almost touchable with its anger.

"Now this. It's the same beastie, whatever the hell it is. But we are miles from the nearest frigging cemetery. It isn't a ghoul, and maybe if I had called you in with the first or even the second case, this wouldn't have happened. But I figure I'm getting good at this supernatural crap. I've had some experience now, but it isn't enough. It isn't nearly enough." His big hands were crushing his notebook.

"That's the longest speech I've ever heard you make," I said.

He half laughed. "I need the name, Anita."

"Dominga Salvador. She's the voodoo priest for the entire Midwest. But if you send police down there she won't talk to you. None of them will."

"But they'll talk to you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Okay, but I better hear something from you by tomorrow."

"I don't know if I can set up a meeting that soon."

"Either you do it, or I do it," he said.

"Okay, okay, I'll do it, somehow."

"Thanks, Anita. At least now we have someplace to start."

"It might not be a zombie at all, Dolph. I'm just guessing."

"What else could it be?"

"Well, if there had been blood on the glass, I'd say maybe a lycanthrope."

"Oh, great, just what I need—a rampaging shapeshifter."

"But there was no blood on the glass."

"So probably some kind of undead," he said.

"Exactly."

"You talk to this Dominga Salvador and give me a report ASAP."

"Aye, aye, Sergeant."

He made a face at me and walked back inside the house. Better him than me. All I had to do was go home, change clothes, and prepare to raise the dead. At full dark tonight I had three clients lined up or would that be lying down?

Ellen Grisholm's therapist thought it would be therapeutic for Ellen to confront her child-molesting father. The trouble was the father had been dead for several months. So I was going to raise Mr. Grisholm from the dead and let his daughter tell him what a son of a bitch he was. The therapist said it would be cleansing. I guess if you have a doctorate, you're allowed to say things like that.

The other two raisings were more usual; a contested will, and a prosecution's star witness that had had the bad taste to have a heart attack before testifying in court. They still weren't sure if the testimony of a zombie was admissible in court, but they were desperate enough to try, and to pay for the privilege.

I stood there in the greenish-brown grass. Glad to see the family hadn't been addicted to sprinklers. A waste of water. Maybe they had even recycled their pop cans, newspapers. Maybe they had been decent earth-loving citizens. Maybe not.

One of the uniforms lifted the yellow Do-Not-Cross tape and let me out. I ignored all the staring people and got in my car. It was a late-model Nova. I could have afforded something better but why bother? It ran.

The steering wheel was too hot to touch. I turned on the air-conditioning and let the car cool down. What I had told Dolph about Dominga Salvador had been true. She wouldn't talk to the police, but that hadn't been the reason I tried to keep her name out of it.

If the police came knocking on Señora Dominga's door, she'd want to know who sent them. And she'd find out. The Señora was the most powerful vaudun priest I had ever met.

Raising a murderous zombie was just one of many things she could do, if she wanted to.

Frankly, there were things worse than zombies that could come crawling through your window some dark night. I knew as little about that side of the business as I could get away with. The Señora had invented most of it.

No, I did not want Dominga Salvador angry with me. So it looked like I was going to have to talk with her tomorrow. It was sort of like getting an appointment to see the godfather of voodoo. Or in this case the godmother. The trouble was this godmother was unhappy with me. Dominga had sent me invitations to her home. To her ceremonies. I had politely declined. I think my being a Christian disappointed her. So I had managed to avoid a face to face, until now.

I was going to ask the most powerful vaudun priest in the United States, maybe in all of North America, if she just happened to raise a zombie. And if that zombie just happened to be going around killing people, on her orders? Was I crazy? Maybe. It looked like tomorrow was going to be another busy day.

Chapter 4

The alarm screamed. I rolled over swatting at the buttons on top of the digital clock. Surely to God, I'd hit the snooze button soon. I finally had to prop myself up on one elbow and actually open my eyes. I turned off the alarm and stared at the glowing numbers. 6:00 A.M. Shit. I'd only gotten home at three.

Why had I set the alarm for six? I couldn't remember. I am not at my best after only three hours of sleep. I lay back down in the still warm nest of sheets. My eyes were fluttering shut when I remembered. Dominga Salvador.

She had agreed to meet me at 7:00 A.M. today. Talk about a breakfast meeting. I struggled out of the sheet, and just sat on the side of the bed for a minute. The apartment

was absolutely still. The only sound was the hush-hush of the air-conditioning. Quiet as a funeral.

I got up then, thoughts of blood-coated teddy bears dancing in my head.

Fifteen minutes later I was dressed. I always showered after coming in from work no matter how late it was. I couldn't stand the thought of going to bed between nice clean sheets smeared with dried chicken blood. Sometimes it's goat blood, but more often chicken.

I had compromised on the outfit, caught between showing respect and not melting in the heat. It would have been easy if I hadn't planned to carry a gun with me. Call me paranoid, but I don't leave home without it.

The acid washed jeans, jogging socks, and Nikes were easy. An Uncle Mike's inter-pants holster complete with a Firestar 9mm completed the outfit. The Firestar was my backup piece to the Browning Hi-Power. The Browning was far too bulky to put down an inter-pants holster, but the Firestar fit nicely.

Now all I needed was a shirt that would hide the gun, but leave it accessible to grab and shoot. This was harder than it sounded. I finally settled on a short, almost middrift top that just barely fell over my waistband. I turned in front of the mirror.

The gun was invisible as long as I didn't forget and raise my arms too high. The top, unfortunately, was a pale, pale pink. What had possessed me to buy this top, I really didn't remember. Maybe it had been a gift? I hoped so. The thought that I had actually spent money on anything pink was more than I could bear.

I hadn't opened the drapes at all yet. The entire apartment was in twilight. I had special-ordered very heavy drapes. I rarely saw sunlight, and I didn't miss it much. I turned on the light over my fish tank. The angelfish rose towards the top, mouths moving in slow-motion begging.

Fish are my idea of pets. You don't walk them, pick up after them, or have to housebreak them. Clean the tank occasionally, feed them, and they don't give a damn how many hours of overtime you work.

The smell of strong brewed coffee wafted through the apartment from my Mr. Coffee. I sat at my little two-seater kitchen table sipping hot, black Colombian vintage. Beans fresh from my freezer, ground on the spot. There was no other way to drink coffee. Though in a pinch I'll take it just about any way I can get it.

The doorbell chimed. I jumped, spilling coffee onto the table. Nervous? Me? I left my Firestar on the kitchen table instead of taking it to the door with me. See, I'm not paranoid. Just very, very careful.

I checked the peephole and opened the door. Manny Rodriguez stood in the doorway. He's about two inches taller than I am. His coal-black hair is streaked with grey and white. Thick waves of it frame his thin face and black mustache. He's fifty-two, and with one exception, I would still rather have him backing me in a dangerous situation than anyone else I know.

We shook hands, we always do that. His grip was firm and dry. He grinned at me, flashing very white teeth in his brown face. "I smell coffee."

I grinned back. "You know it's all I have for breakfast." He walked in, and I locked the door behind him, habit.

"Rosita thinks you don't take care of yourself." He dropped into a near-perfect imitation of his wife's scolding voice, a much thicker Mexican accent than his own. "She doesn't eat right, so thin. Poor Anita, no husband, not even a boyfriend." He grinned.

"Rosita sounds like my stepmother. Judith is sick with worry that I'll be an old maid."

"You're what, twenty-four?"

"Mm-uh."

He just shook his head. "Sometimes I do not understand women."

It was my turn to grin. "What am I, chopped liver?"

"Anita, you know I didn't mean..."

"I know, I'm one of the boys. I understand."

"You are better than any of the boys at work."

"Sit down. Let me pour coffee in your mouth before your foot fits in again."

"You are being difficult. You know what I meant." He stared at me out of his solid brown eyes, face very serious.

I smiled. "Yeah, I know what you meant."

I picked one of the dozen or so mugs from my kitchen cabinet. My favorite mugs dangled from a mug-tree on the countertop.

Manny sat down, sipping coffee, glancing at his cup. It was red with black letters that said, "I'm a coldhearted bitch but I'm good at it." He laughed coffee up his nose.

I sipped my own coffee from a mug decorated with fluffy baby penguins: I'd never admit it, but it is my favorite mug.

"Why don't you bring your penguin mug to work?" he asked.

Bert's latest brainstorm was that we all use personalized coffee cups at work. He thought it would add a homey note to the office. I had brought in a grey on grey cup that said, "It's a dirty job and I get to do it." Bert had made me take it home.

"I enjoy yanking Bert's chain."

"So you're going to keep bringing in unacceptable cups."

I smiled. "Mm-uh."

He just shook his head.

"I really appreciate you coming to see Dominga with me."

He shrugged. "I couldn't let you go see the devil woman alone, could I?"

I frowned at the nickname, or was it an insult? "That's what your wife calls Dominga, not what I call her."

He glanced down at the gun still lying on the tabletop. "But you'll take a gun with you, just in case."

I looked at him over the top of my cup. "Just in case."

"If it comes to shooting our way out, Anita, it will be too late. She has bodyguards all over the place."

"I don't plan to shoot anybody. We are just going to ask a few questions. That's all."

He smirked. "*Por favor*, Señora Salvador, did you raise a killer zombie recently?"

"Knock it off, Manny. I know it's awkward."

"Awkward?" He shook his head. "Awkward, she says. If you piss off Dominga Salvador, it's a hell of a lot more than just awkward."

"You don't have to come."

"You called me for backup." He smiled that brilliant teeth flashing smile that lit up his entire face. "You didn't call Charles or Jamison. You called me, and, Anita, that is the best compliment you could give an old man."

"You're not an old man." And I meant it.

"That is not what my wife keeps telling me. Rosita has forbidden me to go vampire hunting with you, but she can't curtail my zombie-related activities, not yet anyway."

The surprise must have shone on my face, because he said, "I know she talked to you two years back, when I was in the hospital."

"You almost died," I said.

"And you had how many broken bones?"

"Rosita made a reasonable request, Manny. You have four children to think of."

"And I'm too old to be slaying vampires." His voice held irony, and almost bitterness.

"You'll never be too old," I said.

"A nice thought." He drained his coffee mug. "We better go. Don't want to keep the Señora waiting."

"God forbid," I said.

"Amen," he said.

I stared at him as he rinsed his mug out in the sink. "Do you know something you're not telling me?"

"No," he said.

I rinsed my own cup, still staring at him. I could feel a suspicious frown between my eyes. "Manny?"

"Honest Mexican, I don't know nuthin'."

"Then what's wrong?"

"You know I was vaudun before Rosita converted me to pure Christianity."

"Yeah, so?"

"Dominga Salvador was not just my priestess. She was my lover."

I stared at him for a few heartbeats. "You're kidding?"

His face was very serious as he said, "I wouldn't joke about something like that."

I shrugged. People's choices of lovers never failed to amaze me. "That's why you could get me a meeting with her on such short notice."

He nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because you might have tried to sneak over there without me."

"Would that have been so bad?"

He just stared at me, brown eyes very serious. "Maybe."

I got my gun from the table and fitted it to the inter-pants holster. Eight bullets. The Browning could hold fourteen. But let's get real; if I needed more than eight bullets, I was dead. And so was Manny.

"Shit," I whispered.

"What?"

"I feel like I'm going to visit the bogeyman."

Manny made a back and forth motion with his head. "Not a bad analogy."

Great, just freaking, bloody great. Why was I doing this? The image of Benjamin Reynolds's blood-coated teddy bear flashed into my mind. All right, I knew why I was

doing it. If there was even a remote chance that the boy could still be alive, I'd go into hell itself—if I stood a chance of coming back out. I didn't mention this out loud. I did not want to know if hell was a good analogy, too.

Chapter 5

The neighborhood was older houses; fifties, forties. The lawns were dying to brown for lack of water. No sprinklers here. Flowers struggled to survive in beds close to the houses. Mostly petunias, geraniums, a few rosebushes. The streets were clean, neat, and one block over you could get yourself shot for wearing the wrong color of jacket.

Gang activity stopped at Señora Salvador's neighborhood. Even teenagers with automatic pistols fear things you can't stop with bullets no matter how good a shot you are. Silver plated bullets will harm a vampire, but not kill it. It will kill a lycanthrope, but not a zombie. You can hack the damn things to pieces, and the disconnected body parts will crawl after you. I've seen it. It ain't pretty. The gangs leave the Señora's turf alone. No violence. It is a place of permanent truce.

There are stories of one Hispanic gang that thought it had protection against gris-gris. Some people say that the gang's ex-leader is still down in Dominga's basement, obeying an occasional order. He was great show-and-tell to any juvenile delinquents who got out of hand.

Personally, I had never seen her raise a zombie. But then I'd never seen her call the snakes either. I'd just as soon keep it that way.

Señora Salvador's two-story house is on about a half acre of land. A nice roomy yard. Bright red geraniums flamed against the whitewashed walls. Red and white, blood and bone. I was sure the symbolism was not lost on casual passersby. It certainly wasn't lost on me.

Manny parked his car in the driveway behind a cream colored Impala. The two-car garage was painted white to match the house. There was a little girl of about five riding a tricycle furiously up and down the sidewalk. A slightly older pair of boys were sitting on the steps that led up to the porch. They stopped playing and looked at us.

A man stood on the porch behind them. He was wearing a shoulder holster over a sleeveless blue T-shirt. Sort of blatant. All he needed was a flashing neon sign that said "Bad Ass."

There were chalk markings on the sidewalk. Pastel crosses and unreadable diagrams. It looked like a children's game, but it wasn't. Some devoted fans of the Señora had chalked designs of worship in front of her house. Stubs of candles had melted to lumps around the designs. The girl on the tricycle peddled back and forth over the designs. Normal, right?

I followed Manny over the sun-scorched lawn. The little girl on the tricycle was watching us now, small brown face unreadable.

Manny removed his sunglasses and smiled up at the man. "*Buenos días*, Antonio. It has been a long time."

"*Sí*," Antonio said. His voice was low and sullen. His deeply tanned arms were crossed loosely over his chest. It put his right hand right next to his gun butt.

I used Manny's body to shield me from sight and casually put my hands close to my own gun. The Boy Scout motto, "Always be prepared." Or was that the Marines?

"You've become a strong, handsome man," Manny said.

"My grandmother says I must let you in," Antonio said.

"She is a wise woman," Manny said.

Antonio shrugged. "She is the Señora." He peered around Manny at me. "Who is this?"

"Señorita Anita Blake." Manny stepped back so I could move forward. I did, right hand loose on my waist like I had an attitude, but it was the closest I could stay to my gun.

Antonio looked down at me. His dark eyes were angry, but that was all. He didn't have near the gaze of Harold Gaynor's bodyguards. I smiled. "Nice to meet you."

He squinted at me suspiciously for a moment, then nodded. I continued to smile at him, and a slow smile spread over his face. He thought I was flirting with him. I let him think it.

He said something in Spanish. All I could do was smile and shake my head. He spoke softly, and there was a look in his dark eyes, a curve to his mouth. I didn't have to speak the language to know I was being propositioned. Or insulted.

Manny's neck was stiff, his face flushed. He said something from between clenched teeth.

It was Antonio's turn to flush. His hand started to go for his gun. I stepped up two steps, touching his wrist as if I didn't know what was going on. The tension in his arm was like a wire, straining.

I beamed up at him as I held his wrist. His eyes flicked from Manny to me, then the tension eased, but I didn't let go of his wrist until his arm fell to his side. He raised my hand to his lips, kissing it. His mouth lingered on the back of my hand, but his eyes stayed on Manny. Angry, rage-filled.

Antonio carried a gun, but he was an amateur. Amateurs with guns eventually get themselves killed. I wondered if Dominga Salvador knew that? She may have been a whiz at voodoo but I bet she didn't know much about guns, and what it took to use one on a regular basis. Whatever it took, Antonio didn't have it. He'd kill you all right. No sweat. But for the wrong reasons. Amateur's reasons. Of course, you'll be just as dead.

He guided me up on the porch beside him, still holding my hand. It was my left hand. He could hold that all day. "I must check you for weapons, Manuel."

"I understand," Manny said. He stepped up on the porch and Antonio stepped back, keeping room between them in case Manny jumped him. That left me with a clear shot of Antonio's back. Careless; under different circumstances, deadly.

He made Manny lean against the porch railing like a police frisk. Antonio knew what he was doing, but it was an angry search, lots of quick jerky hand movements, as if just touching Manny's body enraged him. A lot of hate in old Tony.

It never occurred to him to pat me down for weapons. Tsk-tsk.

A second man came to the screen door. He was in his late forties, maybe. He was wearing a white undershirt with a plaid shirt unbuttoned over it. The sleeves were folded back as far as they'd go. Sweat stood out on his forehead. I was betting there was a gun at the small of his back. His black hair had a pure white streak just over the forehead. "What is taking so long, Antonio?" His voice was thick and held an accent.

"I searched him for weapons."

The older man nodded. "She is ready to see you both."

Antonio stood to one side, taking up his post on the porch once more. He made a kissing noise as I walked past. I felt Manny stiffen, but we made it into the living room without anyone getting shot. We were on a roll.

The living room was spacious, with a dining-room set taking up the left-hand side. There was a wall piano in the living room. I wondered who played. Antonio? Naw.

We followed the man through a short hallway into a roomy kitchen. Golden oblongs of sunshine lay heavy on a black and white tiled floor. The floor and kitchen were old, but the appliances were new. One of those deluxe refrigerators with an ice maker and water dispenser took up a hunk of the back wall. All the appliances were done in a pale yellow: Harvest Gold, Autumn Bronze.

Sitting at the kitchen table was a woman in her early sixties. Her thin brown face was seamed with a lot of smile lines. Pure white hair was done in a bun at the nape of her neck. She sat very straight in her chair, thin-boned hands folded on the tabletop. She looked terribly harmless. A nice old granny. If a quarter of what I'd heard about her was true, it was the greatest camouflage I'd ever seen.

She smiled and held out her hands. Manny stepped forward and took the offering, brushing his lips on her knuckles. "It is good to see you, Manuel." Her voice was rich, a contralto with the velvet brush of an accent.

"And you, Dominga." He released her hands and sat across from her.

Her quick black eyes flicked to me, still standing in the doorway. "So, Anita Blake, you have come to me at last."

It was a strange thing to say. I glanced at Manny. He gave a shrug with his eyes. He didn't know what she meant either. Great. "I didn't know you were eagerly awaiting me, Señora."

"I have heard stories of you, *chica*. Wondrous stories." There was a hint in those black eyes, that smiling face, that was not harmless.

"Manny?" I asked.

"It wasn't me."

"No, Manuel does not talk to me anymore. His little wife forbids it." That last sentence was angry, bitter.

Oh, God. The most powerful voodoo priestess in the Midwest was acting like a scorned lover. Shit.

She turned those angry black eyes to me. "All who deal in vaudun come to Señora Salvador eventually."

"I do not deal in vaudun."

She laughed at that. All the lines in her face flowed into the laughter. "You raise the dead, the zombie, and you do not deal in vaudun. Oh, *chica*, that is funny." Her voice sparkled with genuine amusement. So glad I could make her day.

"Dominga, I told you why we wished this meeting. I made it very clear. . ." Manny said.

She waved him to silence. "Oh, you were very careful on the phone, Manuel." She leaned towards me. "He made it very clear that you were not here to participate in any of my pagan rituals." The bitterness in her voice was sharp enough to choke on.

"Come here, *chica*," she said. She held out one hand to me, not both. Was I supposed to kiss it as Manny had done. I didn't think I'd come to see the pope.

I realized then that I didn't want to touch her. She had done nothing wrong. Yet, the muscles in my shoulders were screaming with tension. I was afraid, and I didn't know why.

I stepped forward and took her hand, uncertain what to do with it. Her skin was warm and dry. She sort of lowered me to the chair closest to her, still holding my hand. She said something in her soft, deep voice.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry I don't understand Spanish."

She touched my hair with her free hand. "Black hair like the wing of a crow. It does not come from any pale skin."

"My mother was Mexican."

"Yet you do not speak her tongue."

She was still holding my hand, and I wanted it back. "She died when I was young. I was raised by my father's people."

"I see."

I pulled my hand free and instantly felt better. She had done nothing to me. Nothing. Why was I so damn jumpy? The man with the streaked hair had taken up a post behind the Señora. I could see him clearly. His hands were in plain sight. I could see the back door and the entrance to the kitchen. No one was sneaking up behind me. But the hair at the base of my skull was standing at attention.

I glanced at Manny, but he was staring at Dominga. His hands were gripped together on the tabletop so tightly that his knuckles were mottled.

I felt like someone at a foreign film festival without subtitles. I could sort of guess what was going on, but I wasn't sure I was right. The creeping skin on my neck told me some hocus-pocus was going on. Manny's reaction said that just maybe the hocus-pocus was meant for him.

Manny's shoulders slumped. His hands relaxed their awful tension. It was a visible release of some kind. Dominga smiled, a brilliant flash of teeth. "You could have been so powerful, *mi corazón*."

"I did not want the power, Dominga," he said.

I stared from one to the other, not exactly sure what had just happened. I wasn't sure I wanted to know. I was willing to believe that ignorance was bliss. It so often is.

She turned her quick black eyes to me. "And you, *chica*, do you want power?" The creeping sensation at the base of my skull spread over my body. It felt like insects marching on my skin. Shit.

"No." A nice simple answer. Maybe I should try those more often.

"Perhaps not, but you will."

I didn't like the way she said that. It was ridiculous to be sitting in a sunny kitchen at 7:28 in the morning, and be scared. But there it was. My gut was twitching with it.

She stared at me. Her eyes were just eyes. There was none of that seductive power of a vampire. They were just eyes, and yet . . . The hair on my neck tried to crawl down my spine.

Goose bumps broke out on my body, a rush of prickling warmth. I licked my lips and stared at Dominga Salvador.

It was a slap of magic. She was testing me. I'd had it done before. People are so fascinated with what I do. Convinced that I know magic. I don't. I have an affinity with the dead.

It's not the same.

I stared into her nearly black eyes and felt myself sway forward. It was like falling without movement. The world sort of swung for a moment, then steadied. Warmth burst out of my body, like a twisting rope of heat. It went outward to the old woman. It hit her solid, and I felt it like a jolt of electricity.

I stood up, gasping for air. "Shit!"

"Anita, are you all right?" Manny was standing now, too. He touched my arm gently.

"I'm not sure. What the hell did she do to me?"

"It is what you have done to me, *chica*," Dominga said. She looked a little pale around the edges. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

The man stood away from the wall, his hands loose and ready. "No," Dominga said, "Enzo, I am all right." Her voice was breathy as if she had been running:

I stayed standing. I wanted to go home now, please.

"We did not come here for games, Dominga," Manny said. His voice had deepened with anger and, I think, fear. I agreed with that last emotion.

"It is not a game, Manuel. Have you forgotten everything I taught you. Everything you were?"

"I have forgotten nothing, but I did not bring her here to be harmed."

"Whether she is harmed or not is up to her, *mi corazón*."

I didn't much like that last part. "You're not going to help us. You're just going to play cat and mouse. Well, this mouse is leaving." I turned to leave, keeping a watchful eye on Enzo. He wasn't an amateur.

"Don't you wish to find the little boy that Manny said was taken? Three years old, very young to be in the hands of the bokor."

It stopped me. She knew it would. Damn her. "What is a bokor?"

She smiled. "You really don't know, do you?"

I shook my head.

The smile widened, all surprised pleasure. "Place your right hand palm up on the table, *por favor*."

"If you know something about the boy, just tell me. Please."

"Endure my little tests, and I will help you."

"What sort of tests?" I hoped I sounded as suspicious as I felt.

Dominga laughed, an abrupt and cheery sound. It went with all the smile lines in her face. Her eyes were practically sparkling with mirth. Why did I feel like she was laughing at me?

"Come, *chica*, I will not hurt you," she said.

"Manny?"

"If she does anything that may harm you, I will say so."

Dominga gazed up at me, a sort of puzzled wonder on her face. "I have heard that you can raise three zombies in a night, night after night. Yet, you truly are a novice."

"Ignorance is bliss," I said.

"Sit, *chica*. This will not hurt, I promise."

This will not hurt. It promised more painful things later. I sat. "Any delay could cost the boy his life." Try to appeal to her good side.

She leaned towards me. "Do you really think the child is still alive?" Guess she didn't have a good side.

I leaned back from her. I couldn't help it, and I couldn't lie to her. "No."

"Then we have time, don't we?"

"Time for what?"

"Your hand, *chica*, *por favor*, then I will answer your questions."

I took a deep breath and placed my right hand on the table, palm up. She was being mysterious. I hated people who were mysterious.

She brought a small black bag from under the table, as if it had been sitting in her lap the whole time. Like she'd planned this.

Manny was staring at the bag like something noisome was about to crawl out. Close. Dominga Salvador pulled something noisome out of it.

It was a charm, a gris-gris made of black feathers, bits of bone, a mummified bird's foot. I thought at first it was a chicken until I saw the thick black talons. There was a hawk or eagle out there somewhere with a peg leg.

I had visions of her digging the talons into my flesh, and was all tensed to pull away. But she simply placed the gris-gris on my open palm. Feathers, bits of bone, the dried hawk foot. It wasn't slimy. It didn't hurt. In fact, I felt a little silly.

Then I felt it, warmth. The thing was warm, sitting there in my hand. It hadn't been warm a second ago. "What are you doing to it?"

Dominga didn't answer. I glanced up at her, but her eyes were staring at my hand, intent. Like a cat about to pounce.

I glanced back down. The talons flexed, then spread, then flexed. It was moving in my hand. "Shiiit!" I wanted to stand up. To fling the vile thing to the floor. But I didn't. I sat there with every hair on my body tingling, my pulse thudding in my throat, and let the thing move in my hand. "All right," my voice sounded breathy, "I've passed your little test. Now get this thing the hell out of my hand."

Dominga lifted the claw gently from my hand. She was careful not to touch my skin. I didn't know why, but it was a noticeable effort.

"Dammit, dammit!" I whispered under my breath. I rubbed my hand against my stomach, touching the gun hidden there. It was comforting to know that if worse came to worst, I could just shoot her. Before she scared me to death. "Can we get down to business now?" My voice sounded almost steady. Bully for me.

Dominga was cradling the claw in her hands. "You made the claw move. You were frightened, but not surprised. Why?"

What could I say? Nothing I wanted her to know. "I have an affinity with the dead. It responds to me like some people can read thoughts."

She smiled. "Do you really believe that your ability to raise the dead is like mind reading? Parlor tricks?"

Dominga had obviously never met a really good telepath. If she had, she wouldn't have been scornful: In their own way, they were just as scary as she was.

"I raise the dead, Señora. It is just a job."

"You do not believe that any more than I do."

"I try real hard," I said.

"You've been tested before by someone." She made it a statement.

"My grandmother on my mother's side tested me, but not with that." I pointed to the still flexing foot. It looked like one of those fake hands that you can buy at Spencer's. Now that I wasn't holding it, I could pretend it just had tiny little batteries in it somewhere. Right.

"She was vaudun?"

I nodded.

"Why did you not study with her?"

"I have an inborn gift for raising the dead. That doesn't dictate my religious preferences."

"You are Christian." She made the word sound like something bad.

"That's it." I stood. "I wish I could say it's been a pleasure, but it hasn't."

"Ask your questions, *chica*."

"What?" The change of subject was too fast for me.

"Ask whatever you came here to ask," she said.

I glanced at Manny. "If she says she will answer, she will answer." He didn't look completely happy about it.

I sat down, again. The next insult and I'm outta here. But if she could really help . . . oh, hell, she was dangling that thin little thread of hope. And after what I'd seen at the Reynolds house, I was grabbing for it.

I had planned to be as polite as possible on the wording of the question, now I didn't give a shit. "Have you raised a zombie in the last few weeks?"

"Some," she said.

Okay. I hesitated over the next question. The feel of that thing moving in my hand flashed back on me. I rubbed my hand against my pants leg as if I could rub the sensation away. What was the worst she could do to me if I offended her? Don't ask. "Have you sent any zombies out on errands . . . of revenge?" There; that was polite, amazing.

"None."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

She smiled. "I'd remember if I loosed murderers from the grave."

"Killer zombies don't have to be murderers," I said.

"Oh?" Her pale eyebrows raised. "Are you so very familiar with raising 'killer' zombies?"

I fought the urge to squirm like a schoolchild caught at a lie. "Only one."

"Tell me."

"No." My voice was very firm. "No, that is a private matter." A private nightmare that I was not going to share with the voodoo lady.

I decided to change the subject just a little. "I've raised murderers before. They weren't more violent than regular undead."

"How many dead have you called from the grave?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Give me an"—she seemed to be groping for a word - "estimation."

"I can't. It must have been hundreds."

"A thousand?" she asked.

"Maybe, I haven't kept count," I said.

"Has your boss at Animators, Incorporated, kept count?"

"I would assume that all my clients are on file, yes," I said.

She smiled. "I would be interested in knowing the exact number."

What could it hurt? "I'll find out if I can."

"Such an obedient girl." She stood. "I did not raise this 'killer' zombie of yours. If that is what is eating citizens." She smiled, almost laughed, as if it were funny. "But I know people that would never speak to you. People that could do this horrible deed. I will question them, and they will answer me. I will have truth from them, and I will pass this truth on to you, Anita."

She said my name like it was meant to be said, Ahneetah. Made it sound exotic.

"Thank you very much, Señora Salvador."

"But there is one favor I will ask in return for this information," she said.

Something unpleasant was about to be said, I'd have bet on it. "What would that favor be, Señora?"

"I want you to pass one more test for me."

I stared at her, waiting for her to go on, but she didn't. "What sort of test?" I asked.

"Come downstairs, and I will show you." Her voice was mild as honey.

"No, Dominga," Manny said. He was standing now. "Anita, nothing the Señora could tell you would be worth what she wants."

"I can talk to people and things that will not talk to you, either of you. Good Christians that you are."

"Come on, Anita, we don't need her help." He had started for the door. I didn't follow him. Manny hadn't seen the slaughtered family. He hadn't dreamed about blood-coated teddy bears last night. I had. I couldn't leave if she could help me. Whether Benjamin Reynolds was dead or not wasn't the point. The thing, whatever it was, would kill again. And I was betting it had something to do with voodoo. It wasn't my area. I needed help, and I needed it fast.

"Anita, come on." He touched my arm, pulling me a little towards the door.

"Tell me about the test."

Dominga smiled triumphantly. She knew she had me. She knew I wasn't leaving until I had her promised help. Damn.

"Let us retire to the basement. I will explain the test there."

Manny's grip on my arm tightened. "Anita, you don't know what you're doing."

He was right, but. . . "Just stay with me, Manny, back me up. Don't let me do anything that will really hurt. Okay?"

"Anita, anything she wants you to do down there will hurt. Maybe not physically, but it will hurt."

"I have to do this, Manny." I patted his hand and smiled. "It'll be all right."

"No," he said, "it won't be."

I didn't know what to say to that, except that he was probably right. But it didn't matter. I was going to do it. Whatever she asked, within reason, if it would stop the killings. If it would fix it so that I never had to see another half-eaten body.

Dominga smiled. "Let us go downstairs." '

"May I speak with Anita alone, Señora, *por favor*," Manny said. His hand was still on my arm. I could feel the tension in his hand.

"You will have the rest of this beautiful day to talk to her, Manuel. But I have only this short time. If she does this test for me now, I promise to aid her in any way I can to catch this killer."

It was a powerful offer. A lot of people would talk to her just out of pure terror. The police can't inspire that. All they can do is arrest you. It wasn't enough of a deterrent. Having the undead crawl through your window . . . that was a deterrent.

Four, maybe five people were already dead. It was a bad way to die. "I've already said I'd do it. Let's go."

She walked around the table and took Manny's arm. He jumped like she'd struck him. She pulled him away from me. "No harm will come to her, Manuel. I swear."

"I do not trust you, Dominga."

She laughed. "But it is her choice, Manuel. I have not forced her."

"You have blackmailed her, Dominga. Blackmailed her with the safety of others."

She looked back over her shoulder. "Have I blackmailed you, *chica*?"

"Yes," I said.

"Oh, she is your student, *corazón*. She has your honesty. And your bravery."

"She is brave, but she has not seen what lies below."

I wanted to ask what exactly was in the basement, but I didn't. I really didn't want to know. I've had people warn me about supernatural shit before. Don't go in that room; the monster will get you. There usually is a monster, and it usually tries to get me. But up till now I've been faster or luckier than the monsters. Here's to my luck holding.

I wished that I could heed Manny's warning. Going home sounded very good about now, but duty reared its ugly head. Duty and a whisper of nightmares. I didn't want to see another butchered family.

Dominga led Manny from the room. I followed with Enzo bringing up the rear. What a day for a parade.

Chapter 6

The basement stairs were steep, wooden slats. You could feel the vibrations in the stairs as we tromped down them. It was not comforting. The bright sunlight from the door spilled into absolute darkness. The sunlight faltered, seemed to fade as if it had no power in this cavelike place. I stopped on the grey edge of daylight, staring down into the night-dark of the room. I couldn't even make out Dominga and Manny. They had to be just in front of me, didn't they?

Enzo the bodyguard waited at my back like some patient mountain. He made no move to hurry me. Was it my decision then? Could I just pack up my toys and go home?

"Manny," I called.

A voice came distantly. Too far away. Maybe it was an acoustic trick of the room. Maybe not. "I'm here, Anita."

I strained to see where the voice was coming from, but there was nothing to see. I took two steps farther down into the inky dark and stopped like I'd hit a wall. There was the damp rock smell of most basements, but under that something stale, sour, sweet. That almost indescribable smell of corpses. It was faint here at the head of the stairs. I was betting it would get worse the farther down I went.

My grandmother had been a priestess of vaudun. Her Humfo had not smelled like corpses. The line between good and evil wasn't as clear cut in voodoo as in Wicca or Christianity and satanism, but it was there. Dominga Salvador was on the wrong side of the line. I had known that when I came. It still bothered me.

Grandmother Flores had told me that I was a necromancer. It was more than being a voodoo priestess, and less. I had a sympathy with the dead, all dead. It was hard to be vaudun and a necromancer and not be evil. Too tempting, Grandma said. She had encouraged my being Christian. Encouraged my father to cut me off from her side of the family. Encouraged it for love of me and fear for my soul.

And here I was going down the steps into the jaws of temptation. What would Grandma Flores say to that? Probably, go home. Which was good advice. The tight feeling in my stomach was saying the same thing.

The lights came on. I blinked on the stairs. The one dim bulb at the foot of the staircase seemed as bright as a star. Dominga and Manny stood just under the bulb, looking up at me.

Light. Why did I feel instantly better? Silly, but true. Enzo let the door swing shut behind us. The shadows were thick, but down a narrow bricked hallway more bare light bulbs dangled.

I was almost at the bottom of the stairs. That sweet, sour smell was stronger. I tried breathing through my mouth, but that only made it clog the back of my throat. The smell of rotting flesh clings to the tongue.

Dominga led the way between the narrow walls. There were regular patches in the walls. Places where it looked like cement had been put over—doors. Paint had been smoothed over the cement, but there had been doors, rooms, at regular intervals. Why wall them up? Why cover the doors in cement? What was behind them?

I rubbed fingertips across the rough cement. The surface was bumpy and cool. The paint wasn't very old. It would have flaked in this dampness. It hadn't. What was behind this blocked up door?

The skin just between my shoulder blades started to itch. I fought an urge to glance back at Enzo. I was betting he was behaving himself. I was betting that being shot was the least of my worries.

The air was cool and damp. A very basement of a basement. There were three doors, two to the right, one to the left that were just doors. One door had a shiny new padlock on it. As we walked past it, I heard the door sigh as if something large had leaned against it.

I stopped. "What's in there?"

Enzo had stopped when I stopped. Dominga and Manny had rounded a corner, and we were alone. I touched the door. The wood creaked, rattling against its hinges. Like some giant cat had rubbed against the door. A smell rolled out from under the door. I

gagged and backed away. The stench clung to my mouth and throat. I swallowed convulsively and tasted it all the way down.

The thing behind the door made a mewling sound. I couldn't tell if it was human or animal. It was bigger than a person, whatever it was. And it was dead. Very, very dead.

I covered my nose and mouth with my left hand. The right was free just in case. In case that thing should come crashing out. Bullets against the walking dead. I knew better, but the gun was still a comfort. In a pinch I could shoot Enzo. But somehow I knew that if the thing rattling the door got out, Enzo would be in as much danger as I was.

"We must go on, now," he said.

I couldn't tell anything from his face. We might have been walking down the street to the corner store. He seemed impervious, and I hated him for it. If I'm terrified, by God, everyone else should be, too.

I eyed the supposedly unlocked door to my left. I had to know. I yanked it open. The room was maybe eight by four, like a cell. The cement floor and whitewashed walls were clean, empty. It looked like a cell waiting for its next occupant. Enzo slammed the door shut. I didn't fight him. It wasn't worth it. If I was going to go one on one with someone who outweighed me by over a hundred pounds, I was going to be picky about where I drew the line. An empty room wasn't worth it.

Enzo leaned against the door. Sweat glistened across his face in the harsh light. "Do not try any other doors, señorita. It could be very bad."

I nodded. "Sure, no problem." An empty room and he was sweating. Nice to know something frightened him. But why this room and not the one with the mewling stench behind it? I didn't have a clue.

"We must catch up with the Señora." He made a gracious motion like a maître d' showing me to a chair. I went where he pointed. Where else was I going to go?

The hallway fed into a large rectangular chamber. It was painted the same startling white as the cell had been. The whitewashed floor was covered in brilliant red and black designs. Verve it was called. Symbols drawn in the voodoo sanctuary to summon the lwa, the gods of vaudun.

The symbols acted as walls bordering a path. They led to the altar. If you stepped off the path you messed up all those carefully formed symbols. I didn't know if that would be good or bad. Rule number three hundred sixty-nine when dealing with unfamiliar magic: when in doubt, leave it alone.

I left it alone.

The end of the room gleamed with candles. The warm, rich light flickered and filled the white walls with heat and light. Dominga stood in the midst of that light, that whiteness, and gleamed with evil. There was no other word for it. She wasn't just bad, she was evil. It gleamed around her like darkness made liquid and touchable. The smiling old woman was gone. She was a creature of power.

Manny stood off to one side. He was staring at her. He glanced at me. His eyes were showing a lot of white. The altar was directly behind Dominga's straight back. Dead animals spilled off the top of it to form a pool on the floor. Chickens, dogs, a small pig, two goats. Lumps of fur and dried blood that I couldn't identify. The altar looked like a fountain where dead things flowed out of the center, sluggish and thick.

The sacrifices were fresh. No smell of decay. The glazed eyes of a goat stared at me. I hated killing goats. They always seemed so much more intelligent than chickens. Or maybe I just thought they were cuter.

A tall woman stood to the right of the altar. Her skin gleamed nearly black in the candlelight as if she had been carved of some heavy, gleaming wood. Her hair was short and neat, falling to her shoulders. Wide cheekbones, full lips, expert makeup. She wore a long silky dress, the bright scarlet of fresh blood. It matched her lipstick.

To the right of the altar stood a zombie. It had once been a woman. Long, pale brown hair fell nearly to her waist. Someone had brushed it until it gleamed. It was the only thing about the corpse that looked alive. The skin had turned a greyish color. The flesh had narrowed down around the bones like shrink wrap. Muscles moved under the thin, rotting skin, stringy and shrunken. The nose was almost gone, giving it a half-finished look. A crimson gown hung loose and flapping on the skeletal remains.

There was even an attempt at makeup. Lipstick had been abandoned when the lips shriveled up but a dusting of mauve eye shadow outlined the bulging eyes. I swallowed very hard and turned to stare at the first woman.

She was a zombie. One of the best preserved and most lifelike I had ever seen, but no matter how luscious she looked, she was dead. The woman, the zombie, stared back at me. There was something in her perfect brown eyes that no zombie has for long. The memory of who and what they were fades within a few days, sometimes hours. But this zombie was afraid. The fear was like a shiny, bright pain in her eyes. Zombies didn't have eyes like that.

I turned back to the more decayed zombie and found her staring at me, too. The bulging eyes were staring at me. With most of the flesh holding the eyes in the socket gone, her facial expressions weren't as good, but she managed. It managed to be afraid. Shit.

Dominga nodded, and Enzo motioned me farther into the circle. I didn't want to go.

"What the hell is going on here, Dominga?"

She smiled, almost a laugh. "I am not accustomed to such rudeness."

"Get used to it," I said. Enzo sort of breathed down my back. I did my best to ignore him. My right hand was sort of casually near my gun, without looking like I was reaching for my gun. It wasn't easy. Reaching for a gun usually looks like reaching for a gun. No one seemed to notice though. Goody for our side.

"What have you done to the two zombies?"

"Inspect them yourself, *chica*. If you are as powerful as the stories say, you will answer your own question."

"And if I can't figure it out?" I asked.

She smiled, but her eyes were as flat and black as a shark's. "Then you are not as powerful as the stories."

"Is this the test?"

"Perhaps."

I sighed. The voodoo lady wanted to see how tough I really was. Why? Maybe there wasn't a reason. Maybe she was just a sadistic power-hungry bitch. Yeah, I could believe that. Then again, maybe there was a purpose to the theatrics. If so, I still didn't know what it was.

I glanced at Manny. He gave a barely perceivable shrug. He didn't know what was going on either. Great.

I didn't like playing Dominga's games, especially when I didn't know the rules. The zombies were still staring at me. There was something in their eyes. It was fear, and something worse—hope. Shit. Zombies didn't have hope. They didn't have anything. They were dead. These weren't dead. I had to know. Here's hoping that curiosity didn't kill the animator.

I stepped around Dominga carefully, watching her out of the corner of my eye. Enzo stayed behind blocking the path between the verve. He looked big and solid standing there, but I could get past him, if I wanted it bad enough. Bad enough to kill him. I hoped I wouldn't want it that bad.

The decayed zombie stared down at me. She was tall, almost six feet. Skeletal feet peeked out from underneath the red gown. A tall, slender woman, probably beautiful, once. Bulging eyes rolled in the nearly bare sockets. A wet, sucking sound accompanied the movements.

I'd thrown up the first time I heard that sound. The sound of eyeballs rolling in rotting sockets. But that was four years ago, when I was new at this. Decaying flesh didn't make me flinch anymore or throw up. As a general rule.

The eyes were pale brown with a lot of green in them. The smell of some expensive perfume floated around her. Powdery and fine, like talcum powder in your nose, sweet, flowery. Underneath was the stink of rotting flesh. It wrinkled my nose, caught at the back of my throat. The next time I smelled this delicate, expensive perfume, I would think of rotting flesh. Oh, well, it smelled too expensive to buy, anyway.

She was staring at me. She, not it, she. There was the force of personality in her eyes. I call most zombies "it" because it fits. They may come from the grave very alive-looking, but it doesn't last. They rot. Personality and intelligence goes first, then the body. It's always that order. God is not cruel enough to force anyone to be aware while their body decays around them. Something had gone very wrong with this one.

I stepped around Dominga Salvador. For no reason that I could name, I stayed out of reach. She had no weapon, I was almost sure of that. The danger she represented had nothing to do with knives or guns. I simply didn't want her to touch me, not even by accident.

The zombie on the left was perfect. Not a sign of decay. The look in her eyes was alert, alive. God help us. She could have gone anywhere and passed for human. How had I known she wasn't alive? I wasn't even sure. None of the usual signs were there, but I knew dead when I felt it. Yet . . . I stared up at the second woman. Her lovely, dark face stared back. Fear screamed out of her eyes.

Whatever power let me raise the dead told me this was a zombie, but my eyes couldn't tell. It was amazing. If Dominga could raise zombies like this, she had me beat hands down.

I have to wait three days before I raise a corpse. It gives the soul time to leave the area. Souls usually hover around for a while. Three days is average. I can't call shit from the grave if the soul's still present. It has been theorized that if an animator could keep the soul intact while raising the body, we'd get resurrection. You know, resurrection, the real thing, like in Jesus and Lazarus. I didn't believe that. Or maybe I just know my limitations.

I stared up at this zombie and knew what was different. The soul was still there. The soul was still inside both bodies. How? How in Jesus' name did she do it?

"The souls. The souls are still in the bodies." My voice held the distaste I felt. Why bother to hide it?

"Very good, *chica*."

I went to stand to her left, keeping Enzo in sight. "How did you do it?"

"The soul was captured at the moment it took flight from the body."

I shook my head. "That doesn't explain anything."

"Don't you know how to capture souls in a bottle?"

Souls in a bottle? Was she kidding? No, she wasn't. "No, I don't." I tried not to sound superior as I said it.

"I could teach you so much, Anita, so very much."

"No, thanks," I said. "You captured their souls, then you raised the body, and put the soul back in." I was guessing, but it sounded right.

"Very, very good. That is it exactly." She was staring at me so hard that it was uncomfortable. Her empty, black eyes were memorizing me.

"But why is the second zombie rotting? The theory is with the soul intact, the zombie won't decay?"

"It is no longer a theory. I have proved it," she said.

I stared at the rotted corpse, and it stared back. "Then why is that one rotting, and this one isn't?" Just two necromancers talking shop. Tell me, do you raise your zombies only during the dark of the moon?

"The soul may be put into the body, then removed again, as often as I wish."

I stared at Dominga Salvador now. I stared and tried not to let my jaw drop, not to let the dawning horror slip across my face. She would enjoy shocking me. I didn't want her taking pleasure from me, for any reason.

"Let me test my understanding here," I said in my best executive trainee voice. "You put the soul into the body and it didn't rot. Then you took the soul out of the body, making it an ordinary zombie, and it did rot."

"Exactly," she said.

"Then you put the soul back in the rotted corpse, and the zombie was aware and alive again. Did the rotting stop when the soul went back in?"

"Yes. "

Shit. "So you could keep the zombie over there rotted just that much forever?"

"Yes."

Double shit. "And this one?" I pointed this time, like I was doing a lecture.

"Many people would pay dearly for her."

"Wait a minute, you mean sell her as a sex slave?"

"Perhaps."

"But. . ." The idea was too horrible. She was a zombie, which meant she didn't need to eat or sleep or anything. You could keep her in a closet and take her out like a toy. A perfectly obedient slave.

"Are they as obedient as normal zombies, or does the soul give them free will?"

"They seem to be very obedient."

"Maybe they're just scared of you," I said.

She smiled. "Perhaps."

"You can't just keep the soul imprisoned forever."

"I can't," she said.

"The soul needs to go on."

"To your Christian heaven or hell?"

"Yes," I said.

"These were wicked women, *chica*. Their own families gave them to me. Paid me to punish them."

"You took money for this?"

"It is illegal to tamper with dead bodies without permission of the family," she said.

I don't know if she had planned to horrify me. Maybe not. But with that one sentence she let me know that what she was doing was perfectly legal. The dead had no rights. This was the reason we needed some laws to protect zombies. Shit.

"No one deserves to spend eternity locked in a corpse," I said.

"We could do this to criminals on death row, *chica*. They could be made to serve society after death."

I shook my head. "No, it's wrong."

"I have created a non-rotting zombie, *chica*. Animators, I believe you call yourselves, have been searching for the secret for years. I have it, and people will pay for it."

"It's wrong. I may not know much about voodoo, but even among your own people, it's wrong. How can you keep the souls prisoner and not allow them to go on and join with the lao?"

She shrugged and sighed. She suddenly looked tired. "I was hoping, *chica*, that you would help me. With two of us working, we could create more zombies much faster. We could be wealthy beyond our dreams."

"You've asked the wrong girl."

"I see that now. I had hoped that since you were not vaudun, you would not see it as wrong."

"Christian, Buddhist, Moslem, you name it, Dominga, no one's going to think it's all right."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. It does not hurt to ask."

I glanced at the rotted zombie. "At least put your first experiment out of its misery."

Dominga glanced at the zombie. "She makes a powerful demonstration, does she not?"

"You've created a non-rotting zombie, great. Don't be sadistic."

"You think I am being cruel?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Manuel, am I being cruel?"

Manny stared at me while he answered. His eyes were trying to tell me something. I couldn't tell what. "Yes, Señora, you are being cruel."

She glanced over at him then, surprise in the movement of her body, her face. "Do you really think I am cruel, Manuel? Your beloved *amante*?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes."

"You were not so quick to judge a few years back, Manuel. You slew the white goat for me, more than once."

I turned towards Manny. It was like that moment in a movie where the main character has a revelation about someone. There should be music and camera angles when you learn one of your best friends participated in human sacrifice. More than once she had said. More than once.

"Manny?" My voice was a hoarse whisper. This, for me, was worse than the zombies. The hell with strangers. This was Manny, and it couldn't be true.

"Manny?" I said it again. He wouldn't look at me. Bad sign.

"You didn't know, *chica*? Didn't your Manny tell you of his past?"

"Shut up," I said.

"He was my most treasured helper. He would have done anything for me."

Shut up!" I screamed it at her. She stopped, her face thinning with anger. Enzo took two steps into the altar area. "Don't." I wasn't even sure who I was saying it to. "I need to hear from him, not from you."

The anger was still in her face. Enzo loomed like an avalanche about to be unleashed. Dominga gave one sharp nod. "Ask him then, *chica*."

"Manny, is she telling the truth? Did you perform human sacrifices?" My voice sounded so normal. It shouldn't have. My stomach was so tight, it hurt. I wasn't afraid anymore, or at least not of Dominga. The truth; I was afraid of the truth.

He looked up. His hair fell across his face framing his eyes. A lot of pain in those eyes. Almost flinching.

"It's the truth, isn't it?" My skin felt cold. "Answer me, dammit." My voice still sounded ordinary, calm.

"Yes," he said.

"Yes, you committed human sacrifice?"

He glared at me now, anger helping him meet my eyes. "Yes, Yes!"

It was my turn to look away. "God, Manny, how could you?" My voice was soft now, not ordinary. If I didn't know better, I'd say it sounded like I was on the verge of tears.

"It was nearly twenty years ago, Anita. I was vaudun and a necromancer. I believed. I loved the Señora. Thought I did."

I stared up at him. The look on his face made my throat tight. "Manny, dammit."

He didn't say anything. He just stood there looking miserable. And I couldn't reconcile the two images. Manny Rodriguez and someone who would slaughter the hornless goat in a ritual. He had taught me right from wrong in this business. He had refused to do so many things. Things not half as bad as this. It made no sense.

I shook my head. "I can't deal with this right now." I heard myself say it out loud, and hadn't really meant to. "Fine, you've dropped your little bombshell, Señora Salvador. You said you'd help us, if I passed your test. Did I pass?" When in doubt, concentrate on one disaster at a time.

"I wanted to offer you a chance to help me with my new business venture."

"We both know I'm not going to do that," I said.

"It is a pity, Anita. With training you could rival my powers."

Be just like her when I grew up. No thanks. "Thanks anyway, but I'm happy where I am."

Her eyes flicked to Manny, back to me. "Happy?"

"Manny and I will deal with it, Señora. Now will you help me?"

"If I help you without you helping me in some way, you will owe me a favor."

I didn't want to owe her a favor. "I would rather just trade information."

"What could you possibly know that would be worth all the effort I will expend hunting for your killer zombie?"

I thought about that for a moment. "I know that legislation is being written right now, about zombies. Zombies are going to have rights, and laws protecting them soon." I hoped it was soon. No need to tell her how early in the process the legislation was.

"So, I must sell a few non-rotting zombies soon, before it becomes illegal."

"I wouldn't think illegal would bother you much. Human sacrifice is illegal, too."

She gave a tiny smile. "I do not do such things anymore, Anita. I have given up my wicked ways."

I didn't believe that, and she knew I didn't believe it. Her smile widened. "When Manuel left, I stopped such evil practices. Without his urgings, I became a respectable bokar."

She was lying, but I couldn't prove it. And she knew that, too. "I gave you valuable information. Now will you help me?"

She nodded graciously. "I will search among my followers to see if any knows of your killer zombie." I had the sense that she was quietly laughing at me.

"Manny, will she help us?"

"If the Señora says she will do a thing, it will be done. She is good that way."

"I will find your killer if it has anything to do with vaudun," she said.

"Great." I didn't say thank you, because it seemed wrong. I wanted to call her a bitch and shoot her between the eyes, but then I would have had to shoot Enzo, too. And how would I explain that to the police? She was breaking no laws. Dammit.

"I don't suppose appealing to your better nature would make you forget this mad scheme to use your new improved zombies for slaves?"

She smiled. "*Chica, chica*, I will be rich beyond your wildest dreams. You can refuse to join me, but you cannot stop me."

"Don't bet on it," I said.

"What will you do, go to the police? I am breaking no laws. The only way to stop me is to kill me." She looked directly at me while she said it.

"Don't tempt me."

Manny moved up beside me. "Don't, Anita, don't challenge her."

I was sort of mad at him, too, so what the hell. "I will stop you, Señora Salvador. Whatever it takes."

"You call death magic against me, Anita, and it is you who will die."

I didn't know death magic from frijoles. I shrugged. "I was thinking something more down to earth, like a bullet."

Enzo surged into the altar area, moving to stand between his boss-lady and me. Dominga stopped him. "No, Enzo, she is angry this morning, and shocked." Her eyes were still laughing at me. "She knows nothing of the deeper magics. She cannot harm me, and she is too morally superior to commit cold-blooded murder."

The worst part about it was that she was right. I couldn't just put a bullet between her eyes, not unless she threatened me. I glanced at the waiting zombies, patient as the dead, but underneath that endless patience was fear, and hope, and. . . God, the line between life and death was getting thinner all the time.

"At least lay to rest your first experiment. You've proved you can put the soul in and out multiple times. Don't make her watch."

"But, Anita, I already have a buyer for her."

"Oh, Jesus, you don't mean . . . Oh, God, a necrophiliac."

"Those that love the dead better than you or I ever will, will pay extraordinary amounts for such as her."

Maybe I could just shoot her. "You are a cold-hearted, amoral bitch."

"And you, *chica*, need to learn respect for your elders."

"Respect has to be earned," I said.

"I think, Anita Blake, that you need to remember why people fear the dark. I will see that very soon you have a visitor to your window. Some dark night when you are fast asleep in your warm, safe bed. Something evil will creep into your room. I will earn your respect, if that is the way you want it."

I should have been afraid, but I wasn't. I was angry and wanted to go home. "You can force people to be afraid of you, Señora, but you can't force them to respect you."

"We shall see, Anita. Call me after you have gotten my gift. It will be soon."

"Will you still help locate the killer zombie?"

"I said I would, and I will."

"Good," I said. "May we go now?"

She waved Enzo back beside her. "By all means run out into the daylight where you can be brave."

I walked to the pathway. Manny stayed right with me. We were careful not to look at each other. We were too busy watching the Señora and her pets. I stopped just inside the path. Manny touched my arm lightly, as if he knew what I was about to say. I ignored him.

"I may not be willing to kill you in cold blood, but hurt me first, and I'll put a bullet in you some bright, sunshiny day."

"Threats will not save you, *chica*," she said.

I smiled sweetly. "You either, bitch."

Her face went all thin and angry. I smiled wider.

"She does not mean it, Señora," Manny said. "She will not kill you."

"Is this true, *chica*?" Her voice was a rich growl of sound, pleasant and frightening at the same time.

I gave Manny a quick dirty look. It was a good threat. I didn't like weakening it with common sense, or truth. "I said, I'd shoot you. I didn't say I'd kill you. Now did I?"

"No, you did not."

Manny grabbed my arm and started pulling me backwards towards the stairs. He was pulling on my left arm, leaving my right free for my gun. Just in case.

Dominga never moved. Her black, angry eyes stared at me until we rounded the corner. Manny pulled me into the hallway with its cement covered doors. I pulled free of him. We stared at each other for a heartbeat.

"What's behind the doors?"

"I don't know."

Doubt must have shown on my face because he said, "God as my witness, Anita, I don't know. It wasn't like this twenty years ago."

I just stared at him as if looking would change things. I wish Dominga Salvador had kept Manny's secret to herself. I had not wanted to know.

"Anita, we have to get out of here, now." The light bulb over our head went out, like someone had snuffed it. We both looked up. There was nothing to see. My arms broke out in goose bumps. The bulb just ahead of us dimmed, then blinked off.

Manny was right. We needed to leave now. I broke into a half jog towards the stairs. Manny stayed with me. The door with its shiny padlock rattled and thumped as if the thing were trying to get out. Another light bulb flashed off. The darkness was snapping at our heels. We were at a full run by the time we hit the stairs. There were two bulbs left.

We were halfway up the stairs when the last light vanished. The world went black. I froze on the stairs unwilling to move without being able to see. Manny's arm brushed mine, but I couldn't see him. The darkness was complete. I could have touched my eyeballs and not seen my finger. We grabbed hands and held on. His hand wasn't much bigger than mine. It was warm and familiar, and damn comforting.

The cracking of wood was loud as a shotgun blast in the dark. The stench of rotting meat filled the stairwell. "Shit!" The word echoed and bounced in the blackness. I wished I hadn't said it. Something large pulled itself into the corridor. It couldn't be as big as it sounded. The wet, slithering sounds moved towards the stairs. Or sounded like they did.

I stumbled up two steps. Manny didn't need any urging. We stumbled through the darkness, and the sounds below hurried. The light under the door was so bright, it almost hurt. Manny flung open the door. The sunlight blazed against my eyes. We were both momentarily blinded.

Something screamed behind us, caught in the edge of daylight. The scream was almost human. I started to turn, to look. Manny slammed the door. He shook his head. "You don't want to see. I don't want to see."

He was right. So why did I have this urge to yank the door open, to stare down into the dark until I saw something pale and shapeless? A screaming nightmare of a sight. I stared at the closed door, and I let it go.

"Do you think it will come out after us?" I asked.

"Into the daylight?" Manny asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"I don't think so. Let's leave without finding out."

I agreed. The August sunlight streamed into the living room. Warm and real. The scream, the darkness, the zombies, all of it seemed wrong for the sunlight. Things that go bump in the morning. It didn't sound quite right.

I opened the screen door calmly, slowly. Panicked, me? But I was listening so hard I could hear blood rush in my ears. Listening for slithery sounds of pursuit. Nothing.

Antonio was still on guard outside. Should we warn him about the possibility of a Lovecraftian horror nipping at our heels?

"Did you fuck the zombie downstairs?" Antonio asked.

So much for warning old Tony.

Manny ignored him.

"Go fuck yourself," I said.

He said, "Heh!"

I kept walking down the porch steps. Manny stayed with me. Antonio didn't draw his gun and shoot us. The day was looking up.

The little girl on the tricycle had stopped by Manny's car. She stared up at me as I got in the passenger side door. I stared back into huge brown eyes. Her face was darkly tanned. She couldn't have been more than five.

Manny got in the driver's side door. He put the car in gear, and we pulled away. The little girl and I stared at each other. Just before we turned the corner she started pedaling up and down the sidewalk again.

Chapter 7

The air conditioner blasted cold air into the car. Manny drove through the residential streets. Most of the driveways were empty. People off to work. Small children playing in the yards. A few moms out on the front steps. I didn't see any daddies at home with the kids. Things change, but not that much. The silence stretched out between us. It was not a comfortable silence.

Manny glanced at me furtively out of the corner of his eye.

I slumped in the passenger seat, the seat belt digging across my gun. "So," I said, "you used to perform human sacrifice."

I think he flinched. "Do you want me to lie?"

"No, I want to not know. I want to live in blessed ignorance."

"It doesn't work that way, Anita," he said.

"I guess it doesn't," I said. I adjusted the lap strap so it didn't press over my gun. Ah, comfort. If only everything else were that easy to fix. "What are we going to do about it?"

"About you knowing?" he asked. He glanced at me as he asked. I nodded.

"You aren't going to rant and rave? Tell me what an evil bastard I am?"

"Doesn't seem much point in it," I said.

He looked at me a little longer this time. "Thanks."

"I didn't say it was alright, Manny. I'm just not going to yell at you. Not yet, anyway."

He passed a large white car full of dark-skinned teenagers. Their car stereo was up so loud, my teeth rattled. The driver had one of those high-boned, flat faces, straight off of an Aztec carving. Our eyes met as we moved by them. He made kissing motions with his mouth. The others laughed uproariously.

I resisted the urge to flip them off. Mustn't encourage the little tykes.

They turned right. We went straight. Relief.

Manny stopped two cars back from a light. Just beyond the light was the turnoff 40 West. We'd take 270 up to Olive and then a short jaunt to my apartment. We had forty-five minutes to an hour of travel time. Not a problem normally. Today I wanted away from Manny. I wanted some time to digest. To decide how to feel.

"Talk to me, Anita, please."

"Honest to God, Manny, I don't know what to say." Truth, try to stick to the truth between friends. Yeah.

"I've known you for four years, Manny. You are a good man. You love your wife, your kids. You've saved my life. I've saved yours. I thought I knew you."

"I haven't changed."

"Yes," I looked at him as I said it, "you have. Manny Rodriguez would never under any circumstance take part in human sacrifice."

"It's been twenty years."

"There's no statute of limitations on murder."

"You going to the cops?" His voice was very quiet.

The light changed. We waited our turn and merged into the morning traffic. It was as heavy as it ever got in St. Louis. It's not the gridlock of L.A., but stop and jerk is still pretty darn annoying. Especially this morning.

"I don't have any proof. Just Dominga Salvador's word. I wouldn't exactly call her a reliable witness."

"If you had proof?"

"Don't push me on this, Manny." I stared out the window. There was a silver Miada with the top down. The driver was white-haired, male, and wore a jaunty little cap, plus racing gloves. Middle-age crisis.

"Does Rosita know?" I asked.

"She suspects, but she doesn't know for sure."

"Doesn't want to know," I said.

"Probably not." He turned and stared at me then.

A red Ford truck was nearly in front of us. I yelled, "Manny!"

He slammed on the brakes, and only the seat belt kept me from kissing the dashboard.

"Jesus, Manny, watch your driving!"

He concentrated on traffic for a few seconds, then without looking at me this time, "Are you going to tell Rosita?"

I thought about that for about a second. I shook my head, realized he couldn't see it, and said, "I don't think so. Ignorance is bliss on this one, Manny. I don't think your wife could deal with it."

"She'd leave me and take the kids."

I believed she would. Rosita was a very religious person. She took all the commandments very seriously.

"She already thinks I'm risking my eternal soul by raising the dead," Manny said.

"She didn't have a problem until the pope threatened to excommunicate all animators unless they stopped raising the dead."

"The Church is very important to Rosita."

"Me, too, but I'm a happy little Episcopalian now. Switch churches."

"It's not that easy," he said.

It wasn't. I knew that. But, hey, you do what you can, or what you have to. "Can you explain why you would do human sacrifice? I mean, something that will make sense to me?"

"No," he said. He pulled into the far lane. It seemed to be going a little faster. It slowed down as soon as we pulled in. Murphy's law of traffic.

"You won't even try to explain?"

"It's indefensible, Anita. I live with what I did. I can't do anything else."

He had a point. "This has to change the way I think about you, Manny."

"In what way?"

"I don't know yet." Honesty. If we were very careful, we could still be honest with each other. "Is there anything else you think I should know? Anything that Dominga might spill later on?"

He shook his head. "Nothing worse."

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," he said. "That's it, no interrogation?"

"Not now, maybe not ever." I was tired all at once. It was 9:23 in the morning, and I needed a nap. Emotionally drained. "I don't know how to feel about this, Manny. I don't know how it changes our friendship, or our working relationship, or even if it does. I think it does. Oh, hell, I don't know."

"Fair enough," he said. "Let's move on to something we aren't confused about."

"And what would that be?" I asked.

"The Señora will send something bad to your window, just like she said she would."

"I figured that."

"Why did you threaten her?"

"I didn't like her."

"Oh, great, just great," he said. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"I am going to stop her, Manny. I figured she should know."

"Never give the bad guys a head start, Anita. I taught you that."

"You also taught me that human sacrifice is murder."

"That hurt," he said.

"Yes," I said, "it did."

"You need to be prepared, Anita. She will send something after you. Just to scare you, I think, not to really harm."

"Because you made me 'fess up to not killing her," I said.

"No, because she doesn't really believe you'll kill her. She's intrigued with your powers. I think she'd rather convert you than kill you."

"Have me as part of her zombie-making factory."

"Yes."

"Not in this lifetime."

"The Señora is not used to people saying no, Anita."

"Her problem, not mine."

He glanced at me, then back to the traffic. "She'll make it your problem."

"I'll deal with it."

"You can't be that confident."

"I'm not, but what do you want me to do, break down and cry. I'll deal with it when, and if, something noisome drags itself through my window."

"You can't deal with the Señora, Anita. She is powerful, more powerful than you can ever imagine."

"She scared me, Manny. I am suitably impressed. If she sends something I can't handle, I'll run. Okay?"

"Not okay. You don't know, you just don't know."

"I heard the thing in the hallway. I smelled it. I'm scared, but she's just human, Manny. All the mumbo jumbo won't keep her safe from a bullet."

"A bullet may take her out, but not down."

"What does that mean?"

"If she were shot, say in the head or heart, and seemed dead, I'd treat her like a vampire. Head and heart taken out. Body burned." He glanced at me sort of sideways.

I didn't say anything. We were talking about killing Dominga Salvador. She was capturing souls and putting them into corpses. It was an abomination. She would probably attack me first. Some supernatural goodie come creeping into my home. She was evil and would attack me first. Would it be murder to ambush her? Yeah. Would I do it anyway? I let the thought take shape in my head. Rolled it over like a piece of candy, tasting the idea. Yeah, I could do it.

I should have felt bad that I could plan a murder, for any reason, and not flinch. I didn't feel bad. It was sort of comforting to know if she pushed me, I could push back. Who was I to cast stones at Manny for twenty-year-old crimes? Yeah, who indeed.

Chapter 8

It was early afternoon. Manny had dropped me off without a word. He hadn't asked to come up, and I hadn't offered. I still didn't know what to think about him, Dominga Salvador, and non-rotting zombies, complete with souls. I decided not to think. What I needed was good physical activity. As luck would have it, I had judo class this afternoon.

I have a black belt, which sounds a lot more impressive than it really is. In the dojo with referees and rules, I do okay. Out in the real world where most bad guys outweigh me by a hundred pounds, I trust a gun.

I was actually reaching for the doorknob when the bell chimed. I put the overstuffed gym bag by the door and used the little peephole. I always had to stand on tiptoe to see out of it.

The distorted image was blond, fair-eyed, and barely familiar. It was Tommy, Harold Gaynor's muscle-bound bodyguard. This day was just getting better and better.

I don't usually take a gun to judo class. It's in the afternoon. In the summer that means daylight. The really dangerous stuff doesn't come out until after dark. I untucked the red polo shirt I was wearing and clipped my inter-pants holster back in place. The pocket-size 9mm dug in just a little. If I had known I was going to need it, I would have worn looser jeans.

The doorbell rang again. I hadn't called out to let him know I was in here. He didn't seem discouraged. He rang the doorbell a third time, leaning on it.

I took a deep breath and opened the door. I looked up into Tommy's pale blue eyes. They were still empty, dead. A perfect blankness. Were you born with a stare like that, or did you have to practice?

"What do you want?" I asked.

His lips twitched. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"I don't think so."

He shrugged massive shoulders. I could see the straps of his shoulder holster imprinted on his suit jacket. He needed a better tailor.

A door opened to my left. A woman came out with a toddler in her arms. She locked the door before turning and seeing us. "Oh, hi." She smiled brightly.

"Hello," I said.

Tommy nodded.

The woman turned and walked towards the stairs. She was murmuring something nonsensical and high-pitched to the toddler.

Tommy looked back at me. "You really want to do this in the hallway?"

"What are we doing?"

"Business. Money."

I looked at his face, and it told me nothing. The only comfort I had was that if Tommy meant to do me harm he probably wouldn't have come to my apartment to do it. Probably.

I stepped back, holding the door very wide. I stayed out of arm's reach as he walked into my apartment. He looked around. "Nice, clean."

"Cleaning service," I said. "Talk to me about business, Tommy. I've got an appointment."

He glanced at the gym bag by the door. "Work or pleasure?" he asked.

"None of your business," I said.

Again that bare twist of lips. I realized it was his version of a smile. "Down in the car I got a case full of money. A million five, half now, half after you raise the zombie."

I shook my head. "I gave Gaynor my answer."

"But that was in front of your boss. This is just you and me. No one'll know if you take it. No one."

"I didn't say no because there were witnesses. I said no because I don't do human sacrifice." I could feel myself smiling. This was ridiculous. I thought about Manny then. Alright, maybe it wasn't ridiculous. But I wasn't doing it.

"Everyone has their price, Anita. Name it. We can meet it."

He had never once mentioned Gaynor's name. Only I had. He was being so bloody careful, too careful. "I don't have a price, Tommy-boy. Go back to Mr. Harold Gaynor and tell him that."

His face clouded up then. A wrinkling between his eyes. "I don't know that name."

"Oh, give me a break. I'm not wearing a wire."

"Name your price. We can meet it," he said.

"There is no price."

"Two million, tax-free," he said.

"What zombie could be worth two million dollars, Tommy?" I stared at his softly frowning face. "What could Gaynor hope to gain that would allow him to make a profit on that kind of expenditure?"

Tommy just stared at me. "You don't need to know that."

"I thought you'd say that. Go away, Tommy. I'm not for sale." I stepped back towards the door, planning to escort him out. He moved forward suddenly, faster than he looked. Muscled arms wide to grab me.

I pulled the Firestar and pointed it at his chest. He froze. Dead eyes, blinking at me. His large hands balled into fists. A nearly purple flush crept up his neck into his face. Rage.

"Don't do it," I said, my voice sounded soft.

"Bitch," he wheezed it at me.

"Now, now, Tommy, don't get nasty. Ease down, and we can all live to see another glorious day."

His pale eyes flicked from the gun to my face, then back to the gun. "You wouldn't be so tough without that piece."

If he wanted me to offer to arm wrestle him, he was in for a disappointment. "Back off, Tommy, or I'll drop you here and now. All the muscle in the world won't help you."

I watched something move behind his dead eyes, then his whole body relaxed. He took a deep breath through his nose. "Okay, you got the drop on me today. But if you keep disappointing my boss, I'm gonna find you without that gun." His lips twitched. "And we'll see how tough you really are."

A little voice in my head said, "Shoot him now." I knew as surely as I knew anything that dear Tommy would be at my back someday. I didn't want him there, but . . . I couldn't just kill him because I thought he might come after me someday. It wasn't a good enough reason. And how would I ever have explained it to the police?

"Get out, Tommy." I opened the door without taking either my gaze or the gun off the man. "Get out and tell Gaynor that if he keeps annoying me, I'll start sending his bodyguards home in boxes."

Tommy's nostrils flared just a bit at that, veins straining in his neck. He walked very stiffly past me and out into the hall. I held the gun at my side and watched him, listening to his footsteps retreat down the stairs. When I was as sure as I could be that he was gone, I put my gun back in its holster, grabbed my gym bag, and headed for judo class. Mustn't let these little interruptions spoil my exercise program. Tomorrow I would miss my workout for sure. I had a funeral to attend. Besides, if Tommy really did challenge me to arm wrestling, I was going to need all the help I could get.

Chapter 9

I hate funerals. At least this one wasn't for anyone I had particularly liked. Cold, but true. Peter Burke had been an unscrupulous SOB when alive. I didn't see why death should automatically grant him sainthood. Death, especially violent death, will turn the meanest bastard in the world into a nice guy. Why is that?

I stood there in the bright August sunlight in my little black dress and dark sunglasses, watching the mourners. They had set up a canopy over the coffin, flowers, and chairs for the family. Why was I here, you might ask, if I had not been a friend? Because Peter Burke had been an animator. Not a very good one, but we are a small,

exclusive club. If one of us dies, we all come. It's a rule. There are no exceptions. Maybe your own death, but then again being that we raise the dead, maybe not.

There are things you can do to a corpse so it won't rise again as a vampire, but a zombie is a different beast. Short of cremation, an animator can bring you back. Fire was about the only thing a zombie respected or feared.

We could have raised Peter and asked him who put a gun to his head. But they had put a 357 Magnum with an expanding point just behind his ear. There wasn't enough left of his head to fill a plastic bag. You could raise him as a zombie, but he couldn't talk. Even the dead need mouths.

Manny stood beside me, uncomfortable in his dark suit. Rosita, his wife, stood spine absolutely straight. Thick brown hands gripping her black patent leather purse. She is what my stepmother used to call large-boned. Her black hair was cut just below the ears and loosely permed. The hair needed to be longer. It emphasized how perfectly round her face was.

Charles Montgomery stood just behind me like a tall dark mountain. Charles looks like he played football somewhere. He has the ability to frown and make people run for cover. He just looks like a hard ass. Truth is, Charles faints at the sight of anything but animal blood. It's lucky for him he looks like such a big black dude. He has almost no tolerance for pain. He cries at Walt Disney movies, like when Bambi's mother dies. It's endearing as hell.

His wife, Caroline, was working. She hadn't been able to switch shifts with anyone. I wondered how hard she had tried. Caroline is okay but she sort of looks down on what we do. Mumbo jumbo she calls it. She's a registered nurse. I guess after dealing with doctors all day, she has to look down on someone.

Up near the front of the crowd was Jamison Clarke. He was tall; thin, and the only red-haired, green-eyed black man I've ever met. He nodded at me across the grave. I nodded back.

We were all here; the animators of Animators, Incorporated. Bert and Mary, our daytime secretary, were holding down the fort. I hoped Bert didn't book us in anything we couldn't handle. Or would refuse to handle. He did that if you didn't watch him.

The sun slapped my back like a hot metal hand. The men kept pulling at their ties and high collars. The smell of chrysanthemums was thick like wax at the back of my throat. No one ever gives you football mums unless you die. Carnations, roses, snapdragons, they all have happier lives, but mums, and glads - they're the funeral flowers. At least the tall spires of gladiolus had no scent.

A woman sat in the front line of chairs under the canopy. She was leaning over her knees like a broken doll. Her sobs were loud enough to drown out the words of the priest. Only his quiet, soothing rhythm reached me as I stood near the back.

Two small children were gripping the hands of an older man. Grampa? The children were pale, hollow-eyed. Fear vied with tears on their faces. They watched their mother break down completely, useless to them. Her grief was more important than theirs. Her loss greater. Bullshit.

My own mother had died when I was eight. You never really filled in the hole. It was like a piece of you gone missing. An ache that never quite goes away. You deal with it. You go on, but it's there.

A man sat beside her, rubbing her back in endless circles. His hair was nearly black, cut short and neat. Broad shouldered. From the back he looked eerily like Peter Burke. Ghosts in sunlight.

The cemetery was dotted with trees. The shade rustled and flickered pale grey in the sunlight. On the other side of the gravel driveway that twined through the cemetery were two men. They stood quietly, waiting. Grave diggers. Waiting to finish the job.

I looked back at the coffin under its blanket of pink carnations. There was a bulky mound just behind it, covered in bright green fake grass. Underneath was the fresh dug earth waiting to go back in the hole.

Mustn't let the loved ones think about red-clay soil pouring down on the gleaming coffin. Clods of dirt hitting the wood, covering your husband, father. Trapping them forever inside a lead-lined box. A good coffin will keep the water and worms out, but it doesn't stop decay.

I knew what would be happening to Peter Burke's body. Cover it in satin, wrap a tie round its neck, rouge the cheeks, close the eyes; it's still a corpse.

The funeral ended while I wasn't looking. The people rose gratefully in one mass movement. The dark-haired man helped the grieving widow to stand. She nearly fell. Another man rushed forward and supported her other side. She sagged between them, feet dragging on the ground.

She looked back over her shoulder, head almost lolling on her neck. She screamed, loud and ragged, then flung herself on the coffin. The woman collapsed against the flowers, digging at the wood. Fingers scrambling for the locks on the coffin. The ones that held the lid down.

Everyone just froze for a moment, staring. I saw the two children through the crowd still standing, wide-eyed. Shit. "Stop her," I said it too loud. People turned to stare. I didn't care.

I pushed my way through the vanishing crowd and the aisles of chairs. The dark-haired man was holding the widow's hands while she screamed and struggled. She had collapsed to the ground, and her black dress had worked up high on her thighs.

She was wearing a white slip. Her mascara had run like black blood down her face.

I stood in front of the man and the two children. He was staring at the woman like he would never move again. "Sir," I said. He didn't react. "Sir?"

He blinked, staring down at me like I had just appeared in front of him. "Sir, do you really think the children need to see all this?"

"She's my daughter," he said. His voice was deep and thick..

Drugged or just grief?

"I sympathize, sir, but the children should go to the car now."

The widow had begun to wail, loud and wordless, raw pain. The girl was beginning to shake. "You're her father, but you're their grandfather. Act like it. Get them out of here."

Anger flickered in his eyes then. "How dare you?"

He wasn't going to listen to me. I was just an intrusion on their grief. The oldest, a boy of about five, was staring up at me. His brown eyes were huge, his thin face so pale it looked ghostly.

"I think it is you who should go," the grandfather said.

"You're right. You are so right," I said. I walked around them out into the grass and the summer heat. I couldn't help the children. I couldn't help them, just as no one had been there to help me. I had survived. So would they, maybe.

Manny and Rosita were waiting for me. Rosita hugged me. "You must come to Sunday dinner after church."

I smiled. "I don't think I can make it, but thanks for asking."

"My cousin Albert will be there," she said. "He is an engineer. He will be a good provider."

"I don't need a good provider, Rosita."

She sighed. "You make too much money for a woman. It makes you not need a man."

I shrugged. If I ever did marry, which I'd begun to doubt, it wouldn't be for money. Love. Shit, was I waiting for love? Naw, not me.

"We have to pick up Tomas at kindergarten," Manny said. He was smiling at me apologetically around Rosita's shoulder. She was nearly a foot taller than he. She towered over me, too.

"Sure, tell the little guy hi for me."

"You should come to dinner," Rosita said, "Albert is a very handsome man."

"Thanks for thinking of me, Rosita, but I'll skip it."

"Come on, wife," Manny said. "Our son is waiting for us."

She let him pull her towards the car, but her brown face was set in disapproval. It offended some deep part of Rosita that I was twenty-four and had no prospects of marriage. Her and my stepmother.

Charles was nowhere to be seen. Hurrying back to the office to see clients. I thought Jamison had, too, but he stood in the grass, waiting for me.

He was dressed impeccably, crossed-lapels, narrow red tie with small dark dots on it. His tie clip was onyx and silver. He smiled at me, always a bad sign.

His greenish eyes looked hollow, like someone had erased part of the skin. If you cry enough, the skin goes from puffy red to hollow white. "I'm glad so many of us showed up," he said.

"I know he was a friend of yours, Jamison. I'm sorry."

He nodded and looked down at his hands. He was holding a pair of sunglasses loosely. He looked up at me, eyes staring straight into mine. All serious.

"The police won't tell the family anything," he said. "Peter gets blown away, and they don't have a clue who did it."

I wanted to tell him the police were doing their best, because they were. But there are a hell of a lot of murders in St. Louis over a year. We were giving Washington, D.C. a run for their money as murder capital of the United States. "They're doing their best, Jamison."

"Then why won't they tell us anything?" His hands convulsed. The sound of breaking plastic was a crumbling sharp sound. He didn't seem to notice.

"I don't know," I said.

"Anita, you're in good with the police. Could you ask?" His eyes were naked, full of such real pain. Most of the time I could ignore, or even dislike, Jamison. He was a tease, a flirt, a bleeding-heart liberal who thought that vampires were just people with fangs. But today . . . today he was real.

"What do you want me to ask?"

"Are they making any progress? Do they have any suspects? That sort of thing."

They were vague questions, but important ones. "I'll see what I can find out."

He gave a watery smile. "Thanks, Anita, really, thanks." He held out his hand. I took it. We shook. He noticed his broken sunglasses. "Damn, ninety-five dollars down the tubes."

Ninety-five dollars for sunglasses? He had to be kidding. A group of mourners were taking the family away at last. The mother was smothered in well-meaning male relatives. They were literally carrying her away from the grave. The children and Grampa brought up the rear. No one listens to good advice.

A man stepped away from the crowd and walked towards us. He was the one who reminded me of Peter Burke from the back. He was around six feet, dark-complected, a black mustache, and thin almost goateelike beard framing a handsome face. It was handsome, a dark movie-star face, but there was something about the way he moved. Maybe it was the white streak in his black hair just over the forehead. Whatever, you knew that he would always play the villain.

"Is she going to help us?" he asked, no preamble, no hello.

"Yes," Jamison said. "Anna Blake, this is John Burke, Peter's brother."

John Burke, *the* John Burke, I wanted to ask. New Orleans's greatest animator and vampire slayer? A kindred spirit. We shook hands. His grip was strong, almost painfully so, as if he wanted to see if I would flinch. I didn't. He let go. Maybe he just didn't know his own strength? But I doubted it.

"I am truly sorry about your brother," I said. I meant it. I was glad I meant it.

He nodded. "Thank you for talking to the police about him."

"I'm surprised you couldn't get the New Orleans police to give you some juice with our local police," I said.

He had the grace to look uncomfortable. "The New Orleans police and I have had a disagreement."

"Really?" I said, eyes wide. I had heard the rumors, but I wanted to hear the truth. Truth is always stranger than fiction.

"John was accused of participating in some ritual murders," Jamison said. "Just because he's a practicing vaudun priest."

"Oh," I said. Those were the rumors. "How long have you been in town, John?"

"Almost a week."

"Really?"

"Peter had been missing for two days before they found the . . . body." He licked his lips. His dark brown eyes flicked to the scene behind me. Were the grave diggers moving in? I glanced back, but the grave looked just the same to me.

"Anything you could find out would be most appreciated," he said.

"I'll do what I can."

"I have to get back to the house." He shrugged, as if to loosen the shoulder muscles. "My sister-in-law isn't taking it well."

I let it go. I deserved brownie points for that. One thing I didn't let go. "Can you look after your niece and nephew?"

He looked at me, a puzzled frown between his black eyebrows.

"I mean, keep them out of the really dramatic stuff if you can."

He nodded. "It was rough for me to watch her throw herself on the coffin. God, what must the kids be thinking?" Tears glittered in his eyes like silver. He kept them open very wide so the tears wouldn't spill out.

I didn't know what to say. I did not want to see him cry. "I'll talk to the police, find out what I can. I'll tell Jamison when I have anything."

John Burke nodded, carefully. His eyes were like a glass where only the surface tension kept the water from spilling over.

I nodded to Jamison and left. I turned on the air-conditioning in my car and let it run full blast. The two men were still standing in the hot sunshine in the middle of summer brown grass when I put the car in gear and drove away.

I would talk to the police and find out what I could. I also had another name for Dolph. John Burke, biggest animator in New Orleans, voodoo priest. Sounded like a suspect to me.

Chapter 10

The phone was ringing as I shoved the key into my apartment door. I yelled at it, "I'm coming, I'm coming!" Why do people do that? Yell at the phone as if the other person can hear you and will wait?

I shoved the door open and scooped up the phone on the fourth ring. "Hello."

"Anita?"

"Dolph," I said. My stomach tightened. "What's up?"

"We think we found the boy." His voice was quiet, neutral.

"Think," I said. "What do you mean, think?"

"You know what I mean, Anita," he said. He sounded tired.

"Like his parents?" It wasn't a question.

"Yeah."

"God, Dolph, is there much left?"

"Come and see. We're at the Burrell Cemetery. Do you know it?"

"Sure, I've done work there."

"Be here as soon as you can. I want to go home and hug my wife."

"Sure, Dolph, I understand." I was talking to myself. The phone had gone dead. I stared at the receiver for a moment. My skin felt cold. I did not want to go and view the remains of Benjamin Reynolds. I did not want to know. I pulled a lot of air in through my nose and let it out slowly.

I stared down at the dark hose, high heels, dress. It wasn't my usual crime scene attire, but it would take too long to change. I was usually the last expert called in. Once I was through, they could cover the body. And everyone could go home. I grabbed a pair of black Nikes for walking over grass and through blood. Once you got bloodstains on dress shoes, they never come clean.

I had the Browning Hi-Power, complete with holster sort of draped atop my little black clutch purse. The gun had been in my car during the funeral. I couldn't figure out a way to carry a gun of any kind while wearing a dress. I know you see thigh holsters on television, but does the word "chafing" mean anything to you?

I hesitated on getting my backup gun and shoving it in my purse, but didn't. My purse, like all purses, seems to have a traveling black hole in it. I'd never get the gun out in time if I really needed it.

I did have a silver knife in a thigh sheath under the short black skirt. I felt like Kit Carson in drag, but after Tommy's little visit, I didn't want to be unarmed. I had no illusions what would happen if Tommy did catch me with no gun. Knives weren't as good, but they beat the hell out of kicking my little feet and screaming.

I had never yet had to try to fast draw a knife from a thigh sheath. It was probably going to look vaguely obscene, but if it kept me alive . . . hey, I can take a little embarrassment.

Burrell Cemetery is at the crest of a hill. Some of the gravestones go back centuries. The soft, weathered limestone is almost unreadable, like hard candy that's been sucked clean. The grass is waist tall, luxuriant with only the headstones standing like tired sentinels.

There is a house on the edge of the cemetery where the caretaker lives, but he doesn't have to take care of much. The graveyard is full and has been for years. The last person buried here could remember the 1904 World's Fair.

There is no road into the graveyard anymore. There is a ghost of one, like a wagon track where the grass doesn't grow quite so high. The caretaker's house was surrounded by police cars and the coroner's van. My Nova seemed underdressed. Maybe I should get some buggy whip antennae, or plaster Zombies "R" Us on the side of the car. Bert would probably get mad.

I got a pair of coveralls from the trunk and slipped into them. They covered me from neck to ankle. Like most coveralls the crotch hit at knee level, I never understood why, but it meant my skirt didn't bunch up. I bought them originally for vampire stakings, but blood is blood. Besides, the weeds would play hell with my panty hose. I got a pair of surgical gloves from the little Kleenex-like box in the trunk. Nikes instead of dress shoes, and I was ready to view the remains.

Remains. Nice word.

Dolph stood like some ancient sentinel, towering over everyone else in the field. I worked my way towards him, trying not to trip over broken bits of headstone. A wind hot enough to scald rustled the grass. I was sweating inside the overalls.

Detective Clive Perry came to meet me, as if I needed an escort. Detective Perry was one of the most polite people I had ever met. He had an old-world courtliness to him. A gentleman in the best sense of the word. I always wanted to ask what he had done to end up on the spook squad.

His slender black face was beaded with sweat. He still wore his suit jacket even though it had to be over a hundred degrees. "Ms. Blake."

"Detective Perry," I said. I glanced up at the crest of the hill. Dolph and a handful of men were standing around like they didn't know what to do. No one was looking at the ground.

"How bad is it, Detective Perry?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Depends on what you compare it to."

"Did you see the tapes and pictures of the Reynolds house?"

"I did."

"Is it worse than that?" It was my new "worst thing I ever saw" measurement.

Before this it had been a vampire gang that had tried to move in from Los Angeles. The respectable vampire community had chopped them up with axes. The parts were still crawling around the room when we found them. Maybe this wasn't worse. Maybe time had just dimmed the memory.

"It isn't bloodier," he said, then he hesitated, "but it was a child. A little boy."

I nodded. He didn't need to explain. It was always worse when it was a child. I never knew exactly why. Maybe it was some primal instinct to protect the young. Some deep hormonal thing. Whatever, kids were always worse. I stared down at a white tombstone. It looked like dull, melted ice. I didn't want to go up the hill. I didn't want to see.

I went up the hill. Detective Perry followed. Brave detective. Brave me.

A sheet rested on the grass like a tent. Dolph stood closest to it. "Dolph," I said.

"Anita."

No one offered to pull back the sheet. "Is this it?"

"Yeah."

Dolph seemed to shake himself, or maybe it was a shiver. He reached down and grabbed the edge of the sheet. "Ready?" he asked.

No, I wasn't ready. Don't make me look. Please don't make me look. My mouth was dry. I could taste my pulse in my throat. I nodded.

The sheet flew back, caught by a gust of wind like a white kite. The grass was trampled down. Struggles? Had Benjamin Reynolds been alive when he was pulled down into the long grass? No, surely not. God, I hoped not.

The footed pajamas had tiny cartoon figures on them. The pajamas had been pulled back like the skin of a banana. One small arm was flung up over his head like he was sleeping. Long-lashed eyelids helped the illusion. His skin was pale and flawless, small cupid-bow mouth half open. He should have looked worse, much worse.

There was a dirty brown stain on his pajamas, the cloth covering his lower body. I did not want to see what had killed him. But that was why I was here. I hesitated, fingers hovering over the torn cloth. I took a deep breath, and that was a mistake. Hunkered over the body in the windy August heat the smell was fresh. New death smells like an outhouse, especially if the stomach or bowels have been ripped open. I knew what I'd find when I lifted the bloody cloth. The smell told me.

I knelt with a sleeve over my mouth and nose for a few minutes, breathing shallow and through my mouth, but it didn't really help. Once you caught a whiff of it, your nose remembered. The smell crawled down my throat and wouldn't let go.

Quick or slow? Did I jerk the cloth back or pull it? Quick. I jerked on the cloth, but it stuck, dried blood catching. The cloth peeled back with a wet, sucking sound.

It looked like someone had taken a giant ice cream scoop and gutted him. Stomach, intestines, upper bowels, gone. The sunshine swam around me, and I had to put a hand on the ground to keep from falling.

I glanced up at the face. His hair was pale brown like his mother's. Damp curls traced his cheeks. My gaze was pulled back to the gaping ruin that was his abdomen. There was some dark, heavy fluid leaking out of the end of his small intestine.

I stumbled away from the crime scene, using the tombstones to help me stand. I would have run if I hadn't known I would fall. The sky was spinning to meet the ground. I collapsed in the smothering grass and vomited.

I threw up until I was empty and the world stopped spinning. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve and stood up using a crooked headstone for support.

No one said a word as I walked back to them. The sheet was covering the body. The body. Had to think of it that way. Couldn't dwell on the fact that it had been a small child. Couldn't. I'd go mad.

"Well?" Dolph asked.

"He hasn't been dead long. Dammit to hell, Dolph, it was late morning, maybe just before dawn. He was alive, alive when that thing took him!" I stared up at him and felt the hot beginnings of tears. I would not cry. I had already disgraced myself enough for one day. I took a deep careful breath and let it out. I would not cry.

"I gave you twenty-four hours to talk to this Dominga Salvador. Did you find out anything?"

"She says she knows nothing of it. I believe her."

"Why?"

"Because if she wanted to kill people she wouldn't have to do anything this dramatic."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"She could wish them to death," I said.

He widened his eyes. "You believe that?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. Yes. Hell, I don't know. She scares me."

He raised one thick eyebrow. "I'll remember that."

"I have another name to add to your list though," I said.

"Who?"

"John Burke. He's up from New Orleans for his brother's funeral."

He wrote the name in his little notebook. "If he's just visiting, would he have time?"

"I can't think of a motive, but he could do it if he wanted to. Check him out with the New Orleans police. I think he's under suspicion down there for murder."

"What's he doing traveling out of state?"

"I don't think they have any proof," I said. "Dominga Salvador said she'd help me. She's promised to ask around and tell me anything she turns up."

"I've been asking around since you gave me her name. She doesn't help anyone outside her own people. How did you get her to cooperate?"

I shrugged. "My winning personality."

He shook his head.

"It wasn't illegal, Dolph. Beyond that I don't want to talk about it."

He let it go. Smart man. "Tell me as soon as you hear anything, Anita. We've got to stop this thing before it kills again."

"Agreed." I turned and looked out over the rolling grass. "Is this the cemetery near where you found the first three victims?"

"Yes."

"Maybe part of the answer's here then," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Most vampires have to return to their coffins before dawn. Ghouls stay in underground tunnels, like giant moles. If it was either of those I'd say the creature was out here somewhere waiting for nightfall."

"But," he said.

"But if it's a zombie it isn't harmed by sunlight and it doesn't need to rest in a coffin. It could be anywhere, but I think it originally came from this cemetery. If they used voodoo there will be signs of the ritual."

"Like what?"

"A chalk verve, drawn symbols around the grave, dried blood, maybe a fire." I stared off at the rustling grass. "Though I wouldn't want to start an open fire in this place."

"If it wasn't voodoo?" he asked.

"Then it was an animator. Again you look for dried blood, maybe a dead animal. There won't be as many signs and it's easier to clean up."

"Are you sure it's some kind of a zombie?" he asked.

"I don't know what else it could be. I think we should act like that's what it is. It gives us someplace to look, and something to look for."

"If it's not a zombie we don't have a clue," he said.

"Exactly."

He smiled, but it wasn't pleasant. "I hope you're right, Anita."

"Me, too," I said.

"If it did come from here, can you find what grave it came from?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" he said.

"Maybe. Raising the dead isn't a science, Dolph. Sometimes I can feel the dead under the ground. Restlessness. How old without looking at the tombstone. Sometimes I can't." I shrugged.

"We'll give you any help you need."

"I have to wait until full dark. My . . . powers are better after dark."

"That's hours away. Can you do anything now?"

I thought about that for a moment. "No. I'm sorry but no."

"Okay, you'll come back tonight then?"

"Yeah," I said.

"What time? I'll send some men out."

"I don't know what time. And I don't know how long it will take. I could be wandering out here for hours and find nothing."

"Or?"

"Or I could find the beastie itself."

"You'll need backup for that, just in case."

I nodded. "Agreed, but guns, even silver bullets, won't hurt it."

"What will?"

"Flamethrowers, napalm like the exterminators use on ghouls tunnels," I said.

"Those aren't standard issue."

"Have an exterminator team standing by," I said.

"Good idea." He made a note.

"I need a favor," I said.

He looked up. "What?"

"Peter Burke was murdered, shot to death. His brother asked me to find out what progress the police are making."

"You know we can't give out information like that."

"I know, but if you can get the facts I can feed just enough to John Burke to keep in touch with him."

"You seem to be getting along well with all our suspects," he said.

"Yeah."

"I'll find out what I can from homicide. Do you know what jurisdiction he was found in?"

I shook my head. "I could find out. It would give me an excuse to talk to Burke again."

"You say he's suspected of murder in New Orleans."

"Mm-huh," I said.

"And he may have done this." He motioned at the sheet.

"Yep."

"You watch your back, Anita."

"I always do," I said.

"You call me as early tonight as you can. I don't want all my people sitting around twiddling their thumbs on overtime."

"As soon as I can. I've got to cancel three clients just to make it." Bert was not going to be pleased. The day was looking up.

"Why didn't it eat more of the boy?" Dolph asked.

"I don't know," I said.

He nodded. "Okay, I'll see you tonight then."

"Say hello to Lucille for me. How's she coming with her master's degree?"

"Almost done. She'll have it before our youngest gets his engineering degree."

"Great."

The sheet flapped in the hot wind. A trickle of sweat trailed down my forehead. I was out of small talk. "See you later," I said, and started down the hill. I stopped and turned back. "Dolph?"

"Yes?" he said.

"I've never heard of a zombie exactly like this one. Maybe it does rise from its grave more like a vampire. If you kept that exterminator team and backup hanging around until after dark, you might catch it rising from the grave and be able to bag it."

"Is that likely?"

"No, but it's possible," I said.

"I don't know how I'll explain the overtime, but I'll do it."

"I'll be here as soon as I can."

"What else could be more important than this?" he asked.

I smiled. "Nothing you'd like to hear about."

"Try me," he said.

I shook my head.

He nodded. "Tonight, early as you can."

"Early as I can," I said.

Detective Perry escorted me back. Maybe politeness, maybe he just wanted to get away from the corpus delicti. I didn't blame him. "How's your wife, Detective?"

"We're expecting our first baby in a month."

I smiled up at him. "I didn't know. Congratulations."

"Thank you." His face clouded over, a frown puckering between his dark eyes. "Do you think we can find this creature before it kills again?"

"I hope so," I said.

"What are our chances?"

Did he want reassurance or the truth. Truth. "I haven't the faintest idea."

"I was hoping you wouldn't say that," he said.

"So was I, Detective. So was I."

Chapter 11

What was more important than bagging the critter that had eviscerated an entire family? Nothing, absolutely nothing. But it was a while until full dark, and I had other problems. Would Tommy go back to Gaynor and tell him what I said? Yes. Would Gaynor let it go? Probably not. I needed information. I needed to know how far he would go. A reporter, I needed a reporter. Irving Griswold to the rescue.

Irving had one of those pastel cubicles that passes for an office. No roof, no door, but you got walls. Irving is five-three. I'd like him for that reason if nothing else. You don't meet many men exactly my height. Frizzy brown hair framed his bald spot like petals on a flower. He wore a white dress shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbow, tie at half-mast. His face was round, pink-cheeked. He looked like a bald cherub. He did not look like a werewolf, but he was one. Even lycanthropy can't cure baldness.

No one on the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* knew Irving was a shapeshifter. It is a disease, and it's illegal to discriminate against lycanthropes, just like people with AIDS, but people do it anyway. Maybe the paper's management would have been broad-minded, liberal, but I was with Irving. Caution was better.

Irving sat in his desk chair. I leaned in the doorway of his cubicle. "How's tricks?" Irving said.

"Do you really think you're funny, or is this just an annoying habit?" I asked.

He grinned. "I'm hilarious. Ask my girlfriend."

"I'll bet," I said.

"What's up, Blake? And please tell me whatever it is is on the record, not off."

"How would you like to do an article on the new zombie legislation that's being cooked up?"

"Maybe," he said. His eyes narrowed, suspicion gleamed forth. "What do you want in return?"

"This part is off the record, Irving, for now."

"It figures." He frowned at me. "Go on."

"I need all the information you have on Harold Gaynor."

"Name doesn't ring any bells," he said. "Should it?" His eyes had gone from cheerful to steady. His concentration was nearly perfect when he smelled a story.

"Not necessarily," I said. Cautious. "Can you get the information for me?"

"In exchange for the zombie story?"

"I'll take you to all the businesses that use zombies. You can bring a photographer and snap pictures of corpses."

His eyes lit up. "A series of articles with lots of semi-gruesome pictures. You center stage in a suit. Beauty and the Beast. My editor would probably go for it."

"I thought he might, but I don't know about the center stage stuff."

"Hey, your boss will love it. Publicity means more business."

"And sells more papers," I said.

"Sure," Irving said. He looked at me for maybe a minute. The room was almost silent. Most had gone home. Irving's little pool of light was one of just a few. He'd been waiting on me. So much for the press never sleeps. The quiet breath of the air conditioner filled the early evening stillness.

"I'll see if Harold Gaynor's in the computer," Irving said at last.

I smiled at him. "Remembered the name after me mentioning it just once, pretty good."

"I am, after all, a trained reporter," he said. He swiveled his chair back to his computer keyboard with exaggerated movements. He pulled imaginary gloves on and adjusted the long tails of a tux.

"Oh, get on with it." I smiled a little wider.

"Do not rush the maestro." He typed a few words and the screen came to life. "He's on file," Irving said. "A big file. It'd take forever to print it all up." He swiveled the chair back to look at me. It was a bad sign.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll get the file together, complete with pictures if we have any. I'll deliver it to your sweet hands."

"What's the catch?"

He put his fingers to his chest. "*Moi*, no catch. The goodness of my heart."

"All right, bring it by my apartment."

"Why don't we meet at Dead Dave's, instead?" he said.

"Dead Dave's is down in the vampire district. What are you doing hanging around out there?"

His sweet cherubic face was watching me very steadily. "Rumor has it that there's a new Master Vampire of the City. I want the story."

I just shook my head. "So you're hanging around Dead Dave's to get information?"

"Exactly."

"The vamps won't talk to you. You look human."

"Thanks for the compliment," he said. "The vamps do talk to you, Anita. Do you know who the new Master is? Can I meet him, or her? Can I do an interview?"

"Jesus, Irving, don't you have enough troubles without messing with the king vampire?"

"It's a him then," he said.

"It's a figure of speech," I said.

"You know something. I know you do."

"What I know is that you don't want to come to the attention of a master vampire. They're mean, Irving."

"The vampires are trying to mainstream themselves. They want positive attention. An interview about what he wants to do with the vampire community. His vision of the future. It would be very up-and-coming. No corpse jokes. No sensationalism. Straight journalism."

"Yeah, right. On page one a tasteful little headline: THE MASTER VAMPIRE OF ST. LOUIS SPEAKS OUT."

"Yeah, it'll be great."

"You've been sniffing newsprint again, Irving."

"I'll give you everything we have on Gaynor. Pictures."

"How do you know you have pictures?" I said.

He stared up at me, his round, pleasant face cheerfully blank.

"You recognized the name, you little son of. . ."

"Tsk, tsk, Anita. Help me get an interview with the Master of the City. I'll give you anything you want."

"I'll give you a series of articles about zombies. Full-color pictures of rotting corpses, Irving. It'll sell papers."

"No interview with the Master?" he said.

"If you're lucky, no," I said.

"Shoot."

"Can I have the file on Gaynor?"

He nodded. "I'll get it together." He looked up at me. "I still want you to meet me at Dead Dave's. Maybe a vamp will talk to me with you around."

"Irving, being seen with a legal executioner of vampires is not going to endear you to the vamps."

"They still call you the Executioner?"

"Among other things."

"Okay, the Gaynor file for going along on your next vampire execution?"

"No," I said.

"Ah, Anita. . ."

"No."

He spread his hands wide. "Okay, just an idea. It'd be a great article."

"I don't need the publicity, Irving, not that kind anyway."

He nodded. "Yeah, yeah. I'll meet you at Dead Dave's in about two hours."

"Make it an hour. I'd like to be out of the District before full dark."

"Is anybody gunning for you down there? I mean I don't want to endanger you, Blake." He grinned. "You've given me too many lead stories. I wouldn't want to lose you."

"Thanks for the concern. No, no one's after me. Far as I know."

"You don't sound real certain."

I stared at him. I thought about telling him that the new Master of the City had sent me a dozen white roses and an invitation to go dancing. I had turned him down. There had been a message on my machine and an invitation to a black tie affair. I ignored it all.

So far the Master was behaving like the courtly gentleman he had been a few centuries back. It couldn't last. Jean-Claude was not a person who took defeat easily.

I didn't tell Irving. He didn't need to know. "I'll see you at Dead Dave's in an hour. I'm gonna run home and change."

"Now that you mention it, I've never seen you in a dress before."

"I had a funeral today."

"Business or personal?"

"Personal," I said.

"Then I'm sorry."

I shrugged. "I've got to go if I'm going to have time to change and then meet you. Thanks, Irving."

"It's not a favor, Blake. I'll make you pay for those zombie articles."

I sighed. I had images of him making me embrace the poor corpse. But the new legislation needed attention. The more people who understood the horror of it, the better chance it had to pass. In truth, Irving was still doing me a favor. No need to let him know that, though.

I walked away into the dimness of the darkened office. I waved over my shoulder without looking back. I wanted to get out of this dress and into something I could hide a gun on. If I was going into Blood Square, I might need it.

Chapter 12

Dead Dave's is in the part of St. Louis that has two names. Polite: the Riverfront. Rude: the Blood Quarter. It is our town's hottest vampire commercial district. Big tourist attraction. Vampires have really put St. Louis on the vacation maps. You'd think that the Ozark Mountains, some of the best fishing in the country, the symphony, Broadway level musicals, or maybe the Botanical Gardens would be enough, but no. I guess it's hard to compete with the undead. I know I find it difficult.

Dead Dave's is all dark glass and beer signs in the windows. The afternoon sunlight was fading into twilight. Vamps wouldn't be out until full dark. I had a little under two hours. Get in, look over the file, get out. Easy. Ri-ight.

I had changed into black shorts, royal-blue polo shirt, black Nikes with a matching blue swish, black and white jogging socks, and a black leather belt. The belt was there so the shoulder holster had something to hang on. My Browning Hi-Power was secure under my left arm. I had thrown on a short-sleeved dress shirt to hide the gun. The dress shirt was in a modest black and royal-blue print. The outfit looked great. Sweat trickled down my spine. Too hot for the shirt, but the Browning gave me thirteen bullets. Fourteen if you're animal enough to shove the magazine full and carry one in the chamber.

I didn't think things were that bad, yet. I did have an extra magazine shoved into the pocket of my shorts. I know it picks up pocket lint, but where else was I going to carry it? One of these days I promise to get a deluxe holster with spaces for extra magazines. But

all the models I'd seen had to be cut down to my size and made me feel like the Frito Bandito.

I almost never carry an extra clip when I've got the Browning. Let's face it, if you need more than thirteen bullets, it's over. The really sad part was the extra ammo wasn't for Tommy, or Gaynor. It was for Jean-Claude. The Master Vampire of the City. Not that silver-plated bullets would kill him. But they would hurt him, make him heal almost human slow.

I wanted out of the District before dark. I did not want to run into Jean-Claude. He wouldn't attack me. In fact, his intentions were good, if not exactly honorable. He had offered me immortality without the messy part of becoming a vampire. There was some implication that I got him along with eternity. He was tall, pale, and handsome. Sexier than a silk teddy.

He wanted me to be his human servant. I wasn't anyone's servant. Not even for eternal life, eternal youth, and a little compromise of the soul. The price was too steep. Jean-Claude didn't believe that. The Browning was in case I had to make him believe it.

I stepped into the bar and was momentarily blind, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dimness. Like one of those old westerns where the good guy hesitates at the front of the bar and views the crowd. I suspected he wasn't looking for the bad guy at all. He had just come out of the sun and couldn't see shit. No one ever shoots you while you're waiting for your eyes to adjust. I wonder why?

It was after five on a Thursday. Most of the bar stools and all the tables were taken. The place was cheek to jowl with business suits, male and female. A spattering of work boots and tans that ended at the elbow, but mostly upwardly mobile types. Dead Dave's had become trendy despite efforts to keep it at bay.

It looked like happy hour was in high gear. Shit. All the yuppies were here to catch a nice safe glimpse of a vampire. They would be slightly sloshed when it happened. Increase the thrill I guess.

Irving was sitting at the rounded corner of the bar. He saw me and waved. I waved back and started pushing my way towards him.

I squeezed between two gentlemen in suits. It took some maneuvering, and a very uncool-looking hop to mount the bar stool.

Irving grinned broadly at me. There was a nearly solid hum of conversation in the air. Words translated into pure noise like the ocean. Irving had to lean into me to be heard over the murmuring sound.

"I hope you appreciate how many dragons I had to slay to save that seat for you," he said. The faint smell of whiskey breathed along my cheek as he spoke.

"Dragons are easy, try vampires sometimes," I said.

His eyes widened. Before his mouth could form the question, I said, "I'm kidding, Irving." Sheesh, some people just don't have a sense of humor. "Besides, dragons were never native to North America," I said.

"I knew that."

"Sure," I said.

He sipped whiskey from a faceted glass. The amber liquid shimmered in the subdued light.

Luther, daytime manager and bartender, was down at the far end of the bar dealing with a group of very happy people. If they had been any happier they'd have been passed out on the floor.

Luther is large, not tall, fat. But it is solid fat, almost a kind of muscle. His skin is so black, it has purple highlights. The cigarette between his lips flared orange as he took a breath. He could talk around a cig better than anyone I'd ever met.

Irving picked up a scuffed leather briefcase from off the floor near his feet. He fished out a file over three inches thick. A large rubber band wrapped it together.

"Jesus, Irving. Can I take it home with me?"

He shook his head. "A sister reporter is doing a feature on local upstanding businessmen who are not what they seem. I had to promise her dibs on my firstborn to borrow it for the night."

I looked at the stack of papers. I sighed. The man on my right nearly rammed an elbow in my face. He turned. "Sorry, little lady, sorry. No harm done." Little came out liddle, and sorry slushed around the edges.

"No harm," I said.

He smiled and turned back to his friend. Another business type who laughed uproariously at something. Get drunk enough and everything is funny.

"I can't possibly read the file here," I said.

He grinned. "I'll follow you anywhere."

Luther stood in front of me. He pulled a cigarette from the pack he always carried with him. He put the tip of his still burning stub against the fresh cigarette. The end flared red like a live coal. Smoke trickled up his nose and out his mouth. Like a dragon.

He crushed the old cig in the clear glass ashtray he carried with him from place to place like a teddy bear. He chain smokes, is grossly overweight, and his grey hair puts him over fifty. He's never sick. He should be the national poster child for the Tobacco Institute.

"A refill?" he asked Irving.

"Yeah, thanks."

Luther took the glass, refilled it from a bottle under the bar, and set it back down on a fresh napkin.

"What can I get for ya, Anita?" he asked.

"The usual, Luther."

He poured me a glass of orange juice. We pretend it is a screwdriver. I'm a teetotaler, but why would I come to a bar if I didn't drink?

He wiped the bar with a spotless white towel. "Gotta message for you from the Master."

"The Master Vampire of the City?" Irving asked. His voice had that excited lilt to it. He smelled news.

"What?" There was no excited lilt to my voice.

"He wants to see you, bad."

I glanced at Irving, then back at Luther. I tried to telepathically send the message, not in front of the reporter. It didn't work.

"The Master's put the word out. Anybody who sees you gives you the message."

Irving was looking back and forth between us like an eager puppy. "What does the Master of the City want with you, Anita?"

"Consider it given," I said.

Luther shook his head. "You ain't going to talk to him, are you?"

"No," I said.

"Why not?" Irving asked.

"None of your business."

"Off the record," he said.

"No."

Luther stared at me. "Listen to me, girl, you talk to the Master. Right now all the vamps and freaks are just supposed to tell you the Master wants a powwow. The next order will be to detain you and take ya to him."

Detain, it was a nice word for kidnap. "I don't have anything to say to the Master."

"Don't let this get outta hand, Anita," Luther said. "Just talk to him, no harm."

That's what he thought. "Maybe I will." Luther was right. It was talk to him now or later. Later would probably be a lot less friendly.

"Why does the Master want to talk to you?" Irving asked. He was like some curious, bright-eyed bird that had spied a worm.

I ignored the question, and thought up a new one. "Did your sister reporter give you any highlights from this file? I don't really have time to read *War and Peace* before morning."

"Tell me what you know about the Master, and I'll give you the highlights."

"Thanks a lot, Luther."

"I didn't mean to sic him on you," he said. His cig bobbed up and down as he spoke. I never understood how he did that. Lip dexterity. Years of practice.

"Would everybody stop treating me like the bubonic fucking plague," Irving said. "I'm just trying to do my job."

I sipped my orange juice and looked at him. "Irving, you're messing with things you don't understand. I cannot give you info on the Master. I can't."

"Won't," he said.

I shrugged. "Won't, but the reason I won't is because I can't."

"That's a circular argument," he said.

"Sue me." I finished the juice. I didn't want it anyway. "Listen, Irving, we had a deal. The file info for the zombie articles. If you're going to break your word, deal's off. But tell me it's off. I don't have time to sit here and play twenty damn questions."

"I won't go back on the deal. My word is my bond," he said in as stagy a voice as he could manage in the murmurous noise of the bar.

"Then give me the highlights and let me get the hell out of the District before the Master hunts me up."

His face was suddenly solemn. "You're in trouble, aren't you?"

"Maybe. Help me out, Irving. Please."

"Help her out," Luther said.

Maybe it was the please. Maybe it was Luther's looming presence. Whatever, Irving nodded. "According to my sister reporter, he's crippled in a wheelchair."

I nodded. Nondirective, that's me.

"He likes his women crippled."

"What do you mean?" I remembered Cicely of the empty eyes.

"Blind, wheelchair, amputee, whatever, old Harry'll go for it."

"Deaf," I said.

"Up his alley."

"Why?" I asked. Clever questions are us.

Irving shrugged. "Maybe it makes him feel better since he's trapped in a chair himself. My fellow reporter didn't know why he was a deviant, just that he was."

"What else did she tell you?"

"He's never even been charged with a crime, but the rumors are real ugly. Suspected mob connections, but no proof. Just rumors."

"Tell me," I said.

"An old girlfriend tried to sue him for palimony. She disappeared."

"Disappeared as in probably dead," I said.

"Bingo."

I believed it. So he'd used Tommy and Bruno to kill before. Meant it would be easier to give the order a second time. Or maybe Gaynor's given the order lots of times, and just never gotten caught.

"What does he do for the mob that earns him his two bodyguards?"

"Oh, so you've met his security specialist."

I nodded.

"My fellow reporter would love to talk to you."

"You didn't tell her about me, did you?"

"Do I look like a stoolie?" He grinned at me.

I let that go. "What's he do for the mob?"

"Helps them clean money, or that's what we suspect."

"No evidence?" I said.

"None." He didn't look happy about it.

Luther shook his head, tapping his cig into the ashtray. Some ash spilled onto the bar. He wiped it with his spotless towel. "He sounds like bad news, Anita. Free advice, leave him the hell alone."

Good advice. Unfortunately. "I don't think he'll leave me alone."

"I won't ask, I don't want to know." Someone else was frantically signaling for a refill. Luther drifted over to them. I could watch the entire bar in the full-length mirror that took up the wall behind the bar. I could even see the door without turning around. It was convenient and comforting.

"I will ask," Irving said, "I do want to know."

I just shook my head.

"I know something you don't know," he said.

"And I want to know it?"

He nodded vigorously enough to make his frizzy hair bob.

I sighed. "Tell me."

"You first."

I had about enough. "I have shared all I am going to tonight, Irving. I've got the file. I'll look through it. You're just saving me a little time. Right now, a little time could be very important to me."

"Oh, shucks, you take all the fun out of being a hard-core reporter." He looked like he was going to pout.

"Just tell me, Irving, or I'm going to do something violent."

He half laughed. I don't think he believed me. He should have. "Alright, alright." He brought out a picture from behind his back with a flourish like a magician.

It was a black and white photo of a woman. She was in her twenties, long brown hair down in a modern style, just enough mousse to make it look spiky. She was pretty. I didn't recognize her. The photo was obviously not posed. It was too casual and there was a look to the face of someone who didn't know she was being photographed.

"Who is she?"

"She was his girlfriend until about five months ago," Irving said.

"So she's . . . handicapped?" I stared down at the pretty, candid face. You couldn't tell by the picture.

"Wheelchair Wanda."

I stared at him. I could feel my eyes going wide. "You can't be serious."

He grinned. "Wheelchair Wanda cruises the streets in her chair. She's very popular with a certain crowd."

A prostitute in a wheelchair. Naw, it was too weird. I shook my head. "Okay, where do I find her?"

"I and my sister reporter want in on this."

"That's why you kept her picture out of the file."

He didn't even have the grace to look embarrassed. "Wanda won't talk to you alone, Anita."

"Has she talked to your reporter friend?"

He frowned, the light of conquest dimming in his eyes. I knew what that meant. "She won't talk to reporters will she, Irving?"

"She's afraid of Gaynor."

"She should be," I said.

"Why would she talk to you and not us?"

"My winning personality," I said.

"Come on, Blake."

"Where does she hang out, Irving?"

"Oh, hell." He finished his dwindling drink in one angry swallow. "She stays near a club called The Grey Cat."

The Grey Cat, like that old joke, all cats are grey in the dark. Cute. "Where's the club?"

Luther answered. I hadn't seen him come back. "On the main drag in the Tenderloin, corner of Twentieth and Grand. But I wouldn't go down there alone, Anita."

"I can take care of myself."

"Yeah, but you don't look like you can. You don't want to have to shoot some dumb shmuck just because he copped a feel, or worse. Take someone who looks mean, save yourself the aggravation."

Irving shrugged. "I wouldn't go down there alone."

I hated to admit it, but they were right. I may be heap big vampire slayer but it doesn't show much on the outside. "Okay, I'll get Charles. He looks tough enough to take on the Green Bay Packers, but his heart is oh so gentle."

Luther laughed, puffing smoke. "Don't let of Charlie see too much. He might faint."

Faint once in public and people never let you forget.

"I'll keep Charles safe." I put more money down on the bar than was needed. Luther hadn't really given me much information this time, but usually he did. Good information. I never paid full price for it. I got a discount because I was connected with the police. Dead Dave had been a cop before they kicked him off the force for being undead. Shortsighted of them. He was still pissed about that, but he liked to help. So he fed me information, and I fed the police selected bits of it.

Dead Dave came out of the door behind the bar. I glanced at the dark glass windows. It looked the same, but if Dave was up, it was full dark. Shit. It was a walk back to my car surrounded by vampires. At least I had my gun. Comforting that.

Dave is tall, wide, short brown hair that had been balding when he died. He lost no more hair but it didn't grow back either. He smiled at me wide enough to flash fangs. An excited wiggle ran through the crowd, as if the same nerve had been touched in all of them. The whispers spread like rings in a pool. Vampire. The show was on.

Dave and I shook hands. His hand was warm, firm, and dry. Have you fed tonight, Dave? He looked like he had, all rosy and cheerful. What did you feed on, Dave? And was it willing? Probably. Dave was a good guy for a dead man.

"Luther keeps telling me you stopped by but it's always in daylight. Nice to see you're slumming after dark."

"Truthfully, I planned to be out of the District before full dark."

He frowned. "You packing?"

I gave him a discreet glimpse of my gun.

Irving's eyes widened. "You're carrying a gun." It only sounded like he shouted it.

The noise level had died down to a waiting murmur. Quiet enough for people to overhear. But then, that's why they had come, to listen to the vampire. To tell their troubles to the dead. I lowered my voice and said, "Announce it to the world, Irving."

He shrugged. "Sorry."

"How do you know newsboy over here?" Dave asked.

"He helps me sometimes with research."

"Research, well la-de-da." He smiled without showing any fang. A trick you learn after a few years. "Luther give you the message?"

"Yeah."

"You going to be smart or dumb?"

Dave is sorta blunt, but I like him anyway. "Dumb probably," I said.

"Just because you got a special relationship with the new Master, don't let it fool you. He's still a master vampire. They are freaking bad news. Don't fuck with him."

"I'm trying to avoid it."

Dave smiled broad enough to show fang. "Shit, you mean . . . Naw, he wants you for more than good tail."

It was nice to know he thought I'd be good tail. I guess. "Yeah," I said.

Irving was practically bouncing in his seat. "What the hell is going on, Anita?"

Very good question. "My business, not yours."

"Anita. . ."

"Stop pestering me, Irving. I mean it."

"Pestering? I haven't heard that word since my grandmother."

I looked him straight in the eyes and said, carefully, "Leave me the fuck alone. That better?"

He put his hands out in an I-give-up gesture. "Heh, just trying to do my job."

"Well, do it somewhere else."

I slid off the bar stool.

"The word's out to find you, Anita," Dave said. "Some of the other vampires might get overzealous."

"You mean try to take me?"

He nodded.

"I'm armed, cross and all. I'll be okay."

"You want me to walk you to your car?" Dave asked.

I stared into his brown eyes and smiled. "Thanks, Dave, I'll remember the offer, but I'm a big girl." Truth was a lot of the vampires didn't like Dave feeding information to the enemy. I was the Executioner. If a vampire stepped over the line, they sent for me. There was no such thing as a life sentence for a vamp. Death or nothing. No prison can hold a vampire.

California tried, but one master vampire got loose. He killed twenty-five people in a one-night bloodbath. He didn't feed, he just killed. Guess he was pissed about being locked up. They'd put crosses over the doors and on the guards. Crosses don't work unless you believe in them. And they certainly don't work once a master vampire has convinced you to take them off.

I was the vampire's equivalent of an electric chair. They didn't like me much. Surprise, surprise.

"I'll be with her," Irving said. He put money down on the bar and stood up. I had the bulky file under my arm. I guess he wasn't going to let it out of his sight. Great.

"She'll probably have to protect you, too," Dave said.

Irving started to say something, then thought better of it. He could say, but I'm a lycanthrope, except he didn't want people to know. He worked very, very hard at appearing human.

"You sure you'll be okay?" he asked. One more chance for a vampire guard to my car.

He was offering to protect me from the Master. Dave hadn't been dead ten years. He wasn't good enough. "Nice to know you care, Dave."

"Go on, get outta here," he said.

"Watch yourself, girl," Luther said.

I smiled brightly at both of them, then turned and walked out of the near silent bar. The crowd couldn't have overheard much, if any, of the conversation, but I could feel them staring at my back. I resisted an urge to whirl around and go "boo." I bet somebody would have screamed.

It's the cross-shaped scar on my arm. Only vampires have them, right? A cross shoved into unclean flesh. Mine had been a branding iron specially made. A now dead master vampire had ordered it. Thought it would be funny. Hardy-har.

Or maybe it was just Dave. Maybe they hadn't noticed the scar. Maybe I was overly sensitive. Make friendly with a nice law-abiding vampire, and people get suspicious. Have a few funny scars and people wonder if you're human. But that's okay. Suspicion is healthy. It'll keep you alive.

Chapter 13

The sweltering darkness closed around me like a hot, sticky fist. A streetlight formed a puddle of brilliance on the sidewalk, as if the light had melted. All the streetlights are reproductions of turn-of-the-century gas lamps. They rise black and graceful, but not quite authentic. Like a Halloween costume. It looks good but is too comfortable to be real.

The night sky was like a dark presence over the tall brick buildings, but the streetlights held the darkness back. Like a black tent held up by sticks of light. You had the sense of darkness without the reality.

I started walking for the parking garage just off First Street. Parking on the Riverfront is damn near impossible. The tourists have only made the problem worse.

The hard soles of Irving's dress shoes made a loud, echoing noise on the stone of the street. Real cobblestones. Streets meant for horses, not cars. It made parking a bitch, but it was . . . charming.

My Nike Airs made almost no sound on the street. Irving was like a clattery puppy beside me. Most lycanthropes I've met have been stealthy. Irving may have been a werewolf but he was more dog. A big, fun-loving dog.

Couples and small groups passed us, laughing, talking, voices too shrill. They had come to see vampires. Real-live vampires, or was that real-dead vampires? Tourists, all of them. Amateurs. Voyeurs. I had seen more undead than any of them. I'd lay money on that. The fascination escaped me.

It was full dark now. Dolph and the gang would be awaiting me at Burrell Cemetery. I needed to get over there. What about the file on Gaynor? And what was I going to do with Irving? Sometimes my life is too full.

A figure detached itself from the darkened buildings. I couldn't tell if he had been waiting or had simply appeared. Magic. I froze, like a rabbit caught in headlights, staring.

"What's wrong, Blake?" Irving asked.

I handed him the file and he took it, looking puzzled. I wanted my hands free in case I had to go for my gun. It probably wouldn't come to that. Probably.

Jean-Claude, Master Vampire of the City, walked towards us. He moved like a dancer, or a cat, a smooth, gliding walk. Energy and grace contained, waiting to explode into violence.

He wasn't that tall, maybe five-eleven. His shirt was so white, it gleamed. The shirt was loose, long, full sleeves made tight at the wrist by three-buttoned cuffs. The front of the shirt had only a string to close the throat. He'd left it untied, and the white cloth framed the pale smoothness of his chest. The shirt was tucked into tight black jeans, and only that kept it from billowing around him like a cape.

His hair was perfectly black, curling softly around his face. The eyes, if you dared to look into them, were a blue so dark it was almost black. Glittering, dark jewels.

He stopped about six feet in front of us. Close enough to see the dark cross-shaped scar on his chest. It was the only thing that marred the perfection of his body. Or what I'd seen of his body.

My scar had been a bad joke. His had been some poor sod's last attempt to stave off death. I wondered if the poor sod had escaped? Would Jean-Claude tell me if I asked? Maybe. But if the answer was no, I didn't want to hear it.

"Hello, Jean-Claude," I said.

"Greetings, *ma petite*," he said. His voice was like fur, rich, soft, vaguely obscene, as if just talking to him was something dirty. Maybe it was.

"Don't call me *ma petite*," I said.

He smiled slightly, not a hint of fang. "As you like." He looked at Irving. Irving looked away, careful not to meet Jean-Claude's eyes. You never looked directly into a vampire's eyes. Never. So why was I doing it with impunity. Why indeed?

"Who is your friend?" The last word was very soft and somehow threatening.

"This is Irving Griswold. He's a reporter for the *Post-Dispatch*. He's helping me with a little research."

"Ah," he said. He walked around Irving as if he were something for sale, and Jean-Claude wanted to see all of him.

Irving gave nervous little glances so that he could keep the vampire in view. He glanced at me, widening his eyes. "What's going on?"

"What indeed, Irving?" Jean-Claude said.

"Leave him alone, Jean-Claude."

"Why have you not come to see me, my little animator?"

Little animator wasn't much of an improvement over *ma petite*, but I'd take it. "I've been busy."

The look that crossed his face was almost anger. I didn't really want him mad at me. "I was going to come see you," I said.

"When?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Tonight." It was not a suggestion.

"I can't."

"Yes, *ma petite*, you can." His voice was like a warm wind in my head.

"You are so damn demanding," I said.

He laughed then. Pleasant and resonating like expensive perfume that lingers in the room after the wearer has gone. His laughter was like that, lingering in the ears like distant music. He had the best voice of any master vampire I'd ever met. Everyone has their talents.

"You are so exasperating," he said, the edge of laughter still in his voice. "What am I to do with you?"

"Leave me alone," I said. I was utterly serious. It was one of my biggest wishes.

His face sobered completely, like someone had flipped a switch. On, happy, off, unreadable. "Too many of my followers know you are human servant, *ma petite*. Bringing you under control is part of consolidating my power." He sounded almost regretful. A lot of help that did me.

"What do you mean, bringing me under control?" My stomach was tight with the beginnings of fear. If Jean-Claude didn't scare me to death, he was going to give me an ulcer.

"You are my human servant. You must start acting like one."

"I am not your servant."

"Yes, *ma petite*, you are."

"Dammit, Jean-Claude, leave me alone."

He was suddenly standing next to me. I hadn't seen him move. He had clouded my mind without me even blinking. I could taste my pulse at the back of my throat. I tried to step back, but one pale slender hand grabbed my right arm, just above the elbow. I shouldn't have stepped back. I should have gone for my gun. I hoped I would live through the mistake.

My voice came out flat, normal. At least I'd die brave. "I thought having two of your vampire marks meant you couldn't control my mind."

"I cannot bewitch you with my eyes, and it is harder to cloud your mind, but it can be done." His fingers encircled my arm. Not hurting. I didn't try to pull away. I knew better. He could crush my arm without breaking a sweat, or tear it from its socket, or bench press a Toyota. If I couldn't arm wrestle Tommy, I sure as hell couldn't match Jean-Claude.

"He's the new Master of the City, isn't he?" It was Irving. I think we had forgotten about him. It would have been better for Irving if we had.

Jean-Claude's grip tightened slightly on my right arm. He turned to look at Irving. "You are the reporter that has been asking to interview me."

"Yes, I am." Irving sounded just the tiniest bit nervous, not much, just the hint of tightness in his voice. He looked brave and resolute. Good for Irving.

"Perhaps after I have spoken with this lovely young woman, I will grant you your interview."

"Really?" Astonishment was plain in his voice. He grinned widely at me. "That would be great. I'll do it any way you want. It. . ."

"Silence." The word hissed and floated. Irving fell quiet as if it were a spell.

"Irving, are you alright?" Funny me asking. I was the one cheek to jowl with a vampire, but I asked anyway.

"Yeah," Irving said. That one word was squeezed small with fear. "I've just never felt anything like him."

I glanced up at Jean-Claude. "He is sort of one of a kind."

Jean-Claude turned his attention back to me. Oh, goody. "Still making jokes, *ma petite*."

I stared up into his beautiful eyes, but they were just eyes. He had given me the power to resist them. "It's a way to pass the time. What do you want, Jean-Claude?"

"So brave, even now."

"You aren't going to do me on the street, in front of witnesses. You may be the new Master, but you're also a businessman. You're mainstream vampire. It limits what you can do."

"Only in public," he said, so soft that only I heard him.

"Fine, but we both agree you aren't going to do violence here and now." I stared up at him. "So cut the theatrics and tell me what the bloody hell you want."

He smiled then, a bare movement of lips, but he released my arm and stepped back. "Just as you will not shoot me down in the street without provocation."

I thought I had provocation, but nothing I could explain to the police. "I don't want to be up on murder charges, that's true."

His smile widened, still not fangs. He did that better than any living vampire I knew. Was living vampire an oxymoron? I wasn't sure anymore.

"So, we will not harm each other in public," he said.

"Probably not," I said. "What do you want? I'm late for an appointment."

"Are you raising zombies or slaying vampires tonight?"

"Neither," I said.

He looked at me, waiting for me to say more. I didn't. He shrugged and it was graceful. "You are my human servant, Anita."

He'd used my real name, I knew I was in trouble now. "Am not," I said.

He gave a long sigh. "You bear two of my marks."

"Not by choice," I said.

"You would have died if I had not shared my strength with you."

"Don't give me crap about how you saved my life. You forced two marks on me. You didn't ask or explain. The first mark may have saved my life, great. The second mark saved yours. I didn't have a choice either time."

"Two more marks and you will have immortality. You will not age because I do not age. You will remain human, alive, able to wear your crucifix. Able to enter a church. It does not compromise your soul. Why do you fight me?"

"How do you know what compromises my soul? You don't have one anymore. You traded your immortal soul for earthly eternity. But I know that vampires can die, Jean-Claude. What happens when you die? Where do you go? Do you just go poof? No, you go to hell where you belong."

"And you think by being my human servant you will go with me?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to find out."

"By fighting me, you make me appear weak. I cannot afford that, *ma petite*. One way or another, we must resolve this."

"Just leave me alone."

"I cannot. You are my human servant, and you must begin to act like one."

"Don't press me on this, Jean-Claude."

"Or what, will you kill me? Could you kill me?"

I stared at his beautiful face and said, "Yes."

"I feel your desire for me, *ma petite*, as I desire you."

I shrugged. What could I say? "It's just a little lust, Jean-Claude, nothing special." That was a lie. I knew it even as I said it.

"No, *ma petite*, I mean more to you than that."

We were attracting a crowd, at a safe distance. "Do you really want to discuss this in the street?"

He took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. "Very true. You make me forget myself, *ma petite*."

Great. "I really am late, Jean-Claude. The police are waiting for me."

"We must finish this discussion, *ma petite*," he said.

I nodded. He was right. I'd been trying to ignore it, and him. Master vampires are not easy to ignore. "Tomorrow night."

"Where?" he asked.

Polite of him not to order me to his lair. I thought about where best to do it. I wanted Charles to go down to the Tenderloin with me. Charles was going to be checking the zombie working conditions at a new comedy club. Good a place as any. "Do you know The Laughing Corpse?"

He smiled, a glimpse of fang touching his lips. A woman in the small crowd gasped. "Yes."

"Meet me there at, say, eleven o'clock."

"My pleasure." The words caressed my skin like a promise. Shit.

"I will await you in my office, tomorrow night."

"Wait a minute. What do you mean, your office?" I had a bad feeling about this.

His smile widened into a grin, fangs glistening in the streetlights. "Why, I own The Laughing Corpse. I thought you knew."

"The hell you did."

"I will await you."

I'd picked the place. I'd stand by it. Dammit. "Come on, Irving."

"No, let the reporter stay. He has not had his interview."

"Leave him alone, Jean-Claude, please."

"I will give him what he desires, nothing more."

I didn't like the way he said desires. "What are you up to?"

"Me, *ma petite*, up to something?" He smiled.

"Anita, I want to stay," Irving said.

I turned to him. "You don't know what you're saying."

"I'm a reporter. I'm doing my job."

"Swear to me, swear to me you won't harm him."

"You have my word," Jean-Claude said.

"That you will not harm him in any way."

"That I will not harm him in any way." His face was expressionless, as if all the smiles had been illusions. His face had that immobility of the long dead. Lovely to look at, but empty of life as a painting.

I looked into his blank eyes and shivered. Shit. "Are you sure you want to stay here?"

Irving nodded. "I want the interview."

I shook my head. "You're a fool."

"I'm a good reporter," he said.

"You're still a fool."

"I can take care of myself, Anita."

We looked at each other for a space of heartbeats. "Fine, have fun. May I have the file?"

He looked down at his arms as if he had forgotten he was holding it. "Drop it by tomorrow morning or Madeline is going to have a fit."

"Sure. No problem." I tucked the bulky file under my left arm as loosely as I could manage it. It hampered my being able to draw my gun, but life's imperfect.

I had information on Gaynor. I had the name of a recent ex-girlfriend. A woman scorned. Maybe she'd talk to me. Maybe she'd help me find clues. Maybe she'd tell me to go to hell. Wouldn't be the first time.

Jean-Claude was watching me with his still eyes. I took a deep breath through my nose and let it out through my mouth. Enough for one night. "See you both tomorrow." I turned and walked away. There was a group of tourists with cameras. One was sort of tentatively raised in my direction.

"If you snap my picture, I will take the camera away from you and break it." I smiled while I said it.

The man lowered his camera uncertainly. "Geez, just a little picture."

"You've seen enough," I said. "Move on, the show's over." The tourists drifted away like smoke when the wind blows through it. I walked down the street towards the parking garage. I glanced back and found the tourists had drifted back to surround Jean-Claude and Irving. The tourists were right. The show wasn't over yet.

Irving was a big boy. He wanted the interview. Who was I to play nursemaid on a grown werewolf? Would Jean-Claude find out Irving's secret? If he did, would it make a difference? Not my problem. My problem was Harold Gaynor, Dominga Salvador, and a monster that was eating the good citizens of St. Louis, Missouri. Let Irving take care of his own problems. I had enough of my own.

Chapter 14

The night sky was a curving bowl of liquid black. Stars like pinprick diamonds gave a cold, hard fight. The moon was a glowing patchwork of greys and goldish-silver. The city makes you forget how dark the night, how bright the moon, how very many stars.

Burrell Cemetery didn't have any streetlights. There was nothing but the distant yellow gleam of a house's windows. I stood at the top of the hill in my coveralls and Nikes, sweating.

The boy's body was gone. It was in the morgue waiting for the coroner's attentions. I was finished with it. Never had to look at it again. Except in my dreams.

Dolph stood beside me. He didn't say a word, just looked out over the grass and broken tombstones, waiting. Waiting for me to do my magic. To pull the rabbit out of the hat. The best that could happen was the rabbit to be in and to destroy it. Next best thing was finding the hole it had come from. That could tell us something. And something was better than what we had right now.

The exterminators followed a few paces behind. The man was short, beefy, grey hair cut in a butch. He looked like a retired football coach, but he handled the flamethrower strapped to his back like it was something alive. Thick hands caressing it.

The woman was young, no more than twenty. Thin blond hair tied back in a ponytail. She was a little taller than me, small. Wisps of hair trailed across her face. Her eyes were wide and searched the tall grass, side to side. Like a gunner on point.

I hoped she didn't have an itchy trigger finger. I didn't want to be eaten by a killer zombie, but I didn't want to be plastered with napalm either. Burned alive or eaten alive? Is there anything else on the menu?

The grass rustled and whispered like dry autumn leaves. If we did use the flamethrowers in here, it'd be a grass fire. We'd be lucky to outrun it. But fire was the only thing that could stop a zombie. If it was a zombie and not something else altogether.

I shook my head and started walking. Doubts would get us nowhere. Act like you know what you're doing; it was a rule I lived by.

I am sure that Señora Salvador would have had a specific rite or sacrifice to find a zombie's grave. Her way of doing all this had more rules than my way. Of course her way enabled her to trap souls in rotting corpses. I had never hated anyone enough to do that to them. Kill them, yes, but entrap their soul and make it sit and wait and feel its body rotting. No, that was worse than wicked. It was evil. She needed to be stopped, and only death would do that. I sighed. Another problem for another night.

It bothered me to hear Dolph's footsteps echoing mine. I glanced back at the two exterminators. They killed everything from termites to ghouls, but ghouls are cowards, scavengers mostly. Whatever we were after wasn't a scavenger.

I could feel the three of them at my back. Their footsteps seemed louder than mine. I tried to clear my mind and start the search, but all I could hear was their footsteps. All I could sense was the woman's fear. They were messing up my concentration.

I stopped. "Dolph, I need more room."

"What does that mean?"

"Hang back a little. You're ruining my concentration."

"We might be too far away to help."

"If the zombie rises out of the ground and leeches on me . . ." I shrugged. "What are you going to do, shoot it with napalm and crispy-critter me, too?"

"You said fire was the only weapon," he said.

"It is, but if the zombie actually grapples with anyone, tell the exterminators not to fry the victim."

"If the zombie grabs one of us, we can't use the napalm?" he said.

"Bingo."

"You could have said this sooner."

"I just thought of it."

"Great," he said.

I shrugged. "I'll take point. My oversight. Just hang back and let me do my job." I stepped in close to him to whisper, "And watch the woman. She looks scared enough to start shooting shadows."

"They're exterminators, Anita, not police or vampire slayers."

"For tonight, our lives could depend on them, so keep an eye on her, okay?"

He nodded and glanced back at the two exterminators. The man smiled and nodded. The girl just stared. I could almost smell her fear.

She was entitled to it. Why did it bother me so much? Because she and I were the only women here, and we had to be better than the men. Braver, quicker, whatever. It was a rule for playing with the big boys.

I walked out into the grass alone. I waited until the only thing I could hear was the grass; soft, dry, whispering. Like it was trying to tell me something in a scratchy, frantic

voice. Frantic, fearful. The grass sounded afraid. That was stupid. Grass didn't feel shit. But I did, and there was sweat on every inch of my body. Was it here? Was the thing that had reduced a man to so much raw meat, here in the grass, hiding, waiting?

No. Zombies weren't smart enough for that, but of course, it had been smart enough to hide from the police. That was smart for a corpse. Too smart. Maybe it wasn't a zombie at all. I had finally found something that scared me more than vampires. Death didn't bother me much. Strong Christian and all that. Method of death did. Being eaten alive. One of my top three ways not to go out.

Who would ever have thought I'd be afraid of a zombie, any kind of zombie? Nicely ironic that. I'd laugh later when my mouth wasn't so damn dry.

There was that quiet waiting that all cemeteries have. As if the dead held their collective breath, waiting, but for what? The resurrection? Maybe. But I've dealt with the dead too long to believe in just one answer. The dead are like the living. They do different things.

Most people die and go to heaven or hell, and that's that. But a few, for whatever reason, don't work that way. Ghosts, restless spirits, violence, evil, or simple confusion; all of these can trap a spirit on earth. I'm not saying that it traps the soul. I don't believe that, but some memory of the soul, the essence, lingers.

Was I expecting some specter to rise from the grass and rush screaming towards me? No. I had never seen a ghost yet that could cause actual physical harm. If it causes physical damage, it isn't a ghost; demon maybe, or the spirit of some sorcerer, black magic, but ghosts don't hurt.

That was almost a comforting thought.

The ground sloped out from under my feet. I stumbled and caught myself on one of the leaning headstones. Sunken earth, a grave without a marker. A tingling shock ran up my leg, a whisper of ghostly electricity. I jerked back and sat down hard on the ground.

"Anita, you all right?" Dolph yelled.

I glanced back at him and found the grass completely hid me from view. "I'm fine," I yelled. I got to my feet careful to avoid stepping on the old grave. Whatever person lay under the earth, he, or she, was not a happy camper. It was a hot spot, not a ghost, or even a haunt, but something. It had probably been a full-blown ghost once, but time had worn it away. Ghosts wear out like old clothes and go on to wherever old ghosts go.

The sunken grave would fade away, probably in my lifetime. If I could avoid killer zombies for a few years. And vampires. And gun-toting humans. Oh, hell, the hot spot would probably outlast me.

I looked back to find Dolph and the exterminators maybe twenty yards back. Twenty yards, wasn't that awfully far? I had told them to hang back, but I hadn't meant for them to leave me hanging in the wind. I was just never satisfied.

If I called them to come closer, you think they'd get mad? Probably. I started walking again, trying not to step on any more graves. But it was hard with most of the stones hidden in the long grass. So many unmarked graves, so much neglect.

I could wander aimlessly all bloody night. Had I really thought that I could just accidentally walk over the right grave?

Yes. Hope springs eternal, especially when the alternative isn't very human.

Vampires were once ordinary human beings; zombies, too. Most lycanthropes start out human, though there are a few rare inherited curses. All the monsters start out normal

except me. Raising the dead wasn't a career choice. I didn't sit down in the guidance counselor's office one day and say, "I'd like to raise the dead for a living." No, it wasn't that neat or clean.

I have always had an affinity for the dead. Always. Not the newly dead. No, I don't mess with souls, but once the soul departs, I know it. I can feel it. Laugh all you want. It's the truth.

I had a dog when I was little. Just like most kids. And like most kids' dogs, she died. I was thirteen. We buried Jenny in the backyard. I woke up a week after Jenny died and found her curled up beside me. Thick black fur coated with grave dirt. Dead brown eyes following my every move, just like when she was alive.

I thought for one wild moment she was alive. It had been a mistake, but I know dead when I see it. Feel it. Call it from the grave. I wonder what Dominga Salvador would think about that story. Calling an animal zombie. How shocking. Raising the dead by accident. How frightening. How sick.

My stepmother, Judith, never quite recovered from the shock. She rarely tells people what I do for a living. Dad? Well, Dad ignores it, too. I tried ignoring it, but couldn't. I won't go into details, but does the term "road kill" have any significance for you? It did for Judith. I looked like a nightmare version of the Pied Piper.

My father finally took me to meet my maternal grandmother. She's not as scary as Dominga Salvador, but she's . . . interesting. Grandma Flores agreed with Dad. I should not be trained in voodoo, only in enough control to stop the . . . problems. "Just teach her to control it," Dad said.

She did. I did. Dad took me back home. It was never mentioned again. At least not in front of me. I always wondered what dear stepmother said behind closed doors. For that matter Dad wasn't pleased either. Hell, I wasn't pleased.

Bert recruited me straight out of college. I never knew how he heard about me. I refused him at first, but he waved money at me. Maybe I was rebelling against parental expectations? Or maybe I had finally realized that there is damn little employment opportunity for a B.S. in biology with an emphasis on the supernatural. I minored in creatures of legend. That was real helpful on my resume.

It was like having a degree in ancient Greek or the Romantic Poets, interesting, enjoyable, but then what the hell can you do with it? I had planned to go on to grad school and teach college. But Bert came along and showed me a way to turn my natural talent into a job. At least I can say I use my degree every day.

I never puzzled about how I came to do what I do. There was no mystery. It was in the blood.

I stood in the graveyard and took a deep breath. A bead of sweat trickled down my face. I wiped it with the back of my hand. I was sweating like a pig, and I still felt cold. Fear, but not of the bogeyman, of what I was about to do.

If it were a muscle, I would move it. If it were a thought, I would think it. If it were a magic word, I could say it. It is nothing like that. It is like my skin becomes cool even under cloth. I can feel all my nerve endings naked to the wind. And even in this hot, sweating August night, my skin felt cool. It is almost like a tiny, cool wind emanates from my skin. But it isn't wind, no one else can feel it. It doesn't blow through a room like a Hollywood horror movie. It isn't flashy. It's quiet. Private. Mine.

The cool fingers of "wind" searched outward. Within a ten-to-fifteen-foot circle I would be able to search the graves. As I moved, the circle would move with me, searching.

How does it feel to search through the hard-packed earth for dead bodies? Like nothing human. The closest I can come to describing it is like phantom fingers rifling through the dirt, searching for the dead. But, of course, that isn't quite what it feels like either. Close but no cigar.

The coffin nearest me had been water-ruined years ago. Bits of warped wood, shreds of bone, nothing whole. Bone and old wood, dirt, clean and dead. The hot spot flared almost like a burning sensation. I couldn't read its coffin. The hot spot could keep its secrets. It wasn't worth forcing the issue. It was a life force of sorts, trapped to a dead grave until it faded. That is bound to make you grumpy.

I walked slowly forward. The circle moved with me. I touched bones, intact coffins, bits of cloth in newer graves. This was an old cemetery. There were no decaying corpses. Death had progressed to the nice neat stage.

Something grabbed my ankle. I jumped and walked forward without looking down. Never look down. It's a rule. I got a brief glimpse just behind my eyes of something pale and mist-like with wide screaming eyes.

A ghost, a real-live ghost. I had walked over its grave and it had let me know it didn't like it. A ghost had grabbed me round the ankles. Big deal. If you ignored them, the spectral hands would fade. If you noticed them, you gave them substance, and you could be in deep shit.

Important safety tip with most of the spiritual world: if you ignore it, it has less power. This does not work with demons or other demi-beings. Other exceptions to the rule are vampires, zombies, ghouls, lycanthropes, witches . . . Oh, hell, ignoring only works for ghosts. But it does work.

Phantom hands tugged at my pants leg. I could feel skeletal fingers pulling upwards, as if it would use me to pull itself from the grave. Shit! I was eating my pulse between my teeth. Just keep walking. Ignore it. It will go away. Dammit to hell.

The fingers slipped away, reluctantly. Some types of ghost seem to bear a grudge against the living. A sort of jealousy. They cannot harm you, but they scare the bejesus out of you and laugh while they're doing it.

I found an empty grave. Bits of wood decaying into the earth, but no trace of bone. No body. Empty. The earth above it was thick with grass and weeds. The earth was hard-packed and dry from the drought. The grass and weeds had been disturbed. Bare roots were showing, almost as if someone had tried to pull the grass up. Or something had come up underneath the grass and left a trail.

I knelt on all fours above the dying grass. My hands stayed on top of the hard, reddish dirt, but I could feel the inside of the grave like rolling your tongue around your teeth. You can't see it, but you can feel it.

The corpse was gone. The coffin was undisturbed. A zombie had come from here. Was it the zombie we were looking for? No guarantees. But it was the only zombie raising I could sense.

I stared out away from the grave. It was hard using just my eyes to search the grass. I could almost see what lay under the dirt. But the grave showed behind my eyes in my head somewhere where there were no optic nerves. The graveyard that I could see with

my eyes ended at a fence maybe five yards away. Had I walked it all? Was this the only grave that was empty?

I stood and looked out over the graves. Dolph and the two exterminators were still with me about thirty yards back. Thirty yards? Some backup.

I had walked it all. There was the grabby ghost. The hot spot was there. The newest grave over there. It was mine now. I knew this cemetery. And everything that was restless. Everything that wasn't quite dead was dancing above its grave. White misty phantoms. Sparkling angry lights. Agitated. There was more than one way to wake the dead.

But they would quiet down and sleep, if that was the word. No permanent damage. I glanced back down at the empty grave. No permanent damage.

I waved Dolph and the others over. I got a Ziploc bag out of the coverall pocket and scooped some grave dirt into it.

The moonlight suddenly seemed dimmer. Dolph was standing over me. He did sort of loom.

"Well?" he asked.

"A zombie came out of this grave," I said.

"Is it the killer zombie?"

"I don't know for sure."

"You don't know?"

"Not yet."

"When will you know?"

"I'll take it to Evans and let him do his touchie-feelie routine on it."

"Evans, the clairvoyant," Dolph said.

"Yep."

"He's a flake."

"True, but he's good."

"The department doesn't use him anymore."

"Bully for the department," I said. "He's still on retainer at Animators, Inc."

Dolph shook his head. "I don't trust Evans."

"I don't trust anybody," I said. "So what's the problem?"

Dolph smiled. "Point taken."

I had rolled some of the grass and weeds, roots carefully intact, inside a second bag. I crawled to the head of the grave and spread the weeds. There was no marker. Dammit! The pale limestone had been chipped away at the base. Shattered. Carried away. Shit.

"Why would they destroy the headstone?" Dolph asked.

"The name and date could have given us some clue to why the zombie was raised and to what went wrong."

"Wrong, how?"

"You might raise a zombie to kill one or two people but not wholesale slaughter. Nobody would do that."

"Unless they're crazy," he said.

I stared up at him. "That's not funny."

"No, it isn't."

A madman that could raise the dead. A murderous zombie corpse controlled by a psychotic. Great. And if he, or she, could do it once. . .

"Dolph, if we have a crazy man running around, there could be more than one zombie."

"And if it is crazy, then there won't be a pattern," he said.

"Shit."

"Exactly."

No pattern meant no motive. No motive meant we might not be able to figure this out. "No, I don't believe that."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because if I do believe it, it leaves us no place to go." I took out a pocketknife that I brought for the occasion and started to chip at the remains of the tombstone.

"Defacing a gravemarker is against the law," Dolph said.

"Isn't it though." I scrapped a few smaller pieces into a third bag, and finally got a sizable chunk of marble, big as my thumb.

I stuffed all the bags into the pockets of my coveralls, along with the pocketknife.

"You really think Evans will be able to read anything from those bits and pieces?"

"I don't know." I stood and looked down at the grave. The two exterminators were standing just a short distance away. Giving us privacy. How very polite. "You know, Dolph, they may have destroyed the tombstone, but the grave is still here."

"But the corpse is gone," he said.

"True, but the coffin might be able to tell us something. Anything might help."

He nodded. "Alright, I'll get an exhumation order."

"Can't we just dig it up now, tonight?"

"No," he said. "I have to play by the rules." He stared at me very hard. "And I don't want to come back out here and find the grave dug up. The evidence won't mean shit if you tamper with it."

"Evidence? You really think this case will go to court?"

"Yes."

"Dolph, we just need to destroy the zombie."

"I want the bastards that raised it, Anita. I want them up on murder charges."

I nodded. I agreed with him, but I thought it unlikely. Dolph was a policeman, he had to worry about the law. I worried about simpler things, like survival.

"I'll let you know if Evans has anything useful to say," I said.

"You do that."

"Wherever the beastie is, Dolph, it isn't here."

"It's out there, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Killing someone else while we sit here and chase our tails."

I wanted to touch him. To let him know it was all right, but it wasn't all right. I knew how he felt. We were chasing our tails. Even if this was the grave of the killer zombie, it didn't get us any closer to finding the zombie. And we had to find it. Find it, trap it, and destroy it. The sixty-four-thousand-dollar question was, could we do all that before it needed to feed again? I didn't have an answer. That was a lie. I had an answer. I just didn't like it. Out there somewhere, the zombie was feeding again.

Chapter 15

The trailer park where Evans lives is in St. Charles just off Highway 94. Acres of mobile homes roll out in every direction. Of course, there's nothing mobile about them. When I was a kid, trailers could be hooked to the back of a car and moved. Simple. It was one of their appeals. Some of these mobile homes had three and four bedrooms, multiple baths. The only thing moving these puppies was a semitruck, or a tornado.

Evans's trailer is an older model. I think, if he had to, he could chain it to the back of a pickup and move. Easier than hiring a moving van, I guess. But I doubt Evans will ever move. Hell, he hasn't left the trailer in nearly a year.

The windows were golden with light. There was a little makeshift porch complete with an awning, guarding the door. I knew he would be up. Evans was always up. Insomnia sounded so harmless. Evans had made it a disease.

I was back in my black shorts outfit. The three bags of goodies were stuffed in a fanny pack. If I went in there waving them around, Evans would freak. I needed to work up to it, be subtle. Just thought I'd drop by to see my old buddy. No ulterior motives here. Right.

I opened the screen door and knocked. Silence. No movement. Nothing. I raised my hand to knock again, then hesitated. Had Evans finally gotten to sleep? His first decent night's sleep since I'd known him. Drat. I was still standing there with my hand half-raised when I felt him staring at me.

I looked up at the little window in the door. A slice of pale face was staring out from between the curtains. Evans's blue eye blinked at me.

I waved.

His face disappeared. The door unlocked, then opened. There was no sight of Evans, just the open door. I walked in. Evans was standing behind the door, hiding.

He closed the door by leaning against it. His breathing was fast and shallow as if he'd been running. Stringy yellow hair trailed over a dark blue bathrobe. His face was covered in bristly reddish beard.

"How are you doing, Evans?"

He leaned against the door, eyes too wide. His breathing was still too fast. Was he on something?

"Evans, you all right?" When in doubt, reverse your word order.

He nodded. "What do you want?" His voice was breathy.

I didn't think he was going to believe I had just stopped by. Call it an instinct. "I need your help."

He shook his head. "No."

"You don't even know what I want."

He shook his head. "Doesn't matter."

"May I sit down?" I asked. If directness wouldn't work, maybe politeness would.

He nodded. "Sure."

I glanced around the small living-room area. I was sure there was a couch under the newspapers, paper plates, half-full cups, old clothes. There was a box of petrified pizza on the coffee table. The room smelled stale.

Would he freak if I moved stuff? Could I sit on the pile that I thought was the couch without everything collapsing? I decided to try. I'd sit in the freaking moldy pizza box if Evans would agree to help me.

I perched on a pile of papers. There was definitely something large and solid under the newspapers. Maybe the couch. "May I have a cup of coffee?"

He shook his head. "No clean cups."

This I could believe. He was still pressed against the door as if afraid to come any closer. His hands were plunged into the pockets of his bathrobe.

"Can we just talk?" I asked.

He shook his head. I shook my head with him. He frowned at that. Maybe somebody was home.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I told you, your help."

"I don't do that anymore."

"What?" I asked.

"You know," he said.

"No, Evans, I don't know. Tell me."

"I don't touch things anymore."

I blinked. It was an odd way to phrase it. I stared around at the piles of dirty dishes, the clothes. It did look untouched. "Evans, let me see your hands."

He shook his head. I didn't imitate him this time. "Evans, show me your hands."

"No," it was loud, clear.

I stood up and started walking towards him. It didn't take long. He backed away into the corner by the door and the doorway into the bedroom. "Show me your hands."

Tears welled in his eyes. He blinked, and the tears slid down his cheeks. "Leave me alone," he said.

My chest was tight. What had he done? God, what had he done? "Evans, either you show me your hands voluntarily, or I make you do it." I fought an urge to touch his arm, but that was not allowed.

He was crying harder now, small hiccupy sobs. He pulled his left hand out of the robe pocket. It was pale, bony, whole. I took a deep breath. Thank you, dear God.

"What did you think I'd done?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Don't ask."

He was looking at me now, really looking at me. I did have his attention. "I'm not that crazy," he said.

I started to say, "I never thought you were," but obviously I had. I had thought he had cut his hands off so he wouldn't have to touch anymore. God, that was crazy. Seriously crazy. And I was here to ask him to help me with a murder. Which of us was crazier? Don't answer that.

He shook his head. "What are you doing here, Anita?" The tears weren't even dry on his face, but his voice was calm, ordinary.

"I need your help with a murder."

"I don't do that anymore. I told you."

"You told me once that you couldn't not have visions. Your clairvoyance isn't something you can just turn off."

"That's why I stay in here. If I don't go out, I don't see anybody. I don't have visions anymore."

"I don't believe you," I said.

He took a clean white handkerchief out of his pocket and wrapped it around the doorknob. "Get out."

"I saw a three-year-old boy today. He'd been eaten alive."

He leaned his forehead into the door. "Don't do this to me, please."

"I know other psychics, Evans, but no one with your success rate. I need the best. I need you."

He rubbed his forehead against the door. "Please don't."

I should have gone then, left, done what he said, but I didn't. I stood behind him and waited. Come on, old buddy, old pal, risk your sanity for me. I was the ruthless zombie raiser. I didn't feel guilt. Results were all that mattered. Ri-ight.

But in a way, results were all that mattered. "Other people are going to die unless we can stop it," I said.

"I don't care," he said.

"I don't believe you."

He stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket and whirled around. "The little boy, you're not lying about that, are you?"

"I wouldn't lie to you."

He nodded. "Yeah, yeah." He licked his lips. "Give me what ya got."

I got the bags out of my purse and opened the one with the gravestone fragments in it. Had to start somewhere.

He didn't ask what it was, that would be cheating. I wouldn't even have mentioned the boy except I needed the leverage. Guilt is a wonderful tool.

His hand shook as I dropped the largest rock fragment into his palm. I was very careful that my fingers did not brush his hand. I didn't want Evans inside my secrets. It might scare him off.

His hand clenched around the stone. A shock ran up his spine. He jerked, eyes closed. And he was gone.

"Graveyard, grave." His head jerked to the side like he was listening to something. "Tall grass. Hot. Blood, he's wiping blood on the tombstone." He looked around the room with his closed eyes. Would he have seen the room if his eyes had been open?

"Where does the blood come from?" he asked that. Was I supposed to answer? "No, no!" He stumbled backwards, back smacking into the door. "Woman screaming, screaming, no, no!"

His eyes flew open wide. He threw the rock fragment across the room. "They killed her, they killed her!" He pressed his fists into his eyes. "Oh, God, they slit her throat."

"Who is they?"

He shook his head, fists still shoved against his face. "I don't know."

"Evans, what did you see?"

"Blood." He stared at me between his arms, shielding his face. "Blood everywhere. They slit her throat. They smeared the blood on the tombstone."

I had two more items for him. Dare I ask? Asking didn't hurt. Did it? "I have two more items for you to touch."

"No fucking way," he said. He backed away from me towards the short hall that led to the bedroom. "Get out, get out, get the fuck out of my house. Now!"

"Evans, what else did you see?"

"Get out!"

"Describe one thing about the woman. Help me, Evans!"

He leaned in the doorway and slid to sit on the floor. "A bracelet. She wore a bracelet on her left wrist. Little dangling charms, hearts, bow and arrow, music." He shook his head and buried his head against his eyes. "Go away now."

I started to say thank you, but that didn't cut it. I picked my way over the floor searching for the rock fragment. I found it in a coffee cup. There was something green and growing in the bottom of it. I picked up the stone and wiped it on a pair of jeans on the floor. I put it back in the bag and shoved all of it inside the purse.

I stared around at the filth and didn't want to leave him here. Maybe I was just feeling guilty for having abused him. Maybe. "Evans, thanks."

He didn't look up.

"If I had a cleaning person drop by, would you let her in to clean?"

"I don't want anybody in here."

"Animators, Inc., could pick up the tab. We owe you for this one."

He looked up then. Anger, pure anger was all that was in his face. "Evans, get some help. You're tearing yourself apart."

"Get-the-fuck-out-of-my-house." Each word was hot enough to scald. I had never seen Evans angry. Scared, yes, but not like this. What could I say? It was his house.

I got out. I stood on the shaky porch until I heard the door lock behind me. I had what I wanted, information. So why did I feel so bad? Because I had bullied a seriously disturbed man. Okay, that was it. Guilt, guilt, guilt.

An image flashed into my head, the blood-soaked sheet on the brown patterned couch. Mrs. Reynolds's spine dangling wet and glistening in the sunlight.

I walked to my car and got in. If abusing Evans could save one family, then it was worth it. If it would keep me from having to see another three-year-old boy with his intestines ripped out, I'd beat Evans with a padded club. Or let him beat me.

Come to think of it, wasn't that what we'd just done?

Chapter 16

I was small in the dream. A child. The car was crushed in front where it had been broadsided by another car. It looked like it was made of shiny paper that had been crushed by hand. The door was open. I crawled inside on the familiar upholstery, so pale it was almost white. There was a dark liquid stain on the seat. It wasn't all that large. I touched it, tentatively.

My fingers came away smeared with crimson. It was the first blood I'd ever seen. I stared up at the windshield. It was broken in a spiderweb of cracks, bowed outward where my mother's face had smashed into it. She had been thrown out the door to die in a field beside the road. That's why there wasn't a lot of blood on the seat.

I stared at the fresh blood on my fingers. In real life the blood had been dry, just a stain. When I dreamed about it, it was always fresh.

There was a smell this time. The smell of rotten flesh. That wasn't right. I stared up in the dream and realized it was a dream. And the smell wasn't part of it. It was real.

I woke instantly, staring into the dark. My heart thudding in my throat. My hand went for the Browning in its second home, a sheath attached to the headboard of my bed. It was firm and solid, and comforting. I stayed on the bed, back pressed against the headboard, gun held in a teacup grip.

Through a tiny crack in the drapes moonlight spilled. The meager light outlined a man's shape. The shape didn't react to the gun or my movement. It shuffled forward, dragging its feet through the carpet. It had stumbled into my collection of toy penguins that spilled like a fuzzy tide under my bedroom window. It had knocked some of them over, and it didn't seem able to pick its feet up and walk over them. The figure was wading through the fluffy penguins, dragging its feet as if wading in water.

I kept the gun pointed one-handed at the thing and reached without looking to turn on my bedside lamp. The light seemed harsh after the darkness. I blinked rapidly willing my pupils to contract, to adjust. When they did, and I could see, it was a zombie.

He had been a big man in life. Shoulders broad as a barn door filled with muscle. His huge hands were very strong looking. One eye had dehydrated and was shriveled like a prune. The remaining eye stared at me. There was nothing in that stare, no anticipation, no excitement, no cruelty, nothing but a blankness. A blankness that Dominga Salvador had filled with purpose. Kill she had said. I would have bet on it.

It was her zombie. I couldn't turn it. I couldn't order it to do anything until it fulfilled Dominga's orders. Once it killed me, it would be docile as a dead puppy. Once it killed me.

I didn't think I'd wait for that.

The Browning was loaded with Glazer Safety Rounds, silver-coated. Glazer Safety Rounds will kill a man if you hit him anywhere near the center of the body. The hole will be too big for salvage. A hole in its chest wouldn't bother the zombie. It would keep coming, heart or no heart. If you hit a person in the arm or leg with Safety Rounds, it will take off that arm or leg. Instant amputee. If you hit it right.

The zombie seemed in no hurry. He shuffled through the fallen stuffed toys with that single-minded determination of the dead. Zombies are not inhumanly strong. But they can use every ounce of strength; they don't save anything. Almost any human being could do a superhuman feat, once. Pop muscles, tear cartilage, snap your spine, but you can lift the car. Only inhibitors in the brain prevent us all from destroying ourselves. Zombies don't have inhibitors. The corpse could literally tear me apart while it tore itself apart. But if Dominga had really wanted to kill me, she would have sent a less-decayed zombie. This one was so far gone I might have been able to dodge around it, and make the door. Maybe. But then again . . .

I cupped the butt of the gun in my left, the right where it was supposed to be, my finger on the trigger. I pulled the trigger and the explosion was incredibly loud in the

small room. The zombie jerked, stumbled. Its right arm flew off in a welter of flesh and bone. No blood, it had been dead too long for that.

The zombie kept coming.

I sighted on the other arm. Hold your breath, squee-eeze. I was aiming for the elbow. I hit it. The two arms lay on the carpet and began to worm their way towards the bed. I could chop the thing to pieces, and all the pieces would keep trying to kill me.

The right leg at the knee. The leg didn't come loose completely, but the zombie toppled to one side, listing. It fell on its side, then rolled onto its stomach and began pushing with its remaining leg. Some dark liquid was leaking out of the shattered leg. The smell was worse.

I swallowed, and it was thick. God. I got off the bed on the far side away from the thing. I walked around the bed coming in behind the thing. It knew instantly that I had moved. It tried to turn and come at me, pushing with that last leg. The crawling arms turned faster, fingers scrambling on the carpet. I stood over it and blasted the other leg from less than two feet away. Bits and pieces of it splattered onto my penguins. Damn.

The arms were almost at my bare feet. I fired two quick shots and the hand shattered, exploding on the white carpet. The handless arms flopped and struggled. They were still trying to reach me.

There was a brush of cloth, a sense of movement just behind me, in the darkened living room. I was standing with my back to the open door. I turned and knew it was too late.

Arms grabbed me, clutching me to a very solid chest. Fingers dug into my right arm, pinning the gun against my body. I turned my head away, using my hair to shield my face and neck. Teeth sank into my shoulder. I screamed.

My face was pressed against the thing's shoulder. The fingers were digging in. It was going to crush my arm. The gun barrel was pressed against its shoulder. Teeth tore at the flesh of my shoulder, but it wasn't fangs. It only had human teeth to work with. It hurt like hell, but it would be alright, if I could get away.

I turned my face forward away from the shoulder and pulled the trigger. The entire body jerked backwards. The left arm crumbled. I rolled out of its grip. The arm dangled from my forearm, fingers hanging on.

I was standing in the doorway of my bedroom staring at the thing that had almost got me. It had been a white male, about six-one, built like a football player. It was fresh from the farm. Blood spattered where the shoulder had torn away. The fingers on my arm tightened. It couldn't crush my arm, but I couldn't make it let go either. I didn't have the time.

The zombie charged, one arm wide to grab me. I seemed to have all the time in the world to lift the gun, two-handed. The arm struggled and fought me as if it were still connected to the zombie's brain. I got off two quick shots. The zombie stumbled, its left leg collapsing, but it was too late. It was too close. As it fell, it took me with it.

We landed on the floor with me on the bottom. I managed to keep the Browning up, so that my arms were free and so was the gun. His weight pinned my body, nothing I could do about it. Blood glistened on his lips. I fired point-blank, closing my eyes as I pulled the trigger. Not just because I didn't want to see, but to save my eyes from bone shards.

When I looked, the head was gone except for a thin line of naked jawbone and a fragment of skull. The remaining hand scrambled for my throat. The hand still attached to my arm was helping its body. I couldn't get the gun around to shoot the arm. The angle was wrong.

A sound of something heavy sliding behind me. I risked a glance, craning my neck backwards to see the first zombie coming towards me. Its mouth, all that it had left to hurt me with, was open wide.

I screamed and turned back to the one on top of me. The attached hand fluttered at my neck. I pulled it away and gave it its own arm to hold. It grabbed it. With the brain gone, it wasn't as smart. I felt the fingers on my arm loosen. A shudder ran through the dangling arm. Blood burst out of it like a ripe melon. The fingers spasmed, releasing my arm. The zombie crushed its own arm until it splattered and bones snapped.

The scrambling sounds behind me were closer. "God!"

"Police! Come out with your hands up!" The voice was male and loud from the hallway.

The hell with being cool and self-sufficient. "Help me!"

"Miss, what's happening in there?"

The scrambling sounds were right next to me. I craned my neck and found myself almost nose to nose with the first zombie. I shoved the Browning in its open mouth. Its teeth scrapped on the barrel, and I pulled the trigger.

A policeman was suddenly in the doorway framed against the darkness. From my angle he was huge. Curly brown hair, going gray, mustache, gun in hand. "Jesus," he said.

The second zombie dropped its crushed arm and reached for me again. The policeman took a firm grip of the zombie's belt and pulled him upward with one hand. "Get her out of here," he said.

His partner moved in, but I didn't give him time. I scrambled out from under the half-raised body, scuttling on all fours into the living room. You didn't have to ask me twice. The partner lifted me to my feet by one arm. It was my right and the Browning came up with it.

Normally, a cop will make you drop your gun before anything else. There, is usually no way to tell who the bad guy is. If you have a gun, you are a bad guy unless proven otherwise. Innocent until proven guilty does not work in the field.

He scooped the gun from my hand. I let him. I knew the drill.

A gunshot exploded behind us. I jumped, and the cop did, too. He was about my age, but right then I felt about a million years old. We turned and found the first cop shooting into the zombie. The thing had struggled free of his hand. It was on its feet, staggered by the bullets but not stopped.

"Get over here, Brady," the first cop said. The younger cop drew his gun and moved forward. He hesitated, glancing at me.

"Help him," I said.

He nodded and started firing into the zombie. The sound of gunfire was like thunder. It filled the room until my ears were ringing and the reek of gunpowder was almost overpowering. Bullet holes blossomed in the walls. The zombie kept staggering forward. They were just annoying it.

The problem for police is that they can't load up with Glazer Safety Rounds. Most cops don't run into the supernatural as much as I do. Most of the time they're chasing human crooks. The powers that be frown on taking off the leg of John Q. Public just 'cause he fired at you. You're not really supposed to kill people just because they're trying to kill you. Right?

So they had normal rounds, maybe a little silver coating to make the medicine go down, but nothing that could stop a zombie. They were being backed up. One reloaded while the other fired. The thing staggered forward. Its remaining arm sweeping in front of it, searching. For me. Shit.

"My gun's loaded with Glazer Safety Rounds," I said. "Use it."

The first cop said, "Brady, I told you to get her out of here."

"You needed help," Brady said.

"Get the civilian the fuck out of here."

Civilian, me?

Brady didn't question again. He just backed towards me, gun out but not firing.

"Come on, miss, we gotta get out of here."

"Give me my gun."

He glanced at me, shook his head.

"I'm with the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team." Which was true. I was hoping he would assume I was a cop, which wasn't true.

He was young. He assumed. He handed me back the Browning. "Thanks."

I moved up with the older cop. "I'm with the Spook Squad."

He glanced at me, gun still trained on the advancing corpse. "Then do something."

Someone had turned on the living-room light. Now that no one was shooting it, the zombie was moving out. It walked like a man striding down the street, except it had no head and only one arm. There was a spring in its step. Maybe it sensed I was close.

The body was in better condition than the first zombie's had been. I could cripple it but not incapacitate it. I'd settle for crippled. I fired a third round into the left leg that I had wounded earlier. I had more time to aim, and my aim was true.

The leg collapsed under it. It pulled itself forward with the one arm, leg pushing against the rug. He was on his last leg. I started to smile, then to laugh, but it choked in my throat. I walked around the far side of the couch. I didn't want any accidents after what I'd seen it do to its own body. I didn't want any crushed limbs.

I came in behind it, and it scrambled quicker than it should have to try to face me. It took two shots for the other leg. I couldn't remember how many bullets I'd used. Did I have one more left, or two, or none?

I felt like Dirty Harry, except that this punk didn't give a damn how many bullets I had left. The dead don't scare easy.

It was still pulling itself and its damaged legs along. That one hand. I fired nearly point-blank, and the hand exploded like a crimson flower on the white carpet. It kept coming, using the wrist stump to push along.

I pulled the trigger, and it clicked empty. Shit. "I'm out," I said. I stepped back away from it. It followed me.

The older cop moved in and grabbed it by both ankles. He pulled it backwards. One leg slid slowly out of the pants and twisted free in his hand. "Fuck!" He dropped the leg. It wiggled like a broken-backed snake.

I stared down at the still determined corpse. It was struggling towards me. It wasn't making much progress. The policeman was holding it one-legged sort of in the air. But the zombie kept trying. It would keep trying until it was incinerated or Dominga Salvador changed her orders.

More uniformed cops came in the door. They fell on the butchered zombie like vultures on a wildebeest. It bucked and struggled. Fought to get away, to finish its mission. To kill me. There were enough cops to subdue it. They would hold it until the lab boys arrived. The lab boys would do what they could on-site. Then the zombie would be incinerated by an exterminator team. They had tried taking zombies down to the morgue and holding them for tests, but little pieces kept escaping and hiding out in the strangest places.

The medical examiner had decreed that all zombies were to be truly dead before shipping. The ambulance crew and lab techs agreed with her. I sympathized but knew that most evidence disappears in a fire. Choices, choices.

I stood to one side of my living room. They had forgotten me in the melee. Fine, I didn't feel like wrestling any more zombies tonight. I realized for the first time that I was wearing nothing but an oversize T-shirt and panties. The T-shirt clung wetly to my body, thick with blood. I started towards the bedroom. I think I meant to get a pair of pants. The sight on the floor stopped me.

The first zombie was like a legless insect. It couldn't move, but it was trying. The bloody stump of a body was still trying to carry out its orders. To kill me.

Dominga Salvador had meant to kill me. Two zombies, one almost new. She had meant to kill me. That one thought chased round my head like a piece of song. We had threatened each other, but why this level of violence? Why kill me? I couldn't stop her legally. She knew that. So why make such a damned serious attempt to kill me?

Maybe because she had something to hide? Dominga had given her word that she hadn't raised the killer zombie, but maybe her word didn't mean anything. It was the only answer. She had something to do with the killer zombie. Had she raised it? Or did she know who had? No. She'd raised the beast or why kill me the night after I talked to her? It was too big a coincidence. Dominga Salvador had raised a zombie, and it had gotten away from her. That was it. Evil as she was, she wasn't psychotic. She wouldn't just raise a killer zombie and let it loose. The great voodoo queen had screwed up royally. That, more than anything else, more than the deaths, or the possible murder charge, would piss her off. She couldn't afford her reputation to be trashed like that.

I stared past the bloody, stinking remnants in the bedroom. My stuffed penguins were covered in blood and worse. Could my long suffering dry cleaner get them clean? He did pretty good with my suits.

Glazer Safety Rounds didn't go through walls. It was another reason I liked them. My neighbors didn't get shot up. The police bullets had pierced the bedroom walls. Neat round holes were everywhere.

No one had ever attacked me at home before, not like this. It should have been against the rules. You should be safe in your own bed. I know, I know. Bad guys don't have rules. It's one of the reasons they're bad guys.

I knew who had raised the zombie. All I had to do was prove it. There was blood everywhere. Blood and worse things. I was actually getting used to the smell. God. But it stank. The whole apartment stank. Almost everything in my apartment is white; walls,

carpet, couch, chair. It made the stains show up nicely, like fresh wounds. The bullet holes and cracked plaster board set off the blood nicely.

The apartment was trashed. I would prove Dominga had done this, then, if I was lucky, I'd get to return the favor.

"Sweets to the sweet," I whispered to no one in particular. Tears started to burn at the back of my throat. I didn't want to cry, but a scream was sort of tickling around in my throat, too. Crying or screaming. Crying seemed better.

The paramedics came. One was a short black woman about my own age. "Come on, honey, we got to take a look at you." Her voice was gentle, her hands sort of leading me away from the carnage. I didn't even mind her calling me honey.

I wanted very much to crawl up into someone's lap about now and be comforted. I needed that badly. I wasn't going to get it.

"Honey, we need to see how bad you're bleeding before we take you down to the ambulance."

I shook my head. My voice sounded far away, detached. "It's not my blood."

"What?"

I looked at her, fighting to focus and not drift. Shock was setting in. I'm usually better than this, but hey, we all have our nights.

"It's not my blood. I've got a bite on the shoulder, that's it."

She looked like she didn't believe me. I didn't blame her. Most people see you covered in blood, they just assume part of it has to be yours. They do not take into account that they are dealing with a tough-as-nails vampire slayer and corpse raiser.

The tears were back, stinging just behind my eyes. There was blood all over my penguins. I didn't give a damn about the walls and carpet. They could be replaced, but I'd collected those damned stuffed toys over years. I let the paramedic lead me away. Tears trickling down my cheeks. I wasn't crying, my eyes were running. My eyes were running because there were pieces of zombie all over my toys. Jesus.

Chapter 17

I'd seen enough crime scenes to know what to expect. It was like a play I'd seen too many times. I could tell you all the entrances, the exits, most of the lines. But this was different. This was my place.

It was silly to be offended that Dominga Salvador had attacked me in my own home. It was stupid, but there it was. She had broken a rule. One I hadn't even known I had. Thou shalt not attack the good guy in his, or her, own home. Shit.

I was going to nail her hide to a tree for it. Yeah, me and what army? Maybe, me and the police.

The living-room curtains billowed in the hot breeze. The glass had been shattered in the fire. I was glad I had just signed a two-year lease. At least they couldn't kick me out.

Dolph sat across from me in my little kitchen area. The breakfast table with its two straight-backed chairs seemed tiny with him sitting at it. He sort of filled my kitchen. Or maybe I was just feeling small tonight. Or was it morning?

I glanced at my watch. There was a dark, slick smear obscuring the face. Couldn't read it. Would have to chip the damn thing clean. I tucked my arm back inside the blanket the paramedic had given me. My skin was colder than it should have been. Even thoughts of vengeance couldn't warm me. Later, later I would be warm. Later I would be pissed. Right now I was glad to be alive.

"Okay, Anita, what happened?"

I glanced at the living room. It was nearly empty. The zombies had been carried away. Incinerated on the street no less. Entertainment for the entire neighborhood. Family fun.

"Could I change clothes before I give a statement, please?"

He looked at me for maybe a second, then nodded.

"Great." I got up gripping the blanket around me, edges folded carefully. Didn't want to accidentally trip on the ends. I'd embarrassed myself enough for one night.

"Save the T-shirt for evidence," Dolph called.

I said, "Sure thing," without turning around.

They had thrown sheets over the worst of the stains so they didn't track blood all over the apartment building. Nice. The bedroom stank of rotted corpse, stale blood, old death. God. I'd never be able to sleep in here tonight. Even I had my limits.

What I wanted was a shower, but I didn't think Dolph would wait that long. I settled for jeans, socks, and a clean T-shirt. I carried all of it into the bathroom. With the door closed, the smell was very faint. It looked like my bathroom. No disasters here.

I dropped the blanket on the floor with the T-shirt. There was a bulky bandage over my shoulder where the zombie had bitten me. I was lucky it hadn't taken a hunk of flesh. The paramedic warned me to get a tetanus booster. Zombies don't make more zombies by biting, but the dead have nasty mouths. Infection is more of a danger but a tetanus booster is a precaution.

Blood had dried in flaking patches on my legs and arms. I didn't bother washing my hands. I'd shower later. Get everything clean at once.

The T-shirt hung almost to my knees. A huge caricature of Arthur Conan Doyle was on the front. He was peering through a huge magnifying glass, one eye comically large. I gazed into the mirror over the sink, looking at the shirt. It was soft and warm and comforting. Comforting was good right now.

The old T-shirt was ruined. No saving it. But maybe I could save some of the penguins. I ran cold water into the bathtub. If it was a shirt, I'd soak it in cold water. Maybe it worked with toys.

I got a pair of jogging shoes out from under the bed. I didn't really want to walk over the drying stains in only socks. Shoes were made for such occasions. Alright, so the creator of Nike Airs never foresaw walking over drying zombie blood. It's hard to prepare for everything.

Two of the penguins were turning brown as the blood dried. I carried them gingerly into the bathroom and laid them in the water. I pushed them under until they soaked up enough water to stay partially submerged, then I turned the water off. My hands were

cleaner. The water wasn't. Blood trailed out of the two soft toys like water squeezed out of a sponge. If these two came clean, I could save them all.

I dried my hands on the blanket. No sense getting blood on anything else.

Sigmund, the penguin I occasionally slept with, was barely spattered. Just a few specks across his fuzzy white belly. Small blessings. I almost tucked him under my arm to hold while I gave a statement. Dolph probably wouldn't tell. I put Sigmund a little farther from the worst stains, as if that would help. Seeing the stupid toy tucked safely in a corner did make me feel better. Great.

Zerbrowski was peering at the aquarium. He glanced my way. "These are the biggest freaking angelfish I've ever seen. You could fry some of 'em up in a pan."

"Leave the fish alone, Zerbrowski," I said.

He grinned. "Sure, just a thought."

Back in the kitchen Dolph sat with his hands folded on the tabletop. His face unreadable. If he was upset that I'd almost cashed it in tonight, he didn't show it. But then Dolph didn't show much of anything, ever. The most emotion I'd ever seen him display was about this case. The killer zombie. Butchered civilians.

"You want some coffee?" I asked.

"Sure."

"Me, too," Zerbrowski said.

"Only if you say please."

He leaned against the wall just outside the kitchen. "Please." I got a bag of coffee out of the freezer.

"You keep the coffee in the freezer?" Zerbrowski said.

"Hasn't anyone ever fixed real coffee for you?" I asked.

"My idea of gourmet coffee is Taster's Choice."

I shook my head. "Barbarian."

"If you two are finished with clever repartee," Dolph said, "could we start the statement now?" His voice was softer than his words.

I smiled at him and at Zerbrowski. Damned if it wasn't nice to see both of them. I must have been hurt worse than I knew to be happy to see Zerbrowski.

"I was asleep minding my own business when I woke up to find a zombie standing over me." I measured beans and poured them into the little black coffee grinder that I'd bought because it matched the coffee maker.

"What woke you?" Dolph asked.

I pressed the button on the grinder and the rich smell of fresh ground coffee filled the kitchen. Ah, heaven.

"I smelled corpses," I said.

"Explain."

"I was dreaming, and I smelled rotting corpses. It didn't match the dream. It woke me."

"Then what?" He had his ever present notebook out. Pen poised.

I concentrated on each small step to making the coffee and told Dolph everything, including my suspicions about Señora Salvador. The coffee was beginning to perk and fill the apartment with that wonderful smell that coffee always has by the time I finished.

"So you think Dominga Salvador is our zombie raiser?" Dolph said.

"Yes."

He stared at me across the small table. His eyes were very serious. "Can you prove it?"

"No."

He took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment. "Great, just great."

"The coffee smells done," Zerbrowski said. He was sitting on the floor, back propped against the kitchen doorway.

I got up and poured the coffee. "If you want sugar or cream, help yourself." I put the cream, real cream, out on the kitchen counter along with the sugar bowl. Zerbrowski took a lot of sugar and a dab of cream. Dolph went for black. It was the way I took it most of the time. Tonight I added cream and sweetened it. Real cream in real coffee. Yum, yum.

"If we could get you inside Dominga's house, could you find proof?" Dolph asked.

"Proof of something, sure, but of raising the killer zombie . . ." I shook my head. "If she did raise it and it got away, then she won't want to be tied to it. She'll have destroyed all the proof, just to save face."

"I want her for this," Dolph said.

"Me, too."

"She might also try and kill you again," Zerbrowski said from the doorway. He was blowing on his coffee to cool it.

"No joke," I said.

"You think she'll try again?" Dolph asked.

"Probably. How the hell did two zombies get inside my apartment?"

"Someone picked the lock," Dolph said. "Could the zombie . . ."

"No, a zombie would rip a door off its hinges, but it wouldn't take the time to pick a lock. Even if it had the fine motor skill to do it."

"So someone with skill opened the door and let them in," Dolph said.

"Appears so," I said.

"Any ideas on that?"

"I would bet one of her bodyguards. Her grandson Antonio or maybe Enzo. A big guy in his forties who seems to be her personal protection. I don't know if either of them have the skill, but they'd do it. Enzo, but not Antonio."

"Why cross him off?"

"If Tony had let the zombies in, he'd have stayed and watched."

"You sure?"

I shrugged. "He's that kind of guy. Enzo would do business and leave. He'd follow orders. The grandson wouldn't."

Dolph nodded. "There's a lot of heat from upstairs to solve this case. I think I can get us a search warrant in forty-eight hours."

"Two days is a long time, Dolph."

"Two days without one piece of proof, Anita. Except for your word. I'm going out on a limb for this one."

"She's in it, Dolph, somehow. I don't know why, and I don't know what could have caused her to lose control of the zombie, but she's in it."

"I'll get the warrant," he said.

"One of the brothers in blue said you told him you were a cop," Zerbrowski said.

"I told him I was with your squad. I never said I was a cop."

Zerbrowski grinned. "Mmm-huh."

"Will you be safe here tonight?" Dolph asked.

"I think so. The Señora doesn't want to get on the bad side of the law. They treat renegade witches sort of like renegade vampires. It's an automatic death sentence."

"Because people are too scared of them," Dolph said.

"Because some witches can slip through the fucking bars."

"How about voodoo queens?" Zerbrowski said.

I shook my head. "I don't want to know."

"We better go, leave you to get some sleep," Dolph said. He left his empty coffee cup on the table. Zerbrowski hadn't finished his, but he put it on the counter and followed Dolph out.

I walked them to the door.

"I'll let you know when we get the warrant," Dolph said.

"Could you arrange for me to see Peter Burke's personal effects?"

"Why?"

"There are only two ways to lose control of a zombie this badly. One, you are strong enough to raise it, but not to control it. Dominga can control anything she can raise. Second, someone of near equal power interferes, sort of a challenge." I stared up at Dolph. "John Burke might just be strong enough to have done it. Maybe if I'm helpful enough to take John down to go over his brother's effects—you know, does any of this look out of place, that type of thing—maybe this Burke will let something slip."

"You've already got Dominga Salvador pissed at you, Anita. Isn't that enough for one week?"

"For one lifetime," I said. "But it's something we can do while we wait for the warrant."

Dolph nodded. "Yeah. I'll arrange it. Call Mr. Burke tomorrow morning and set up a time. Then call me."

"Will do."

Dolph hesitated in the doorway for a moment. "Watch your back."

"Always," I said.

Zerbrowski leaned into me and said, "Nice penguins." He followed Dolph down the hallway. I knew the next time I saw the rest of the spook squad they'd all know I collected toy penguins. My secret was out. Zerbrowski would spread it far and wide. At least, he was consistent.

It was nice to know something was.

Chapter 18

Stuffed animals are not meant to be submerged in water. The two in the bathtub were ruined. Maybe spot remover? The smell was thick and seemed permanent. I put an emergency message on my cleaning service's answering machine. I didn't give a lot of details. Didn't want to frighten them off.

I packed an overnight bag. Two changes of clothes and one penguin with his tummy freshly scrubbed, Harold Gaynor's file, and I was set. I also packed both guns: the Firestar in its inner pants holster; the Browning under my arm. A windbreaker hid the Browning from view. I had extra ammo in the jacket pockets. Between both guns I had twenty-two bullets. Twenty-two bullets. Why didn't I feel safe?

Unlike most walking dead, zombies can bear the touch of sunlight. They don't like it, but they can exist with it. Dominga could order a zombie to kill me in daylight just as easily as moonlight. She wouldn't be able to raise the dead during daylight, but if she planned it right, she could raise the dead the night before and send it out to get me the next day. A voodoo priestess with executive planning skills. It would be just my luck.

I didn't really believe that Dominga had backup zombies waiting to jump me. But somehow I was feeling paranoid this morning. Paranoia is just another word for longevity.

I stepped out into the quiet hallway, glancing both ways as if it were a street. Nothing. No walking corpses hiding in the shadows. No one but us fraidy-cats. The only sound was the hush of the air-conditioning. The hallway had that feel to it. I came home often enough at dawn to know the quality of silence. I thought about that for a minute. I knew it was almost dawn. Not by clock or window, but on some level deeper than that. Some instinct that an ancestor had found while hiding in a dark cave, praying for light.

Most people fear the dark in a vague way. They fear what might be out there. I raise the dead. I've slain over a dozen vampires. I know what's out there in the dark. And I am terrified of it. People are supposed to fear the unknown, but ignorance is bliss when knowledge is so damn frightening.

I knew what would have happened to me if I had failed last night. If I had been slower or a worse shot. Two years ago there had been three murders. Nothing connected them except the method of death. They had been torn apart by zombies. They had not been eaten. Normal zombies don't eat anything. They may bite a time or two, but that's the worst of it. There had been the man whose throat was crushed, but that had been accidental. The zombie just bit down on the nearest body part. It happened to be a killing blow. Blind luck.

A zombie will normally just wrestle you to pieces. Like a small boy tearing pieces off of a fly.

Raising a zombie for the purposes of being a murder weapon is an automatic death sentence. The court system has gotten rather quick on the draw the last few years. A death sentence meant what it said these days. Especially if your crime was supernatural in some way. You didn't burn witches anymore. You electrocuted them.

If we could get proof, the state would kill Dominga Salvador for me. John Burke, too, if we could prove he had knowingly caused the zombie to go ape-shit. The trouble with supernatural crimes is proving them in court. Most juries aren't up on the latest spells and incantations. Heck, neither am I. But I've tried explaining zombies and vampires in court before. I've learned to keep it simple and to add any gory details the defense will allow me. A jury appreciates a little vicarious adventure. Most testimony is terribly boring or heartbreaking. I try to be interesting. It's a change of pace.

The parking area was dark. Stars still glimmered overhead. But they were fading like candles in a steady wind. I could taste dawn on the air. Roll it around on my tongue.

Maybe it's all the vampire hunting I do, but I was more attuned to the passage of light and dark than I had been four years ago. I hadn't been able to taste the dawn.

Of course my nightmares were a lot less interesting four years ago. You gain something, you lose something else. It's the way life works.

It was after 5:00 A.M. when I got in my car and headed out for the nearest hotel. I wouldn't be able to stand my apartment until the cleaning crew got the smell out. If they could get the smell out. My landlord was not going to be pleased if they couldn't.

He was going to be even less pleased with the bullet holes and shattered window. Replace the window. Replaster the walls, maybe? I really didn't know what you did to repair bullet holes? Here I was hoping my lease couldn't be challenged in court.

The first hint of dawn was slipping over the eastern sky. A pure white light that spread like ice over the darkness. Most people think dawn is as colorful as sunset but the first color of dawn is white, a pure not-color, that is almost an absence of night.

There was a motel, but all its rooms were on one or two stories, some of them awfully isolated. I wanted a crowd. I settled on The Stouffer Concourse which wasn't terribly cheap but it would force zombies to ride up in elevators. People tended to notice the smell in an elevator. The Stouffer Concourse also had room service at this ungodly hour of dawn. I needed room service. Coffee, give me coffee.

The clerk gave me that wide-eyed-I'm-too-polite-to-say-it-out-loud look. The elevators were mirrored, and I had nothing to do for several floors but look at my reflection. Blood had dried in a stiff darkness in my hair. A stain went down the right side of my face just below the hairline and trailed down my neck. I hadn't noticed it in the mirror at home. Shock will make you forget things.

It wasn't the bloodstains that had made the clerk look askance. Unless you knew what to look for, you wouldn't know it was blood. No, the problem was that my skin was deathly pale, like clean paper. My eyes that are perfectly brown looked black. They were huge and dark and . . . strange. Startled, I looked startled. Surprised to be alive. Maybe. I was still fighting off the edge of shock. No matter how together I felt, my face told a different story. When the shock wore off, I'd be able to sleep. Until then, I'd read Gaynor's file.

The room had two double beds. More room than I needed, but what the heck. I got out clean clothes, put the Firestar in the drawer of the nightstand, and took the Browning into the bathroom with me. If I was careful and didn't turn the shower on full blast, I could fasten the shoulder holster to the towel rack in the back of the stall. It wouldn't even get wet. Though truthfully with most modern guns, wet doesn't hurt them. As long as you clean them afterwards. Most guns will shoot underwater.

I called room service wearing nothing but a towel. I'd almost forgotten. I ordered a pot of coffee, sugar, and cream. They asked if I wanted decaf. I said no thank you. Pushy. Like waiters asking if I wanted a diet Coke when I didn't ask for it. They never ask men, even portly men, if they want diet Cokes.

I could drink a pot of caffeine and sleep like a baby. It doesn't keep me awake or make me jumpy. It just tastes better.

Yes, they would leave the cart outside the door. No, they wouldn't knock. They would add the coffee to my bill. That was fine, I said. They had a credit card number. When they have plastic, people are always eager to add on to your bill. As long as the limit holds.

I propped the straight-backed chair under the doorknob to the hallway. If someone forced the door, I'd hear it. Maybe. I locked the bathroom door and had a gun in the shower with me. I was as secure as I was going to get.

There is something about being naked that makes me feel vulnerable. I would much rather face bad guys with my clothes on than off. I guess everyone's like that.

The bite on my shoulder with its thick bandage was a problem when I wanted to wash my hair. I had to get the blood out, bandage or no bandage.

I used their little bottles of shampoo and conditioner. They smelled like flowers are supposed to smell but never do. Blood had dried in patches on my body. I looked spotted. The water that washed down the drain was pinkish.

It took the entire bottle of shampoo before my hair was squeaky clean. The last rinse water soaked through the bandage on my right shoulder. The pain was sharp and persistent. I'd have to remember to get that tetanus booster.

I scrubbed my body with a washcloth and the munchkin bar of soap. When I had washed and soaked every inch of myself, and was as clean as I was going to get, I stood under the hot needling spray. I let the water pour over my back, down my body. The bandage had soaked through long ago.

What if we couldn't tie Dominga to the zombies? What if we couldn't find proof? She'd try again. Her pride was at stake now. She had set two zombies on me, and I had wasted them both. With a little help from the police. Dominga Salvador would see it as a personal challenge.

She had raised a zombie and it had escaped her control completely. She would rather have innocent people slaughtered than to admit her mistake. And she would rather kill me than have me prove it. Vindictive bitch.

Señora Salvador had to be stopped. If the warrant didn't help, then I'd have to be more practical. She'd made it clear that it was her or me. I preferred it to be her. And if necessary, I'd make sure of it.

I opened my eyes and turned off the water. I didn't want to think about it anymore. I was talking about murder. I saw it as self-defense, but I doubted a jury would. It'd be damn hard to prove. I wanted several things. Dominga out of the picture, dead or in jail. To stay alive. Not to be in jail on a murder charge. To catch the killer zombie before it killed again. Fat chance that. To figure out how John Burke fit into this mess.

Oh, and to keep Harold Gaynor from forcing me to perform human sacrifice. Yeah, I almost forgot that one.

It had been a busy week.

The coffee was outside the door on a little tray. I set it inside on the floor, locked the door, and put the chair against the doorknob again. Only then did I set the coffee tray on a small table by the curtained windows. The Browning was already sitting on the table, naked. The shoulder holster was on the bed.

I opened the drapes. Normally, I would have kept the drapes closed, but today I wanted to see the light. Morning had spread like a soft haze of light. The heat hadn't had time to creep up and strangle that first gentle touch of morning.

The coffee wasn't bad, but it wasn't great either. Of course, the worst coffee I've ever had was still wonderful. Well, maybe not the coffee at police headquarters. But even that was better than nothing. Coffee was my comfort drink. Better than alcohol, I guess.

I spread Gaynor's file on the table and started to read. By eight that morning, earlier than I usually get up, I had read every scribbled note, gazed at every blurry picture. I knew more about Mr. Harold Gaynor than I wanted to, none of it particularly helpful.

Gaynor was mob-connected, but it couldn't be proven. He was a self-made multimillionaire. Bully for him. He could afford the million five that Tommy had offered me. Nice to know a man can pay his bills.

His only family had been a mother who died ten years ago. His father was supposed to have died before he was born. There was no record of the father's death. In fact, the father didn't seem to exist.

An illegitimate birth, carefully disguised? Maybe. So Gaynor was a bastard in the original definition of the word. So what? I'd already known he was one in spirit.

I propped Wheelchair Wanda's picture against the coffeepot. She was smiling, almost like she'd known the picture was being taken. Maybe she was just photogenic. There were two pictures with her and Gaynor together. In one they were smiling, holding hands as Tommy pushed Gaynor's wheelchair and Bruno pushed Wanda. She was gazing at Gaynor with a look I had seen in other women. Adoration, love. I'd even experienced it myself for a brief time in college. You get over it.

The second picture was almost identical to the first. Bruno and Tommy pushing them. But they weren't holding hands. Gaynor was smiling. Wanda wasn't. She looked angry. Cicely of the blond hair and empty eyes was walking on the other side of Gaynor. They were holding hands. Ah-ha.

So Gaynor had kept both of them around for a while. Why had Wanda left? Jealousy? Had Cicely arranged it? Had Gaynor tired of her? The only way to know was to ask.

I stared at the picture with Cicely in it. I put it beside the laughing close-up of Wanda's face. An unhappy young woman, a scorned lover. If she hated Gaynor more than she feared him, Wanda would talk to me. She would be a fool to talk to the papers, but I didn't want to publish her secrets.

I wanted Gaynor's secrets, so I could keep him from hurting me. Barring that, I wanted something to take to the police.

Mr. Gaynor would have other things to worry about if I could get him in jail. He might forget all about one reluctant animator. Unless, of course, he found out I'd had something to do with him being arrested. That would be bad. Gaynor struck me as vengeful. I had Dominga Salvador mad at me. I didn't need anyone else.

I closed the drapes and left a wake-up call for noon. Irving would just have to wait for his file. I had unintentionally given him the interview with the new Master of the City. Surely that cut me a little slack. If not, to hell with it. I was going to bed.

The last thing I did before going to bed was call Peter Burke's house. I figured that John would be staying there. It rang five times before the machine kicked on. "This is Anita Blake, I may have some information for John Burke on a matter we discussed Thursday." The message was a little vague, but I didn't want to leave a message saying, "Call me about your brother's murder." It would have seemed melodramatic and cruel.

I left the hotel's number as well as my own. Just in case. They probably had the ringers turned off. I would. The story had been front page because Peter was, had been, an animator. Animators don't get murdered much in the run-of-the-mill muggings. It's usually something more unusual.

I would drop off Gaynor's file on the way home. I wanted to drop it off at the receptionist desk. I didn't feel like talking to Irving about his big interview. I didn't want to hear that Jean-Claude was charming or had great plans for the city. He'd be very careful what he told a reporter. It would look good in print. But I knew the truth. Vampires are as much a monster as any zombie, maybe worse. Vamps usually volunteer for the process, zombies don't.

Just like Irving volunteered to go off with Jean-Claude. Of course, if Irving hadn't been with me the Master would have left him alone. Probably. So it was my fault, even if it had been his choice. I was achingly tired, but I knew I'd never be able to sleep until I heard Irving's voice. I could pretend I'd called to tell him I was dropping the file off late.

I wasn't sure if Irving would be on his way to work or not. I tried home first. He answered on the first ring.

"Hello."

Something tight in my stomach relaxed. "Hi, Irving, it's me."

"Ms. Blake, to what do I owe this early morning pleasure?" His voice sounded so ordinary.

"I had a bit of excitement at my apartment last night. I was hoping I could drop the file off later in the day."

"What sort of excitement?" His voice had that "tell me" lilt to it.

"The kind that's police business and not yours," I said.

"I thought you'd say that," he said. "You just getting to bed?"

"Yeah."

"I guess I can let a hardworking animator sleep in a little. My sister reporter may even understand."

"Thanks, Irving."

"You alright, Anita?"

No, I wanted to say, but I didn't. I ignored the question. "Did Jean-Claude behave himself?"

"He was great!" Irving's enthusiasm was genuine, all bubbly excitement. "He's a great interview." He was quiet for a moment. "Hey, you called to check up on me. To make sure I was okay."

"Did not," I said.

"Thanks, Anita, that means a lot. But really, he was very civilized."

"Great. I'll let you go then. Have a good day."

"Oh, I will, my editor is doing cartwheels about the exclusive interview with the Master of the City."

I had to laugh at the way he rolled the title off his tongue. "Good night, Irving."

"Get some sleep, Blake. I'll be calling you in a day or two about those zombie articles."

"Talk to you then," I said. We hung up.

Irving was fine. I should worry more about myself and less about everyone else.

I turned off the lights and cuddled under the sheets. My penguin was cradled in my arms. The Browning Hi-Power was under my pillow. It wasn't as easy to get to as the bed holster at home, but it was better than nothing.

I wasn't sure which was more comforting, the penguin or the gun. I guess both were equally comforting, for very different reasons.

I said my prayers like a good little girl. I asked very sincerely that I not dream.

Chapter 19

The cleaning crew had a cancellation and moved my emergency into the slot. By afternoon my apartment was clean and smelled like spring cleaning. Apartment maintenance had replaced the shattered window. The bullet holes had been smeared with white paint. The holes looked like little dimples in the wall. All in all, the place looked great.

John Burke had not returned my call. Maybe I'd been too clever. I'd try a more blunt message later. But right at this moment I had more pleasant things to worry about.

I was dressed for jogging. Dark blue shorts with white piping, white Nikes with pale blue swishes, cute little jogging socks, and tank top. The shorts were the kind with one of those inside pockets that shut with Velcro. Inside the pocket was a derringer. An American derringer to be exact; 6.5 ounces, .38 Special, 4.82 total length. At 6.5 ounces, it felt like a lumpy feather.

A Velcro pocket was not conducive to a fast draw. Two shots and spitting would be more accurate at a distance, but then Gaynor's men didn't want to kill me. Hurt me, but not kill me. They have to get in close to hurt me. Close enough to use the derringer. Of course, that was just two shots. After that, I was in trouble.

I had tried to figure out a way to carry one of my 9mms, but there was no way. I could not jog and tote around that much firepower. Choices, choices.

Veronica Sims was standing in my living room. Ronnie is five-nine, blond hair, grey eyes. She is a private investigator on retainer to Animators, Inc. We also work out together at least twice a week unless one of us is out of town, injured, or up to our necks in vampires. Those last two happen more often than I would like.

She was wearing French-cut purple shorts, and a T-shirt that said, "Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read." There are reasons why Ronnie and I are friends.

"I missed you Thursday at the health club," she said. "Was the funeral awful?"

"Yeah."

She didn't ask me to elaborate. She knows funerals are not my best thing. Most people hate funerals because of the dead. I hate all the emotional shit.

She was stretching long legs parallel to her body, low on the floor. In a sort of stretching crouch. We always warm up in the apartment. Most leg stretches were never meant to be done while wearing short shorts.

I mirrored her movement. The muscles in my upper thighs moved and protested. The derringer was an uncomfortable but endurable lump.

"Just out of curiosity," Ronnie said, "why do you feel it necessary to take a gun with you?"

"I always carry a gun," I said.

She just looked at me, disgust plain in her eyes. "If you don't want to tell me, then don't, but don't bullshit me."

"Alright, alright," I said. "Strangely enough, no one's told me not to tell anyone."

"What, no threats about not going to the police?" she asked.

"Nope."

"My, how terribly friendly."

"Not friendly," I said, sitting flat on the floor, legs out at angles. Ronnie mirrored me. It looked like we were going to roll a ball across the floor. "Not friendly at all." I leaned my upper body over my left leg until my cheek touched my thigh.

"Tell me about it," she said.

I did. When I was done, we were limbered and ready to run.

"Shit, Anita. Zombies in your apartment and a mad millionaire after you to perform human sacrifices." Her grey eyes searched my face. "You're the only person I know who has weirder problems than I do."

"Thanks a lot," I said. I locked my door behind us and put my keys in the pocket along with the derringer. I know it would scratch hell out of it, but what was I supposed to do, run with the keys in my hand?

"Harold Gaynor. I could do some checking on him for you."

"Aren't you on a case?" We clattered down the stairs.

"I'm doing about three different insurance scams. Mostly surveillance and photography. If I have to eat one more fast food dinner, I'm going to start singing jingles."

I smiled. "Shower and change at my place. We'll go out for a real dinner."

"Sounds great, but you don't want to keep Jean-Claude waiting."

"Cut it out, Ronnie," I said.

She shrugged. "You should stay as far away from that . . . creature as you can, Anita."

"I know it." It was my turn to shrug. "Agreeing to meet him seemed the lesser of evils."

"What were your choices?"

"Meeting him voluntarily or being kidnapped and taken to him."

"Great choices."

"Yeah."

I opened the double doors that led outside. The heat smacked me in the face. It was staggeringly hot, like stepping into an oven. And we were going to jog in this?

I looked up at Ronnie. She is five inches taller than I am, and most of that is leg. We can run together, but I have to set the pace and I have to push myself. It is a very good workout. "It has to be over a hundred today," I said.

"No pain, no gain," Ronnie said. She was carrying a sport water bottle in her left hand. We were as prepared as we were going to get.

"Four miles in hell," I said. "Let's do it." We set off at a slow pace, but it was steady. We usually finished the run in a half hour or less. The air was solid with heat. It felt like we were running through semisolid walls of scalding air. The humidity in St. Louis is almost always around a hundred percent. Combine the humidity with hundred-plus temperatures and you get a small, damp slice of hell. St. Louis in the summertime, yippee.

I do not enjoy exercise. Slim hips and muscular calves are not incentive enough for this kind of abuse. Being able to outrun the bad guys is incentive. Sometimes it all comes down to who is faster, stronger, quicker. I am in the wrong business. Oh, I'm not complaining. But 106 pounds is not a lot of muscle to throw around.

Of course, when it comes to vampires, I could be two-hundred-plus of pure human muscles and it wouldn't do me a damn bit of good. Even the newly dead can bench press cars with one hand. So I'm outclassed. I've gotten used to it.

The first mile was behind us. It always hurts the worst. My body takes about two miles to be convinced it can't talk me out of this insanity.

We were moving through an older neighborhood. Lots of small fenced yards and houses dating to the fifties, or even the 1800s. There was the smooth brick wall of a warehouse that dated to pre-Civil War. It was our halfway point. Two miles. I was feeling loose and muscled, like I could run forever, if I didn't have to do it very fast. I was concentrating on moving my body through the heat, keeping the rhythm. It was Ronnie who spotted the man.

"I don't mean to be an alarmist," she said, "but why is that man just standing there?"

I squinted ahead of us. Maybe fifteen feet ahead of us the brick wall ended and there was a tall elm tree. A man was standing near the trunk of the tree. He wasn't trying to conceal himself. But he was wearing a jean jacket. It was much too hot for that, unless you had a gun under it.

"How long's he been there?"

"Just stepped out from around the tree," she said.

Paranoia reigns supreme. "Let's turn back. It's two miles either way."

Ronnie nodded.

We pivoted and started jogging back the other way. The man behind us did not cry out or say stop. Paranoia, it was a vicious disease.

A second man stepped out from the far corner of the brick wall. We jogged towards him a few more steps. I glanced back. Mr. Jean Jacket was casually walking towards us. The jacket was unbuttoned, and his hand was reaching under his arm. So much for paranoia.

"Run," I said.

The second man pulled a gun from his jacket pocket.

We stopped running. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

"Un-uh," the man said, "I don't feel like chasing anyone in this heat. All ya gotta be is alive, chickie, anything else is gravy." The gun was a .22 caliber automatic. Not much stopping power, but it was perfect for wounding. They'd thought this out. That was scary.

Ronnie was standing very stiff beside me. I fought the urge to grab her hand and squeeze it, but that wouldn't be very tough-as-nails vampire slayer, would it? "What do you want?"

"That's better," he said. A pale blue T-shirt gapped where his beer gut spilled over his belt. But his arms had a beefy look to them. He may have been overweight, but I bet it hurt when he hit you. I hoped I didn't have to test the theory.

I backed up so the brick wall was to my back. Ronnie moved with me. Mr. Jean Jacket was almost with us now. He had a Beretta 9mm loose in his right hand. It was not meant for wounding.

I glanced at Ronnie, then at Fatty who was nearly right beside her. I glanced at Mr. Jean Jacket, who was nearly beside me. I glanced back at Ronnie. Her eyes widened just a bit. She licked her lips once, then turned back to stare at Fatty. The guy with the Beretta was mine. Ronnie got the .22. Delegation at its best.

"What do you want?" I said again. I hate repeating myself.

"You to come take a little ride with us, that's all." Fatty smiled as he said it.

I smiled back, then turned to Jean Jacket, and his tame Beretta. "Don't you talk?"

"I talk," he said. He took two steps closer to me, but his gun was very steadily pointed at my chest. "I talk real good." He touched my hair, lightly, with his fingertips. The Beretta was damn near pressed against me. If he pulled the trigger now, it was all over. The dull black barrel of the gun was getting bigger. Illusion, but the longer you stare at a gun, the more important it gets to be. When you're on the wrong end of it.

"None of that, Seymour," Fatty said. "No pussy and we can't kill her, those are the rules."

"Shit, Pete."

Pete, alias Fatty, said, "You can have the blonde. No one said we couldn't have fun with her."

I did not look at Ronnie. I stared at Seymour. I had to be ready if I got that one second chance. Glancing at my friend to see how she was taking the news of her impending rape was not going to help. Really.

"Phallic power, Ronnie. It always goes to the gonads," I said.

Seymour frowned. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means, Seymour, that I think you're stupid and what brains you have are in your balls." I smiled pleasantly while I said it.

He hit me with the flat of his hand, hard. I staggered but didn't go down. The gun was still steady, unwavering. Shit. He made a sound deep in his throat and hit me, closed fist. I went down. For a moment I lay on the gritty sidewalk, listening to the blood pound in my ears. The slap had stung. The closed fist hurt.

Someone kicked me in the ribs. "Leave her alone!" Ronnie screamed.

I lay on my stomach and pretended to be hurt. It wasn't hard. I groped for the Velcro pocket. Seymour was waving the Beretta in Ronnie's face. She was screaming at him. Pete had grabbed Ronnie's arms and was trying to hold her. Things were getting out of hand. Goody.

I stared up at Seymour's legs and struggled to my knees. I shoved the derringer into his groin. He froze and stared down at me.

"Don't move, or I'll serve up your balls on a plate," I said.

Ronnie drove her elbow back into Fatty's solar plexus. He bent over a little, hands going to his stomach. She twisted away and kned him hard in the face. Blood spurted from his nose. He staggered back. She smashed him in the side of the face, getting all her shoulder and upper body into it. He fell down. She had the .22 in her hand.

I fought an urge to yell "Yea Ronnie," but it didn't sound tough enough. We'd do high-fives later. "Tell your friend not to move, Seymour, or I'll pull this trigger."

He swallowed loud enough for me to hear it. "Don't move, Pete, okay?"

Pete just stared at us.

"Ronnie, please get Seymour's gun from him. Thank you."

I was still kneeling in the gravel with the derringer pressed into the man's groin. He let Ronnie take his gun without a fight. Fancy that.

"I've got this one covered, Anita," Ronnie said. I didn't glance at her. She would do her job. I would do mine.

"Seymour, this is a .38 Special, two shots. It can hold a variety of ammunition, .22, .44, or .357 Magnum." This was a lie, the new lightweight version couldn't hold anything higher than .38s, but I was betting Seymour couldn't tell the difference. "Forty-four or .357 and you can kiss the family jewels good-bye. Twenty-two, maybe you'll just be very, very sore. To quote a role model of mine, 'Do you feel lucky today?' "

"What do you want, man, what do you want?" His voice was high and squeaky with fear.

"Who hired you to come after us?"

He shook his head. "No, man, he'll kill us."

"Three-fifty-seven Magnum makes a fucking big hole, Seymour."

"Don't tell her shit," Pete said.

"If he says anything else, Ronnie, shoot his kneecap off," I said.

"My pleasure," Ronnie said. I wondered if she would really do it. I wondered if I'd tell her to do it. Better not to find out.

"Talk to me, Seymour, now, or I pull the trigger." I shoved the gun a little deeper. That must have hurt all on its own. He sort of tried to tippy-toe.

"God, please don't."

"Who hired you?"

"Bruno."

"You asshole, Seymour," Pete said. "He'll kill us."

"Ronnie, please shoot him," I said.

"You said the kneecap, right?"

"Yeah."

"How about an elbow instead?" she asked.

"Your choice," I said.

"You're crazy," Seymour said.

"Yeah," I said, "you remember that. What exactly did Bruno tell you?"

"He said to take you to a building off Grand, on Washington. He said to bring you both, but we could hurt the blonde to get you to come along."

"Give me the address," I said.

Seymour did. I think he would have told me the secret ingredient in the magic sauce if I had asked.

"If you go down there, Bruno will know we told ya," Pete said.

"Ronnie," I said.

"Shoot me now, chickie, it don't matter. You go down there or send the police down there, we are dead."

I glanced at Pete. He seemed very sincere. They were bad guys but. . . "Okay, we won't bust in on him."

"We aren't going to the police," Ronnie asked.

"No, if we did that, we might as well kill them now. But we don't have to do that, do we, Seymour?"

"No, man, no."

"How much ol' Bruno pay you?"

"Four hundred apiece."

"It wasn't enough," I said.

"You're telling me."

"I'm going to get up now, Seymour, and leave your balls where they are. Don't come near me or Ronnie again, or I'll tell Bruno you sold him out."

"He'd kill us, man. He'd kill us slow."

"That's right, Seymour. We'll just all pretend this never happened, right?" He was nodding vigorously.

"That okay with you, Pete?" I asked.

"I ain't stupid. Bruno'd rip out our hearts and feed them to us. We won't talk." He sounded disgusted.

I got up and stepped carefully away from Seymour. Ronnie covered Pete nice and steady with the Beretta. The .22 was tucked into the waistband of her jogging shorts. "Get out of here," I said.

Seymour's skin was pasty, and a sick sweat beaded his face. "Can I have my gun?" He wasn't very bright.

"Don't get cute," I said.

Pete stood. The blood under his nose had started to dry. "Come on, Seymour. We gotta go now."

They moved on down the street side by side. Seymour looked hunched in upon himself as if he were fighting an urge to clutch his equipment.

Ronnie let out a great whoosh of air and leaned back against the wall. The gun was still clutched in her right hand. "My God," she said.

"Yeah," I said.

She touched my face where Seymour had hit me. It hurt. I winced. "Are you all right?" Ronnie asked.

"Sure," I said. Actually, it felt like the side of my face was one great big ache, but it wouldn't make it hurt any less to say it out loud.

"Are we going down to the building where they were to drop us?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I know who Bruno is and who gives him orders. I know why they tried to kidnap me. What could I possibly learn that would be worth two lives?"

Ronnie thought about that for a moment. "You're right, I guess. But you aren't going to report the attack to the police?"

"Why should I? I'm okay, you're okay. Seymour and Pete won't be back."

She shrugged. "You didn't really want me to shoot his kneecap off, did you? I mean we were playing good cop, bad cop, right?" She looked at me very steadily as she asked, her solid grey eyes earnest and true.

I looked away. "Let's walk back home. I don't feel much like jogging."

"Me either."

We set off walking down the street. Ronnie untucked her T-shirt and stuck the Beretta in the waistband. The .22 she sort of cupped in her hand. It wasn't very noticeable that way.

"We were pretending, right? Being tough, right?"

Truth. "I don't know."

"Anita!"

"I don't know, that's the truth."

"I couldn't have shot him to pieces just to keep him from talking."

"Good thing you didn't have to then," I said.

"Would you really have pulled the trigger on that man?"

There was a cardinal singing somewhere off in the distance. The song filled the stale heat and made it seem cooler.

"Answer me, Anita. Would you really have pulled the trigger?"

"Yes."

"Yes?" There was a lilt of surprise in her voice.

"Yes."

"Shit." We walked on in silence for a minute or two, then she asked, "What ammo is in the gun today?"

"Thirty-eights."

"It would have killed him."

"Probably," I said.

I saw her look at me sideways as we walked back. There was a look I'd seen before. A mixture of horror and admiration. I'd just never seen it on a friend's face before. That part hurt. But we went out to dinner that night at The Miller's Daughter in Old St. Charles. The atmosphere was pleasant. The food wonderful. As always.

We talked and laughed and had a very good time. Neither of us mentioned what had happened this afternoon. Pretend hard enough and maybe it will go away.

Chapter 20

At 10:30 that night I was down in the vampire district. Dark blue polo shirt, jeans, red windbreaker. The windbreaker hid the shoulder holster and the Browning Hi-Power. Sweat was pooling in the bends of my arms but it beat the hell out of not having it.

The afternoon fun and games had turned out all right, but that was partly luck. And Seymour losing his temper. And me being able to take a beating and keep on ticking. Ice had kept the swelling down, but the left side of my face was puffy and red, as if some sort of fruit was about to burst out of it. No bruise—yet.

The Laughing Corpse was one of the newest clubs in the District. Vampires are sexy. I'll admit that. But funny? I don't think so. Apparently, I was in the minority. A line stretched away from the club, curling round the block.

It hadn't occurred to me that I'd need a ticket or reservations or whatever just to get in. But, hey, I knew the boss. I walked along the line of people towards the ticket booth. The people were mostly young. The women in dresses, the men in dressy sports wear, with an occasional suit. They were chatting together in excited voices, a lot of casual

hand and arm touching. Dates. I remember dates. It's just been a while. Maybe if I wasn't always ass deep in alligators, I'd date more. Maybe.

I cut ahead of a double-date foursome. "Hey," one man said.

"Sorry," I said.

The woman in the ticket booth frowned at me. "You can't just cut in line like that, ma'am."

Ma'am? "I don't want a ticket. I don't want to see the show. I am supposed to meet Jean-Claude here. That's it."

"Well, I don't know. How do I know you're not some reporter?"

Reporter? I took a deep breath. "Just call Jean-Claude and tell him Anita is here. Okay?"

She was still frowning at me.

"Look, just call Jean-Claude. If I'm a nosy reporter, he'll deal with me. If I'm who I say I am, he'll be happy that you called him. You can't lose."

"I don't know."

I fought an urge to scream at her. It probably wouldn't help. Probably. "Just call Jean-Claude, pretty please," I said.

Maybe it was the pretty please. She swiveled on her stool and opened the upper half of a door in the back of the booth. Small booth. I couldn't hear what she said, but she swiveled back around. "Okay, manager says you can go in."

"Great, thanks." I walked up the steps. The entire line of waiting people glared at me. I could feel their hot stares on my back. But I've been stared at by experts, so I was careful not to flinch. No one likes a line jumper.

The club was dim inside, as most clubs are. A guy just inside the door said, "Ticket, please?"

I stared up at him. He wore a white T-shirt that said, "The Laughing Corpse, it's a scream." A caricature of an openmouthed vampire was drawn very large across his chest. He was large and muscled and had bouncer tattooed across his forehead. "Ticket, please," he repeated.

First the ticket lady, now the ticket man? "The manager said I could come through to see Jean-Claude," I said.

"Willie," the ticket man said, "you send her through?"

I turned around, and there was Willie McCoy. I smiled when I saw him. I was glad to see him. That surprised me. I'm not usually happy to see dead men.

Willie is short, thin, with black hair slicked back from his forehead. I couldn't tell the exact color of his suit in the dimness, but it looked like a dull tomato-red. White button-up shirt, large shiny green tie. I had to look twice before I was sure, but yes, there was a glow-in-the-dark hula girl on his tie. It was the most tasteful outfit I'd ever seen Willie wear.

He grinned, flashing a lot of fang. "Anita, good to see ya."

I nodded. "You, too, Willie."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

He grinned even wider. His canines glistened in the dim light. He hadn't been dead a year yet.

"How long have you been manager here?" I asked.

"Bout two weeks."

"Congratulations."

He stepped closer to me. I stepped back. Instinctive. Nothing personal, but a vampire is a vampire. Don't get too close. Willie was new dead, but he was still capable of hypnotizing with his eyes. Okay, maybe no vampire as new as Willie could actually catch me with his eyes, but old habits die hard.

Willie's face fell. A flicker of something in his eyes—hurt? He dropped his voice but didn't try to step next to me. He was a faster study dead than he ever had been alive.

"Thanks to me helping you last time, I'm in real good with the boss."

He sounded like an old gangster movie, but that was Willie. "I'm glad Jean-Claude's doing right by you."

"Oh, yeah," Willie said, "this is the best job I ever had. And the boss isn't . . ." He waggled his hands back and forth. "Ya know, mean."

I nodded. I did know. I could bitch and complain about Jean-Claude all I wanted, but compared to most Masters of the City, he was a pussycat. A big, dangerous, carnivorous pussycat, but still, it was an improvement.

"The boss's busy right this minute," Willie said. "He said if you was to come early, to give ya a table near the stage."

Great. Aloud I said, "How long will Jean-Claude be?"

Willie shrugged. "Don't know for sure."

I nodded. "Okay, I'll wait, for a little while."

Willie grinned, fangs flashing. "Ya want me to tell Jean-Claude to hurry it up?"

"Would you?"

He grimaced like he'd swallowed a bug. "Hell no."

"Don't sweat it. If I get tired of waiting, I'll tell him myself."

Willie looked at me sorta sideways. "You'd do it, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah."

He just shook his head and started leading me between the small round tables. Every table was thick with people. Laughing, gasping, drinking, holding hands. The sensation of being surrounded by thick, sweaty life was nearly overwhelming.

I glanced at Willie. Did he feel it? Did the warm press of humanity make his stomach knot with hunger? Did he go home at night and dream of ripping into the loud, roaring crowd? I almost asked him, but I liked Willie as much as I could like a vampire. I did not want to know if the answer was yes.

A table just one row back from the stage was empty. There was a big white cardboard foldy thing that said "Reserved." Willie tried to hold my chair for me, I waved him back. It wasn't women's liberation. I simply never understood what I was supposed to do while the guy shoved my chair in under me. Did I sit there and watch him strain to scoot the chair with me in it? Embarrassing. I usually hovered just above the chair and got it shoved into the backs of my knees. Hell with it.

"Would you like a drink while ya wait?" Willie asked.

"Could I have a Coke?"

"Nuthin' stronger?"

I shook my head.

Willie walked away through the tables and the people. On the stage was a slender man with short, dark hair. He was thin all over, his face almost cadaverous, but he was

definitely human. His appearance was more comical than anything, like a long-limbed clown. Beside him, staring blank-faced out at the crowd, was a zombie.

Its pale eyes were still clear, human-looking, but he didn't blink. That familiar frozen stare gazed out at the audience. They were only half listening to the jokes. Most eyes were on the standing deadman. He was just decayed enough around the edges to look scary, but even one row away there was no hint of odor. Nice trick if you could manage it.

"Ernie here is the best roommate I ever had," the comedian said. "He doesn't eat much, doesn't talk my ear off, doesn't bring cute chicks home and lock me out while they have a good time." Nervous laughter from the audience. Eyes glued on ol' Ernie.

"Though there was that pork chop in the fridge that went bad. Ernie seemed to like that a lot."

The zombie turned slowly, almost painfully, to stare at the comedian. The man's eyes flickered to the zombie, then back to the audience, smile in place. The zombie kept staring at him. The man didn't seem to like it much. I didn't blame him. Even the dead don't like to be the butt of jokes.

The jokes weren't that funny anyway. It was a novelty act. The zombie was the act. Pretty inventive, and pretty sick.

Willie came back with my Coke. The manager waiting on my table, la-de-da. Of course, the reserved table was pretty good, too. Willie set the drink down on one of those useless paper lace dollies. "Enjoy," he said. He turned to leave, but I touched his arm. I wish I hadn't.

The arm was solid enough, real enough. But it was like touching wood. It was dead. I don't know what else to call it. There was no feeling of movement. Nothing.

I dropped his arm, slowly, and looked up at him. Meeting his eyes, thanks to Jean-Claude's marks. Those brown eyes held something like sorrow.

I could suddenly hear my heartbeat in my ears, and I had to swallow to calm my own pulse. Shit. I wanted Willie to go away now. I turned away from him and looked very hard at my drink. He left. Maybe it was just the sound of all the laughing, but I couldn't hear Willie walk away.

Willie McCoy was the only vampire I had ever known before he died. I remembered him alive. He had been a small-time hood. An errand boy for bigger fish. Maybe Willie thought being a vampire would make him a big fish. He'd been wrong there. He was just a little undead fish now. Jean-Claude or someone like him would run Willie's "life" for eternity. Poor Willie.

I rubbed the hand that had touched him on my leg. I wanted to forget the feel of his body under the new tomato-red suit, but I couldn't. Jean-Claude's body didn't feel that way. Of course, Jean-Claude could damn near pass for human. Some of the old ones could do that. Willie would learn. God help him.

"Zombies are better than dogs. They'll fetch your slippers and don't need to be walked. Ernie'll even sit at my feet and beg if I tell him to."

The audience laughed. I wasn't sure why. It wasn't that genuine ha-ha laughter. It was that outrageous shocked sound.

The I-can't-believe-he-said-that laughter.

The zombie was moving toward the comedian in a sort of slow-motion jerk. Crumbling hands reached outward and my stomach squeezed tight. It was a flashback to last night. Zombies almost always attack by just reaching out. Just like in the movies.

The comedian didn't realize that Ernie had decided he'd had enough. If a zombie is simply raised without any particular orders, he usually reverts to what is normal for him. A good person is a good person until his brain decays, stripping him of personality. Most zombies won't kill without orders, but every once in a while you get lucky and raise one that has homicidal tendencies. The comedian was about to get lucky.

The zombie walked towards him like a bad Frankenstein monster. The comedian finally realized something was wrong. He stopped in mid-joke, turning eyes wide. "Ernie," he said. It was as far as he got. The decaying hands wrapped around his throat and started to squeeze.

For one pleasant second I almost let the zombie do him in. Exploiting the dead is one thing I feel strongly about, but . . . stupidity isn't punishable by death. If it was, there would be a hell of a population drop.

I stood up, glancing around the club to see if they had planned for this eventuality. Willie came running to the stage. He wrapped his arms around the zombie's waist and pulled, lifted the much taller body off its feet, but the hands kept squeezing.

The comedian slipped to his knees, making little argh sounds. His face was going from red to purple. The audience was laughing. They thought it was part of the show. It was a heck of a lot funnier than the act.

I stepped up to the stage and said softly to Willie, "Need some help?"

He stared at me, still clinging to the zombie's waist. With his extraordinary strength Willie could have ripped a finger at a time off the man's neck and probably saved him. But super-vampire strength doesn't help you if you don't think how to use it. Willie never thought. Of course, the zombie might crush the man's windpipe before even a vampire could peel its fingers away. Maybe. Best not to find out.

I thought the comedian was a putz. But I couldn't stand there and watch him die. Really, I couldn't.

"Stop," I said. Low and for the zombie's ears. He stopped squeezing, but his hands were still tight. The comedian was going limp. "Release him."

The zombie let go. The man fell in a near faint on the stage. Willie straightened up from his frantic tugging at the deadman. He smoothed his tomato-red suit back into place. His hair was still perfectly slick. Too much hair goop for a mere zombie wrestling to displace his hairdo.

"Thanks," he whispered. Then he stood to his full five feet four and said, "The Amazing Albert and his pet zombie, ladies and gentlemen." The audience had been a bit uncertain, but the applause began. When the Amazing Albert staggered to his feet, the applause exploded. He croaked into the microphone. "Ernie thinks it's time to go home now. You've been a great audience." The applause was loud and genuine.

The comedian left the stage. The zombie stayed and stared at me. Waiting, waiting for another order. I don't know why everyone can't speak and have zombies obey them. It doesn't even feel like magic to me. There is no tingle of the skin, no breath of power. I speak and the zombies listen. Me and E. F. Hutton.

"Follow Albert and obey his orders until I tell you otherwise." The zombie looked down at me for a second, then turned slowly and shuffled after the man. The zombie

wouldn't kill him now. I wouldn't tell the comedian that, though. Let him think his life was in danger. Let him think he had to let me lay the zombie to rest. It was what I wanted. It was probably what the zombie wanted.

Ernie certainly didn't seem to like being the straight man in a comedy routine. Hecklers are one thing. Choking the comic to death is a little extreme.

Willie escorted me back to my table. I sat down and sipped my Coke. He sat down across from me. He looked shaken. His small hands trembled as he sat across from me. He was a vampire, but he was still Willie McCoy. I wondered how many years it would take for the last remnants of his personality to disappear. Ten years, twenty, a century? How long before the monster ate the man?

If it took that long. It wouldn't be my problem. I wouldn't be there to see it. To tell the truth, I didn't want to see it.

"I never liked zombies," Willie said.

I stared at him. "Are you afraid of zombies?"

His eyes flickered to me, then down to the table. "No."

I grinned at him. "You're afraid of zombies. You're phobic."

He leaned across the table. "Don't tell. Please don't tell." There was real fear in his eyes.

"Who would I tell?"

"You know."

I shook my head. "I don't know what you're talking about, Willie."

"The MASTER." You could hear "master" was in all caps.

"Why would I tell Jean-Claude?"

He was whispering now. A new comedian had come up on stage, there was laughter and noise, and still he whispered. "You're his human servant, whether you like it or not. When we speak to you, he tells us we're speaking to him."

We were leaning almost face-to-face now. The gentle brush of his breath smelled like breath mints. Almost all vampires smell like breath mints. I don't know what they did before mints were invented. Had stinky breath, I guess.

"You know I'm not his human servant."

"But he wants you to be."

"Just because Jean-Claude wants something doesn't mean he gets it," I said.

"You don't know what he's like."

"I think I do. . ."

He touched my arm. I didn't jerk back this time. I was too intent on what he was saying. "He's been different since the old master died. He's a lot more powerful than even you know."

This much I had suspected. "So why shouldn't I tell him you're afraid of zombies?"

"He'll use it to punish me."

I stared at him, our eyes inches apart. "You mean he's torturing people to control them."

He nodded.

"Shit."

"You won't tell?"

"I won't tell. Promise," I said.

He looked so relieved, I patted his hand. The hand felt like a hand. His body didn't feel wood hard anymore. Why? I didn't know, and if I asked Willie, he probably wouldn't know either. One of the mysteries of . . . death.

"Thanks."

"I thought you said that Jean-Claude was the kindest master you've ever had."

"He is," Willie said.

Now that was a frightening truth. If being tormented by your darkest fear was the kindest, how much worse had Nikolaos been. Hell, I knew the answer to that one. She'd been psychotic. Jean-Claude wasn't cruel just for the sake of watching people squirm. There was reason to his cruelty. It was a step up.

"I gotta go. Thanks for helping with the zombie." He stood.

"You were brave, you know," I said.

He flashed a grin my way, fangs glinting in the dim light. The smile vanished from his face like someone had turned a switch. "I can't afford to be anything else."

Vampires are a lot like wolf packs. The weak are either dominated or destroyed. Banishment is not an option. Willie was moving up in the ranks. A sign of weakness could stop that rise or worse. I'd often wondered what vampires feared. One of them feared zombies. It would have been funny if I hadn't seen the fear in his eyes.

The comic on stage was a vampire. He was the new dead. Skin chalk-white, eyes like burned holes in paper. His gums were bloodless and receding from canines that would have been the envy of any German shepherd. I had never seen a vampire look so monstrous. They all usually made an effort to appear human. This one wasn't.

I had missed the audience's reaction to his first appearance, but now they were laughing. If I had thought the zombie jokes were bad, these were worse. A woman at the next table laughed so hard, tears spilled down her cheeks.

"I went to New York, tough city. A gang jumped me, but I put the bite on them." People were holding their ribs as if in pain.

I didn't get it. It was genuinely not funny. I gazed around the crowd and found every eye fixed on the stage. They peered up at him with the helpless devotion of the bespelled.

He was using mind tricks. I'd seen vampires seduce, threaten, terrify, all by concentrating. But I had never seen them cause laughter. He was forcing them to laugh.

It wasn't the worst abuse of vampiric powers I'd ever seen. He wasn't trying to hurt them. And this mass hypnosis was harmless, temporary. But it was wrong. Mass mind control was one of the top scary things that most people don't know vampires can do.

I knew, and I didn't like it. He was the fresh dead and even before Jean-Claude's marks, the comic couldn't have touched me. Being an animator gave you partial immunity to vampires. It was one of the reasons that animators are so often vampire slayers. We've got a leg up, so to speak.

I had called Charles earlier, but I still didn't see him. He is not easy to miss in a crowd, sort of like Godzilla going through Tokyo. Where was he? And when would Jean-Claude be ready to see me? It was now after eleven. Trust him to browbeat me into a meeting and then make me wait. He was such an arrogant son of a bitch.

Charles came through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen area. He strode through the tables, heading for the door. He was shaking his head and murmuring to a small Asian man who was having to quick-run to keep up.

I waved, and Charles changed direction towards me. I could hear the smaller man arguing, "I run a very good, clean kitchen."

Charles murmured something that I couldn't hear. The bespelled audience was oblivious. We could have shot off a twenty-one-gun salute, and they wouldn't have flinched. Until the vampire comic was finished, they would hear nothing else.

"What are you, the damn health department?" the smaller man asked. He was dressed in a traditional chef's outfit. He had the big floppy hat wadded up in his hands. His dark uptilted eyes were sparkling with anger.

Charles is only six-one, but he seems bigger. His body is one wide piece from broad shoulders to feet. He seems to have no waist. He is like a moving mountain. Huge. His perfectly brown eyes are the same color as his skin. Wonderfully dark. His hand is big enough to cover my face.

The Asian chef looked like an angry puppy beside Charles. He grabbed Charles's arm. I don't know what he thought he was going to do, but Charles stopped moving. He stared down at the offending hand and said very carefully, voice almost painfully deep, "Do not touch me."

The chef dropped his arm like he'd been burned. He took a step back. Charles was only giving him part of the "look." The full treatment had been known to send would-be muggers screaming for help. Part of the look was enough for one irate chef.

His voice was calm, reasonable when he spoke again, "I run a clean kitchen."

Charles shook his head. "You can't have zombies near the food preparation. It's illegal. The health codes forbid corpses near food."

"My assistant is a vampire. He's dead."

Charles rolled his eyes at me. I sympathized. I'd had the same discussion with a chef or two. "Vampires are not considered legally dead anymore, Mr. Kim. Zombies are."

"I don't understand why."

"Zombies rot and carry disease just like any dead body. Just because they move around doesn't mean they aren't a depository for disease."

"I don't . . ."

"Either keep the zombies away from the kitchen or we will close you down. Do you understand that?"

"And you'd have to explain to the owner why his business was not making money," I said, smiling up at both of them.

The chef looked a bit pale. Fancy that. "I . . . I understand. It will be taken care of."

"Good," Charles said.

The chef darted one frightened look at me, then began to thread his way back to the kitchen. It was funny how Jean-Claude was beginning to scare so many people. He'd been one of the more civilized vampires before he became head bloodsucker. Power corrupts.

Charles sat down across from me. He seemed too big for the table. "I got your message. What's going on?"

"I need an escort to the Tenderloin."

It's hard to tell when Charles blushes, but he squirmed in his chair. "Why in the world do you want to go down there?"

"I need to find someone who works down there."

"Who?"

"A prostitute," I said.

He squirmed again. It was like watching an uncomfortable mountain. "Caroline is not going to like this."

"Don't tell her," I said.

"You know Caroline and I don't lie to each other, about anything."

I fought to keep my face neutral. If Charles had to explain his every move to his wife, that was his choice. He didn't have to let Caroline control him. He chose to do it. But it grated on me like having your teeth cleaned.

"Just tell her that you had extra animator business. She won't ask details." Caroline thought that our job was gross. Beheading chickens, raising zombies, how uncouth.

"Why do you need to find this prostitute?"

I ignored the question and answered another one. The less Charles knew about Harold Gaynor, the safer he'd be. "I just need someone to look menacing. I don't want to have to shoot some poor slob because he made a pass at me. Okay?"

Charles nodded. "I'll come. I'm flattered you asked."

I smiled encouragingly at him. Truth was that Manny was more dangerous and much better backup. But Manny was like me. He didn't look dangerous. Charles did. I needed a good bluff tonight, not firepower.

I glanced at my watch. It was almost midnight. Jean-Claude had kept me waiting an hour. I looked behind me and caught Willie's gaze. He came towards me immediately. I would try to use this power only for good.

He bent close, but not too close. He glanced at Charles, acknowledging him with a nod. Charles nodded back. Mr. Stoic.

"What ya want?" Willie said.

"Is Jean-Claude ready to see me or not?"

"Yeah, I was just coming to get ya. I didn't know you was expecting company tonight." He looked at Charles.

"He's a coworker."

"A zombie raiser?" Willie asked.

Charles said, "Yes." His dark face was impassive. His look was quietly menacing.

Willie seemed impressed. He nodded. "Sure, ya got zombie work after you see Jean-Claude?"

"Yeah," I said. I stood and spoke softly to Charles, though chances were that Willie would hear it. Even the newly dead hear better than most dogs.

"I'll be as quick as I can."

"Alright," he said, "but I need to get home soon."

I understood. He was on a short leash. His own fault, but it seemed to bother me more than it bothered Charles. Maybe it was one of the reasons I'm not married. I'm not big on compromise.

Chapter 21

Willie led me through a door and a short hallway. As soon as the door closed behind us, the noise was muted, distant as a dream. The lights were bright after the dimness of the club. I blinked against it. Willie looked rosy-cheeked in the bright light, not quite alive, but healthy for a deadman. He'd fed tonight on something, or someone. Maybe a willing human, maybe animal. Maybe.

The first door on the left said "Manager's Office." Willie's office? Naw.

Willie opened the door and ushered me in. He didn't come in the office. His eyes flicked towards the desk, then he backed out, shutting the door behind him.

The carpeting was pale beige; the walls eggshell-white. A large black-lacquered desk sat against the far wall. A shiny black lamp seemed to grow out of the desk. There was a blotter perfectly placed in the center of the desk. There were no papers, no paper clips, just Jean-Claude sitting behind the desk.

His long pale hands were folded on the blotter. Soft curling black hair, midnight-blue eyes, white shirt with its strange button-down cuffs. He was perfect sitting there, perfectly still like a painting. Beautiful as a wet dream, but not real. He only looked perfect. I knew better.

There were two brown metal filing cabinets against the left wall. A black leather couch took up the rest of the wall. There was a large oil painting above the couch. It was a scene of St. Louis in the 1700s. Settlers coming downriver in flatboats. The sunlight was autumn thick. Children ran and played. It didn't match anything in the room.

"The picture yours?" I asked.

He gave a slight nod.

"Did you know the painter?"

He smiled then, no hint of fangs, just the beautiful spread of lips. If there had been a vampire GQ, Jean-Claude would have been their cover boy.

"The desk and couch don't match the rest of the decor," I said.

"I am in the midst of remodeling," he said.

He just sat there looking at me. "You asked for this meeting, Jean-Claude. Let's get on with it."

"Are you in a hurry?" His voice had dropped lower, the brush of fur on naked skin.

"Yes, I am. So cut to the chase. What do you want?"

The smile widened, slightly. He actually lowered his eyes for a moment. It was almost coy. "You are my human servant, Anita."

He used my name. Bad sign that. "No," I said, "I'm not."

"You bear two marks, only two more remain." His face still looked pleasant, lovely. The expression didn't match what he was saying.

"So what?"

He sighed. "Anita. . ." He stopped in midsentence and stood. He came around the desk. "Do you know what it means to be Master of the City?" He leaned on the desk, half sitting. His shirt gaped open showing an expanse of pale chest. One nipple showed small and pale and hard. The cross-shaped scar was an insult to such pale perfection.

I had been staring at his bare chest. How embarrassing. I met his gaze and managed not to blush. Bully for me.

"There are other benefits to being my human servant, *ma petite*." His eyes were all pupil, black and drowning deep.

I shook my head. "No."

"No lies, *ma petite*, I can feel your desire." His tongue flicked across his lips. "I can taste it."

Great, just great. How do you argue with someone who can feel what you're feeling? Answer: don't argue, agree. "Alright, I lust after you. Does that make you happy?"

He smiled. "Yes." One word, but it flowed through my mind, whispering things that he had not said. Whispers in the dark.

"I lust after a lot of men, but that doesn't mean I have to sleep with them."

His face was almost slack, eyes like drowning pools. "Casual lust is easily defeated," he said. He stood in one smooth motion. "What we have is not casual, *ma petite*. Not lust, but desire." He moved towards me, one pale hand outstretched.

My heart was thudding in my throat. It wasn't fear. I didn't think it was a mind trick. It felt real. Desire, he called it, maybe it was. "Don't," my voice was hoarse, a whisper.

He, of course, did not stop. His fingers traced the edge of my cheek, barely touching. The brush of skin on skin. I stepped away from him, forced to draw a deep shaking breath. I could be as uncool as I wanted, he could feel my discomfort. No sense pretending.

I could feel where he had touched me, a lingering sensation. I looked at the ground while I spoke. "I appreciate the possible fringe benefits, Jean-Claude, really. But I can't. I won't." I met his eyes. His face was a terrible blankness. Nothing. It was the same face of a moment ago, but some spark of humanity, of life, was gone.

My pulse started thudding again. It had nothing to do with sex. Fear. It had a lot to do with fear.

"As you like, my little animator. Whether we are lovers or not, it does not change what you are to me. You are my human servant."

"No," I said.

"You are mine, Anita. Willing or not, you are mine."

"See, Jean-Claude, here's where you lose me. First you try seducing me, which has its pleasant side. When that doesn't work, you resort to threats."

"It is not a threat, *ma petite*. It is the truth."

"No, it isn't. And stop calling me *ma fucking petite*."

He smiled at that.

I didn't want him amused by me. Anger replaced fear in a quick warm rush. I liked anger. It made me brave, and stupid. "Fuck you."

"I have already offered that." His voice made something low jerk in my stomach.

I felt the rush of heat as I blushed. "Damn you, Jean-Claude, damn you."

"We need to talk, *ma petite*. Lovers or not, servant or not, we need to talk."

"Then talk. I haven't got all night."

He sighed. "You don't make this easy."

"If it was easy you wanted, you should have picked on someone else."

He nodded. "Very true. Please, be seated." He went back to lean on the desk, arms crossed over his chest.

"I don't have that kind of time," I said.

He frowned slightly. "I thought we agreed to talk this out, *ma petite*."

"We agreed to meet at eleven. You're the one who wasted an hour, not me."

His smile was almost bitter. "Very well. I will give you a . . . condensed version."

I nodded. "Fine with me."

"I am the new Master of the City. But to survive with Nikolaos alive, I had to hide my powers. I did it too well. There are those who think I am not powerful enough to be the Master of all. They are challenging me. One of the things they are using against me is you."

"How?"

"Your disobedience. I cannot even control my own human servant. How can I possibly control all the vampires in the city and surrounding areas?"

"What do you want from me?"

He smiled then, wide and genuine, flashing fangs. "I want you to be my human servant."

"Not in this lifetime, Jean-Claude."

"I can force the third mark on you, Anita." There was no threat as he said it. It was just a fact.

"I would rather die than be your human servant." Master vampires can smell the truth. He would know I meant it.

"Why?"

I opened my mouth to try to explain, but didn't. He would not understand. We stood two feet apart but it might have been miles. Miles across some dark chasm. We could not bridge that gap. He was a walking corpse. Whatever he had been as a living man, it was gone. He was the Master of the City, and that was nothing even close to human.

"If you force this issue, I will kill you," I said.

"You mean that." There was surprise in his voice. It isn't often a girl gets to surprise a centuries-old vampire.

"Yes."

"I do not understand you, *ma petite*."

"I know," I said.

"Could you pretend to be my servant?"

It was an odd question. "What does pretending mean?"

"You come to a few meetings. You stand at my side with your guns and your reputation."

"You want the Executioner at your back." I stared at him for a space of heartbeats. The true horror of what he'd just said floated slowly through my mind. "I thought the two marks were accident. That you panicked. You meant all along to mark me, didn't you?"

He just smiled.

"Answer me, you son of a bitch."

"If the chance arose, I was not averse to it."

"Not averse to it!" I was almost yelling. "You cold-bloodedly chose me to be your human servant! Why?"

"You are the Executioner."

"Damn you, what does that mean?"

"It is impressive to be the vampire who finally caught you."

"You haven't caught me."

"If you would behave yourself, the others would think so. Only you and I need know that it is pretense."

I shook my head. "I won't play your game, Jean-Claude."

"You will not help me?"

"You got it."

"I offer you immortality. Without the compromise of vampirism. I offer you myself. There have been women over the years who would have done anything I asked just for that."

"Sex is sex, Jean-Claude. No one's that good."

He smiled slightly. "Vampires are different, *ma petite*. If you were not so stubborn, you might find out how different."

I had to look away from his eyes. The look was too intimate. Too full of possibilities.

"There's only one thing I want from you," I said.

"And what is that, *ma petite*?"

"All right, two things. First, stop calling me *ma petite*; second, let me go. Wipe these damn marks away."

"You may have the first request, Anita."

"And the second?"

"I cannot, even if I wanted to."

"Which you don't," I said.

"Which I don't."

"Stay away from me, Jean-Claude. Stay the fuck away from me, or I'll kill you."

"Many people have tried through the years."

"How many of them had eighteen kills?"

His eyes widened just a bit. "None. There was this man in Hungary who swore he killed five."

"What happened to him?"

"I tore his throat out."

"You understand this, Jean-Claude. I would rather have my throat torn out. I would rather die trying to kill you than submit to you." I stared at him, trying to see if he understood any of what I said. "Say something."

"I have heard your words. I know you mean them." He was suddenly standing in front of me. I hadn't seen him move, hadn't felt him in my head. He was just suddenly inches in front of me. I think I gasped.

"Could you truly kill me?" His voice was like silk on a wound, gentle with an edge of pain. Like sex. It was like velvet rubbing inside my skull. It felt good, even with fear tearing through my body. Shit. He could still have me. Still take me down. No way.

I looked up into his so-blue eyes and said, "Yes."

I meant it. He blinked once, gracefully, and stepped back. "You are the most stubborn woman I have ever met," he said. There was no play in his voice this time. It was a flat statement.

"That's the nicest compliment you've ever paid me."

He stood in front of me, hands at his sides. He stood very still. Snakes or birds can stand utterly still but even a snake has a sense of aliveness, of action waiting to resume. Jean-Claude stood there with no sense of anything, as if despite what my eyes told me, he had vanished. He was not there at all. The dead make no noise.

"What happened to your face?"

I touched the swollen cheek before I could stop myself. "Nothing," I lied.

"Who hit you?"

"Why, so you can go beat him up?"

"One of the fringe benefits of being my servant is my protection."

"I don't need your protection, Jean-Claude."

"He hurt you."

"And I shoved a gun into his groin and made him tell me everything he knew," I said.

Jean-Claude smiled. "You did what?"

"I shoved a gun into his balls, alright?"

His eyes started to sparkle. Laughter spread across his face and burst out between his lips. He laughed full-throated.

The laugh was like candy: sweet, and infectious. If you could bottle Jean-Claude's laugh, I know it would be fattening. Or orgasmic.

"*Ma petite, ma petite*, you are absolutely marvelous."

I stared at him, letting that wonderful, touchable laugh roll around me. It was time to go. It is very hard to be dignified when someone is laughing uproariously at you. But I managed.

My parting shot made him laugh harder. "Stop calling me *ma petite*."

Chapter 22

I stepped back out into the noise of the club. Charles was standing beside the table, not sitting. He looked uncomfortable from a distance. What had gone wrong now?

His big hands were twisted together. Dark face scrunched up into near pain. A kind God had made Charles look big and bad, because inside he was all marshmallow. If I'd had Charles's natural size and strength, I'd have been a guaranteed bad ass. It was sort of sad and unfair.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I called Caroline," he said.

"And?"

"The baby-sitter's sick. And Caroline's been called in to the hospital. Someone has to stay with Sam while she goes to work."

"Mm-huh," I said.

He didn't look the least bit tough when he said, "Can going down to the Tenderloin wait until tomorrow?"

I shook my head.

"You're not going to go down there alone," Charles said. "Are you?"

I stared up at the great mountain of a man, and sighed. "I can't wait, Charles."

"But the Tenderloin." He lowered his voice as if just saying the word too loud would bring a cloud of pimps and prostitutes to descend upon us. "You can't go down there alone at night."

"I've gone worse places, Charles. I'll be all right."

"No, I won't let you go alone. Caroline can just get a new sitter or tell the hospital no." He smiled when he said it. Always happy to help a friend. Caroline would give him hell for it. Worst of all, now I didn't want to take Charles with me. You had to do more than look tough.

What if Gaynor got wind of me questioning Wanda? What if he found Charles and thought he was involved? No. It had been selfish to risk Charles. He had a four-year-old son. And a wife.

Harold Gaynor would eat Charles raw for dinner. I couldn't involve him. He was a big, friendly, eager-to-please bear. A lovable, cuddly bear. I didn't need a teddy bear for backup. I needed someone who would be able to take any heat that Gaynor might send our way.

I had an idea.

"Go home, Charles. I won't go alone. I promise."

He looked uncertain. Like maybe he didn't trust me. Fancy that. "Anita, are you sure? I won't leave you hanging like this."

"Go on, Charles. I'll take backup."

"Who can you get at this hour?"

"No questions. Go home to your son."

He looked uncertain, but relieved. He hadn't really wanted to go to the Tenderloin. Maybe Caroline's short leash was what Charles wanted, needed. An excuse for all the things he really didn't want to do. What a basis for a marriage.

But, hey, if it works, don't fix it.

Charles left with many apologies. But I knew he was glad to go. I would remember that he had been glad to go.

I knocked on the office door. There was a silence, then, "Come in, Anita."

How had he known it was me? I wouldn't ask. I didn't want to know.

Jean-Claude seemed to be checking figures in a large ledger. It looked antique with yellowed pages and fading ink. The ledger looked like something Bob Crachit should have been scribbling in on a cold Christmas Eve.

"What have I done to merit two visits in one night?" he said.

Looking at him now, I felt silly. I spent all this time avoiding him. Now I was going to invite him to accompany me on a bit of sleuthing? But it would kill two bats with one stone. It would please Jean-Claude, and I really didn't want him angry with me, if I could avoid it. And if Gaynor did try to go up against Jean-Claude, I was betting on Jean-Claude.

It was what Jean-Claude had done to me a few weeks ago. He had chosen me as the vampire's champion. Put me up against a monster that had slain three master vampires. And he had bet that I would come out on top against Nikolaos. I had, but just barely.

What was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander. I smiled sweetly at him. Pleased to be able to return the favor so quickly.

"Would you care to accompany me to the Tenderloin?"

He blinked, surprise covering his face just like a real person. "To what purpose?"

"I need to question a prostitute about a case I'm working on. I need backup."

"Backup?" he asked.

"I need backup that looks more threatening than I do. You fit the bill."

He smiled beatifically. "I would be your bodyguard."

"You've given me enough grief, do something nice for a change."

The smile vanished. "Why this sudden change of heart, *ma petite*?"

"My backup had to go home and baby-sit his kid."

"And if I do not go?"

"I'll go alone," I said.

"Into the Tenderloin?"

"Yep."

He was suddenly standing by the desk, walking towards me. I hadn't seen him rise.

"I wish you'd stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Clouding my mind so I can't see you move."

"I do it as often as I can, *ma petite*, just to prove I still can."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I gave up much of my power over you when I gave you the marks. I practice what little games are left me." He was standing almost in front of me. "Lest you forget who and what I am."

I stared up into his blue, blue eyes. "I never forget that you are the walking dead, Jean-Claude."

An expression I could not read passed over his face. It might have been pain. "No, I see the knowledge in your eyes of what I am." His voice dropped low, almost a whisper, but it wasn't seductive. It was human. "Your eyes are the clearest mirror I have ever seen, *ma petite*. Whenever I begin to pretend to myself. Whenever I have delusions of life. I have only to look into your face and see the truth."

What did he expect me to say? Sorry, I'll try to ignore the fact that you're a vampire. "So why keep me around?" I asked.

"Perhaps if Nikolaos had had such a mirror, she would not have been such a monster."

I stared at him. He might be right. It made his choice of me as human servant almost noble. Almost. Oh, hell. I would not start feeling sorry for the freaking Master of the City. Not now. Not ever.

We would go down to the Tenderloin. Pimps beware. I was bringing the Master as backup. It was like carrying a thermonuclear device to kill ants. Overkill has always been a specialty of mine.

Chapter 23

The Tenderloin was originally the red light district on the Riverfront in the 1800s. But the Tenderloin, like so much of St. Louis, moved uptown. Go down Washington past the Fox Theater, where you can see Broadway traveling companies sing bright musical.

Keep driving down Washington to the west edge of downtown St. Louis and you will come to the resurrected carcass of the Tenderloin.

The night streets are neon-coated, sparkling, flashing, pulsing-colors. It looks like some sort of pornographic carnival. All it needs is a Ferris wheel in one of the empty lots. They could sell cotton candy shaped like naked people. The kiddies could play while Daddy went to get his jollies. Mom would never have to know.

Jean-Claude sat beside me in the car. He had been utterly silent on the drive over. I had had to glance at him a time or two just to make sure he was still there. People make noise. I don't mean talking or belching or anything overt. But people, as a rule, can't just sit without making noise. They fidget, the sound of cloth rubbing against the seats; they breathe, the soft intake of air; they wet their lips, wet, quiet, but noise. Jean-Claude didn't do any of these things as we drove. I couldn't even swear he blinked. The living dead, yippee.

I can take silence as good as the next guy, better than most women and a lot of men. Now, I needed to fill the silence. Talk just for the noise. A waste of energy, but I needed it.

"Are you in there, Jean-Claude?"

His neck turned, bringing his head with it. His eyes glittered, reflecting the neon signs like dark glass. Shit.

"You can play human, Jean-Claude, better than almost any vampire I've ever met. What's all this supernatural crap?"

"Crap?" he said, voice soft.

"Yeah, why are you going all spooky on me?"

"Spooky?" he asked, and the sound filled the car. As if the word meant something else entirely.

"Stop that," I said.

"Stop what?"

"Answering every question with a question."

He blinked once. "So sorry, *ma petite*, but I can feel the street."

"Feel the street? What does that mean?"

He settled back against the upholstery, leaning his head and neck into the seat. His hand clasped over his stomach. "There is a great deal of life here."

"Life?" He had me doing it now.

"Yes," he said, "I can feel them running back and forth. Little creatures, desperately seeking love, pain, acceptance, greed. A lot of greed here, too, but mostly pain and love."

"You don't come to a prostitute for love. You come for sex."

He rolled his head so his dark eyes stared at me. "Many people confuse the two."

I stared at the road. The hairs at the back of my neck were standing at attention.

"You haven't fed yet tonight, have you?"

"You are the vampire expert. Can you not tell?" His voice had dropped to almost a whisper. Hoarse and thick.

"You know I can never tell with you."

"A compliment to my powers, I'm sure."

"I did not bring you down here to hunt," I said. My voice sounded firm, a tad loud. My heart was loud inside my head.

"Would you forbid me to hunt tonight?" he asked.

I thought about that one for a minute or two. We were going to have to turn around and make another pass to find a parking space. Would I forbid him to hunt tonight? Yes. He knew the answer. This was a trick question. Trouble was I couldn't see the trick.

"I would ask that you not hunt here tonight," I said.

"Give me a reason, Anita."

He had called me Anita without me prompting him. He was definitely after something. "Because I brought you down here. You wouldn't have hunted here, if it hadn't been for me."

"You feel guilt for whomever I might feed on tonight?"

"It is illegal to take unwilling human victims," I said.

"So it is."

"The penalty for doing so is death," I said.

"By your hand."

"If you do it in this state, yes."

"They are just whores, pimps, cheating men. What do they matter to you, Anita?"

I don't think he had ever called me Anita twice in a row. It was a bad sign. A car pulled away not a block from The Grey Cat Club. What luck. I slid my Nova into the slot. Parallel parking is not my best thing, but luckily the car that pulled away was twice the size of my car. There was plenty of room to maneuver, back and forth from the curb.

When the car was lurched nearly onto the curb but safely out of traffic, I cut the engine. Jean-Claude lay back in his seat, staring at me. "I asked you a question, *ma petite*, what do these people mean to you?"

I undid my seat belt and turned to look at him. Some trick of light and shadow had put most of his body in darkness. A band of nearly gold light lay across his face. His high cheekbones were very prominent against his pale skin. The tips of his fangs showed between his lips. His eyes gleamed like blue neon. I looked away and stared at the steering wheel while I talked.

"I have no personal stake in these people, Jean-Claude, but they are people. Good, bad, or indifferent, they are alive, and no one has the right to just arbitrarily snuff them out."

"So it is the sanctity of life you cling to?"

I nodded. "That and the fact that every human being is special. Every death is a loss of something precious and irreplaceable." I looked at him as I finished the last.

"You have killed before, Anita. You have destroyed that which is irreplaceable."

"I'm irreplaceable, too," I said. "No one has the right to kill me, either."

He sat up in one liquid motion, and reality seemed to collect around him. I could almost feel the movement of time in the car, like a sonic boom for the inside of my head, instead of my ear.

Jean-Claude sat there looking entirely human. His pale skin had a certain flush to it. His curling black hair, carefully combed and styled, was rich and touchable. His eyes were just midnight-blue, nothing exceptional but the color. He was human again, in the blink of an eye.

"Jesus," I whispered.

"What is wrong, *ma petite*?"

I shook my head. If I asked how he did it, he'd just smile.

"Why all the questions, Jean-Claude? Why the worry about my view of life?"

"You are my human servant." He raised a hand to stop the automatic objection. "I have begun the process of making you my human servant, and I would like to understand you better."

"Can't you just . . . scent my emotions like you can the people on the street?"

"No, *ma petite*. I can feel your desire but little else. I gave that up when I made you my marked servant."

"You can't read me?"

"No."

That was really nice to know. Jean-Claude didn't have to tell me. So why did he? He never gave anything away for free. There were strings attached that I couldn't even see. I shook my head. "You are just to back me up tonight. Don't do anything to anybody unless I say so, okay?"

"Do anything?"

"Don't hurt anyone unless they try to hurt us."

He nodded, face very solemn. Why did I suspect that he was laughing at me in some dark corner of his mind? Giving orders to the Master of the City. I guess it was funny.

The noise level on the sidewalk was intense. Music blared out of every other building. Never the same song, but always loud. The flashing signs proclaimed, "Girls, Girls, Girls. Topless." A pink-edged sign read, "Talk to the Naked Woman of Your Dreams." Eeek.

A tall, thin black woman came up to us. She was wearing purple shorts so short that they looked like a thong bikini. Black fishnet panty hose covered her legs and buttocks. Provocative.

She stopped somewhere between the two of us. Her eyes flicked from one to the other. "Which one of ya does it, and which one of ya watches?"

Jean-Claude and I exchanged glances. He was smiling ever so slightly. "Sorry, we were looking for Wanda," I said.

"A lot of names down here," she said. "I can do anything this Wanda can do, and do it better." She stepped very close to Jean-Claude, almost touching. He took her hand in his and lifted it gently to his lips. His eyes watched me as he did it.

"You're the doer," she said. Her voice had gone throaty, sexy. Or maybe that was just the effect Jean-Claude had on women. Maybe.

The woman cuddled in, against him. Her skin looked very dark against the white lace of his shirt. Her fingernails were painted a bright pink, like Easter basket grass.

"Sorry to interrupt," I said, "but we don't have all night."

"This is not the one you seek then," he said.

"No," I said.

He gripped her arms just above the elbows and pushed her away. She struggled just a bit to reach him again. Her hands grabbed at his arms, trying to pull herself closer to him. He held her straight-armed, effortlessly. He could have held a semitruck effortlessly.

"I'll do you for free," she said.

"What did you do to her?" I asked.

"Nothing."

I didn't believe him. "Nothing, and she offers to do you for free?" Sarcasm is one of my natural talents. I made sure that Jean-Claude heard it.

"Be still," he said.

"Don't tell me to shut up."

The woman was standing perfectly still. Her hands dropped to her sides, limp. He hadn't been talking to me at all.

Jean-Claude took his hands away from her. She never moved. He stepped around her like she was a crack in the pavement. He took my arm, and I let him. I watched the prostitute, waiting for her to move.

Her straight, nearly naked back shuddered. Her shoulders slumped. She threw back her head and drew a deep trembling breath.

Jean-Claude pulled me gently down the street, his hand on my elbow. The prostitute turned around, saw us. Her eyes never even hesitated. She didn't know us.

I swallowed hard enough for it to hurt. I pulled free of Jean-Claude's hand. He didn't fight me. Good for him.

I backed up against a storefront window. Jean-Claude stood in front of me, looking down. "What did you do to her?"

"I told you, *ma petite*, nothing."

"Don't call me that. I saw her, Jean-Claude. Don't lie to me."

A pair of men stopped beside us to look in the window. They were holding hands. I glanced in the window and felt color creep up my cheeks. There were whips, leather masks, padded handcuffs, and things I didn't even have a name for. One of the men leaned into the other and whispered. The other man laughed. One of them caught me looking. Our eyes met, and I looked away, fast. Eye contact down here was a dangerous thing.

I was blushing and hating it. The two men walked away, hand in hand.

Jean-Claude was staring in the window like he was out for a Saturday afternoon of window-shopping. Casual.

"What did you do to that woman?"

He stared in the storefront. I couldn't tell exactly what had caught his attention. "It was careless of me, *ma* . . . Anita. My fault entirely."

"What was your fault?"

"My . . . powers are greater when my human servant is with me." He stared at me then. His gaze solid on my face. "With you beside me, my powers are enhanced."

"Wait, you mean like a witch's familiar?"

He cocked his head to one side, a slight smile on his face. "Yes, very close to that. I did not know you knew anything about witchcraft."

"A deprived childhood," I said. I was not going to be diverted from the important topic. "So your ability to bespell people with your eyes is stronger when I'm with you. Strong enough that without trying, you bespelled that prostitute."

He nodded.

I shook my head. "No, I don't believe you."

He shrugged, a graceful gesture on him. "Believe what you like, *ma petite*. It is the truth."

I didn't want to believe it. Because if it were true, then I was in fact his human servant. Not in my actions but by my very presence. With sweat trickling down my spine from the heat, I was cold. "Shit," I said.

"You could say that," he said.

"No, I can't deal with this right now. I can't." I stared up at him. "You keep whatever powers we have between us in check, okay?"

"I will try," he said.

"Don't try, dammit, do it."

He smiled wide enough to flash the tips of his fangs. "Of course, *ma petite*."

Panic was starting in the pit of my stomach. I gripped my hands into fists at my sides. "If you call me that one more time, I'm going to hit you."

His eyes widened just a bit, his lips flexed. I realized he was trying not to laugh. I hate it when people find my threats amusing.

He was an invasive son of a bitch; and I wanted to hurt him. To hurt him because he scared me. I understand the urge, I've had it before with other people. It's an urge that can lead to violence. I stared up at his softly amused face. He was a condescending bastard, but if it ever came to real violence between us, one of us would die. Chances were good it would be me.

The humor leaked out of his face, leaving it smooth and lovely, and arrogant. "What is it, Anita?" His voice was soft and intimate. Even in the heat and movement of this place, his voice could roll me up and under. It was a gift.

"Don't push me into a corner, Jean-Claude. You don't want to take away all my options."

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"If it comes down to you or me, I'm going to pick me. You remember that."

He looked at me for a space of heartbeats. Then he blinked and nodded. "I believe you would. But remember, *ma . . .* Anita, if you hurt me, it hurts you. I could survive the strain of your death. The question, *amante de moi*, is could you survive mine?"

Amante de moi? What the hell did that mean? I decided not to ask. "Damn you, Jean-Claude, damn you."

"That, dear Anita, was done long before you met me."

"What does that mean?"

His eyes were as innocent as they ever were. "Why, Anita, your own Catholic Church has declared all vampires as suicides. We are automatically damned."

I shook my head. "I'm Episcopalian, now, but that isn't what you meant."

He laughed then. The sound was like silk brushed across the nape of the neck. It felt smooth and good, but it made you shudder.

I walked away from him. I just left him there in front of the obscene window display. I walked into the crowd of whores, hustlers, customers. There was nobody on this street as dangerous as Jean-Claude. I had brought him down here to protect me. That was laughable. Ridiculous. Obscene.

A young man who couldn't have been more than fifteen stopped me. He was wearing a vest with no shirt and a pair of torn jeans. "You interested?"

He was taller than me by a little. His eyes were blue. Two other boys just behind him were staring at us.

"We don't get many women down here," he said.

"I believe you." He looked incredibly young. "Where can I find Wheelchair Wanda?"

One of the boys behind him said, "A cripp lover, Jesus."

I agreed with him. "Where?" I held up a twenty. It was too much to pay for the information, but maybe if I gave it to him, he could go home sooner. Maybe if he had twenty dollars, he could turn down one of the cars cruising the street. Twenty dollars, it would change his life. Like sticking your finger in a nuclear meltdown.

"She's just outside of The Grey Cat. At the end of the block."

"Thanks." I gave him the twenty. His fingernails had grime embedded in them.

"You sure you don't want some action?" His voice was small and uncertain, like his eyes. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jean-Claude moving through the crowd. He was coming for me. To protect me. I turned back to the boy. "I've got more action than I know what to do with," I said.

He frowned, looking puzzled. That was all right. I was puzzled, too. What do you do with a master vampire that won't leave you alone? Good question. Unfortunately, what I needed was a good answer.

Chapter 24

Wheelchair Wanda was a small woman sitting in one of those sport wheelchairs that are used for racing. She wore workout gloves, and the muscles in her arms moved under her tanned skin as she pushed herself along. Long brown hair fell in gentle waves around a very pretty face. The makeup was tasteful. She wore a shiny metallic blue shirt and no bra. An ankle-length skirt with at least two layers of multicolored crinoline and a pair of stylish black boots hid her legs.

She was moving towards us at a goodly pace. Most of the prostitutes, male and female, looked ordinary. They weren't dressed outrageously, shorts, middrifts. In this heat who could blame them? I guess if you wear fishnet jumpsuits, the police just naturally get suspicious.

Jean-Claude stood beside me. He glanced up at the sign that proclaimed "The Grey Cat" in a near blinding shade of fuchsia neon. Tasteful.

How does one approach a prostitute, even just to talk? I didn't know. Learn something new every day. I stood in her path and waited for her to come to me. She glanced up and caught me watching her. When I didn't look away, she got eye contact and smiled.

Jean-Claude moved up beside me. Wanda's smile broadened or deepened. It was a definite "come along smile" as my Grandmother Blake used to say.

Jean-Claude whispered, "Is that a prostitute?"

"Yes," I said.

"In a wheelchair?" he asked.

"Yep."

"My," was all he said. I think Jean-Claude was shocked. Nice to know he could be.

She stopped her chair with an expert movement of hands.

She smiled, craning to look up at us. The angle looked painful.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," I said.

She continued to smile. I continued to stare. Why did I suddenly feel awkward? "A friend told me about you," I said.

Wanda nodded.

"You are the one they refer to as Wheelchair Wanda?"

She grinned suddenly, and her face looked real. Behind all those lovely but fake smiles was a real person. "Yeah, that's me."

"Could we talk?"

"Sure," she said. "You got a room?"

Did I have a room? Wasn't she supposed to do that? "No."

She waited.

Oh, hell. "We just want to talk to you for an hour, or two. We'll pay whatever the going rate is."

She told me the going rate.

"Jesus, that's a little steep," I said.

She smiled beatifically at me. "Supply and demand," she said. "You can't get a taste of what I have anywhere else." She smoothed her hands down her legs as she said it. My eyes followed her hands like they were supposed to. This was too weird.

I nodded. "Okay, you got a deal." It was a business expense. Computer paper, ink pens medium point, one prostitute, manila file folders. See, it fit right in.

Bert was going to love this one.

Chapter 25

We took Wanda back to my apartment. There are no elevators in my building. Two flights of stairs are not exactly wheelchair accessible. Jean-Claude carried her. His stride was even and fluid as he walked ahead of me. Wanda didn't even slow him down. I followed with the wheelchair. It did slow me down.

The only consolation I had was I got to watch Jean-Claude climb the stairs. So sue me. He had a very nice backside for a vampire.

He was waiting for me in the upper hallway, standing with Wanda cuddled in his arms. They both looked at me with a pleasant sort of blankness.

I wheeled the collapsed wheelchair over the carpeting. Jean-Claude followed me. The crinoline in Wanda's skirts crinkled and whispered as he moved.

I leaned the wheelchair against my leg and unlocked the door. I pushed the door all the way back to the wall to give Jean-Claude room. The wheelchair folded inwards like a cloth baby stroller. I struggled to make the metal bars catch, so the chair would be solid again. As I suspected, it was easier to break it than to fix it.

I glanced up from my struggles and found Jean-Claude still standing outside my door. Wanda was staring at him, frowning.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I have never been to your apartment."

"So?"

"The great vampire expert . . . come, Anita."

Oh. "You have my permission to enter my home."

He gave a sort of bow from the neck. "I am honored," he said.

The wheelchair snapped into shape again. Jean-Claude set Wanda in her chair. I closed the door. Wanda smoothed her long skirts over her legs.

Jean-Claude stood in the middle of my living room and gazed about. He gazed at the penguin calendar on the wall by the kitchenette. He rifled the pages to see future months, gazing at pictures of chunky flightless birds until he'd seen every picture.

I wanted to tell him to stop, but it was harmless. I didn't write appointments on the calendar. Why did it bother me that he was so damned interested in it?

I turned back to the prostitute in my living room. The night was entirely too weird. "Would you like something to drink?" I asked. When in doubt, be polite.

"Red wine if you have it," Wanda said.

"Sorry, nothing alcoholic in the house. Coffee, soft drinks with real sugar in them, and water, that's about it."

"Soft drink," she said.

I got her a can of Coke out of the fridge. "You want a glass?"

She shook her head.

Jean-Claude was leaning against the wall, staring at me as I moved about the kitchen. "I don't need a glass either," he said softly.

"Don't get cute," I said.

"Too late," he said.

I had to smile.

The smile seemed to please him. Which made me frown. Life was hard around Jean-Claude. He sort of wandered off towards the fish tank. He was giving himself a tour of my apartment. Of course, he would. But at least it would give Wanda and I some privacy.

"Shit, he's a vampire," Wanda said. She sounded surprised. Which surprised me. I could always tell. Dead was dead to me, no matter how pretty the corpse.

"You didn't know?" I asked.

"No, I'm not coffin-bait," she said. There was a tightness to her face. The flick of her eyes as she followed Jean-Claude's casual movements around the room was new. She was scared.

"What's coffin-bait?" I handed her the soft drink.

"A whore that does vampires."

Coffin-bait, how quaint. "He won't touch you."

She turned brown eyes to me then. Her gaze was very thorough, as if she were trying to read the inside of my head. Was I telling the truth?

How terrifying to go away with strangers to rooms and not know if they will hurt you or not. Desperation, or a death wish.

"So you and I are going to do it?" she asked. Her gaze never left my face.

I blinked at her. It took me a moment to realize what she meant. "No." I shook my head. "No, I said I just wanted to talk. I meant it." I think I was blushing.

Maybe the blush did it. She popped the top on the soda can and took a drink. "You want me to talk about doing it with other people, while you do it with him?" She motioned her head towards the wandering vampire.

Jean-Claude was standing in front of the only picture I had in the room. It was modern and matched the decor. Grey, white, black, and palest pink. It was one of those designs that the longer you stared at it, the more shapes you could pick out.

"Look, Wanda, we are just going to talk. That's it. Nobody is going to do anything to anybody. Okay?"

She shrugged. "It's your money. We can do what you want."

That one statement made my stomach hurt. She meant it. I'd paid the money. She would do anything I wanted. Anything? It was too awful. That any human being would say "anything" and mean it. Of course, she drew the line at vampires. Even whores have standards.

Wanda was smiling up at me. The change was extraordinary. Her face glowed. She was instantly lovely. Even her eyes glowed. It reminded me of Cicely's soundless laughing face.

Back to business. "I heard you were Harold Gaynor's mistress a while back." No preliminaries, no sweet talk. Off with the clothes.

Wanda's smile faded. The glow of humor died in her eyes, replaced by wariness. "I don't know the name."

"Yeah, you do," I said. I was still standing, forcing her to look up at me in that near painful angle.

She sipped her drink and shook her head without looking up at me.

"Come on, Wanda, I know you were Gaynor's sweetie. Admit you know him, and we'll work from there."

She glanced up at me, then down. "No. I'll do you. I'll let the vamp watch. I'll talk dirty to you both. But I don't know anybody named Gaynor."

I leaned down, putting my hands on the arms of her chair. Our faces were very close. "I'm not a reporter. Gaynor will never know you talked to me unless you tell him."

Her eyes had gotten bigger. I glanced where she was staring. The Windbreaker had fallen forward. My gun was showing, which seemed to upset her. Good.

"Talk to me, Wanda." My voice was soft. Mild. The mildest of voices is often the worst threat.

"Who the hell are you? You're not cops. You're not a reporter. Social workers don't carry guns. Who are you?" That last question had the lilt of fear in it.

Jean-Claude strolled into the room. He'd been in my bedroom. Great, just great. "Trouble, *ma petite*?"

I didn't correct him on the nickname. Wanda didn't need to know there was dissent in the ranks. "She's being stubborn," I said.

I stepped back from her chair. I took off the Windbreaker and laid it over the kitchen counter. Wanda stared at the gun like I knew she would.

I may not be intimidating, but the Browning is.

Jean-Claude walked up behind her. His slender hands touched her shoulders. She jumped like it had hurt. I knew it hadn't hurt. Might be better if it did.

"He'll kill me," Wanda said.

A lot of people seemed to say that about Mr. Gaynor. "He'll never know," I said.

Jean-Claude rubbed his cheek against her hair. His fingers kneading her shoulders, gently. "And, my sweet coquette, he is not here with you tonight." He spoke with his lips against her ear. "We are." He said something else so soft I could not hear. Only his lips moved, soundlessly for me.

Wanda heard him. Her eyes widened, and she started to tremble. Her entire body seemed in the grip of some kind of fit. Tears glittered in her eyes and fell down her cheeks in one graceful curve.

Jesus.

"Please, don't. Please don't let him." Her voice was squeezed small and thin with fear.

I hated Jean-Claude in that moment. And I hated me. I was one of the good guys. It was one of my last illusions. I wasn't willing to give it up, not even if it worked. Wanda would talk or she wouldn't. No torture. "Back off, Jean-Claude," I said.

He gazed up at me. "I can taste her terror like strong wine." His eyes were solid, drowning blue. He looked blind. His face was still lovely as he opened his mouth wide and fangs glistened.

Wanda was still crying and staring at me. If she could have seen the look on Jean-Claude's face, she would have been screaming.

"I thought your control was better than this, Jean-Claude?"

"My control is excellent, but it is not endless." He stood away from her and began to pace the room on the other side of the couch. Like a leopard pacing its cage. Contained violence, waiting for release. I could not see his face. Had the spook act been for Wanda's benefit? Or real?

I shook my head. No way to ask in front of Wanda. Maybe later. Maybe.

I knelt in front of Wanda. She was gripping the soda can so hard, she was denting it. I didn't touch her, just knelt close by. "I won't let him hurt you. Honest. Harold Gaynor is threatening me. That's why I need information."

Wanda was looking at me, but her attention was on the vampire in back of her. There was a watchful tension in her shoulders. She would never relax while Jean-Claude was in the room. The lady had taste.

"Jean-Claude, Jean-Claude."

His face looked as ordinary as it ever did when he turned to face me. A smile crooked his full lips. It was an act. Pretense. Damn him. Was there something in becoming a vampire that made you sadistic?

"Go into the bedroom for a while. Wanda and I need to talk in private."

"Your bedroom." His smile widened. "My pleasure, *ma petite*."

I scowled at him. He was undaunted. As always. But he left the room as I'd asked.

Wanda's shoulders slumped. She drew a shaky breath. "You really aren't going to let him hurt me, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

She started to cry then, soft, shaky tears. I didn't know what to do. I've never known what to do when someone cries. Did I hug her? Pat her hand comfortingly. What?

I finally sat back on the ground in front of her, leaning back on my heels, and did nothing. It took a few moments, but finally the crying stopped. She blinked up at me. The makeup around her eyes had faded, just vanished. It made her look vulnerable, more

rather than less attractive. I had the urge to take her in my arms and rock her like a child. Whisper lies, about how everything would be alright.

When she left here tonight, she was still going to be a whore. A crippled whore. How could that be alright? I shook my head more at me than at her.

"You want some Kleenex?"

She nodded.

I got her the box from the kitchen counter. She wiped at her face and blew her nose softly, very ladylike.

"Can we talk now?"

She blinked at me and nodded. She took a shaky sip of pop.

"You know Harold Gaynor, right?"

She just stared at me, dully. Had we broken her? "If he finds out, he will kill me. Maybe I don't want to be coffin-bait, but I sure as hell don't want to die either."

"No one does. Talk to me, Wanda, please."

She let out a shaky sigh. "Okay, I know Harold."

Harold? "Tell me about him."

Wanda stared at me. Her eyes narrowed. There were fine lines around her eyes. It made her older than I had thought. "Has he sent Bruno or Tommy after you yet?"

"Tommy came for a personal meeting."

"What happened?"

"I drew a gun on him."

"That gun?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yes."

"What did you do to make Harold mad?"

Truth or lie? Neither. "I refused to do something for him."

"What?"

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter."

"It can't have been sex. You aren't crippled." She said the last word like it was hard. "He doesn't touch anyone who's whole." The bitterness in her voice was thick enough to taste.

"How did you meet him?" I asked.

"I was in college at Wash U. Gaynor was donating money for something."

"And he asked you out?"

"Yeah." Her voice was so soft, I had to lean forward to hear it.

"What happened?"

"We were both in wheelchairs. He was rich. It was great." She rolled her lips under, like she was smoothing lipstick, then out, and swallowed.

"When did it stop being great?" I asked.

"I moved in with him. Dropped out of college. It was . . . easier than college. Easier than anything. He couldn't get enough of me." She stared down at her lap again. "He started wanting variety in the bedroom. See, his legs are crippled, but he can feel. I can't feel." Wanda's voice had dropped almost to a whisper. I had to lean against her knees to hear. "He liked to do things to my legs, but I couldn't feel it. So at first I thought that was okay, but . . . but he got really sick." She looked at me suddenly, her face only inches from mine. Her eyes were huge, swimming with unshed tears. "He cut me up. I couldn't feel it, but that's not the point, is it?"

"No," I said.

The first tear trailed down her face. I touched her hand. Her fingers wrapped around mine and held on.

"It's alright," I said, "it's alright."

She cried. I held her hand and lied. "It's alright now, Wanda. He can't hurt you anymore."

"Everyone hurts you," she said. "You were going to hurt me." There was accusation in her eyes.

It was a little late to explain good cop, bad cop to her. She wouldn't have believed it anyway.

"Tell me about Gaynor."

"He replaced me with a deaf girl."

"Cicely," I said.

She looked up, surprised. "You've met her?"

"Briefly."

Wanda shook her head. "Cicely is one sick chickie. She likes torturing people. It gets her off." Wanda looked at me as if trying to gauge my reaction. Was I shocked? No.

"Harold slept with both of us at the same time, sometimes. At the end it was always a threesome. It got real rough." Her voice dropped lower and lower, a hoarse whisper. "Cicely likes knives. She's real good at skinning things." She rolled her lips under again in that lipstick-smoothing gesture. "Gaynor would kill me just for telling you his bedroom secrets."

"Do you know any business secrets?"

She shook her head. "No, I swear. He was always very careful to keep me out of that. I thought at first it was so if the police came, I wouldn't be arrested." She looked down at her lap. "Later, I realized it was because he knew I would be replaced. He didn't want me to know anything that could hurt him when he threw me away."

There was no bitterness now, no anger, only a hollow sadness. I wanted her to rant and rave. This quiet despair was aching. A hurt that would never heal. Gaynor had done worse than kill her. He'd left her alive. Alive and as crippled inside as out.

"I can't tell you anything but bedroom talk. It won't help you hurt him."

"Is there any bedroom talk that isn't about sex?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Personal secrets, but not sex. You were his sweetie for nearly two years. He must have talked about something other than sex."

She frowned, thinking. "I . . . I guess he talked about his family."

"What about his family?"

"He was illegitimate. He was obsessed with his real father's family."

"He knew who they were?"

Wanda nodded. "They were rich, old money. His mother was a hooker turned mistress: When she got pregnant, they threw her out."

Like Gaynor did to his women, I thought. Freud is so often at work in our lives. Out loud I said, "What family?"

"He never said. I think he thought I'd blackmail them or go to them with his dirty little secrets. He desperately wants them to regret not welcoming him into the family. I think he only made his money so he could be as rich as they were."

"If he never gave you a name, how do you know he wasn't lying?"

"You wouldn't ask if you could hear him. His voice was so intense. He hates them. And he wants his birthright. Their money is his birthright."

"How does he plan to get their money?" I asked.

"Just before I left him, Harold had found where some of his ancestors were buried. He talked about treasure. Buried treasure, can you believe it?"

"In the graves?"

"No, his father's people got their first fortune from being river pirates. They sailed the Mississippi and robbed people. Gaynor was proud of that and angry about it. He said that the whole bunch of them were descended from thieves and whores. Where did they get off being so high and mighty to him?" She was watching my face as she spoke the last. Maybe she saw the beginnings of an idea.

"How would knowing the graves of his ancestors help him get their treasure?"

"He said he'd find some voodoo priest to raise them. He'd force them to give him their treasure that had been lost for centuries."

"Ah," I said.

"What? Did that help?"

I nodded. My role in Gaynor's little scheme had become clear. Painfully clear. The only question left was why me? Why didn't he go to someone thoroughly disreputable like Dominga Salvador? Someone who would take his money and kill his hornless goat and not lose any sleep over it. Why me, with my reputation for morality?

"Did he ever mention any names of voodoo priests?"

Wanda shook her head. "No, no names. He was always careful about names. There's a look on your face. How could what I have told you just now help you?"

"I think the less you know about that, the better, don't you?"

She stared at me for a long time but finally nodded. "I guess so."

"Is there any place . . ." I let it trail off. I was going to offer her a plane ticket or a bus ticket to anywhere. Anywhere where she wouldn't have to sell herself. Anywhere where she could heal.

Maybe she read it in my face or my silence. She laughed, and it was a rich sound. Shouldn't whores have cynical cackles?

"You are a social worker type after all. You want to save me, don't you?"

"Is it terribly naive to offer you a ticket home or somewhere?"

She nodded. "Terribly. And why should you want to help me? You're not a man. You don't like women. Why should you offer to send me home?"

"Stupidity," I said and stood.

"It's not stupid." She took my hand and squeezed it. "But it wouldn't do any good. I'm a whore. Here at least I know the town, the people. I have regulars." She released my hand and shrugged. "I get by."

"With a little help from your friends," I said.

She smiled, and it wasn't happy. "Whores don't have friends."

"You don't have to be a whore. Gaynor made you a whore, but you don't have to stay one."

There were tears trembling in her eyes for the third time that night. Hell, she wasn't tough enough for the streets. No one was.

"Just call a taxi, okay. I don't want to talk anymore."

What could I do? I called a taxi. I told the driver the fare was in a wheelchair like Wanda told me to. She let Jean-Claude carry her back downstairs because I couldn't do it. But she was very tight and still in his arms. We left her in her chair on the curb.

I watched until the taxi came and took her away. Jean-Claude stood beside me in the golden circle of light just in front of my apartment building. The warm light seemed to leech color from his skin.

"I must leave you now, *ma petite*. It has been very educational, but time grows short."

"You're going to go feed, aren't you?"

"Does it show?"

"A little."

"I should call you *ma vérité*, Anita. You always tell me the truth about myself."

"Is that what *vérité* means? Truth?" I asked.

He nodded.

I felt bad. Itchy, grumpy, restless. I was mad at Harold Gaynor for victimizing Wanda. Mad of Wanda for allowing it. Angry with myself for not being able to do anything about it. I was pissed at the whole world tonight. I'd learned what Gaynor wanted me to do. And it didn't help a damn bit.

"There will always be victims, Anita. Predators and prey, it is the way of the world."

I glared up at him. "I thought you couldn't read me anymore."

"I cannot read your mind or your thoughts, only your face and what I know of you."

I didn't want to know that Jean-Claude knew me that well. That intimately. "Go away, Jean-Claude, just go away."

"As you like, *ma petite*." And just like that he was gone. A rush of wind, then nothing.

"Show-off," I murmured. I was left standing in the dark, tasting the first edge of tears. Why did I want to cry over a whore whom I'd just met? Over the unfairness of the world in general?

Jean-Claude was right. There would always be prey and predator. And I had worked very hard to be one of the predators. I was the Executioner. So why were my sympathies always with the victims? And why did the despair in Wanda's eyes make me hate Gaynor more than anything he'd ever done to me?

Why indeed?

Chapter 26

The phone rang. I moved nothing but my eyes to glance at the bedside clock: 6:45 A.M. Shit. I lay there waiting, half drifted to sleep again when the answering machine picked up.

"It's Dolph. We found another one. Call my pager. . ."

I scrambled for the phone, dropping the receiver in the process. "H'lo, Dolph. I'm here."

"Late night?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Our friend has decided that single family homes are easy pickings." His voice sounded rough with lack of sleep.

"God, not another family."

"Fraid so. Can you come out?"

It was a stupid question, but I didn't point that out. My stomach had dropped into my knees. I didn't want a repeat of the Reynolds house. I didn't think my imagination could stand it.

"Give me the address. I'll be there."

He gave me the address.

"St. Peters," I said. "It's close to St. Charles, but still . . ."

"Still what?"

"It's a long way to walk for a single family home. There are lots of houses that fit the bill in St. Charles. Why did it travel so far to feed?"

"You're asking me?" he said. There was something almost like laughter in his voice. "Come on out, Ms. Voodoo Expert. See what there is to see."

"Dolph, is it as bad as the Reynolds house?"

"Bad, worse, worst of all," he said. The laughter was still there, but it held an edge of something hard and self deprecating.

"This isn't your fault," I said.

"Tell that to the top brass. They're screaming for someone's ass."

"Did you get the warrant?"

"It'll come in this afternoon late."

"No one gets warrants on a weekend," I said.

"Special panic-mode dispensation," Dolph said. "Get your ass out here, Anita. Everyone needs to go home." He hung up.

I didn't bother saying bye.

Another murder. Shit, shit, shit. Double shit. It was not the way I wanted to spend Saturday morning. But we were getting our warrant. Yippee. The trouble was I didn't know what to look for. I wasn't really a voodoo expert. I was a preternatural crimes expert. It wasn't the same thing. Maybe I should ask Manny to come along. No, no, I didn't want him near Dominga Salvador in case she decided to cut a deal and give him to the police. There is no statute of limitations on human sacrifice. Manny could still go down for it. It'd be Dominga's style to trade my friend for her life. Making it, in a roundabout way, my fault. Yeah, she'd love that.

The message light on my answering machine was blinking. Why hadn't I noticed it last night? I shrugged. One of life's mysteries. I pressed the playback button.

"Anita Blake, this is John Burke. I got your message. Call me anytime here. I'm eager to hear what you have." He gave the phone number, and that was it.

Great, a murder scene, a trip to the morgue, and a visit to voodoo land, all in one day. It was going to be a busy and unpleasant day. It matched last night perfectly, and the night before. Shit, I was on a roll.

Chapter 27

There was a patrol cop throwing up his guts into one of those giant, elephant-sized trash cans in front of the house. Bad sign. There was a television news van parked across the street. Worse sign. I didn't know how Dolph had kept zombie massacres out of the news so long. Current events must have been really hopping for the newshounds to ignore such easy headlines. ZOMBIES MASSACRE FAMILY. ZOMBIE SERIAL MURDERER ON LOOSE. Jesus, it was going to be a mess.

The camera crew, complete with microphone-bearing suit, watched me as I walked towards the yellow police tape. When I clipped the official plastic card on my collar, the news crew moved like one animal. The uniform at the police tape held it for me, his eyes on the descending press. I didn't look back. Never look back when the press are gaining on you. They catch you if you do.

The blond in the suit yelled out, "Ms. Blake, Ms. Blake, can you give us a statement?"

Always nice to be recognized, I guess. But I pretended not to hear. I kept walking, head determinedly down.

A crime scene is a crime scene is a crime scene. Except for the unique nightmarish qualities of each one. I was standing in a bedroom of a very nice one-story ranch. There was a white ceiling fan that turned slowly. It made a faint whirring creak, as if it wasn't screwed in tight on one side.

Better to concentrate on the small things. The way the east light fell through the slanting blinds, painting the room in zebra-stripe shadows. Better not to look at what was left on the bed. Didn't want to look. Didn't want to see.

Had to see. Had to look. Might find a clue. Sure, and pigs could fucking fly. But still, maybe, maybe there would be a clue. Maybe. Hope is a lying bitch.

There are roughly two gallons of blood in the human body. As much blood as they put on television and the movies, it's never enough. Try dumping out two full gallons of milk on your bedroom floor. See what a mess it makes, now multiply that by . . . something. There was too much blood for just one person. The carpet squeaked underfoot, and blood came up in little splatters like mud after a rain. My white Nikes were spotted with scarlet before I was halfway to the bed.

Lesson learned: wear black Nikes to murder scenes.

The smell was thick in the room. I was glad for the ceiling fan. The room smelled like a mixture of slaughterhouse and outhouse. Shit and blood. The smell of fresh death, more often than not.

Sheets covered not just the bed, but a lot of the floor around the bed. It looked like giant paper towels thrown over the world's biggest Kool-Aid spill. There had to be pieces all over, under the sheets. The lumps were so small, too small to be a body. There wasn't a single scarlet-soaked bump that was big enough for a human body.

"Please don't make me look," I whispered to the empty room.

"Did you say something?"

I jumped and found Dolph standing just behind me. "Jesus, Dolph, you scared me."

"Wait until you see what's under the sheets. Then you can be scared."

I didn't want to see what was under the army of blood-soaked sheets. Surely, I'd seen enough for one week. My quota of gore had to have been exceeded, night before last.

Yeah, I was over my quota.

Dolph stood in the doorway waiting. There were tiny pinched lines by his eyes that I had never noticed. He was pale and needed a shave.

We all needed something. But first I had to look under the sheets. If Dolph could do it, I could do it. Ri-ight.

Dolph stuck his head out in the hallway. "We need some help in here lifting the sheets. After Blake sees the remains we can go home." I think he added that last because no one had moved to help. He wasn't going to get any volunteers. "Zerbrowski, Perry, Merlioni, get your butts in here."

The bags under Zerbrowski's eyes looked like bruises. "Hiya, Blake."

"Hi, Zerbrowski, you look like shit."

He laughed. "And you still look fresh and lovely as a spring morning." He grinned at me.

"Yeah, right," I said.

Detective Perry said, "Ms. Blake, good to see you again."

I had to smile. Perry was the only cop I knew who would be gracious even over the bloody remains. "Nice to see you, too, Detective Perry."

"Can we get on with this," Merlioni said, "or are the two of you planning to elope?" Merlioni was tall, though not as tall as Dolph. But then who was? He had grey curling hair cut short and buzzed on the sides and over his ears. He wore a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a tie at half-mast. His gun stuck out on his left hip like a lumpy wallet.

"You take the first sheet then, Merlioni, if you're in such a damn hurry," Dolph said.

Merlioni sighed. "Yeah, yeah." He stepped to the sheet on the floor. He knelt. "You ready for this, girlie?"

"Better girlie than dago," I said.

He smiled.

"Do it."

"Showtime," Merlioni said. He raised the sheet and it stuck in a wet swatch that pulled up one wet inch at a time.

"Zerbrowski, help him raise the damn thing," Dolph said.

Zerbrowski didn't argue. He must have been tired. The two men lifted the sheet in one wet motion. The morning sunlight streamed through the red sheet and painted the rug even redder than it was, or maybe it didn't make any difference. Blood dripped from the edges of the sheet where the men held it. Wet, heavy drops, like a sink that needed fixing. I'd never seen a sheet saturated with blood before. A morning of firsts.

I stared at the rug and couldn't make sense of it. It was just a pile of lumps, small lumps. I knelt beside them. Blood soaked through the knee of my jeans, it was cold. Better than warm, I guess.

The biggest lump was wet and smooth, about five inches long. It was pink and healthy-looking. It was a scrap of upper intestine. A smaller lump lay just beside it. I stared at the lump but the longer I stared the less it looked like anything. It could have been a hunk of meat from any animal. Hell, the intestine didn't have to be human. But it was, or I wouldn't be here.

I poked the smaller glob with one gloved finger. I had remembered my surgical gloves this time. Goody for me. The glob was wet and heavy and solid. I swallowed hard, but I was no closer to knowing what it was. The two scraps were like morsels dropped from a cat's mouth. Crumbs from the table. Jesus.

I stood. "Next." My voice sounded steady, ordinary. Amazing.

It took all four men lifting from different corners to peel the sheet back from the bed. Merlioni cursed and dropped his corner, "Dammit!"

Blood had run down his arm onto the white shirt. "Did um's get his shirt messy?" Zerbrowski asked.

"Fuck yes. This place is a mess."

"I guess the lady of the house didn't have time to clean up before you came, Merlioni," I said. My eyes flicked down to the bed and the remains of the lady of the house. But I looked back up at Merlioni instead. "Or can't the dago cop take it?"

"I can take anything you can dish out, little lady," he said.

I frowned and shook my head. "Betcha can't."

"I'll take some of that action," Zerbrowski said.

Dolph didn't stop us, tell us this was a crime scene, not a betting parlor. He knew we needed it to stay sane. I could not stare down at the remains and not make jokes. I couldn't. I'd go crazy. Cops have the weirdest sense of humor, because they have to.

"How much you bet?" Merlioni said.

"A dinner for two at Tony's," I said.

Zerbrowski whistled. "Steep, very steep."

"I can afford to foot the bill. Is it a deal?"

Merlioni nodded. "My wife and I haven't been out in ages." He offered his blood-soaked hand. I took it. The cool blood clung to the outside of my surgical gloves. It felt wet, like it had soaked through to the skin, but it hadn't. It was a sensory illusion. I knew that when I took off the gloves my hands would be powder dry. It was still unnerving.

"How we prove who's toughest?" Merlioni asked.

"This scene, here and now," I said.

"Deal."

I turned my attention back to the carnage with renewed determination. I would win the bet. I wouldn't let Merlioni have the satisfaction. It gave me something to concentrate on rather than the mess on the bed.

The left half of a rib cage lay on the bed. A naked breast was still attached to it. The lady of the house? Everything was brilliant scarlet red, like someone had poured buckets of red paint on the bed. It was hard to pick out the pieces. There a left arm, small, female.

I picked up the fingers and they were limp, no rigor mortis. There was a wedding band set on the third finger. I moved the fingers back and forth. "No rigor mortis. What do you think, Merlioni?"

He squinted down at the arm. He couldn't let me outdo him so he fiddled with the hand, turning it at the wrist. "Could be rigor came and went. You know the first rigor doesn't last."

"You really think nearly two days have passed?" I shook my head. "The blood's too fresh for that. Rigor hasn't set in. The crime isn't eight hours old yet."

He nodded. "Not bad, Blake. But what do you make of this?" He poked the rib cage enough to make the breast jiggle.

I swallowed hard. I would win this bet. "I don't know. Let's see. Help me roll it over." I stared into his face while I asked. Did he pale just a bit? Maybe.

"Sure."

The three others were standing at the side of the room, watching the show. Let them. It was a lot more diverting than thinking of this as work.

Merlioni and I moved the rib cage over on its side. I made sure to give him the fleshy parts, so he ended up groping the dead body. Was breast tissue breast tissue? Did it matter that it was bloody and cold? Merlioni looked just a little green. I guess it mattered.

The insides of the rib cage were snatched clean like Mr. Reynolds's rib cage. Clean and bloody smooth. We let the rib cage fall back on the bed. It splattered blood in a faint spray onto us. His white shirt showed it worse than my blue polo shirt did. Point for me.

He grimaced and brushed at the blood specks. He smeared blood from his gloves down the shirt. Merlioni closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Are you alright, Merlioni?" I asked. "I wouldn't want you to continue if it's upsetting you."

He glared at me, then smiled. A most unpleasant smile. "You ain't seen it all, girlie. I have."

"But have you touched it all?"

A trickle of sweat slid down his face. "You won't want to touch it all."

I shrugged. "We'll see." There was a leg on the bed, from the hair and the one remaining tennis shoe it looked male. The round, wet mound of the ball socket gleamed out at us. The zombie had just torn the leg off, tearing flesh without tearing bone.

"That must have hurt like a son of a bitch," I said.

"You think he was alive when the leg was pulled off?"

I nodded. "Yeah." I wasn't a hundred percent sure. There was too much blood to tell who had died when, but Merlioni looked a little paler.

The rest of the pieces were just bloody entrails, globs of flesh, bits of bone. Merlioni picked up a handful of entrails. "Catch."

"Jesus, Merlioni, that isn't funny." My stomach was one tight knot.

"No, but the look on your face is," he said.

I glared at him and said, "Throw it or don't, Merlioni, no teasing."

He blinked at me for a minute, then nodded. He tossed the string of entrails. They were awkward to throw but I managed to catch them. They were wet, heavy, flaccid, squeeshy, and altogether disgusting, like touching raw calf's liver but more so.

Dolph made an exasperated sound. "While you two are playing gross out, can you tell me something useful?"

I dropped the flesh back on the bed. "Sure. The zombie came in through the sliding glass door like last time. It chased the man or woman back in here and got them both." I stopped talking. I just froze.

Merlioni was holding up a baby blanket. Some trick had left a corner of it clean. It was edged in satiny pink with tiny balloons and clowns all over it. Blood dripped heavily from the other end of it.

I stared at the tiny balloons and clowns while they danced in useless circles. "You bastard," I whispered.

"Are you referring to me?" Merlioni asked.

I shook my head. I didn't want to touch the blanket. But I reached out for it. Merlioni made sure that the bloody edge slapped my bare arm. "Dago bastard," I said.

"You referring to me, bitch?"

I nodded and tried to smile but didn't really manage it. We had to keep pretending that this was alright. That this was doable. It was obscene. If the bet hadn't held me I'd have run screaming from the room.

I stared at the blanket. "How old?"

"Family portrait out front, I'd guess three, four months."

I was finally on the other side of the bed. There was another sheet-draped spot. It was just as bloody, just as small. There was nothing whole under the sheet. I wanted to call the bet off. If they wouldn't make me look I'd take them all to Tony's. Just don't make me lift that last sheet. Please, please.

But I had to look, bet or no bet, I had to see what there was to see. Might as well see it and win, as run and lose.

I handed the blanket back to Merlioni. He took it and laid it back on the bed, up high so the clean corner would stay clean.

I knelt on one side of the sheet. He knelt on the other. Our eyes met. It was a challenge then, to the gruesome end. We peeled back the sheet.

There were only two things under the sheet. Only two. My stomach contracted so hard I had to swallow vomit. I coughed and almost lost it there, but I held on. I held on.

I'd thought the blood-soaked form was the baby, but it wasn't. It was a doll. So blood-soaked I couldn't tell what color its hair had been, but it was just a doll. A doll too old for a four-month-old baby.

A tiny hand lay on the carpet, covered in gore like everything else, but it was a hand. A tiny hand. The hand of a child, not a baby. I spread my hand just above it to size it. Three, maybe four. About the same age as Benjamin Reynolds. Was that coincidence? Had to be. Zombies weren't that choosy.

"I'm breast-feeding the baby, maybe, when I hear a loud noise. Husband goes to check. Noise wakes the little girl, she comes out of her room to see what's the matter. Husband sees the monster, grabs the child, runs for the bedroom. The zombie takes them here. Kills them all, here." My voice sounded distant, clinical. Bully for me.

I tried to wipe some of the blood off the tiny hand. She was wearing a ring like Mommy. One of those plastic rings you get out of bubble gum machines.

"Did you see the ring, Merlioni?" I asked. I lifted the hand from the carpet and said, "Catch."

"Jesus!" He was on his feet and moving before I could do anything else. Merlioni walked very fast out the door. I wouldn't really have thrown the hand. I wouldn't.

I cradled the tiny hand in my hands. It felt heavy, as if the fingers should curl round my hand. Should ask me to take it for a walk. I dropped the hand on the carpet. It landed with a wet splat.

The room was very hot and spinning ever so slightly. I blinked and stared at Zerbrowski. "Did I win the bet?"

He nodded. "Anita Blake, tough chick. One night of delectable feasting at Tony's on Merlioni's tab. I hear they make great spaghetti."

The mention of food was too much. "Bathroom, where?"

"Down the hall, third door on the left," Dolph said.

I ran for the bathroom. Merlioni was just coming out. I didn't have time to savor my victory. I was too busy tossing my cookies.

Chapter 28

I knelt with my forehead against the cool linoleum of the bathtub. I was feeling better. Lucky I hadn't taken time to eat breakfast.

There was a tap on the door.

"What?" I said.

"It's Dolph. Can I come in?"

I thought about that for a minute. "Sure."

Dolph came in with a washcloth in his hand. Linen closet, I guessed. He stared at me for a minute or two and shook his head. He rinsed the washrag in the sink and handed it to me. "You know what to do with it."

I did. The rag was cold and felt wonderful on my face and neck. "Did you give Merlioni one, too?" I asked.

"Yeah, he's in the kitchen. You're both assholes, but it was entertaining."

I managed a weak smile.

"Now that you're through grandstanding, any useful observations?" He sat on the closed lid of the stool.

I stayed on the floor. "Did anybody hear anything, this time?"

"Neighbor heard something around dawn, but he went on to work. Said, he didn't want to get involved in a domestic dispute."

I stared up at Dolph. "Had he heard fighting from this house before?"

Dolph shook his head.

"God, if he had just called the police," I said.

"You think it would have made a difference?" Dolph asked.

I thought about that for a minute. "Maybe not to this family, but we might have trapped the zombie."

"Spilled milk," Dolph said.

"Maybe not. The scene is still very fresh. The zombie killed them, then took the time to eat four people. That isn't quick. At dawn the thing was still killing them."

"Your point."

"Seal the area."

"Explain."

"The zombie has to be nearby, within walking distance. It's hiding, waiting for nightfall."

"I thought zombies could go out in daylight," Dolph said.

"They can, but they don't like it. A zombie won't go out in the day unless ordered to."

"So the nearest cemetery," he said.

"Not necessarily. Zombies aren't like vamps or ghouls. It doesn't need to be coffins or even graves. The zombie will just want to get out of the light."

"So where do we look?"

"Sheds, garages, any place that will shield it."

"So he could be in some kid's tree house," Dolph said.

I smiled. Nice to know I still could. "I doubt the zombie would climb if given a choice. Notice that all the houses are one-stories."

"Basements," he said.

"But no one runs down to the basement," I said.

"Would it have helped?"

I shrugged. "Zombies aren't great at climbing, as a rule. This one is faster and more alert but . . . At best the basement might have delayed it. If there were windows, they might have gotten the children out." I rubbed the cloth on the back of my neck. "The zombie picks one-story houses with sliding glass doors. It might rest near one."

"The medical examiner says the corpse is tall, six feet, six-two. Male, white. Immensely strong."

"We knew the last, and the rest doesn't really help."

"You got a better idea?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "have all the officers about the right height walk the neighborhood for an hour. Then block off that much of the area."

"And search all the sheds and garages," Dolph said.

"And basements, crawl spaces, old refrigerators," I said.

"If we find it?"

"Fry it. Get an exterminator team out here."

"Will the zombie attack during the day?" Dolph asked.

"If disturbed enough, yes. This one's awfully aggressive."

"No joke," he said. "We'd need a dozen exterminator teams or more. The city'll never go for that. Besides, we could walk a pretty damn wide circle. We might search and miss it completely."

"It'll move at dark. If you're ready, you'll find it then."

"Okay. You sound like you're not going to help search."

"I'll be back to help, but John Burke returned my call."

"You taking him to the morgue?"

"Yeah, in time to try to use him against Dominga Salvador. What timing," I said.

"Good. You need anything from me?"

"Just access to the morgue for both of us," I said.

"Sure thing. You think you'll really learn anything from Burke?"

"Don't know till I try," I said.

He smiled. "Give it the old college try, eh?"

"Win one for the Gipper," I said.

"You go visit the morgue and deal with voodoo John. We'll turn this fucking neighborhood upside down."

"Nice to know we've both got our days planned," I said.

"Don't forget this afternoon we check out Salvador's house."

I nodded. "Yeah, and tonight we hunt zombies."

"We're going to end this shit tonight," he said.

"I hope so."

He looked at me, eyes narrowed. "You got a problem with our plans?"

"Just that no plan is perfect."

He was quiet a moment, then stood. "Wish this one was."

"Me, too."

Chapter 29

The St. Louis County morgue was a large building. It needs to be. Every death not attended by a physician comes to the morgue. Not to mention every murder. In St. Louis that made for some very heavy traffic.

I use to come to the morgue fairly regularly. To stake suspected vampire victims so they wouldn't rise and feast on the morgue attendants. With the new vamp laws, that's murder. You have to wait for the puppies to rise, unless they've left a will strictly forbidding coming back as a vampire. My will says to put me out of my misery if they think I'm coming back with fangs. Hell, my will asks for cremation. I don't want to come back as a zombie either, thank you very much.

John Burke was as I remembered him. Tall, dark, handsome, vaguely villainous. It was the little goatee that did it. No one wears goatees outside of horror movies. You know, the ones with strange cults that worship horned images.

He looked a little faded around the eyes and mouth. Grief will do that to you even if your skin tone is dark. His lips were set in a thin line as we walked into the morgue. He held his shoulders as if something hurt.

"How's it going at your sister-in-law's?" I asked.

"Bleak, very bleak."

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. So I let it go. If he didn't want to talk about it, that was his privilege.

We were walking down a wide empty corridor. Wide enough for three gurneys to wheel abreast. The guard station looked like a WWII bunker, complete with machine guns, in case the dead should rise all at once and make for freedom. It had never happened here in St. Louis, but it had happened as close as Kansas City.

A machine gun will take the starch out of any walking dead. You're only in trouble if there are a lot of them. If there is a crowd, you're pretty much cooked.

I flashed my ID at the guard. "Hi, Fred, long time no see."

"I wish they let you come down here like before. We've had three get up this week and go home. Can you believe that?"

"Vampires?"

"What else? There's going to be more of them than of us someday."

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. He was probably right. "We're here to see the personal effects of Peter Burke. Sergeant Rudolph Storr was supposed to clear it."

Fred checked his little book. "Yeah, you're authorized. Take the right corridor, third door on the left. Dr. Saville is waiting for you."

I raised an eyebrow at that. It wasn't often that the chief medical examiner did errands for the police or anybody else. I just nodded as if I had expected royal treatment.

"Thanks, Fred, see you on the way out."

"More and more people do," he said. He didn't sound happy about it.

My Nikes made no sound in the perpetual quiet. John Burke wasn't making any noise either. I hadn't pegged him as a tennis shoe man. I glanced down, and I was right. Soft-soled brown tie-ups, not tennis shoes. But he still moved beside me like a quiet shadow.

The rest of his outfit sort of matched the shoes. A dressy brown sport jacket so dark brown it was almost black, over a pale yellow shirt, brown dress slacks. He only needed a tie, and he could have gone to corporate America. Did he always dress up, or was this just what he had brought for his brother's funeral? No, the suit at the funeral had been perfectly black.

The morgue was always quiet, but on a Saturday morning it was deathly still. Did the ambulances circle like planes until a decent hour on the weekend? I knew the murder count went up on the weekend, yet Saturday and Sunday morning were always quiet. Go figure.

I counted doors on the left-hand side. Knocked on the third door. A faint "Come in," and I opened the door.

Dr. Marian Saville is a small woman with short dark hair bobbed just below her ears, an olive complexion, deeply brown eyes, and fine high cheekbones. She is French and Greek and looks it. Exotic without being intimidating. It always surprised me that Dr. Saville wasn't married. It wasn't for lack of being pretty.

Her only fault was that she smoked, and the smell clung to her like nasty perfume.

She came forward with a smile and an offered hand. "Anita, good to see you again."

I shook her hand, and smiled. "You, too, Dr. Saville."

"Marian, please."

I shrugged. "Marian, are those the personal effects?"

We were in a small examining room. On a lovely stainless steel table were several plastic bags.

"Yes."

I stared at her, wondering what she wanted. The chief medical examiner didn't do errands. Something else was up, but what? I didn't know her well enough to be blunt, and I didn't want to be barred from the morgue, so I couldn't be rude. Problems, problems.

"This is John Burke, the deceased's brother," I said.

Dr. Saville's eyebrows raised at that. "My condolences, Mr. Burke."

"Thank you." John shook the hand she offered him, but his eyes were all for the plastic bags. There was no room today for attractive doctors or pleasantries. He was

going to see his brother's last effects. He was looking for clues to help the police catch his brother's killer. He had taken the notion very seriously.

If he wasn't involved with Dominga Salvador, I would owe him a big apology. But how was I to get him to talk with Dr. Marian hovering around? How was I supposed to ask for privacy? It was her morgue, sort of.

"I have to be here to make sure no evidence is tampered with," she said. "We've had a few very determined reporters lately."

"But I'm not a reporter."

She shrugged. "You're not an official person, Anita. New rules from on high that no nonofficial person is to be allowed to look at murder evidence without someone to watch over them."

"I appreciate it being you, Marian."

She smiled. "I was here anyway. I figured you'd resent my looking over your shoulder less than anyone else."

She was right. What did they think I was going to do, steal a body? If I wanted to, I could empty the damn place and get every corpse to play follow the leader.

Perhaps that was why I needed watching. Perhaps.

"I don't mean to be rude," John said, "but could we get on with this?"

I glanced up at his handsome face. The skin was tight around the mouth and eyes as if it had thinned. Guilt speared me in the side. "Sure, John, we're being thoughtless."

"Your forgiveness, Mr. Burke," Marian said. She handed us both little plastic gloves. She and I slipped into them like pros, but John wasn't used to putting on examining gloves. There is a trick to it—practice. By the time I finished helping him on with his gloves, he was grinning. His whole face changed when he smiled. Brilliant and handsome and not the least villainous.

Dr. Saville popped the seal on the first bag. It was clothing.

"No," John said, "I don't know his clothing. It may be his, and I wouldn't know. Peter and I had . . . hadn't seen each other in two years." The guilt in those last words made me wince.

"Fine, we'll go on to the smaller items," Marian said, and smiled as she said it. Nice and cheery, practicing her bedside manner. She so seldom got to practice.

She opened a much smaller bag and spilled the contents gently on the shiny silver surface. A comb, a dime, two pennies, a movie ticket stub, and a voodoo charm. A gris-gris.

It was woven of black and red thread with human teeth worked into the beading. More bones dangled all the way around it. "Are those human finger bones?" I asked.

"Yes," John said, his voice very still. He looked strange as he stood there, as if some new horror were dawning behind his eyes.

It was an evil piece of work, but I didn't understand the strength of his reaction to it.

I leaned over it, poking it with one finger. There was some dried skin woven in the center of it all. And it wasn't just black thread, it was black hair.

"Human hair, teeth, bones, skin," I said softly.

"Yes," John repeated.

"You're more into voodoo than I am," I said. "What does it mean?"

"Someone died to make this charm."

"Are you sure?"

He glared down at me with withering contempt. "Don't you think if it could be anything else I wouldn't say it? Do you think I enjoy learning my brother took part in human sacrifice?"

"Did Peter have to be there? He couldn't have just bought it afterwards?"

"NO!" It was almost a yell. He turned away from us, pacing to the wall. His breathing was loud and ragged.

I gave him a few moments to collect himself, then asked what had to be asked.

"What does the gris-gris do?"

He turned a calm enough face to us, but the strain showed around his eyes. "It enables a less powerful necromancer to raise older dead, to borrow the power of some much greater necromancer."

"How borrow?"

He shrugged. "That charm holds some of the power of the most powerful among us. Peter paid dearly for it; so he could raise more and older dead. Peter, God, how could you?"

"How powerful would you need to be to share your power like this?"

"Very powerful," he said.

"Is there any way to trace it back to the person who made it?"

"You don't understand, Anita. That thing is a piece of someone's power. It is one substance to what soul they have left. It must have been a great need or great greed to do it. Peter could never have afforded it. Never."

"Can it be traced back?"

"Yes, just get it in the room with the person who truly owns it. The thing will crawl back to him. It's a piece of his soul gone missing."

"Would that be proof in court?"

"If you could make the jury understand it, yes, I guess so." He stepped towards me.

"You know who did this?"

"Maybe. "

"Who, tell me who?"

"I'll do better than that. I'll arrange for you to come on a search of their house."

A grim smile touched his lips. "I'm beginning to like you a great deal, Anita Blake."

"Compliments later."

"What's this mean?" Marian asked. She had turned the charm completely over.

There, shining among the hair and bone, was a small charm, like from a charm bracelet. It was in the shape of a musical symbol—a treble clef.

What had Evans said when he touched the grave fragments; they slit her throat, she had a charm bracelet with a musical note on it and little hearts. I stared at the charm and felt the world shift. Everything fell together in one motion. Dominga Salvador hadn't raised the killer zombie. She had helped Peter Burke raise it. But I had to be sure. We only had a few hours until we'd be back at Dominga's door trying to prove a case.

"Are there any women that came in around the same time as Peter Burke?"

"I'm sure there are," Marian said with a smile.

"Women with their throats slit," I said.

She stared at me for a heartbeat. "I'll check the computer."

"Can we take the charm with us?"

"Why?"

"Because if I'm right, she had a charm bracelet with a bow and arrow and little hearts on it, and this came from the bracelet." I held the gold charm up to the light. It sparkled merrily as if it didn't know its owner was dead.

Chapter 30

Death turns you grey before any other color. Oh, a body that loses a lot of blood will look white or bluish. But once a body starts to decay, not rot, not yet, it looks greyish.

The woman looked grey. Her neck wound had been cleaned and searched. The wound looked puckered like a second giant mouth below her chin.

Dr. Saville pulled her head back casually. "The cut was very deep. It severed the muscles in the neck and the carotid artery. Death was fairly quick."

"Professionally done," I said.

"Well, yes, whoever cut her throat knew what they were doing. There are a dozen different ways to injure the neck that won't kill or won't kill quickly."

John Burke said, "Are you saying that my brother had practice?"

"I don't know," I said. "Do you have her personal effects?"

"Right here." Marian unfastened a much smaller bag and spilled it out on an empty table. The golden charm bracelet sparkled under the fluorescent lights.

I picked the bracelet up in my still gloved hand. A tiny strung bow complete with arrow, a different musical note, two entwined hearts. Everything Evans had said.

"How did you know about the charm and the dead woman?" John Burke asked.

"I took some evidence to a clairvoyant. He saw the woman's death and the bracelet."

"What's that got to do with Peter?"

"I believe a voodoo priestess had Peter raise a zombie. It got away from him. It's been killing people. To hide what she's done, she killed Peter."

"Who did it?"

"I have no proof unless the gris-gris will be proof enough."

"A vision and a gris-gris." John shook his head. "Hard sell to a jury."

"I know. That's why we need more proof."

Dr. Saville just watched us talk, like an eager spectator.

"A name, Anita, give me a name."

"Only if you swear not to go after her until the law has its chance. Only if the law fails, promise me."

"I give you my word."

I studied his face for a minute. The dark eyes stared back, clear and certain. Bet he could lie with a clear conscience. "I don't trust just anybody's word." I stared at him a moment longer. He never flinched. I guess my hard-as-nails look has faded a little. Or maybe he meant to keep his word. It happens sometimes.

"Alright, I'll take your word. Don't make me regret it."

"I won't," he said. "Now give me the name."

I turned to Dr. Saville. "Excuse us, Marian. The less you know about all this, the greater your chances of never waking to a zombie crawling through your window." An exaggeration, sort of, but it made my point.

She looked like she wanted to protest but finally nodded. "Very well, but I would dearly love to hear the complete story someday, if it's safe."

"If I can tell it, it's yours," I said.

She nodded again, shut the drawer the Jane Doe lay on, and left. "Yell when you're finished. I've got work to do," she said and the door closed behind her.

She left us with the evidence still clutched in our hands. Guess she trusted me. Or us?

"Dominga Salvador," I said.

He drew a sharp breath. "I know that name. She is a frightening force if all the stories are true."

"They're true," I said.

"You've met her?"

"I've had the misfortune."

There was a look on his face that I didn't much like. "You swore no revenge."

"The police will not get her. She is too crafty for that," he said.

"We can get her legally. I believe that."

"You aren't sure," he said

What could I say? He was right. "I'm almost sure."

"Almost is not good enough for killing my brother."

"That zombie has killed a lot more people than just your brother. I want her, too. But we're going to get her legally, through the court system."

"There are other ways to get her," he said.

"If the law fails us, feel free to use voodoo. Just don't tell me about it."

He looked amused, puzzled. "No outrage about me using black magic?"

"The woman tried to kill me once. I don't think she'll give up."

"You survived an attack by the Señora?" he asked. He looked amazed.

I didn't like him looking amazed. "I can take care of myself, Mr. Burke."

"I don't doubt that, Ms. Blake." He smiled. "I've bruised your ego. You don't like me being so surprised, do you?"

"Keep your observations to yourself, okay?"

"If you have survived a head-on confrontation with what Dominga Salvador would send to you, then I should have believed some of the stories I heard of you. The Executioner, the animator who can raise anything no matter how old."

"I don't know about that last, but I'm just trying to stay alive, that's all."

"If Dominga Salvador wants you dead that won't be easy."

"Damn near impossible," I said.

"So let us get her first," he said.

"Legally," I said.

"Anita, you are being naive."

"The offer to come on a raid of her house still stands."

"You're sure you can arrange that?"

"I think so."

His eyes had a sort of dark light to them, a sparkling blackness. He smiled, tight-lipped, and very unpleasant, as if he were contemplating tortures for one Dominga Salvador. The private vision seemed to fill him with pleasure.

The skin between my shoulders crept with that look. I hoped John never turned those dark eyes on me. Something told me he would make a bad enemy. Almost as bad as Dominga Salvador. Almost as bad, but not quite.

Chapter 31

Dominga Salvador sat in her living room smiling. The little girl who had been riding her tricycle on my last trip here was sitting in her grandma's lap. The child was as relaxed and languorous as a kitten. Two older boys sat at Dominga's feet. She was the picture of maternal bliss. I wanted to throw up.

Of course, just because she was the most dangerous voodoo priestess I'd ever met didn't mean she wasn't a grandma, too. People are seldom just one thing. Hitler liked dogs.

"You are more than welcome to search, Sergeant. My house is your house," she said in a candy-coated voice that had already offered us lemonade, or perhaps iced tea.

John Burke and I were standing to one side, letting the police do their job. Dominga was making them feel silly for their suspicions. Just a nice old lady. Right.

Antonio and Enzo were also standing to one side. They didn't quite fit this picture of grandmotherly bliss, but evidently she wanted witnesses. Or maybe a shootout wasn't out of the question.

"Mrs. Salvador, do you understand the possible implications of this search?" Dolph said.

"There are no implications because I have nothing to hide." She smiled sweetly. Damn her.

"Anita, Mr. Burke," Dolph said.

We came forward like props in a magic show. Which wasn't far off. A tall police officer had the video camera ready to go.

"I believe you know Ms. Blake," Dolph said.

"I have had the pleasure," Dominga said.

Butter wouldn't have melted in her lying mouth.

"This is John Burke."

Her eyes widened just a little. The first slip in her perfect camouflage. Had she heard of John Burke? Did the name worry her? I hoped so.

"So glad to meet you at last, Mr. John Burke," she said finally.

"Always good to meet another practitioner of the art," he said.

She bowed her head slightly in acknowledgment. At least she wasn't trying to pretend complete innocence. She admitted to being a voodoo priestess. Progress..

It was obscene for the godmother of voodoo to be playing the innocent.

"Do it, Anita," Dolph said. No preliminaries, no sense of theater, just do it. That was Dolph for you.

I took a plastic bag out of my pocket. Dominga looked puzzled. I pulled out the gris-gris. Her face became very still, like a mask. A funny little smile curled her lips. "What is that?"

"Come now, Señora," John said, "do not play the fool. You know very well what it is."

"I know that it is a charm of some kind, of course. But do the police now threaten old women with voodoo?"

"Whatever works," I said.

"Anita," Dolph said.

"Sorry." I glanced at John, and he nodded. I sat the gris-gris on the carpet about six feet from Dominga Salvador. I had had to take John's word on a lot of this. I had checked some of it over the phone with Manny. If this worked and if we could get it admitted into court, and if we could explain it to the jury, then we might have a case. How many ifs was that?

The gris-gris just sat there for a moment, then the finger bones rippled as if an invisible finger had ruffled them.

Dominga lifted her granddaughter from her lap and shooed the boys over to Enzo. She sat alone on the couch and waited. The strange little smile was still on her face, but it looked sickly now.

The charm began to ooze towards her like a slug, pushing and struggling with muscles it did not have. The hairs on my arms stood to attention.

"You recording this, Bobby?" Dolph asked.

The cop with the video camera said, "I'm getting it. I don't fucking believe it, but I'm getting it."

"Please, do not use such words in front of the children," Dominga said.

The cop said, "Sorry, ma'am."

"You are forgiven." She was still trying to play the perfect hostess while that thing crawled towards her feet. She had nerve. I'd give her that.

Antonio didn't. He broke. He strode forward as if he meant to pluck the thing from the rug.

"Don't touch it," Dolph said.

"You are frightening my grandmother with your tricks," he said.

"Don't touch it," Dolph said again. This time he stood. His bulk seemed to fill the room. Antonio looked suddenly small and frail beside him.

"Please, you are frightening her." But it was his face that was pale and covered with a sheen of sweat. What was ol' Tony in such a fret about? It wasn't his ass going to jail.

"Stand over there," Dolph said, "now, or do we have to cuff you?"

Antonio shook his head. "No, I . . . I will go back." He did, but he glanced at Dominga as he moved. A quick, fearful glance. When she met his eyes, there was nothing but rage in them. Her black eyes glittered with rage. Her face was suddenly contorted with it. What had happened to strip the act away? What was going on?

The gris-gris made its painful way to her. It fawned at her feet like a dog, rolling on the toes of her shoes in abandon like a cat who wants its belly rubbed.

She tried to ignore it, to pretend.

"Would you refuse your returned power?" John asked.

"I don't know what you mean." Her face was under control again. She looked puzzled. Gosh, she was good. "You are a powerful voodoo priest. You are doing this to trap me."

"If you don't want the charm, I will take it," he said. "I will add your magic to mine. I will be the most powerful practitioner in the States." For the first time, John's power flowed across my skin. It was a breath of magic that was frightening. I had begun to think of John as ordinary, or as ordinary as any of us get. My mistake.

She just shook her head.

John strode forward and knelt, reaching for the writhing gris-gris. His power moved with him like an invisible hand.

"No!" She grabbed it, cradling it in her hands.

John smiled up at her. "Do you acknowledge that you made this charm? If not, I can take it and use it as I see fit. It was found in my brother's effects. It's legally mine, correct, Sergeant Storr?"

"Correct," Dolph said.

"No, you cannot."

"I can and I will, unless you look into that camera and admit making it."

She snarled at him. "You will regret this."

"You will regret having killed my brother."

She stared at the video camera. "Very well, I made this charm, but I admit nothing else. I made the charm for your brother, but that is all."

"You performed human sacrifice to make this charm," John said.

She shook her head. "The charm is mine. I made it for your brother, that is all. You have the charm but nothing else."

"Señora, forgive me," Antonio said. He looked pale and shaken and very, very scared.

"Calenta," she said, "shut up!"

"Zerbrowski, take our friend here into the kitchen and take his statement," Dolph said.

Dominga stood at that. "You fool, you miserable fool. Tell them anything more, and I will rot the tongue out of your mouth."

"Get him out of here, Zerbrowski."

Zerbrowski led a nearly weeping Antonio from the room. I had a feeling that of Tony had been responsible for getting the charm back. He failed, and he was going to pay the consequences. The police were the least of his problems. If I were him, I'd make damn sure grandma was locked up tonight. I wouldn't want her near her voodoo paraphernalia. Ever.

"We're going to search now, Mrs. Salvador."

"Help yourself, Sergeant. You will find nothing else to help you."

She was very calm when she said it. "Even the stuff behind the doors?" I asked.

"They are gone, Anita. You will find nothing that is not legal and . . . wholesome." She made that last sound like a bad word.

Dolph glanced my way. I shrugged. She seemed awfully sure.

"Okay, boys, take the place apart." Uniforms and detectives moved like they had a purpose. I started to follow Dolph out. He stopped me.

"No, Anita, you and Burke stay up here."

"Why?"

"You're civilians."

A civilian, me? "Was I a civilian when I walked the cemetery for you?"

"If one of my people could have done it, I wouldn't have let you do that either."

"Let me?"

He frowned. "You know what I mean."

"No, I don't think I do."

"You may be a bad ass, you may even be as good as you think you are, but you aren't police. This is a job for cops. You stay in the living room with the civies just this once. When it's all clear, you can come down and identify the bogeymen for us."

"Don't do me any favors, Dolph."

"I didn't peg you for a pouter, Blake."

"I am not pouting," I said.

"Whining?" he said.

"Cut it out. You've made your point. I'll stay behind, but I don't have to like it."

"Most of the time you're ass deep in alligators. Enjoy being out of the line of fire for once, Anita." With that he led the way towards the basement.

I hadn't really wanted to go down into the darkness again. I certainly didn't want to see the creature that had chased Manny and I up the stairs. And yet . . . I felt left out. Dolph was right. I was pouting. Great.

John Burke and I sat on the couch. Dominga sat in the recliner where she had been since we hit the door. The children had been shoed out to play, with Enzo to watch them.

He looked relieved. I almost volunteered to go with them. Anything was better than just sitting here straining to hear the first screams.

If the monster, and that was the only word that matched the noises, was down there, there would be screaming. The police were great with bad guys, but monsters were new to them. It had been simpler, in a way, when all this shit was taken care of by a few experts. A few lone people fighting the good fight. Staking vampires. Turning zombies. Burning witches. Though there is some debate whether I might have ended up on the receiving end of some fire a few years back. Say, the 1950s.

What I did was undeniably magic. Before we got all the bogeymen out in the open, supernatural was supernatural. Destroy it before it destroys you. Simpler times. But now the police were expected to deal with zombies, vampires, the occasional demon. Police were really bad with demons. But then who isn't?

Dominga sat in her chair and stared at me. The two uniforms left in the living room stood like all police stand, blank faced, bored, but let anyone move and the cops saw it. The boredom was just a mask. Cops always saw everything. Occupational hazard.

Dominga wasn't looking at the police. She wasn't even paying attention to John Burke, who was much closer to her equal. She was staring at little old me.

I met her black gaze and said, "You got a problem?"

The cop's eyes flicked to us. John shifted on the couch. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"She's staring at me."

"I will do a great deal more than stare at you, *chica*." Her voice crawled low. The hairs at the nape of my neck tried to crawl down my shirt.

"A threat." I smiled. "I don't think you're going to be hurting anybody anymore."

"You mean this." She held out the charm. It writhed in her hand as if thrilled that she had noticed it. She crushed it in her hand. It made futile movements as if pushing against her. Her hand covered it completely. She stared straight at me, as she brought her hand slowly to her chest.

The air was suddenly heavy, hard to breathe. Every hair on my body was creeping down my skin.

"Stop her!" John said. He stood.

The policeman nearest her hesitated for only an instant, but it was enough. When he pried her fingers open, they were empty.

"Sleight of hand, Dominga. I thought better of you than that."

John was pale. "It isn't a trick." His voice was shaky. He sat down heavily on the couch beside me. His dark face looked pale. His power seemed to have shriveled up. He looked tired.

"What is it? What did she do?" I asked.

"You have to bring back the charm, ma'am," the uniform said.

"I cannot," she said.

"John, what the hell did she do?"

"Something she shouldn't have been able to do."

I was beginning to know how Dolph must feel having to depend on me for information. It was like pulling fucking teeth. "What did she do?"

"She absorbed her power back into herself," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"She absorbed the gris-gris into her body. Didn't you feel it?"

I had felt something. The air was clearer now, but it was still heavy. My skin was tingling with the nearness of something. "I felt something, but I still don't understand."

"Without ceremony, without help from the loa, she absorbed it back into her soul. We won't find a trace of it. No evidence."

"So all we have is the tape?"

He nodded.

"If you knew she could do this, why didn't you speak up earlier? We wouldn't have let her hold the thing."

"I didn't know. It's impossible without ceremonial magic."

"But she did it."

"I know, Anita, I know." He sounded scared for the first time. Fear didn't sit well on his darkly handsome face. After the power I'd felt from him, the fear seemed even more out of place. But it was real nonetheless.

I shivered, like someone had walked on my grave. Dominga was staring at me.

"What are you staring at?"

"A dead woman," she said softly

I shook my head. "Talk is cheap, Señora. Threats don't mean squat."

John touched my arm. "Do not taunt her, Anita. If she can do that instantly, there's no telling what else she can do."

The cop had had enough. "She's not doing anything. If you so much as twitch wrong, lady, I'm going to shoot you."

"But I am just an old woman. Would you threaten me?"

"Don't talk either."

The other uniform said, "I knew a witch once who could bespell you with her voice."

Both uniforms had their hands near their guns. Funny how magic changes how people perceive you. They were fine when they thought she needed human sacrifice and ceremony. Let her do one instant trick, and she was suddenly very dangerous. I'd always known she was dangerous.

Dominga sat silently under the watchful eyes of the cops. I had been distracted by her little performance. There were still no screams from downstairs. Nothing. Silence.

Had it gotten them all? That quickly, without a shot fired. Naw. But still, my stomach was tight, sweat trickled down my spine. Are you alright, Dolph? I thought.

"Did you say something?" John asked.

I shook my head. "Just thinking really hard."

He nodded as if that made sense to him.

Dolph came into the living room. I couldn't tell anything by his face. Mr. Stoic.

"Well, what was it?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said.

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"She's cleaned the place out completely. We found the rooms you told me about. One door had been busted from inside, but the room's been scrubbed down and painted." He held up one big hand. It was stained white. "Hell, the paint's still wet."

"It can't all be gone. What about the cement-covered doors?"

"Looks like someone took a jackhammer to them. They're just freshly painted rooms, Anita. The place stinks of pine scented bleach and wet paint. No corpses, no zombies. Nothing."

I just stared at him. "You've got to be kidding."

He shook his head. "I'm not laughing."

I stood in front of Dominga. "Who warned you?"

She just stared up at me, smiling. I had a great urge to slap that smile off her face. Just to hit her once would feel good. I knew it would.

"Anita," Dolph said, "back off."

Maybe the anger showed on my face, or maybe it was the fact that my hands were balled into fists and I seemed to be shaking. Shaking with anger and the beginnings of something else. If she didn't go to jail, that meant she was free to try to kill me again tonight. And every night after that.

She smiled as if she could read my mind. "You have nothing, *chica*. You have gambled all on a hand with nothing in it."

She was right. "Stay away from me, Dominga."

"I will not come near you, *chica*, I will not need to."

"Your last little surprise didn't work out so well. I'm still here."

"I have done nothing. But I am sure there are worse things that could come to your door, *chica*."

I turned to Dolph. "Dammit, isn't there anything we can do?"

"We got the charm, but that's it."

Something must have showed on my face because he touched my arm. "What is it?"

"She did something to the charm. It's gone."

He took a deep breath and stalked away, then back. "Dammit to hell, how?"

I shrugged. "Let John explain. I still don't understand it." I hate admitting that I don't know something. It's always bothered me to admit ignorance. But hey, a girl can't be an expert on everything. I had worked hard to stay away from voodoo. Work hard and where does it get you? Staring into the black eyes of a voodoo priestess who's plotting your death. A most unpleasant death by the looks of it.

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. I went back to her. I stood and stared into her dark face and smiled. Her own smile faltered, which made my smile bigger.

"Someone tipped you off and you've been cleaning up this cesspit for two days." I leaned over her, putting my hands on the arms of the chair. It brought our faces close together.

"You had to break down your walls. You had to let out or destroy all your creations. Your inner sanctum, your hougun, is cleaned and whitewashed. All the verve gone. All the animal sacrifices gone. All that slow building of power, line by line, drop by bloody drop, you're going to have to start over, you bitch. You're going to have to rebuild it all."

The look in those black eyes made me shiver, and I didn't care. "You're getting old to rebuild that much. Did you have to destroy many of your toys? Dig up any graves?"

"Have your joke now, *chica*, but I will send what I have saved to you some dark night."

"Why wait? Do it now, in daylight. Face me or are you afraid?"

She laughed then, and it was a warm, friendly sound. It startled me so much I stood up straight, almost jumped back.

"Do you think I am foolish enough to attack you with the police all around? You must think me a fool."

"It was worth a try," I said.

"You should have joined with me in my zombie enterprises. We could have been rich together."

"The only thing we're likely to do together is kill each other," I said.

"So be it. Let it be war between us."

"It always was," I said.

She nodded and smiled some more.

Zerbrowski came out of the kitchen. He was grinning from ear to ear. Something good was up.

"The grandson just spilled the beans."

Everyone in the room stared at him. Dolph said, "Spilled what?"

"Human sacrifice. How he was supposed to get the gris-gris back from Peter Burke after he killed him, on his grandmother's orders, but some joggers came by and he panicked. He's so afraid of her"—he motioned to Dominga—"he wants her behind bars. He's terrified of what she'll do to him for forgetting the charm."

The charm that we didn't have anymore. But we had the video and now we had Antonio's confession. The day was looking up.

I turned back to Dominga Salvador. She looked tall and proud and terrifying. Her black eyes blazed with some inner light. Standing this close to her, the power crawled over my skin, but a good bonfire would take care of that. They'd fry her in the electric chair, then burn the body and scatter the ashes at a crossroad.

I said softly, "Gotcha."

She spit at me. It landed on my hand and burned like acid. "Shit!"

"Do that again and we'll shoot you, and save the taxpayers some money," Dolph said. He had his gun out.

I went in search of the bathroom to wash her spit off my hand. A blister had formed where it had hit. Second fucking degree burns from her spit. Dear God.

I was glad Antonio had broken. I was glad she was going to be locked away. I was glad she was going to die. Better her than me.

Chapter 32

Riverridge was a modern housing development. Which meant that there were three models to choose from. You could end up with four identical houses in a row, like cookies on a baking sheet. There was also no river within sight. No ridge either.

The house that was the center of the police search area was identical to its neighbor, except for color. The murder house, which is what the news was calling it, was grey with white shutters. The house that had been passed safely by was blue with white shutters. Neither's shutters worked. They were just for show. Modern architecture is full of perks that are just for show; balcony railings without a balcony, peaked roofs that make it look like you have an extra room that you don't have, porches so narrow that only Santa's elves could sit on them. It makes me nostalgic for Victorian architecture. It might have been overdone, but everything worked.

The entire housing project had been evacuated. Dolph had been forced to give a statement to the press. More's the pity. But you can't evacuate a housing development the size of a small town and keep it quiet. The cat was out of the bag. They were calling them the zombie massacres. Geez.

The sun was going down in a sea of scarlet and orange. It looked like someone had melted two giant crayons and smeared them across the sky. There wasn't a shed, garage, basement, tree house, playhouse, or anything else we could think of that had been left unsearched. Still, we had found nothing.

The newshounds were prowling restlessly at the edge of the search area. If we had evacuated hundreds of people and searched their premises without a warrant and found no zombie . . . we were going to be in deep fucking shit.

But it was here. I knew it was here. Alright, I was almost sure it was here.

John Burke was standing next to one of those giant trash cans. Dolph had surprised me by allowing John to come on the zombie hunt. As Dolph said, we needed all the help we could get.

"Where is it, Anita?" Dolph asked.

I wanted to say something brilliant. My God, Holmes, how did you know the zombie was hiding in the flower pot? But I couldn't lie. "I don't know, Dolph. I just don't know."

"If we don't find this thing . . ." He let the thought trail off, but I knew what he meant.

My job was secure if this fell apart. Dolph's was not. Shit. How could I help him? What were we missing? What?

I stared at the quiet street. It was eerily quiet. The windows were all dark. Only the streetlights pushed back the coming dark. Soft halos of light.

Every house had a mailbox on a post near the sidewalk that edged the curb. Some of the mailboxes were unbelievably cute. One had been shaped like a sitting cat. Its paw went up if there was mail in its tummy. The family name was Catt. It was too precious.

Every house had at least one large super duper trash can in front of it. Some of them were bigger than I was. Surely, Sunday couldn't be trash day. Or had today been trash day, and the police line had stopped it?

"Trash cans," I said aloud.

"What?" Dolph asked.

"Trash cans." I grabbed his arm, feeling almost lightheaded. "We've stared at those fucking trash cans all day. That's it."

John Burke stood quietly beside me, frowning.

"Are you feeling okay, Blake?" Zerbrowski came up behind us, smoking. The end of his cigarette looked like a bloated firefly.

"The cans are big enough for a large person to hide in."

"Wouldn't your arms and legs fall asleep?" Zerbrowski asked.

"Zombies don't have circulation, not like we do."

Dolph yelled, "Everybody check the trash cans. The zombie is in one of them. Move it!"

Everyone scattered like an anthill stirred with a stick, but we had a purpose now. I ended up with two uniformed officers. Their nameplates said "Ki" and "Roberts." Ki was Asian and male. Roberts was blond and female. A nicely mixed team.

We fell into a rhythm without discussing it. Officer Ki would move up and dump the trash can. Roberts and I would cover him with guns. We were all set to yell like hell if a zombie came tumbling out. It would probably be the right zombie. Life is seldom that cruel.

We'd yell and an exterminator team would come running. At least, they'd better come running. This zombie was entirely too fast, too destructive. It might be more resistant to gunfire. Better not to find out. Just french-fry the sucker and be done with it.

We were the only team working on the street. There was no sound but our footsteps, the rubber crunch of trash cans overturning, the rattle of cans and bottles as the trash spilled. Didn't anybody tie their bags up anymore?

Darkness had fallen in a solid blackness. I knew there were stars and a moon up there somewhere, but you couldn't prove it from where we stood. Clouds as thick and dark as velvet had come in from the west. Only the streetlights made it bearable.

I didn't know how Roberts was doing, but the muscles in my shoulders and neck were screaming. Every time Ki put his hands to the can and pushed, I was ready. Ready to fire, ready to save him before the zombie leapt up and ripped his throat out. A trickle of sweat dripped down his high-cheekboned face. Even in the dim light it glimmered.

Glad to know I wasn't the only one feeling the effort. Of course, I wasn't the one putting my face over the possible hiding place of a berserk zombie. Trouble was, I didn't

know how good a shot Ki was, or Roberts either for that matter. I knew I was a good shot. I knew I could slow the thing down until help arrived. I had to stay on shooting detail. It was the best division of labor. Honest.

Screams. To the left. The three of us froze. I whirled towards the screaming. There was nothing to see, nothing but dark houses and pools of streetlight. Nothing moved. But the screams continued high and horrified.

I started running towards the screams. Ki and Roberts were at my back. I ran with the Browning in a two-handed grip pointed up. Easier to run that way. Didn't dare holster the gun. Visions of blood-coated teddy bears, and the screams. The screams sort of faded. Someone was dying up ahead.

There was a sense of movement everywhere in the darkness. Cops running. All of us running but it was too late. We were all too late. The screaming had stopped. No gunshots. Why not? Why hadn't someone gotten off a shot?

We ran down the side yards of four houses when we hit a metal fence. Had to holster the guns. Couldn't climb it with one hand. Dammit. I did my best to vault the fence using my hands for leverage.

I stumbled to my knees in the soft dirt of a flower bed. I was trampling some tall summer flowers. On my knees I was considerably shorter than the flowers. Ki landed beside me. Only Roberts landed on her feet.

Ki stood up without drawing his gun. I drew the Browning while I crouched in the flowers. I could stand up after I was armed.

I had a sense of rushing movement but not clear sight. The flowers obscured my vision. Roberts was suddenly tumbling backwards, screaming.

Ki was drawing his gun, but something hit him, knocked him on top of me. I rolled but was still half under him. He lay still on top of me.

"Ki, move it, dammit!"

He sat up and crawled towards his partner, his gun silhouetted against the streetlight. He was staring down at Roberts. She wasn't moving.

I searched the darkness trying to see something, anything. It had moved more than human fast. Fast as a ghoul. No zombie moved like that. Had I been wrong all along? Was it something else? Something worse? How many lives would my mistake cost tonight? Was Roberts dead?

"Ki, is she alive?" I searched the darkness, fighting the urge to look only at the lighted areas. There was shouting, but it was confusion, "Where is it? Where did it go?" The sounds were getting farther away.

I screamed, "Here, here!" The voices hesitated, then started our way. They were making so much noise, like a heard of arthritic elephants.

"How bad is she hurt?"

"Bad." He'd put his gun down. He was pressing his hands over her neck. Something black and liquid was spreading over his hands. God.

I knelt on the other side of Roberts, gun ready, searching the darkness. Everything was taking forever, yet it was only seconds.

I checked her pulse, one-handed. It was thready, but there. My hand came away covered in blood. I wiped it on my pants. The thing had damn near slit her throat.

Where was it?

Ki's eyes were huge, all pupil. His skin looked leprous in the streetlight. His partner's blood was dripping out between his fingers.

Something moved, too low to the ground to be a man, but about that size. It was just a shape creeping along the back of the house in front of us. Whatever it was had found the deepest shadow and was trying to creep away.

That showed more intelligence than a zombie had. I was wrong. I was wrong. I was fucking wrong. And Roberts was dying because of it.

"Stay with her. Keep her alive."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"After it." I climbed the fence one-handed. The adrenaline must have been pumping because I made it.

I gained the yard and it was gone. A streaking shape fast as a mouse caught in the kitchen light. A blur of speed, but big, big as a man.

It rounded the corner of the house and I lost sight of it. Dammit. I ran as far from the wall as I could, my stomach tight with anticipation of fingers ripping my throat out. I came round the house gun pointed, two-handed, ready. Nothing. I scanned the darkness, the pools of light. Nothing.

Shouts behind me. The cops had arrived. God, let Roberts live.

There, movement, creeping across the streetlight around the edge of another house. Someone shouted, "Anita!"

I was already running towards the movement. I shouted as I ran, "Bring an exterminator team!" But I didn't stop. I didn't dare stop. I was the only one in sight of it. If I lost it, it was gone.

I ran into the darkness, alone, after something that might not be a zombie at all. Not the brightest thing I've ever done, but it wasn't going to get away. It wasn't.

It was never going to hurt another family. Not if I could stop it. Now. Tonight.

I ran through a pool of light and it made the darkness heavier, blinding me temporarily. I froze in the dark, willing my eyes to adjust faster.

"Persistent woman," a voice hissed. It was to my right, so close the hair on my arms stood up.

I froze, straining my peripheral vision. There, a darker shape rising out of the evergreen shrubs that hugged the edge of the house. It rose to its full height, but didn't attack. If it wanted me, it could have me before I could turn and fire. I'd seen it move. I knew I was dead.

"You arrre not like the resst." The voice was sibilant, as if parts of the mouth were missing, so it put great effort into forming each word. A gentleman's voice decayed by the grave.

I turned towards it, slowly, slowly.

"Put me back."

I had turned my head enough to be able to see some of it. My night vision is better than most. And the streetlights made it lighter than it should have been.

The skin was pale, yellowish-white. The skin clung to the bones of his face like wax that had half-melted. But the eyes, they weren't decayed. They burned out at me with a glitter that was more than just eyes.

"Put you back where?" I asked.

"My grave," he said. His lips didn't work quite right, there wasn't enough flesh left on them.

Light blazed into my eyes. The zombie screamed, covering his face. I couldn't see shit. It crashed into me. I pulled the trigger blind. I thought I heard a grunt as the bullet hit home. I fired the gun again one-handed, throwing an arm across my neck. Trying to protect myself as I fell half-blind.

When I blinked up into the electric-shot darkness, I was alone. I was unhurt. Why? Put me back, it had said. In my grave. How had it known what I was? Most humans couldn't tell. Witches could tell sometimes, and other animators always spotted me. Other animators. Shit.

Dolph was suddenly there, pulling me to my feet. "God, Blake, are you hurt?"

I shook my head. "What the hell was that light?"

"A halogen flashlight."

"You damn near blinded me."

"We couldn't see to shoot," he said.

Police had run past us in the darkness. There were shouts of, "There it is!" Dolph and I and the offending flashlight, bright as day, were left behind as the chase ran merrily on.

"It spoke to me, Dolph," I said. .

"What do you mean, it spoke to you?"

"It asked me to put it back in its grave." I stared up at him as I said it. I wondered if my face looked like Ki's had, pale, eyes wide and black. Why wasn't I scared?

"It's old, a century at least. It was a voodoo something in life. That's what went wrong. That's why Peter Burke couldn't control it."

"How do you know all this? Did it tell you?"

I shook my head. "The way it looked, I could judge the age. It recognized me as someone who could lay it to rest. Only a witch or another animator could have recognized me for what I am. My money's on an animator."

"Does that change our plan?" he asked.

I stared up at him. "It's killed how many people?" I didn't wait for him to answer. "We kill it. Period."

"You think like a cop, Anita." It was a great compliment from Dolph, and I took it as one.

It didn't matter what it had been in life. So it had been an animator, or rather a voodoo practioner. So what? It was a killing machine. It hadn't killed me. Hadn't hurt me. I couldn't afford to return the favor.

Shots echoed far way. Some trick of the summer air made them echo. Dolph and I looked at each other.

I still had the Browning in my hand. "Let's do it."

He nodded.

We started running, but he outdistanced me quickly. His legs were as tall as I was. I couldn't match his pace. I might be able to run him into the ground, but I'd never match his speed.

He hesitated, glancing at me.

"Go on, run," I said.

He put on an extra burst of speed and was gone into the darkness. He didn't even look back. If you said you were fine in the dark with a killer zombie on the loose, Dolph would believe you. Or at least he believed me.

It was a compliment but it left me running alone in the dark for the second time tonight. Shouts were coming from two opposite directions. They had lost it. Damn.

I slowed. I had no desire to run into the thing blind. It hadn't hurt me the first time, but I'd put at least one bullet into it. Even a zombie gets pissed about things like that.

I was under the cool darkness of a tree shadow. I was on the edge of the development. A barbed-wire fence cut across the entire back of the subdivision. Farmland stretched as far as I could see. At least the field was planted in beans. The zombie'd have to be lying flat to hide in there. I caught glimpses of policemen with flashlights, searching the darkness, but they were all about fifty yards to either side of me.

They were searching the ground, the shadows, because I'd told them zombies didn't like to climb. But this wasn't any ordinary zombie. The tree rustled over my head. The hair on my neck crawled down my spine. I whirled, looking upwards, gun pointing.

It snarled at me and leapt.

I fired twice before its weight hit me and knocked us both to the ground. Two bullets in the chest, and it wasn't even hurt.

I fired a third time, but I might as well have been hitting a wall.

It snarled in my face, broken teeth with dark stains, breath foul as a new opened grave. I screamed back, wordless, and pulled the trigger again. The bullet hit it in the throat. It paused, trying to swallow. To swallow the bullet?

Those glittering eyes stared down at me. There was someone home, like Dominga's soul-locked zombies. There was someone looking out of those eyes. We froze in one of those illusionary seconds that last years. He was straddling my waist, hands at my throat, but not pressing, not hurting, not yet. I had the gun under his chin. None of the other bullets had hurt him; why would this one?

"Didn't mean to kill," it said softly, "didn't understand at first. Didn't remember what I was."

The police were there on either side, hesitating. Dolph screamed, "Hold your fire, hold your fire, dammit!"

"I needed meat, needed it to remember who I was. Tried not to kill. Tried to walk past all the hussess, but I could not. Too many hussess," he whispered. His hands tensed, stained nails digging in. I fired into his chin. His body jerked backwards, but the hands squeezed my neck.

Pressure, pressure, tighter, tighter. I was beginning to see white star bursts on my vision. The night was fading from black to grey. I pressed the gun just above the bridge of his nose and pulled the trigger again, and again.

My vision faded, but I could still feel my hands, pulling the trigger. Darkness flowed over my eyes and swallowed the world. I couldn't feel my hands anymore.

I woke to screams, horrible screams. The stink of burning flesh and hair was thick and choking on my tongue.

I took a deep shaking breath and it hurt. I coughed and tried to sit up. Dolph was there supporting me. He had my gun in his hand. I drew one ragged breath after another and coughed hard enough to make my throat raw. Or maybe the zombie had done that.

Something the size of a man was rolling over the summer grass. It burned. It flamed with a clean orange light that sent the darkness shattering in fire shadows like the sun on water.

Two exterminators in their fire suits stood by it, covering it in napalm, as if it were a ghoul. The thing screamed high in its throat, over and over, one loud ragged shriek after another.

"Jesus, why won't it die?" Zerbrowski was standing nearby. His face was orange in the firelight.

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to say it out loud. The zombie wouldn't die because it had been an animator when alive. That much I knew about animator zombies. What I hadn't known was that they came out of the grave craving flesh. That they remembered only when they ate flesh.

That I hadn't known. Didn't want to know.

John Burke stumbled into the firelight. He was cradling one arm to his chest. Blood stained his clothing. Had the zombie whispered to John? Did he know why the thing wouldn't die?

The zombie whirled, the fire roaring around it. The body was like the wick of a candle. It took one shaking step towards us. Its flaming hand reached out to me. To me.

Then it fell forward, slowly, into the grass. It fell like a tree in slow motion, fighting for life. If that was the word. The exterminators stayed ready, taking no chances. I didn't blame them.

It had been a necromancer once upon a time. That burning hulk, slowly catching the grass on fire, had been what I was. Would I be a monster if raised from the grave? Would I? Better not to find out. My will said cremation because I didn't want someone raising me just for kicks. Now I had another reason to do it. One had been enough.

I watched the flesh blacken, curl, peel away. Muscles and bone popped in miniature explosions, tiny pops of sparks.

I watched the zombie die and made a promise to myself. I'd see Dominga Salvador burned in hell for what she'd done. There are fires that last for all eternity. Fires that make napalm look like a temporary inconvenience. She'd burn for all eternity, and it wouldn't be half long enough.

Chapter 33

I was lying on my back in the emergency room. A white curtain hid me from view. The noises on the other side of the curtain were loud and unfriendly. I liked my curtain. The pillow was flat, the examining table was hard. It felt white and clean and wonderful. It hurt to swallow. It even hurt a little bit just to breathe. But breathing was important. It was nice to be able to do it.

I lay there very quietly. Doing what I was told for once. I listened to my breathing, the beating of my own heart. After nearly dying, I am always very interested in my body.

I notice all sorts of things that go unnoticed during most of life. I could feel blood coursing through the veins in my arms. I could taste my calm, orderly pulse in my mouth like a piece of candy.

I was alive. The zombie was dead. Dominga Salvador was in jail. Life was good.

Dolph pushed the curtain back. He closed the curtain like you'd close a door to a room. We both pretended we had privacy even though we could see people's feet passing under the hem of the curtain.

I smiled up at him. He smiled back. "Nice to see you up and around."

"I don't know about the up part," I said. My voice had a husky edge to it. I coughed, tried to clear it, but it didn't really help.

"What'd the doc say about your voice?" Dolph asked.

"I'm a temporary tenor." At the look on his face, I added, "It'll pass."

"Good."

"How's Burke?" I asked.

"Stitches, no permanent damage."

I had figured as much after seeing him last night, but it was good to know.

"And Roberts?"

"She'll live."

"But will she be alright?" I had to swallow hard. It hurt to talk.

"She'll be alright. Ki was cut up, too, on the arm. Did you know?"

I shook my head and stopped in mid-motion. That hurt, too. "Didn't see it."

"Just a few stitches. He'll be fine." Dolph plunged his hands in his pants pockets.

"We lost three officers. One hurt worse than Roberts, but he'll make it."

I stared up at him. "My fault."

He frowned. "How do you figure that?"

"I should have guessed," I had to swallow, "it wasn't an ordinary zombie."

"It was a zombie, Anita. You were right. You were the one who figured out it was hiding in one of those damn trash cans." He grinned down at me. "And you nearly died killing it. I think you've done your part."

"Didn't kill it. Exterminators killed it." Big words seemed to hurt more than little words.

"Do you remember what happened as you were passing out?"

"No."

"You emptied your clip into its face. Blew its damn brains out the back of its head. You went limp. I thought you were dead. God"—he shook his head—"don't ever do that to me again."

I smiled. "I'll try not to."

"When its brains started leaking out the back of its head, it stood up. You took all the fight out of it."

Zerbrowski pushed into the small space, leaving the curtain gaping behind him. I could see a small boy with a bloody hand crying into a woman's shoulder. Dolph swept the curtain closed. I bet Zerbrowski was one of those people who never shut a drawer.

"They're still digging bullets out of the corpse. And every bullet's yours, Blake."

I just looked at him.

"You are such a bad ass, Blake."

"Somebody has to be with you around, Zerbrow. . ." I couldn't finish his name. It hurt. It figures.

"Are you in pain?" Dolph asked.

I nodded, carefully. "The doc's getting me painkiller. Already got tetanus booster."

"You've got a necklace of bruises blossoming on that pale neck of yours,"

Zerbrowski said.

"Poetic," I said.

He shrugged.

"I'll check in on the rest of the injured one more time, then I'll have a uniform drive you back to your place," Dolph said.

"Thanks."

"I don't think you're in any condition to drive."

Maybe he was right. I felt like shit, but it was happy shit. We'd done it. We'd solved the crime, and people were going to jail for it. Yippee.

The doctor came back in with the painkillers. He glanced at the two policemen. "Right." He handed me a bottle with three pills in it. "This should see you through the night and into the next day. I'd call in sick if I were you." He glanced at Dolph as he said it. "You hear that, boss?"

Dolph sort of frowned. "I'm not her boss."

"You're the man in charge, right?" the doctor asked.

Dolph nodded.

"Then..."

"I'm on loan," I said.

"Loan?"

"You might say we borrowed her from another department," Zerbrowski said.

The doctor nodded. "Then tell her superior to let her off tomorrow. She may not look as hurt as the others, but she's had a nasty shock. She's very lucky there was no permanent damage."

"She doesn't have a superior," Zerbrowski said, "but we'll tell her boss." He grinned at the doctor.

I frowned at Zerbrowski.

"Well, then, you're free to go. Watch those scratches for infection. And that bite on your shoulder." He shook his head. "You cops earn your money." With that parting wisdom, he left.

Zerbrowski laughed. "Wouldn't do for the doc to know we'd let a civie get messed up."

"She's had a nasty shock," Dolph said.

"Very nasty," Zerbrowski said.

They started laughing.

I sat up carefully, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed. "If you two are through yukking it up, I need a ride home."

They were both laughing so hard that tears were creeping out of their eyes. It hadn't been that funny, but I understood. For tension release laughter beats the hell out of tears. I didn't join them because I suspected strongly that laughing would hurt.

"I'll drive you home," Zerbrowski gasped between giggles.

I had to smile. Seeing Dolph and Zerbrowski giggling was enough to make anyone smile.

"No, no," Dolph said. "You two in a car alone. Only one of you would come out alive."

"And it'd be me," I said.

Zerbrowski nodded. "Ain't it the truth."

Nice to know there was one subject we agreed on.

Chapter 34

I was half asleep in the back of the squad car when they pulled up in front of my apartment building. The throbbing pain in my throat had slid away on a smooth tide of pain medication. I felt nearly boneless. What had the doctor given me? It felt great, but it was like the world was some sort of movie that had little to do with me. Distant and harmless as a dream.

I'd given Dolph my car keys. He promised to have someone park the car in front of my apartment building before morning. He also said he'd call Bert and tell him I wouldn't be in to work today. I wondered how Bert would take the news. I wondered if I cared. Nope.

One of the uniformed police officers leaned back over the seat and said, "You going to be alright, Miss Blake?"

"Ms.," I corrected automatically.

He gave me a half smile as he held the door for me. No door handles on the inside of a squad car. He had to hold the door for me, but he did it with relish, and said, "You going to be alright, Ms. Blake?"

"Yes, Officer"—I had to blink to read his name tag— "Osborn. Thank you for bringing me home. To your partner, too."

His partner was standing on the other side of the car, leaning his arms on the roof of the car. "It's a kick to finally meet the spook squad's Executioner." He grinned as he said it.

I blinked at him and tried to pull all the pieces together enough to talk and think at the same time. "I was the Executioner long before the spook squad came along."

He spread his hands, still grinning. "No offense."

I was too tired and too drugged to worry about it. I just shook my head. "Thanks again."

I was a touch unsteady going up the stairs. I clutched the railing like it was a lifeline. I'd sleep tonight. I might wake up in the middle of the hallway, but I'd sleep.

It took me two tries to put the key in the door lock. I staggered into my apartment, leaning my forehead against the door to close it. I turned the lock and was safe. I was home. I was alive. The killer zombie was destroyed. I had the urge to giggle, but that was the pain medication. I never giggle on my own.

I stood there leaning the top of my head against the door. I was staring at the toes of my Nikes. They seemed very far away, as if distances had grown since last I looked at my feet. The doc had given me some weird shit. I would not take it tomorrow. It was too reality-altering for my taste.

The toes of black boots stepped up beside my Nikes. Why were there boots in my apartment? I started to turn around. I started to go for my gun. Too late, too slow, too fucking bad.

Strong brown arms laced across my chest, pinning my arms. Pinning me against the door. I tried to struggle now that it was too late. But he had me. I craned my neck backwards trying to fight off the damn medication. I should have been terrified. Adrenaline pumping, but some drugs don't give a shit if you need your body. You belong to the drug until it wears off, period. I was going to hurt the doctor. If I lived through this.

It was Bruno pinning me to the door.

Tommy came up on the right. He had a needle in his hands.

"NO!"

Bruno cupped his hand over my mouth. I tried to bite him, and he slapped me. The slap helped a little but the world was still cotton-coated, distant. Bruno's hand smelled like after-shave. A choking sweetness.

"This is almost too easy," Tommy said.

"Just do it," Bruno said.

I stared at the needle as it came closer to my arm. I would have told them that I was drugged already, if Bruno's hand hadn't been clasped over my mouth. I would have asked what was in the syringe, and whether it would react badly with what I had already taken. I never got the chance.

The needle plunged in. My body stiffened, struggling, but Bruno held me tight. Couldn't move. Couldn't get away. Dammit! Dammit! The adrenaline was finally chasing the cobwebs away, but it was too late. Tommy took the needle out of my arm and said, "Sorry, we don't have any alcohol to swab it off with." He grinned at me.

I hated him. I hated them both. And if the shot didn't kill me, I was going to kill them both. For scaring me. For making me feel helpless. For catching me unaware, drugged, and stupid. If I lived through this mistake, I wouldn't make it again. Please, dear God, let me live through this mistake.

Bruno held me motionless and mute until I could feel the injection taking hold. I was sleepy. With a bad guy holding me against my will, I was sleepy. I tried to fight it, but it didn't work. My eyelids fluttered. I struggled to keep them open. I stopped trying to get away from Bruno and put everything I had into not closing my eyes.

I stared at my door and tried to stay awake. The door swam in dizzying ripples as if I were seeing it through water. My eyelids went down, jerked up, down. I couldn't open my eyes. A small part of me fell screaming into the dark, but the rest of me felt loose and sleepy and strangely safe.

Chapter 35

I was in that faint edge of wakefulness. Where you know you're not quite asleep, but don't really want to wake up either. My body felt heavy. My head throbbed. And my throat was sore.

The last thought made me open my eyes. I was staring at a white ceiling. Brown water marks traced the paint like spilled coffee. I wasn't home. Where was I?

I remembered Bruno holding me down. The needle. I sat up then. The world swam in clear waves of color. I fell back onto the bed, covering my eyes with my hands. That helped a little. What had they given me?

I had an image in my mind that I wasn't alone. Somewhere in that dizzying swirl of color had been a person. Hadn't there? I opened my eyes slower this time. I was content to stare up at the water-ruined ceiling. I was on a large bed. Two pillows, sheets, a blanket. I turned my head carefully and found myself staring into Harold Gaynor's face. He was sitting beside the bed. It wasn't what I wanted to wake up to.

Behind him, leaning against a battered chest of drawers was Bruno. His shoulder holster cut black lines across his blue short-sleeved dress shirt. There was a matching and equally scarred vanity table near the foot of the bed. The vanity sat between two high windows. They were boarded with new, sweet-smelling lumber. The scent of pine rode the hot, still air.

I started to sweat as soon as I realized that there was no air-conditioning.

"How are you feeling, Ms. Blake?" Gaynor asked. His voice was still that jolly Santa voice with an edge of sibilance. As if he were a very happy snake.

"I've felt better," I said.

"I'm sure you have. You have been asleep for over twenty-four hours. Did you know that?"

Was he lying? Why would he lie about how long I'd been asleep? What would it gain him? Nothing. Truth then, probably.

"What the hell did you give me?"

Bruno eased himself away from the wall. He looked almost embarrassed. "We didn't realize you'd already taken a sedative."

"Painkiller," I said.

He shrugged. "Same difference when you mix it with Thorazine."

"You shot me up with animal tranquilizers?"

"Now, now, Ms. Blake, they use it in mental institutions, as well. Not just animals," Gaynor said.

"Gee," I said, "that makes me feel a lot better."

He smiled broadly. "If you feel good enough to trade witty repartee, then you're well enough to get up."

Witty repartee? But he was probably right. Truthfully, I was surprised I wasn't tied up. Glad of it, but surprised.

I sat up much slower than last time. The room only tilted the tiniest bit, before settling into an upright position. I took a deep breath, and it hurt. I put a hand to my throat. It hurt to touch the skin.

"Who gave you those awful bruises?" Gaynor asked.

Lie or truth? Partial lie. "I was helping the police catch a bad guy. He got a little out of hand."

"What happened to this bad guy?" Bruno asked.

"He's dead now," I said.

Something flickered across Bruno's face. Too quick to read. Respect maybe. Naw.

"You know why I've had you brought here, don't you?"

"To raise a zombie for you," I said.

"To raise a very old zombie for me, yes."

"I've refused your offer twice. What makes you think I'll change my mind?"

He smiled, such a jolly old elf. "Why, Ms. Blake, I'll have Bruno and Tommy persuade you of the error of your ways. I still plan on giving you a million dollars to raise this zombie. The price hasn't changed."

"Tommy offered me a million five last time," I said.

"That was if you came voluntarily. We can't pay full price when you force us to take such chances."

"Like a federal prison term for kidnapping," I said.

"Exactly. Your stubbornness has cost you five hundred thousand dollars. Was it really worth that?"

"I won't kill another human being just so you can go looking for lost treasure."

"Little Wanda has been bearing tales."

"I was just guessing, Gaynor. I read a file on you and it mentioned your obsession with your father's family." It was an outright lie. Only Wanda had known that.

"I'm afraid it's too late. I know Wanda talked to you. She's confessed everything."

Confessed? I stared at him, trying to read his blankly good humored face. "What do you mean, confessed?"

"I mean I gave her to Tommy for questioning. He's not the artist that Cicely is, but he does leave more behind. I didn't want to kill my little Wanda."

"Where is she now?"

"Do you care what happens to a whore?" His eyes were bright and birdlike as he stared at me. He was judging me, my reactions.

"She doesn't mean anything to me," I said. I hoped my face was as bland as my words. Right now they weren't going to kill her. If they thought they could use her to hurt me, they might.

"Are you sure?"

"Listen, I haven't been sleeping with her. She's just a chippie with a very bent angle."

He smiled at that. "What can we do to convince you to raise this zombie for me?"

"I will not commit murder for you, Gaynor. I don't like you that much," I said.

He sighed. His apple-cheeked face looked like a sad Kewpie doll. "You are going to make this difficult, aren't you, Ms. Blake?"

"I don't know how to make it easy," I said. I put my back to the cracked wooden headboard of the bed. I was comfortable enough, but I still felt a little fuzzy around the edges. But it was as good as it was going to get for a while. It beat the hell out of being unconscious.

"We have not really hurt you yet," Gaynor said. "The reaction of the Thorazine with whatever other medication you had in you was accidental. We did not harm you on purpose."

I could argue with that, but I decided not to. "So where do we go from here?"

"We have both your guns," Gaynor said. "Without a weapon you are a small woman in the care of big, strong men."

I smiled then. "I'm used to being the smallest kid on the block, Harry."

He looked pained. "Harold or Gaynor, never Harry."

I shrugged. "Fine."

"You are not in the least intimidated that we have you completely at our mercy?"

"I could argue that point."

He glanced up at Bruno. "Such confidence, where does she get it?"

Bruno didn't say anything. He just stared at me with those empty doll eyes.

Bodyguard eyes, watchful, suspicious, and blank all at the same time.

"Show her we mean business, Bruno."

Bruno smiled, a slow spreading of lips that left his eyes dead as a shark's. He loosened his shoulders, and did a few stretching exercises against the wall. His eyes never left me.

"I take it, I'm going to be the punching bag?" I asked.

"How well you put it," Gaynor said.

Bruno stood away from the wall, limber and eager. Oh, well. I slid off the bed on the opposite side. I had no desire for Gaynor to grab me. Bruno's reach was over twice mine. His legs went on forever. He had to outweigh me by nearly a hundred pounds, and it was all muscle. I was about to get badly hurt. But as long as they didn't tie me up, I'd go down swinging. If I could cause him any serious damage, I'd be satisfied.

I came out from behind the bed, hands loose at my side. I was already in that partial crouch that I used on the judo mat. I doubted seriously if Bruno's fighting skill of choice was judo. I was betting karate or tae kwon do.

Bruno stood in an awkward-looking stance, halfway between an x and a t. It looked like someone had taken his long legs and crumbled them at the knees. But as I moved forward he scooted backwards like a crab, fast and out of reach.

"Jujitsu?" I made it half question.

He raised an eyebrow. "Most people don't recognize it."

"I've seen it," I said.

"You practice?"

"No."

He smiled. "Then I am going to hurt you."

"Even if I knew jujitsu, you'd hurt me," I said.

"It'd be a fair fight."

"If two people are equal in skill, size matters. A good big person will always beat a good small person." I shrugged. "I don't have to like it, but it's the truth."

"You're being awful calm about this," Bruno said.

"Would being hysterical help?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Then I'd just as soon take my medicine like, if you'll excuse the expression, a man."

He frowned at that. Bruno was accustomed to people being scared of him. I wasn't scared of him. I'd decided to take the beating. With the decision came a certain amount of calm. I was going to get beat up, not pleasant, but I had made my mind up to take the beating. I could do it. I'd done it before. If my choices were a) getting beat up or b) performing human sacrifice, I'd take the beating.

"Ready or not," Bruno said.

"Here you come," I finished for him. I was getting tired of the bravado. "Either hit me or stand up straight. You look silly crouched down like that."

His fist was a dark blur. I blocked it with my arm. The impact made the arm go numb. His long leg kicked out and connected solidly with my stomach. I doubled over like I was supposed to, all the air gone in one movement. His other foot came up and caught me on the side of the face. It was the same cheek of Seymour had smashed. I fell to the floor not sure what part of my body to comfort first.

His foot came for me again. I caught it with both hands. I came up in a rush, hoping to trap his knee between my arms and pop the joint. But he twisted away from me, totally airborne for a moment.

I dropped to the ground and felt the air pass overhead as his legs kicked out where my head had been. I was on the ground again, but by choice. He stood over me, impossibly tall from this angle. I lay on my side, knees drawn up.

He came for me, evidently planning to drag me to my feet. I kicked out with both feet at an angle to his kneecap. Hit it just right above or below and you dislocate it.

The leg buckled, and he screamed. It had worked. Hot damn. I didn't try to wrestle him. I didn't try to grab his gun. I ran for the door.

Gaynor grabbed for me, but I flung open the door and was out in a long hallway before he could maneuver his fancy chair. The hallway was smooth with a handful of doors and two blind corners. And Tommy.

Tommy looked surprised to see me. His hand went for his shoulder holster. I pushed on his shoulder and foot-swept his leg. He fell backwards and grabbed me as he fell. I rode him down, making sure my knee ground into his groin. His grip loosened enough for me to slip out of reach. There were sounds behind me from the room. I didn't look back. If they were going to shoot me, I didn't want to see it.

The hallway took a sharp turn. I was almost to it when the smell slowed me from a run to a walk. The smell of corpses was just around the corner. What had they been doing while I slept?

I glanced back at the men. Tommy was still lying on the floor, cradling himself. Bruno leaned against the wall, gun in hand, but he wasn't pointing it at me. Gaynor was sitting in his chair, smiling.

Something was very wrong.

Around the blind corner came that something that was wrong, very, very wrong. It was no taller than a tall man, maybe six feet. But it was nearly four feet wide. It had two legs, or maybe three, it was hard to tell. The thing was leprously pale like all zombies, but this one had a dozen eyes. A man's face was centered where the neck would have been. Its eyes dark and seeing, and empty of everything sane. A dog's head was growing out of the shoulder. The dog's decaying mouth snapped at me. A woman's leg grew out of the center of the mess, complete with black high-heeled shoe.

The thing shambled towards me. Pulling with three of a dozen arms, dragging itself forward. It left a trail behind it like a snail.

Dominga Salvador stepped around the corner. "*Buenas noches, chica.*"

The monster scared me, but the sight of Dominga grinning at me scared me just a little bit more.

The thing had stopped moving forward. It squatted in the hallway, kneeling on its inadequate legs. Its dozens of mouths panted as if it couldn't get enough air.

Or maybe the thing didn't like the way it smelled. I certainly didn't. Covering my mouth and nose with my arm didn't block out much of the smell. The hallway suddenly smelled like bad meat.

Gaynor and his wounded bodyguards had stayed at the end of the hall. Maybe they didn't like being near Dominga's little pet. I know it didn't do much for me. Whatever the reason we were isolated. It was just her and me and the monster.

"How did you get out of jail?" Better to deal with more mundane problems first. The mind-melting ones could wait for later.

"I made my bail," she said.

"This quickly on a murder involving witchcraft?"

"Voodoo is not witchcraft," she said.

"The law sees it as the same thing when it comes to murder."

She shrugged, then smiled beatifically. She was the Mexican grandmother of my nightmares.

"You've got a judge in your pocket," I said.

"Many people fear me, *chica*. You should be one of them."

"You helped Peter Burke raise the zombie for Gaynor."

She just smiled.

"Why didn't you just raise it yourself?" I asked.

"I didn't want someone as unscrupulous as Gaynor to witness me murdering someone. He might use it for blackmail."

"And he didn't realize that you had to kill someone for Peter's gris-gris?"

"Correct," she said.

"You hid all your horrors here?"

"Not all. You forced me to destroy much of my work, but this I saved. You can see why." She caressed a hand down the slimy hide.

I shuddered. Just the thought of touching that monstrosity was enough to make my skin cold. And yet . . .

"How did you make it?" I had to know. It was so obviously a creation of our shared art that I had to know.

"Surely, you can animate bits and pieces of the dead," Dominga said.

I could, but no one else I had ever met could do it. "Yes," I said.

"I found I could take these odds and ends and meld them together."

I stared at the shambling thing. "Meld them?" The thought was too horrible.

"I can create new creatures that have never existed before."

"You make monsters," I said.

"Believe what you will, *chica*, but I am here to persuade you to raise the dead for Gaynor."

"Why don't you do it?"

Gaynor's voice came from just behind us. I whirled, putting the wall at my back so I could watch everybody. What good that would do me, I wasn't sure. "Dominga's power went wrong once. This is my last chance. The last known grave. I won't risk it on her."

Dominga's eyes narrowed, her age-thinned hands forming fists. She didn't like being dismissed out of hand. Couldn't say I blamed her.

"She could do it, Gaynor, easier than I could."

"If I truly believed that, I would kill you because I wouldn't need you anymore."

Hmm, good point. "You've had Bruno rough me up. Now what?"

Gaynor shook his head. "Such a little girl to have taken both my bodyguards down."

"I told you ordinary methods of persuasion will not work on her," Dominga said.

I stared past her at the slathering monster. She called this ordinary?

"What do you propose?" Gaynor asked.

"A spell of compulsion. She will do as I bid, but it takes time to do such a spell for one as powerful as she. If she knew any voodoo to speak of, it would not work at all. But for all her art, she is but a baby in voodoo."

"How long will you need?"

"Two hours, no more."

"This had better work," Gaynor said.

"Do not threaten me," Dominga said.

Oh, goody, maybe the bad guys would fight and kill each other.

"I am paying you enough money to set up your own small country. I should get results for that."

Dominga nodded her head. "You pay well, that is true. I will not fail you. If I can compel Anita to kill another person, then I can compel her to help me in my zombie business. She will help me rebuild what she forced me to destroy. It has a certain irony, no?"

Gaynor smiled like a demented elf. "I like it."

"Well, I don't," I said.

He frowned at me. "You will do as you are told. You have been very naughty."

Naughty? Me?

Bruno had worked himself close to us. He was leaning heavily on the wall, but his gun was very steadily pointed at the center of my chest. "I'd like to kill you now," he said. His voice sounded raw with pain.

"A dislocated knee hurts like hell, doesn't it?" I smiled when I said it. Better dead than a willing servant of the voodoo queen.

I think he ground his teeth. The gun wavered just a little, but I think that was rage, not pain. "I will enjoy killing you."

"You didn't do so good last time. I think the judges would have given the match to me."

"There are no fucking judges here. I am going to kill you."

"Bruno," Gaynor said, "we need her alive and whole."

"After she raises the zombie?" Bruno asked.

"If she is a willing servant of the Señora, then you are not to hurt her. If the compulsion doesn't work, then you may kill her."

Bruno gave a fierce flash of teeth. It was more snarl than smile. "I hope the spell fails."

Gaynor glanced at his bodyguard. "Don't let personal feelings interfere with business, Bruno."

Bruno swallowed hard. "Yes, sir." It didn't sound like a title that came easily to him.

Enzo came around the corner behind Dominga. He stayed near the wall as far from her "creation" as he could get.

Antonio had finally lost his job as bodyguard. It was just as well. He was much better suited to stool pigeon.

Tommy came limping down the hall, still sort of scrunched over himself. The big Magnum was in his hands. His face was nearly purple with rage, or maybe pain. "I'm gonna kill you," he hissed.

"Take a number," I said.

"Enzo, you help Bruno and Tommy tie this little girl to a chair in the room. She's a lot more dangerous than she seems," Gaynor said.

Enzo grabbed my arm. I didn't fight him. I figured I was safer in his hands than either of the other two. Tommy and Bruno both looked as if they were looking forward to me trying something. I think they wanted to hurt me.

As Enzo led me past them, I said, "Is it because I'm a woman or are you always this bad at losing?"

"I'm gonna shoot her," Tommy grunted.

"Later," Gaynor said, "later."

I wondered if he really meant that. If Dominga's spell worked, I'd be like a living zombie, obeying her will. If the spell didn't work, then Tommy and Bruno would kill me, a piece at a time. I hoped there was a third choice.

Chapter 36

The third choice was being tied to a chair in the room where I woke up. It was the best of the three choices, but that wasn't saying much. I don't like being tied up. It means your options have gone from few to none. Dominga had clipped some of my hair and the tips of my fingernails. Hair and nails for her compulsion spell. Shit.

The chair was old and straight-backed. My wrists were tied to the slats that made up the back of the chair. Ankles tied separately to a leg of the chair. The ropes were tight. I tugged at the ropes, hoping for some slack. There wasn't any.

I had been tied up before, and I always have this Houdini fantasy that this time I'll have enough slack to wiggle free. It never works that way. Once you're tied up, you stay tied up until someone lets you go.

The trouble was when they let me go, they were going to try a nasty little spell on me. I had to get away before then. Somehow, I had to get away. Dear God, please let me get away.

The door opened as if on cue, but it wasn't help.

Bruno entered, carrying Wanda in his arms. Blood had dried down the right side of her face from a cut above the eye. Her left cheek was ripe with a huge bruise. The lower lip had burst in a still bleeding cut. Her eyes were shut. I wasn't even sure she was conscious.

I had an aching line on the left side of my face where Bruno had kicked me, but it was nothing to Wanda's injuries.

"Now what?" I asked Bruno.

"Some company for you. When she wakes up, ask her what else Tommy did to her. See if that will persuade you to raise the zombie."

"I thought Dominga was going to bespell me into helping you."

He shrugged. "Gaynor doesn't put much faith in her since she screwed up so badly."

"He doesn't give second chances, I guess," I said.

"No, he doesn't." He laid Wanda on the floor near me. "You best take his offer, girl. One dead whore and you get a million dollars. Take it."

"You're going to use Wanda for the sacrifice," I said. My voice sounded tired even to me.

"Gaynor don't give second chances."

I nodded. "How's your knee?"

He grimaced. "I put it back in place."

"That must have hurt like hell," I said.

"It did. If you don't help Gaynor, you're going to find out exactly how much it hurt."

"An eye for an eye," I said.

He nodded and stood. He favored his right leg. He caught me looking at the leg.

"Talk to Wanda. Decide what you want to end up as. Gaynor's talking about making you a cripple, then keeping you around as his toy. You don't want that."

"How can you work for him?"

He shrugged. "Pays real well."

"Money isn't everything."

"Spoken by somebody who's never gone hungry."

He had me there. I just looked at him. We stared at each other for a few minutes. There was something human in his eyes at last. I couldn't read it though. Whatever emotion it was, it was nothing I understood.

He turned and left the room.

I stared down at Wanda. She lay on her side without moving. She was wearing another long multicolored skirt. A white blouse with a wide lace collar was half-ripped from one shoulder. The bra she wore was the color of plums. I bet there had been panties to match before Tommy got hold of her.

"Wanda," I said it softly. "Wanda, can you hear me?"

Her head moved slowly, painfully. One eye opened wide and panic-stricken. The other eye was glued shut with dried blood. Wanda pawed at the eye, frantic for a moment. When she could open both eyes, she blinked at me. Her eyes took a moment to focus and really see who it was. What had she expected to see in those first few panicked moments? I didn't want to know.

"Wanda, can you speak?"

"Yes." The voice was soft, but clear.

I wanted to ask if she was alright, but I knew the answer to that. "If you can get over here and free me, I'll get us out of here."

She looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "We can't get out. Harold's gonna kill us." She made that last sound like a statement of pure fact.

"I don't believe in giving up, Wanda. Untie me and I'll think of something."

"He'll hurt me if I help you," she said.

"He's planning on you being the human sacrifice to raise his ancestor. How much more hurt can you get?"

She blinked at me, but her eyes were clearing. It was almost as if panic were a drug, and Wanda was fighting off the influence. Or maybe it was Harold Gaynor who was the drug. Yeah, that made sense. She was a junkie. A Harold Gaynor junkie. Every junkie is willing to die for one more fix. But I wasn't.

"Untie me, Wanda, please. I can get us out of this."

"And if you can't?"

"Then we're no worse off," I said.

She seemed to think about that for a minute. I strained for sounds from the hallway. If Bruno came back while we were in the middle of escaping, it would be very bad.

Wanda propped herself up on her arms. Her legs trailed out behind her under the skirt, dead, no movement at all. She began dragging herself towards me. I thought it would be slow work, but she moved quickly. The muscles in her arms bunched and pushed, working well. She was by the chair in a matter of minutes.

I smiled. "You're very strong."

"My arms are all I have. They have to be strong," Wanda said.

She started picking at the ropes that bound my right wrist. "It's too tight."

"You can do it, Wanda."

She picked at the knot with her fingers, until after what seemed hours, but was probably about five minutes, I felt the rope give. Slack, I had slack. Yea!

"You've almost got it, Wanda." I felt like a cheerleader.

The sound of footsteps clattered down the hall towards us. Wanda's battered face stared up at me, terror in her eyes. "There's not time," she whispered.

"Go back where you were. Do it. We'll finish later," I said.

Wanda hand-walked back to where Bruno had laid her. She had just arranged herself into nearly the same position when the door opened. Wanda was pretending to be unconscious, not a bad idea.

Tommy stood in the doorway. He'd taken off his jacket and the black webbing of the shoulder rig stood out on his white polo shirt. Black jeans emphasized his pinched-in waist. He looked top-heavy from lifting so many weights.

He'd added one new thing to the outfit. A knife. He twirled it in his hand like a baton. It was almost a perfect sheen of light. Manual dexterity. Wowee.

"I didn't know you used a knife, Tommy." My voice sounded calm, normal, amazing.

He grinned. "I have a lot of talents. Gaynor wants to know if you've changed your mind about the zombie raising."

It wasn't exactly a question, but I answered it. "I won't do it."

His grin widened. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"Why?" I was afraid I knew the answer.

"Because he sent me in here to persuade you."

I stared at the glittering knife, I couldn't help myself. "With a knife?"

"With something else long and hard, but not so cold," he said.

"Rape?" I asked. The word sort of hung there in the hot, still air.

He nodded, grinning like a damn Cheshire cat. I wished I could make him disappear except for his smile. I wasn't afraid of his smile. It was the other end I was worried about.

I jerked at the ropes helplessly. The right wrist gave a little more. Had Wanda loosened the rope enough? Had she? Please God, let it be.

Tommy stood over me. I stared up the length of his body and what I saw in his eyes was nothing human. There were all sorts of ways to become a monster. Tommy had found one. There was nothing but an animal hunger in his gaze. Nothing human left.

He put a leg on either side of the chair, straddling me without sitting down. His flat stomach was pressed against my face. His shirt smelled of expensive after-shave. I jerked my head back, trying not to touch him.

He laughed and ran fingers through the tight waves of my hair. I tried to jerk my head out of his reach, but he grabbed a handful of hair and forced my head back.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he said.

I didn't dare jerk at the ropes. If my wrist came free he'd see it. I had to wait, wait until he was distracted enough not to notice. The thought of what I might have to do to distract him, allow him to do to me, made my stomach hurt. But staying alive was the goal. Everything else was gravy. I didn't really believe that, but I tried.

He sat down on me, his weight settling on my legs. His chest was pressed against my face, and there was nothing I could do about it.

He rubbed the flat of the knife across my cheek. "You can stop this anytime. Just say yes, and I'll tell Gaynor." His voice was already growing thick. I could feel him growing hard where he was pressed against my belly.

The thought of Tommy using me like that was almost enough to make me say yes. Almost. I jerked on the ropes and the right one gave a little more. One more hard tug and I could get free. But I'd have just one hand to Tommy's two, and he had a gun and a knife. Not good odds, but it was the best I was going to get tonight.

He kissed me, forcing his tongue in my mouth. I didn't respond, because he wouldn't have believed that. I didn't bite his tongue either because I wanted him close. With only one hand free, I needed him close. I needed to do major damage with one hand. What? What could I do?

He nuzzled my neck, face buried in my hair on the left side. Now or never. I pulled with everything I had and the right wrist popped free. I froze. Surely he'd felt it, but he was too busy sucking on my neck to notice. His free hand massaged my breast.

He had his eyes closed as he kissed to the right side of my neck. His eyes were closed. The knife was loose in his other hand. Nothing I could do about the knife. Had to take the chance. Had to do it.

I caressed the side of his face, and he nuzzled my hand. Then his eyes opened. It had occurred to him that I was supposed to be tied. I plunged my thumb into his open eye. I dug it in, feeling the wet pop as his eye exploded.

He shrieked, rearing back, hand to his eye. I grabbed the wrist with the knife and held on. The screams were going to bring reinforcements. Dammit.

Strong arms wrapped around Tommy's waist and pulled him backwards. I grabbed the knife as he slid to the floor. Wanda was struggling to hold him. The pain was so severe, it hadn't occurred to him to go for his gun. Putting out an eye hurts and panics a lot more than a kick to the groin.

I cut my other hand free and nicked my arm doing it. If I hurried too much, I'd end up slitting my own wrist. I forced myself to be more careful slicing my ankles free.

Tommy had managed to get free of Wanda. He staggered to his feet, one hand still over the eye. Blood and clear liquid trailed down his face. "I'll kill you!" He reached for his gun.

I reversed my grip on the knife and threw it. It thumped into his arm. I'd been aiming for his chest. He screamed again. I picked up the chair and smashed it into his face. Wanda grabbed his ankles, and Tommy went down.

I pounded at his face with the chair until the chair broke apart in my hands. Then I beat him with a chair leg until his face was nothing but a bloody mess.

"He's dead," Wanda said. She was tugging at my pants leg. "He's dead. Let's get out of here."

I dropped the blood-coated chair leg and collapsed to my knees. I couldn't swallow. I couldn't breathe. I was splattered with blood. I'd never beaten someone to death before. It had felt good. I shook my head. Later, I'd worry about it later.

Wanda put an arm over my shoulders. I grabbed her around the waist, and we stood. She weighed a lot less than she should have. I didn't want to see what was under the pretty skirt. It wasn't a full set of legs, but for once that was good. She was easier to move.

I had Tommy's gun in my right hand. "I need this hand free, so hold on tight."

Wanda nodded. Her face was very pale. I could feel her heart pounding against her ribs. "We're going to get out of this," I said.

"Sure," but her voice was shaky. I don't think she believed me. I wasn't sure I believed me.

Wanda opened the door, and out we went.

Chapter 37

The hallway was just like I remembered it. A long stretch with no cover, then a blind corner at each end.

"Right or left?" I whispered to Wanda.

"I don't know. This house is like a maze. Right I think."

We went right, because at least it was a decision. The worst thing we could do was just stand there waiting for Gaynor to come back.

I heard footsteps behind us. I started to turn, but with Wanda in my arms, I was slow. The gunshot echoed in the hallway. Something hit my left arm, around Wanda's waist. The impact spun me around and sent us both crashing to the floor.

I ended up on my back with my left arm trapped under Wanda's weight. The left arm was totally numb.

Cicely stood at the end of the hallway. She held a small caliber handgun two-handed. Her long, long legs were far apart. She looked like she knew what she was doing.

I raised the .357 and aimed at her, still lying flat on my back on the floor. It was an explosion of sound that left my ears ringing. The recoil thrust my hand skyward,

backwards. It was everything I could do not to drop the gun. If I'd needed a second shot I'd have never gotten it off in time. But I didn't need a second shot.

Cicely lay crumpled in the middle of the hallway. Blood was spreading on the front of her blouse. She didn't move, but that didn't mean anything. Her gun was still gripped in one hand. She could be pretending, then when I walked up, she'd shoot me. But I had to know.

"Can you get off my arm, please?" I asked.

Wanda didn't say anything, but she lifted herself to a sitting position, and I could finally see my arm. It was still attached. Goody. Blood was seeping down my arm in a crimson line. A point of icy burning had started to chase away the numbness. I liked the numbness better.

I did my best to ignore the arm as I stood up and walked towards Cicely. I had the Magnum pointed at her. If she so much as twitched, I'd hit her again. Her miniskirt had hiked up her thighs, displaying black garters and matching underwear. How undignified.

I stood over her, staring down. Cicely wasn't going to twitch, not voluntarily. Her silk blouse was soaked with blood. A hole big enough for me to put my fist through took up most of her chest. Dead, very dead.

I kicked the .22 out of her hand, just in case. You can never tell with someone who plays voodoo. I've had people get up before with worse injuries. Cicely just lay there, bleeding.

I was lucky she'd had a ladylike caliber pistol. Anything bigger and I might have lost the arm. I stuck her pistol in the front of my pants, because I couldn't figure out where else to put it. I did click the safety on first.

I'd never been shot before. Bitten, stabbed, beaten, burned, but never shot. It scared me because I wasn't sure how badly I was hurt. I walked back to Wanda. Her face was pale, her brown eyes like islands in her face. "Is she dead?"

I nodded.

"You're bleeding," she said. She tore a strip from her long skirt. "Here, let me wrap it."

I knelt and let her tie the multicolored strip just above the wound. She wiped the blood away with another piece of skirt. It didn't look that bad. It looked almost like a raw, bloody scrap.

"I think the bullet just grazed me," I said. A flesh wound, nothing but a flesh wound. It burned and was almost cold at the same time. Maybe the cold was shock. One little bullet graze, and I was going into shock? Surely not.

"Come on, we've got to get out of here. The shots will bring Bruno." It was good that I had pain in the arm. It meant I could feel and I could move the arm. The arm did not want to be wrapped around Wanda's waist again, but it was the only way to move her and keep my right hand free.

"Let's go left. Maybe Cicely came in this way," Wanda said. There was a certain logic to that. We turned and walked past Cicely's body.

She lay there, blue eyes staring impossibly wide. There is never a look of horror on the face of the newly dead, more surprise than anything. As if death had caught them while they weren't looking.

Wanda stared down at the body as we passed it. She whispered, "I never thought she'd die first."

We rounded the corner and came face-to-face with Dominga's monster.

Chapter 38

The monster stood in the middle of a narrow little hall that seemed to take up most of the back of the house. Many-paned windows lined the wall. And in the middle of those windows was a door. Through the windows I could see black night sky. The door led outside. The only thing standing between us and freedom was the monster.

The only thing, sheesh.

The shambling mound of body parts struggled towards us. Wanda screamed, and I didn't blame her. I raised the Magnum and sighted on the human face in the middle. The shot echoed like captive thunder.

The face exploded in a welter of blood and flesh and bone. The smell was worse. Like rotten fur on the back of my throat. The mouths screamed, an animal howling at its wound. The thing kept coming, but it was hurt. It seemed confused as to what to do now. Had I taken out the dominant brain? Was there a dominant brain? No way to be sure.

I fired three more times, exploding three more heads. The hallway was full of brains and blood and worse. The monster kept coming.

The gun clicked on empty. I threw the gun at it. One clawed hand batted it away. I didn't bother trying the .22. If the Magnum couldn't stop it, the .22 sure as hell couldn't.

We started backing down the hallway. What else could we do? The monster pulled its twisted bulk after us. It was that same sliding sound that had chased Manny and I out of Dominga's basement. I was looking at her caged horror.

The flesh between the different textures of skin, fur, and bone was seamless. No Frankenstein stitches. It was like the different pieces had melted together like wax.

I tripped over Cicely's body, too busy watching the monster to see where my feet were. We sprawled across her body. Wanda screamed.

The monster scrambled forward. Misshapen hands grabbed at my ankles. I kicked at it, struggling to climb over Cicely's body, away from it. A claw snagged in my jeans and pulled me towards it. It was my turn to scream. What had once been a man's hand and arm wrapped around my ankle.

I grabbed onto Cicely's body. Her flesh was still warm. The monster pulled us both easily. The extra weight didn't slow it down. My hands scrambled at the bare wood floor. Nothing to hold on to.

I stared back at the thing. Eager rotting mouths yawned at me. Broken, discolored teeth, tongues working like putrid snakes in the openings. God!

Wanda grabbed my arm, trying to hold me, but without legs to brace she just succeeded in being pulled closer to the thing. "Let go!" I screamed it at her.

She did, screaming, "Anita!"

I was screaming myself, "No! Stop it! Stop it!" I put everything I had into that yell, not volume, but power. It was just another zombie, that was all. If it wasn't under specific orders, it would listen to me. It was just another zombie. I had to believe that, or die.

"Stop, right now!" My voice broke with the edge of hysteria. I wanted nothing more than just to start screaming and never stop.

The monster froze with my foot halfway to one of its lower mouths. The mismatched eyes stared at me, expectantly.

I swallowed and tried to sound calm, though the zombie wouldn't care. "Release me."

It did.

My heart was threatening to come out my mouth. I lay back on the floor for a second, relearning how to breathe. When I looked up, the monster was still sitting there, waiting. Waiting for orders like a good little zombie.

"Stay here, do not move from this spot," I said.

The eyes just stared at me, obedient as only the dead can be. It would sit there in the hallway until it got specific orders contradicting mine. Thank you, dear God, that a zombie is a zombie is a zombie.

"What's happening?" Wanda asked. Her voice was broken into sobs. She was near hysterics.

I crawled to her. "It's alright. I'll explain later. We have a little time, but we can't waste it. We've got to get out of here."

She nodded, tears sliding down her bruised face.

I helped her up one last time. We limped towards the monster. Wanda shied away from it, pulling on my sore arm.

"It's alright. It won't hurt us, if we hurry." I had no idea how close Dominga was. I didn't want her changing the orders while we were right next to it. We stayed near the wall and squeezed past the thing. Eyes on the back of the body, if it had a back and a front, followed our progress. The smell from the running wounds was nearly overwhelming. But what was a little gagging between friends?

Wanda opened the door to the outside world. Hot summer wind blew our hair into spider silk strands across our faces. It felt wonderful.

Why hadn't Gaynor and the rest come to the rescue? They had to have heard the gunshots and the screaming. The gunshots at least would have brought somebody.

We stumbled down three stone steps to the gravel of a turn around. I stared off into the darkness at hills covered in tall, waving grass and decaying tombstones. The house was the caretaker's house at Burrell Cemetery. I wondered what Gaynor had done to the caretaker.

I started to lead Wanda away from the cemetery towards the distant highway, then stopped. I knew why no one had come now.

The sky was thick and black and so heavy with stars if I'd had a net I could have caught some. There was a high, hot wind blowing against the stars. I couldn't see the moon. Too much starlight. On the hot seeking fingers of the wind I felt it. The pull. Dominga Salvador had completed her spell. I stared off into the rows of headstones and knew I had to go to her. Just as the zombie had had to obey me, I had to obey her. There was no saving throw, no salvaging it. As easy as that I was caught.

Chapter 39

I stood very still on the gravel. Wanda moved in my arms, turning to look at me. Her face by starlight was incredibly pale. Was mine as pale? Was the shock spread over my face like moonlight? I tried to take a step forward. To carry Wanda to safety. I could not take a step forward. I struggled until my legs were shaking with the effort. I couldn't leave.

"What's the matter? We have to get out of here before Gaynor comes back," Wanda said.

"I know," I said.

"Then what are you doing?"

I swallowed something cold and hard in my throat. My pulse was thudding in my chest. "I can't leave."

"What are you talking about?" There was an edge of hysteria to Wanda's voice.

Hysterics sounded perfect. I promised myself a complete nervous breakdown if we got out of here alive. If I could ever leave. I fought against something that I couldn't see, or touch, but it held me solid. I had to stop or my legs were going to collapse. We had enough problems in that direction already. If I couldn't go forward, maybe, backwards.

I backed up a step, two steps. Yeah, that worked.

"Where are you going?" Wanda asked.

"Into the cemetery," I said.

"Why!"

Good question, but I wasn't sure I could explain it so that Wanda would understand. I didn't understand it myself. How could I explain it to anyone else? I couldn't leave, but did I have to take Wanda back with me? Would the spell allow me to leave her here?

I decided to try. I laid her down on the gravel. Easy, some of my choices were still open.

"Why are you leaving me?" She clutched at me, terrified.

Me, too.

"Make it to the road if you can," I said.

"On my hands?" she asked.

She had a point, but what could I do? "Do you know how to use a gun?"

"No."

Should I leave her the gun, or should I take it with me, and maybe get a chance to kill Dominga? If this worked like ordering a zombie, then I could kill her if she didn't specifically forbid me to do it. Because I still had free will, of a sort. They'd bring me, then send someone back for Wanda. She was to be the sacrifice.

I handed her the .22. I clicked off the safety. "It's loaded and it's ready to fire," I said. "Since you don't know anything about guns, keep it hidden until Enzo or Bruno is right on top of you, then fire point-blank. You can't miss at point-blank range."

"Why are you leaving me?"

"A spell, I think," I said.

Her eyes widened. "What kind of spell?"

"One that allows them to order me to come to them. One that forbids me to leave."

"Oh, God," she said.

"Yeah," I said. I smiled down at her. A reassuring smile that was all lie. "I'll try to come back for you."

She just stared at me, like a kid whose parents left her in the dark before all the monsters were gone.

She clutched the gun in her hands and watched me walk off into the darkness.

The long dry grass hissed against my jeans. The wind blew the grass in pale waves. Tombstones loomed out of the weeds like the backs of small walls, or the humps of sea monsters. I didn't have to think where I was going, my feet seemed to know the way.

Was this how a zombie felt when ordered to come? No, you had to be within hearing distance of a zombie. You couldn't do it from this far away.

Dominga Salvador stood at the crown of a hill. She was highlighted against the moon. It was sinking towards dawn. It was still night, but the end of night. Everything was still velvet, silver, deep pockets of night shadows, but there was the faintest hint of dawn on the hot wind.

If I could delay until dawn, I couldn't raise the zombie. Maybe the compulsion would fade, too. If I was luckier than I deserved.

Dominga was standing inside a dark circle. There was a dead chicken at her feet. She had already made a circle of power. All I had to do was step into it and slaughter a human being. Over my dead body, if necessary.

Harold Gaynor sat in his electric wheelchair, on the opposite side of the circle. He was outside of it, safe. Enzo and Bruno stood by him, safe. Only Dominga had risked the circle.

She said, "Where is Wanda?"

I tried to lie, to say she was safe, but truth spilled out of my mouth, "She's down by the house on the gravel."

"Why didn't you bring her?"

"You can only give me one order at a time. You ordered me to come. I came."

"Stubborn, even now, how curious," she said. "Enzo, go fetch the girl. We need her."

Enzo walked away over the dry, rustling grass without a word. I hoped Wanda killed him. I hoped she emptied the gun into him. No, save a few bullets for Bruno.

Dominga had a machete in her right hand. Its edge was black with blood. "Enter the circle, Anita," she said.

I tried to fight it, tried not to do it. I stood there on the verge of the circle, almost swaying. I stepped across. The circle tingled up my spine, but it wasn't closed. I don't know what she'd done to it, but it wasn't closed. The circle looked solid enough but it was still open. Still waiting for the sacrifice.

Shots echoed in the darkness. Dominga jumped. I smiled.

"What was that?"

"I think it was your bodyguard biting the big one," I said.

"What did you do?"

"I gave Wanda a gun."

She slapped me with her empty hand. It wouldn't really have hurt, but she slapped the same cheek Bruno and what's-his-name had hit. I'd been smacked three times in the same place. The bruise was going to be a beaut.

Dominga looked at something behind me and smiled. I knew what it would be before I turned and saw it.

Enzo was carrying Wanda up the hill. Dammit. I'd heard more than one shot. Had she panicked and shot too soon, wasted her ammunition? Damn.

Wanda was screaming and beating her small fists against Enzo's broad back. If we were alive come morning, I would teach Wanda better things to do with her fists. She was crippled, not helpless.

Enzo carried her over the circle. Until it closed everyone could pass over it without breaking the magic. He dropped Wanda to the ground, holding her arms out behind her at a painful angle. She still struggled and screamed. I didn't blame her.

"Get Bruno to hold her still. The death needs to be one blow," I said.

Dominga nodded. "Yes, it does." She motioned for Bruno to enter the circle. He hesitated, but Gaynor told him, "Do what she says."

Bruno didn't hesitate after that. Gaynor was his greenback god. Bruno grabbed one of Wanda's arms. With a man on each arm, and her legs useless, she was still moving too much.

"Kneel and hold her head still," I said.

Enzo dropped first, putting a big hand on the back of Wanda's head. He held her steady. She started to cry. Bruno knelt, putting his free hand on her shoulders to help steady her. It was important for the death to be a single blow.

Dominga was smiling now. She handed me a small brown jar of ointment. It was white and smelled heavily of cloves. I used more rosemary in mine, but cloves were fine.

"How did you know what I needed?"

"I asked Manny to tell me what you used."

"He wouldn't tell you shit."

"He would if I threatened his family." Dominga laughed. "Oh, don't look so sad. He didn't betray you, *chica*. Manuel thought I was merely curious about your powers. I am, you know."

"You'll see soon enough, won't you," I said.

She gave a sort of bow from the neck. "Place the ointment on yourself in the appointed places."

I rubbed ointment on my face. It was cool and waxy. The cloves made it smell like candy. I smeared it on over my heart, under my shirt, both hands. Last the tombstone.

Now all we needed was the sacrifice.

Dominga told me, "Do not move."

I stayed where I was, frozen as if by magic. Was her monster still frozen in the hallway, like I was now?

Dominga laid the machete on the grass near the edge of the circle, then she stepped out of the circle. "Raise the dead, Anita," she said.

"Ask Gaynor one question first, please." That please hurt, but it worked.

She looked at me curiously. "What question?"

"Is this ancestor also a voodoo priest?" I asked.

"What difference does it make?" Gaynor asked.

"You fool," Dominga said. She whirled on him, hands in fists. "That is what went wrong the first time. You made me think it was my powers!"

"What are you babbling about?" he asked.

"When you raise a voodoo priest or an animator, sometimes the magic goes wrong," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

"Your ancestor's magic interfered with my magic," Dominga said. "Are you sure this ancestor had no voodoo?"

"Not to my knowledge," he said.

"Did you know about the first one?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Dominga said. Her power blazed around her like a dark nimbus. Would she kill him, or did she want the money more?

"I didn't think it was important."

I think Dominga was grinding her teeth. I didn't blame her. He'd cost her her reputation and a dozen lives. He saw nothing wrong with it. But Dominga didn't strike him dead. Greed wins out.

"Get on with it," Gaynor said. "Or don't you want your money?"

"Do not threaten me!" Dominga said.

Peachy keen, the bad guys were going to fight among themselves.

"I am not threatening you, Señora. I merely will not pay unless this zombie is raised."

Dominga took a deep breath. She literally squared her shoulders and turned back to me. "Do as I ordered, raise the dead."

I opened my mouth to think of some other excuse to delay. Dawn was coming. It had to come.

"No more delays. Raise the dead, Anita, now!" That last word had the tone of a command.

I swallowed hard and walked towards the edge of the circle. I wanted to get out, to leave, but I couldn't. I stood there, leaning against that invisible barrier. It was like beating against a wall that I couldn't feel. I stayed there straining until my entire body trembled. I took a deep shaking breath.

I picked up the machete.

Wanda said, "No, Anita, please, please don't!" She struggled, but she couldn't move. She would be an easy kill. Easier than beheading a chicken with one hand. And I did that almost every night.

I knelt in front of Wanda. Enzo's hand on the back of her head kept her from moving. But she whimpered, a desperate sound low in her throat.

God, help me.

I placed the machete under her neck and told Enzo, "Raise her head up so I can make sure of the kill."

He grabbed a handful of hair and bowed her neck at a painful angle. Her eyes were showing a lot of white. Even by moonlight I could see the pulse in her throat.

I placed the machete back against her neck. Her skin was solid and real under the blade. I raised it just above her flesh, not touching for an instant. I drove the machete

straight up into Enzo's throat. The point speared his throat. Blood gushed out in a black wave.

Everyone froze for an instant, but me. I jerked the machete out of Enzo and plunged it into Bruno's gut. His hand with the gun half-drawn fell away. I leaned on the machete and drew it up towards his throat. His insides spilled out, in a warm rush.

The smell of fresh death filled the circle. Blood sprayed all over my face, chest, hands, coating me. It was the last step, and the circle closed.

I'd felt a thousand circles close, but nothing like this. The shock of it left me gasping. I couldn't breathe over the rush of power. It was like an electric current was running over my body. My skin ached with it.

Wanda was covered in other people's blood. She was having hysterics in the grass. "Please, please, don't kill me. Don't kill me! Please!"

I didn't have to kill Wanda. Dominga had told me to raise the dead, and I would do just that.

Killing animals never gave me this kind of rush. It felt like my skin was going to crawl off on its own. I shoved the power flowing through me into the ground. But not just into the grave in the circle. I had too much power for just one grave. Too much power for just a handful of graves. I felt the power spreading outward like ripples in a pool. Out and out, until the power was spread thick and clean over the ground. Every grave that I had walked for Dolph. Every grave but the ones with ghosts. Because that was a type of soul magic, and necromancy didn't work around souls.

I felt each grave, each corpse. I felt them coalesce from dust and bone fragments to things that were barely dead at all.

"Arise from your graves all dead within sound of my call. Arise and serve me!" Without naming them all I shouldn't have been able to call a single one from the grave, but the power of two human deaths was too much for the dead to resist.

They rose upward like swimmers through water. The ground rippled underfoot like a horse's skin.

"What are you doing?" Dominga asked.

"Raising the dead," I said. Maybe it showed in my voice. Maybe she felt it. Whatever, she started running towards the circle, but it was too late.

Hands tore through the earth at Dominga's feet. Dead hands grabbed her ankles and sent her sprawling into the long grass. I lost sight of her but I didn't lose control of the zombies. I told them, "Kill her, kill her."

The grass shuddered and surged like water. The sound of muscles pulling away from bone in wet thick pieces filled the night. Bones broke with sharp cracks. Over the sounds of tearing flesh, Dominga shrieked.

There was one last wet sound, thick and full. Dominga's screams broke off abruptly. I felt the dead hands tearing out her throat. Her blood splattered the grass like a black sprinkler.

Her spell shredded on the wind, but I didn't need her urging now. The power had me. I was riding it like a bird on a current of air. It held me, lifted me. It felt solid and insubstantial as air.

The dry sunken earth cracked open over Gaynor's ancestor's grave. A pale hand shot skyward. A second hand came through the crack. The zombie tore the dry earth. I heard

other old graves breaking in the still, summer night. It broke its way out of his grave, just like Gaynor had wanted.

Gaynor sat in his wheelchair on the crest of the hill. He was surrounded by the dead. Dozens of zombies in various stages of decay crowded close to him. But I hadn't given the order yet. They wouldn't hurt him unless I told them to.

"Ask him where the treasure is," Gaynor shouted.

I stared at him and every zombie turned with my eyes and stared at him, too. He didn't understand. Gaynor was like a lot of people with money. They mistake money for power. It isn't the same thing at all.

"Kill the man Harold Gaynor." I said it loud enough to carry on the still air.

"I'll give you a million dollars for having raised him. Whether I find the treasure or not," Gaynor said.

"I don't want your money, Gaynor," I said.

The zombies were moving in on every side, slow, hands extended, like every horror movie you've ever seen. Sometimes Hollywood is accurate, whatta ya know.

"Two million, three million!" His voice was breaking with fear. He'd had a better seat for Dominga's death than I had. He knew what was coming. "Four million!"

"Not enough," I said.

"How much?" he shouted. "Name your price!" I couldn't see him now. The zombies hid him from view.

"No money, Gaynor, just you dead, that's enough."

He started screaming, wordlessly. I felt the hands begin to rip at him. Teeth to tear.

Wanda grabbed my legs. "Don't, don't hurt him. Please!"

I just stared at her. I was remembering Benjamin Reynolds's blood-coated teddy bear, the tiny hand with that stupid plastic ring on it, the blood-soaked bedroom, the baby blanket. "He deserves to die," I said. My voice sounded separate from me, distant and echoing. It didn't sound like me at all.

"You can't just murder him," Wanda said.

"Watch me," I said.

She tried to climb my body, but her legs betrayed her and she fell in a heap at my feet, sobbing.

I didn't understand how Wanda could beg for his life after what he had done to her. Love, I suppose. In the end she really did love him. And that, perhaps, was the saddest thing of all.

When Gaynor died, I knew it. When pieces of him stained almost every hand and mouth of the dead, they stopped. They turned to me, waiting for new orders. The power was still buoying me up. I wasn't tired. Was there enough to lay them all to rest? I hoped so.

"Go back, all of you, go back to your graves. Rest in the quiet earth. Go back, go back."

They stirred like a wind had blown through them, then one by one they went back to their graves. They lay down on the hard dry earth and the graves just swallowed them whole. It was like magic quicksand. The earth shuddered underfoot like a sleeper moving to a more comfortable position.

Some of the corpses had been as old as Gaynor's ancestor, which meant that I didn't need a human death to raise one three-hundred-year-old corpse. Bert was going to be

pleased. Human deaths seemed to be cumulative. Two human deaths and I had emptied a cemetery. It wasn't possible. But I'd done it anyway. Whatta ya know?

The first light of dawn passed like milk on the eastern sky. The wind died with the light. Wanda knelt in the bloody grass, crying. I knelt beside her.

She jerked back at my touch. I guess I couldn't blame her, but it bothered me anyway.

"We have to get out of here. You need a doctor," I said.

She stared up at me. "What are you?"

Today for the first time I didn't know how to answer that question. Human didn't seem to cover it. "I'm an animator," I said finally.

She just kept staring at me. I wouldn't have believed me either. But she let me help her up. I guess that was something.

But she kept looking at me out of the edge of her eyes. Wanda considered me one of the monsters. She may have been right.

Wanda gasped, eyes wide.

I turned, too slowly. Was it the monster?

Jean-Claude stepped out of the shadows.

I didn't breathe for a moment. It was so unexpected.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Your power called to me, *ma petite*. No dead in the city could fail to feel your power tonight. And I am the city, so I came to investigate."

"How long have you been here?"

"I saw you kill the men. I saw you raise the graveyard."

"Did it ever occur to you to help me?"

"You did not need any help." He smiled, barely visible in the moonlight. "Besides, would it not have been tempting to rend me to pieces, as well?"

"You can't possibly be afraid of me," I said.

He spread his hands wide.

"You're afraid of your human servant? Little ol' *moi*?"

"Not afraid, *ma petite*, but cautious."

He was afraid of me. It almost made some of this shit worthwhile.

I carried Wanda down the hill. She wouldn't let Jean-Claude touch her. A choice of monsters.

Chapter 40

Dominga Salvador missed her court date. Fancy that. Dolph had searched for me that night, after he discovered that Dominga had made bail. He had found my apartment empty. My answers about where I had gone didn't satisfy him, but he let it go. What else could he do?

They found Gaynor's wheelchair, but no trace of him. It's one of those mysteries to tell around campfires. The empty, blood-coated wheelchair in the middle of the cemetery. They did find body parts in the caretaker's house: animal and human. Only Dominga's power had held the thing together. When she died, it died. Thank goodness. Theory was that the monster got Gaynor. Where the monster came from no one seemed to know. I was called in to explain the body parts, that's how the police knew they'd once been attached.

Irving wanted to know what I really knew about Gaynor's vanishing act. I just smiled and played inscrutable. Irving didn't believe me, but all he had were suspicions. Suspicions aren't a news story.

Wanda is waiting tables downtown. Jean-Claude offered her a job at The Laughing Corpse. She declined, not politely. She'd saved quite a bit of money from her "business." I don't know if she'll make it or not, but with Gaynor gone, she seems free to try. She was a junkie whose drug of choice was dead. It was better than rehab.

By Catherine's wedding the bullet wound was just a bandage on my arm. The bruises on my face and neck had turned that sickly shade of greenish-yellow. It clashed with the pink dress. I gave Catherine the option of me not being in the wedding. The wedding coordinator was all for that, but Catherine wouldn't hear of it. The wedding coordinator applied makeup to the bruises and saved the day.

I have a picture of me standing in that awful dress with Catherine's arm around me. We're both smiling. Friendship is strange stuff.

Jean-Claude sent me a dozen white roses in the hospital. The card read, "Come to the ballet with me. Not as my servant, but as my guest."

I didn't go to the ballet. I had enough problems without dating the Master of the City.

I had performed human sacrifice, and it had felt good. The rush of power was like the memory of painful sex. Part of you wanted to do it again. Maybe Dominga Salvador was right. Maybe power talks to everyone, even me.

I am an animator. I am the Executioner. But now I know I'm something else. The one thing my Grandmother Flores feared most. I am a necromancer. The dead are my specialty.

Circus of the Damned

by

Laurell K. Hamilton

Book 3 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Chapter 1

There was dried chicken blood imbedded under my fingernails. When you raise the dead for a living, you have to spill a little blood. It clung in flaking patches to my face and hands. I'd tried to clean the worst of it off before coming to this meeting, but some things only a shower would fix. I sipped coffee from a personalized mug that said, "Piss me off, pay the consequences," and stared at the two men sitting across from me.

Mr. Jeremy Ruebens was short, dark, and grumpy. I'd never seen him when he wasn't either frowning, or shouting. His small features were clustered in the middle of his face as if some giant hand had mashed them together before the clay had dried. His hands smoothed over the lapel of his coat, the dark blue tie, tie clip, white shirt collar. His hands folded in his lap for a second, then began their dance again, coat, tie, tie clip, collar, lap. I figured I could stand to watch him fidget maybe five more times before I screamed for mercy and promised him anything he wanted.

The second man was Karl Inger. I'd never met him before, He was a few inches over six feet. Standing, he had towered over Ruebens and me. A wavy mass of short-cut red hair graced a large face. He had honest-to-god muttonchop sideburns that grew into one of the fullest mustaches I'd ever seen.

Everything was neatly trimmed except for his unruly hair. Maybe he was having a bad hair day.

Ruebens's hands were making their endless dance for the fourth time. Four was my limit.

I wanted to go around the desk, grab his hands, and yell, "Stop that!" But I figured that was a little rude, even for me. "I don't remember you being this twitchy, Ruebens," I said.

He glanced at me. "Twitchy?"

I motioned at his hands, making their endless circuit. He frowned and placed his hands on top of his thighs. They remained there, motionless. Self-control at its best.

"I am not twitchy, Miss Blake."

"It's Ms. Blake. And why are you so nervous, Mr. Ruebens?" I sipped my coffee.

"I am not accustomed to asking help from people like you."

"People like me?" I made it a question.

He cleared his throat sharply. "You know what I mean."

"No, Mr. Ruebens, I don't."

"Well, a zombie queen . . ." He stopped in mid-sentence. I was getting pissed, and it must have shown on my face. "No offense," he said softly.

"If you came here to call me names, get the hell out of my office. If you have real business, state it, then get the hell out of my office."

Ruebens stood up. "I told you she wouldn't help us."

"Help you do what? You haven't told me a damn thing," I said.

"Perhaps we should just tell her why we have come," Inger said. His voice was a deep, rumbling bass, pleasant.

Ruebens drew a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "Very well." He sat back down in his chair. "The last time we met, I was a member of Humans Against Vampires."

I nodded encouragingly and sipped my coffee.

"I have since started a new group, Humans First. We have the same goals as HAV, but our methods are more direct."

I stared at him. HAV's main goal was to make vampires illegal again, so they could be hunted down like animals. It worked for me. I used to be a vampire slayer, hunter, whatever. Now I was a vampire executioner. I had to have a death warrant to kill a specific vampire, or it was murder. To get a warrant, you had to prove the vampire was a danger to society, which meant you had to wait for the vampire to kill people. The lowest kill was five humans, the highest was twenty-three. That was a lot of dead bodies. In the good ol' days you could just kill a vampire on sight.

"What exactly does 'more direct methods' mean?"

"You know what it means," Ruebens said.

"No," I said, "I don't." I thought I did, but he was going to have to say it out loud.

"HAV has failed to discredit vampires through the media or the political machine. Humans First will settle for destroying them all."

I smiled over my coffee mug. "You mean kill every last vampire in the United States?"

"That is the goal," he said.

"It's murder."

"You have slain vampires. Do you really believe it is murder?"

It was my turn to take a deep breath. A few months ago I would have said no. But now, I just didn't know. "I'm not sure anymore, Mr. Ruebens."

"If the new legislation goes through, Ms. Blake, vampires will be able to vote. Doesn't that frighten you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then help us."

"Quit dancing around, Ruebens; just tell me what you want."

"Very well, then. We want the daytime resting place of the Master Vampire of the City."

I just looked at him for a few seconds. "Are you serious?"

"I am in deadly earnest, Ms. Blake."

I had to smile. "What makes you think I know the Master's daytime retreat?"

It was Inger who answered. "Ms. Blake, come now. If we can admit to advocating murder, then you can admit to knowing the Master." He smiled ever so gently.

"Tell me where you got the information and maybe I'll confirm it, or maybe I won't."

His smile widened just a bit. "Now who's dancing?"

He had a point. "If I say I know the Master, what then?"

"Give us his daytime resting place," Ruebens said. He was leaning forward, an eager, nearly lustful look on his face. I wasn't flattered. It wasn't me getting his rocks off. It was the thought of staking the Master.

"How do you know the Master is a he?"

"There was an article in the *Post-Dispatch*. It was careful to mention no name, but the creature was clearly male," Ruebens said.

I wondered how Jean-Claude would like being referred to as a "creature." Better not to find out. "I give you an address and you go in and what, stake him through the heart?"

Ruebens nodded. Inger smiled.

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"You refuse to help us?" Ruebens asked.

"No, I simply don't know the daytime resting place." I was relieved to be able to tell the truth.

"You are lying to protect him," Ruebens said. His face was growing darker; deep frown wrinkles showed on his forehead.

"I really don't know, Mr. Ruebens, Mr. Inger. If you want a zombie raised, we can talk; otherwise . . ." I let the sentence trail off and gave them my best professional smile. They didn't seem impressed.

"We consented to meeting you at this ungodly hour, and we are paying a handsome fee for the consultation. I would think the least you could do is be polite."

I wanted to say, "You started it," but that would sound childish. "I offered you coffee. You turned it down."

Ruebens's scowl deepened, little anger lines showing around his eyes. "Do you treat all your . . . customers this way?"

"The last time we met, you called me a zombie-loving bitch. I don't owe you anything."

"You took our money."

"My boss did that."

"We met you here at dawn, Ms. Blake. Surely you can meet us halfway."

I hadn't wanted to meet with Ruebens at all, but after Bert took their money, I was sort of stuck with it. I'd set the meeting at dawn, after my night's work, but before I went to bed. This way I could drive home and get eight hours uninterrupted sleep. Let Ruebens's sleep be interrupted.

"Could you find out the location of the Master's retreat?" Inger asked.

"Probably, but if I did, I wouldn't give it to you."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because she is in league with him," Ruebens said.

"Hush, Jeremy."

Ruebens opened his mouth to protest, but Inger said, "Please, Jeremy, for the cause."

Ruebens struggled visibly to swallow his anger, but he choked it down. Control.

"Why not, Ms. Blake?" Inger's eyes were very serious, the pleasant sparkle seeping away like melting ice.

"I've killed master vampires before, none of them with a stake."

"How then?"

I smiled. "No, Mr. Inger, if you want lessons in vampire slaying, you're going to have to go elsewhere. Just by answering your questions, I could be charged as an accessory to murder."

"Would you tell us if we had a better plan?" Inger said.

I thought about that for a minute. Jean-Claude dead, really dead. It would certainly make my life easier, but . . . but.

"I don't know," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I think he'll kill you. I don't give humans over to the monsters, Mr. Inger, not even people who hate me."

"We don't hate you Ms. Blake."

I motioned with the coffee mug towards Ruebens. "Maybe you don't, but he does."

Ruebens just glared at me. At least he didn't try to deny it.

"If we come up with a better plan, can we talk to you again?" Inger asked.

I stared at Ruebens's angry little eyes. "Sure, why not?"

Inger stood and offered me his hand. "Thank you, Ms. Blake. You have been most helpful."

His hand enveloped mine. He was a large man, but he didn't try using his size to make me feel small. I appreciated that.

"The next time we meet, Anita Blake, you will be more cooperative." Ruebens said.

"That sounded like a threat, Jerry."

Ruebens smiled, a most unpleasant smile. "Humans First believes the means justifies the end, Anita."

I opened my royal purple suit jacket. Inside was a shoulder holster complete with a Browning Hi-Power 9mm. The purple skirt's thin black belt was just sturdy enough to be looped through the shoulder holster. Executive terrorist chic.

"When it comes to survival, Jerry, I believe that, too."

"We have not offered you violence," Inger said.

"No, but ol' Jerry here is thinking about it. I just want him and the rest of your little group to believe I'm serious. Mess with me, and people are going to die."

"There are dozens of us," Ruebens said, "and only one of you."

"Yeah, but who's going to be first in line?" I said.

"Enough of this, Jeremy, Ms. Blake. We didn't come here to threaten you. We came for your help. We will come up with a better plan and talk to you again."

"Don't bring him," I said.

"Of course," Inger said. "Come along, Jeremy." He opened the door. The soft clack of computer keys came from the outer office. "Good-bye Ms. Blake."

"Good-bye, Mr. Inger, it's been really unpleasant."

Ruebens stopped in the doorway and hissed at me, "You are an abomination before God."

"Jesus loves you, too," I said, smiling. He slammed the door behind them. Childish.

I sat on the edge of my desk and waited to make sure they had left before going outside. I didn't think they'd try anything in the parking lot, but I really didn't want to start shooting people. Oh, I would if I had to, but it was better to avoid it. I had hoped flashing the gun would make Ruebens back off. It had just seemed to enrage him. I rotated my neck, trying to ease some of the tension away. It didn't work.

I could go home, shower, and get eight hours uninterrupted sleep.

Glorious. My beeper went off. I jumped like I'd been stung. Nervous, me?

I hit the button, and the number that flashed made me groan. It was the police. To be exact, it was the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. The Spook Squad. They were responsible for all preternatural crime in Missouri. I was their civilian expert on monsters. Bert liked the retainer I got, but better yet, the good publicity.

The beeper went off again. Same number. "Shit," I said it softly. "I heard you the first time, Dolph." I thought about pretending that I'd already gone

home, turned off the beeper, and was now unavailable, but I didn't. If Detective Sergeant Rudolf Storr called me at half-past dawn, he needed my expertise. Damn.

I called the number and through a series of relays finally got Dolph's voice. He sounded tinny and faraway. His wife had gotten him a car phone for his birthday. We must have been near the limit of its range. It still beat the heck out of talking to him on the police radio. That always sounded like an alien language.

"Hi, Dolph, what's up?"

"Murder."

"What sort of murder?"

"The kind that needs your expertise," he said.

"It's too damn early in the morning to play twenty questions. Just tell me what's happened."

"You got up on the wrong side of bed this morning, didn't you?"

"I haven't been to bed yet."

"I sympathize, but get your butt out here. It looks like we have a vampire victim on our hands."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Shit."

"You could say that."

"Give me the address," I said.

He did. It was over the river and through the woods, way to hell and gone in Arnold. My office was just off Olive Boulevard. I had a forty-five-minute drive ahead of me, one way. Yippee.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

"We'll be waiting," Dolph said, then hung up.

I didn't bother to say good-bye to the dial tone. A vampire victim. I'd never seen a lone kill. They were like potato chips; once the vamp tasted them, he couldn't stop at just one. The trick was, how many people would die before we caught this one?

I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to drive to Arnold. I didn't want to stare at dead bodies before breakfast. I wanted to go home. But somehow I didn't think Dolph would understand. Police have very little sense of humor when they're working on a murder case. Come to think of it, neither did I.

Chapter 2

The man's body lay on its back, pale and naked in the weak morning sunlight. Even limp with death his body was good, a lot of weights, maybe jogging. His longish yellow hair mixed with the still-green lawn. The smooth

skin of his neck was punctured twice with neat fang marks. The right arm was pierced at the bend of the elbow, where a doctor draws blood. The skin of the left wrist was shredded, like an animal had gnawed it. White bone gleamed in the fragile light.

I had measured the bite marks with my trusty tape measure. They were different sizes. At least three different vamps, but I would have bet everything I owned that it was five different vampires. A master and his pack, or flock, or whatever the hell you call a group of vampires.

The grass was wet from early morning mist. The moisture soaked through the knees of the coveralls I had put on to protect my suit. Black Nikes and surgical gloves completed my crime-scene kit. I used to wear white Nikes, but they showed blood too easily.

I said a silent apology for what I had to do, then spread the corpse's legs apart. The legs moved easily, no rigor. I was betting that he hadn't been dead eight hours, not enough time for rigor mortis to set in. Semen had dried on his shriveled privates. One last joy before dying. The vamps hadn't cleaned him off. On the inside of his thigh, close to the groin, were more fang marks. They weren't as savage as the wrist wound, but they weren't neat either.

There was no blood on the skin around the wounds, not even the wrist wound. Had they cleaned the blood off? Wherever he was killed, there was a lot of blood. They'd never be able to clean it all up. If we could find where he died, we'd have all sorts of clues. But in the neatly clipped lawn in the middle of a very ordinary neighborhood, there were no clues. I was betting on that. They'd dumped the body in a place as sterile and unhelpful as the dark side of the moon.

Mist floated over the small residential neighborhood like waiting ghosts. The mist was so low to the ground that it was like walking through sheets of drizzling rain. Tiny beads of moisture clung to the body where the mist had condensed. Beads collected in my hair like silver pearls.

I stood in the front yard of a small, lime-green house with white trim. A chain-link fence peeked around one side encircling a roomy backyard. It was October, and the grass was still green. The top of a sugar maple loomed over the house. Its leaves were that brilliant orangey-yellow that is peculiar to sugar maples, as if their leaves were carved from flame. The mist helped the illusion, and the colors seemed to bleed on the wet air.

All down the street were other small houses with autumn-bright trees and bright green lawns. It was still early enough that most people hadn't gone to work yet, or school, or wherever. There was quite a crowd being held back by the uniform officers. They had hammered stakes into the ground to hold the yellow Do-Not-Cross tape. The crowd pressed as close to the tape as they dared. A boy of about twelve had managed to push his way to the front. He stared at the dead man with huge brown eyes, his mouth open in a little "wow" of excitement. God, where were his parents? Probably gawking at the corpse, too.

The corpse was paper-white. Blood always pools to the lowest point of the body. In this case dark, purplish bruising should have set in at buttocks, arms,

legs, the entire back of his body. There were no marks. He hadn't had enough blood in him to cause lividity marks. Whoever had murdered him had drained him completely. Good to the last drop? I fought the urge to smile and lost. If you spend a lot of time staring at corpses, you get a peculiar sense of humor. You have to, or you will go stark raving mad.

"What's so funny?" a voice asked.

I jumped and whirled. "God, Zerbrowski, don't sneak up on me like that."

"Is the heap big vampire slayer jumping at shadows?" He grinned at me.

His unruly brown hair stuck up in three separate tufts like he'd forgotten to comb it. His tie was at half-mast over a pale blue shirt that looked suspiciously like a pajama top. The brown suit jacket and pants clashed with the top.

"Nice pajamas."

He shrugged. "I've got a pair with little choo-choos on them. Katie thinks they're sexy."

"Your wife got a thing for trains?" I asked.

His grin widened. "If I'm wearing 'em."

I shook my head. "I knew you were perverted, Zerbrowski, but little kids' jammies, that's truly sick."

"Thank you." He glanced down at the body, still smiling. The smile faded. "What do you think of this?" He nodded towards the dead man.

"Where's Dolph?"

"In the house with the lady who found the body." He plunged his hands into the pockets of his pants and rocked on his heels. "She's taking it pretty hard. Probably the first corpse she's seen outside of a funeral."

"That's the way most normal folks see dead people, Zerbrowski."

He rocked forward hard on the balls of his feet, coming to a standstill.

"Wouldn't it be nice to be normal?"

"Sometimes," I said.

He grinned. "Yeah, I know what you mean." He got a notebook out of his jacket pocket that looked as if someone had crumbled it in their fist.

"Geez, Zerbrowski."

"Hey, it's still paper." He tried smoothing the notebook flat, but finally gave up. He posed, pen over the wrinkled paper. "Enlighten me, oh preternatural expert."

"Am I going to have to repeat this to Dolph? I'd like to just do this once and go home to bed."

"Hey, me too. Why do you think I'm wearing my jammies?"

"I just thought it was a daring fashion statement." He looked at me. "Mm-huh."

Dolph walked out of the house. The door looked too small to hold him. He's six-nine and built bulky like a wrestler. His black hair was buzzed close to his head, leaving his ears stranded on either side of his face. But Dolph didn't care much for fashion. His tie was tight against the collar of his white dress shirt. He had to have been pulled out of bed just like Zerbrowski, but he looked neat and tidy and businesslike. It never mattered what hour you called Dolph, he was always ready to do his job. A professional cop down to his socks.

So why was Dolph heading up the most unpopular special task force in St. Louis? Punishment for something, that much I was sure of, but I'd never asked what. I probably never would. It was his business. If he wanted me to know, he'd tell me.

The squad had originally been a pacifier for the liberals. See, we're doing something about supernatural crime. But Dolph had taken his job and his men seriously. They had solved more supernatural crime in the last two years than any other group of policemen in the country. He had been invited to give talks to other police forces. They had even been loaned out to neighboring states twice.

"Well, Anita, let's have it."

That's Dolph; no preliminaries. "Gee, Dolph, it's nice to see you too." He just looked at me.

"Okay, okay." I knelt on the far side of the body so I could point as I talked. Nothing like a visual aid to get your point across. "Just measuring shows that at least three different vampires fed on the man."

"But?" Dolph said.

He's quick. "But I think that every wound is a different vampire."

"Vampires don't hunt in packs."

"Usually they are solitary hunters, but not always."

"What causes them to hunt in packs?" he asked.

"Only two reasons that I've ever come across: first, one is the new dead and an older vampire is teaching the ropes, but that's just two pairs of fangs, not five; second, a master vampire is controlling them, and he's gone rogue."

"Explain."

"A master vampire has nearly absolute control over his or her flock. Some masters use a group kill to solidify the pack, but they wouldn't dump the body here. They'd hide it where the police would never find it."

"But the body's here," Zerbrowski said, "out in plain sight."

"Exactly; only a master that's gone crazy would dump a body like this. Most masters even before vampires were legally alive wouldn't flaunt a kill like this. It attracts attention, usually attention with a stake in one hand and a cross in the other. Even now, if we could trace the kill to the vampires that did it, we could get a warrant and kill them." I shook my head. "Slaughter like this is bad for business, and whatever else vampires are, they're practical. You don't stay alive and hidden for centuries unless you're discreet and ruthless."

"Why ruthless?" Dolph said.

I stared up at him. "It's utterly practical. Someone discovers your secret, you kill them, or make them one of your . . . children. Good business practices, Dolph, nothing more."

"Like the mob," Zerbrowski said.

"Yeah."

"What if they panicked?" Zerbrowski asked. "It was almost dawn."

"When did the woman find the body?"

Dolph checked his notebook. "Five-thirty."

"It's still hours until dawn. They didn't panic."

"If we've got a crazy master vampire, what exactly does that mean?"

"It means they'll kill more people faster. They may need blood every night to support five vampires."

"A fresh body every night?" Zerbrowski made it a question.

I just nodded.

"Jesus," he said.

"Yeah."

Dolph was silent, staring down at the dead man. "What can we do?"

"I should be able to raise the corpse as a zombie."

"I thought you couldn't raise a vampire victim as a zombie," Dolph said.

"If the corpse is going to rise as a vampire, you can't." I shrugged. "The whatever that makes a vampire interferes with a raising. I can't raise a body that is already set to rise as a vamp."

"But this one won't rise," Dolph said, "so you can raise it."

I nodded.

"Why won't this vampire victim rise?"

"He was killed by more than one vampire, in a mass feeding. For a corpse to rise as a vampire, you have to have just one vampire feeding over a space of several days. Three bites ending with death, and you get a vampire. If every vampire victim could come back, we'd be up to our butts in bloodsuckers."

"But this victim can come back as a zombie?" Dolph said.

I nodded.

"When can you do the animating?"

"Three nights from tonight, or really two. Tonight counts as one night."

"What time?"

"I'll have to check my schedule at work. I'll call you with a time."

"Just raise the murder victim and ask who killed him. I like it,"

Zerbrowski said.

"It's not that easy," I said. "You know how confused witnesses to violent crimes are. Have three people see the same crime and you get three different heights, different hair colors."

"Yeah, yeah, witness testimony is a bitch," Zerbrowski said.

"Go on, Anita," Dolph said. It was his way of saying, "Zerbrowski, shut up." Zerbrowski shut up.

"A person who died as the victim of a violent crime is more confused. Scared shitless, so that sometimes they don't remember very clearly."

"But they were there," Zerbrowski said. He looked outraged.

"Zerbrowski, let her finish."

Zerbrowski pantomimed locking his lips with a key and throwing the key away. Dolph frowned. I coughed into my hand to hide the smile. Mustn't encourage Zerbrowski.

"What I'm saying is that I can raise the victim from the dead, but we may not get as much information as you'd expect. The memories we do get will be confused, painful, but it might narrow the field down as to which master vampire led the group."

"Explain," Dolph said.

"There are only supposed to be two master vampires in St. Louis right now. Malcolm, the undead Billy Graham, and the Master of the City. There's always the possibility we've got someone new in town, but the Master of the City should be able to police that."

"We'll take the head of the Church of Eternal Life," Dolph said.

"I'll take the Master," I said.

"Take one of us with you for backup."

I shook my head. "Can't; if he knew I let the cops know who he was, he'd kill us both."

"How dangerous is it for you to do this?" Dolph asked.

What was I supposed to say? Very? Or did I tell them the Master had the hots for me, so I'd probably be okay? Neither. "I'll be all right."

He stared at me, eyes very serious.

"Besides, what choice do we have?" I motioned at the corpse. "We'll get one of these a night until we find the vampires responsible. One of us has to talk to the Master. He won't talk to police, but he will talk to me."

Dolph took a deep breath and let it out. He nodded. He knew I was right. "When can you do it?"

"Tomorrow night, if I can talk Bert into giving my zombie appointments to someone else."

"You're that sure the Master will talk to you?"

"Yeah." The problem with Jean-Claude was not getting to see him, it was avoiding him. But Dolph didn't know that, and if he did, he might have insisted on going with me. And gotten us both killed.

"Do it," he said. "Let me know what you find out."

"Will do," I said. I stood up, facing him over the bloodless corpse.

"Watch your back," he said.

"Always."

"If the Master eats you, can I have your nifty coveralls?" Zerbrowski asked.

"Buy your own, you cheap bastard."

"I'd rather have the ones that have enveloped your luscious body."

"Give it a rest, Zerbrowski. I'm not into little choo-choos."

"What the hell do trains have to do with anything?" Dolph asked.

Zerbrowski and I looked at each other. We started giggling and couldn't stop. I could claim sleep deprivation. I'd been on my feet for fourteen straight hours, raising the dead and talking to right-wing fruitcakes. The vampire victim was a perfect end to a perfect night. I had a right to be hysterical with laughter. I don't know what Zerbrowski's excuse was.

Chapter 3

There are a handful of days in October that are nearly perfect. The sky stretches overhead in a clear blue, so deep and perfect that it makes everything else prettier. The trees along the highway are crimson, gold, rust, burgundy, orange. Every color is neon-bright, pulsing in the heavy golden sunlight. The air is cool but not cold; by noon you can wear just a light jacket. It was weather for taking long walks in the woods with someone you wanted to hold hands with. Since I didn't have anyone like that, I was just hoping for a free weekend to go away by myself. The chances of that were slim and none.

October is a big month for raising the dead. Everyone thinks that Halloween is the perfect season for raising zombies. It isn't. Darkness is the only requirement. But everyone wants an appointment for midnight on Halloween. They think spending All Hallows Eve in a cemetery killing chickens and watching zombies crawl out of the ground is great entertainment. I could probably sell tickets.

I was averaging five zombies a night. It was one more zombie than anyone else was doing in one night. I should never have told Bert that four zombies didn't wipe me out. My own fault for being too damn truthful. Of course, truth was, five didn't wipe me out either, but I was damned if I'd tell Bert.

Speaking of my boss, I had to call him when I got home. He was going to love me asking for the night off. It made me smile just thinking about it. Any day I could yank Bert's chain was a good day.

I pulled into my apartment complex at nearly one in the afternoon. All I wanted was a quick shower and seven hours of sleep. I had given up on eight hours; it was too late in the day for that. I had to see Jean-Claude tonight. Joy. But he was the Master Vampire of the City. If there was another master vampire around, he'd know it. I think they can smell each other. Of course, if Jean-Claude had committed the murder, he wasn't likely to confess. But I didn't really believe he'd done it. He was much too good a business vampire to get messy. He was the only master vampire I'd ever met who wasn't crazy in some way: psychotic, or sociopath, take your pick.

All right, all right, Malcolm wasn't crazy, but I didn't approve of his methods. He headed up the fastest-growing church in America today. The Church of Eternal Life offered exactly that. No leap of faith, no uncertainty, just a guarantee. You could become a vampire and live forever, unless someone like me killed you, or you got caught in a fire, or hit by a bus. I wasn't sure about the bus part, but I'd always wondered. Surely there must be something massive enough to damage even a vampire beyond healing. I hoped someday to test the theory.

I climbed the stairs slowly. My body felt heavy. My eyes burned with the need to sleep. It was three days before Halloween, and the month couldn't end too soon for me. Business would start dropping off before Thanksgiving. The decline would continue until after New Year's, then it'd start picking up. I prayed for a freak snowstorm. Business drops off if the snow is bad. People seem to think we can't raise the dead in deep snow. We can, but don't tell anyone. I need the break.

The hallway was full of the quiet noises of my day-living neighbors. I was fishing my keys out of my coat pocket when the door opposite mine opened. Mrs. Pringle stepped out. She was tall, slender, thinning with age, white hair done in a small bun at the back of her head. The hair was perfectly white. Mrs. Pringle didn't bother with dyes or makeup. She was over sixty-five and didn't care who knew it.

Custard, her Pomeranian, pranced at the end of his leash. He was a round ball of golden fur with little fox ears. Most cats outweighed him, but he's one of those little dogs with a big-dog attitude. In a past life he was a Great Dane.

"Hello, Anita." Mrs. Pringle smiled as she said it. "You're not just getting in from work, are you?" Her pale eyes were disapproving.

I smiled. "Yeah, I had an . . . emergency come up."

She raised an eyebrow, probably wondering what an animator would have for an emergency, but she was too polite to ask. "You don't take good enough care of yourself, Anita. If you keep burning the candle at both ends, you'll be worn out by the time you're my age."

"Probably," I said.

Custard yapped at me. I did not smile at him. I don't believe in encouraging small, pushy dogs. With that peculiar doggy sense, he knew I didn't like him, and he was determined to win me over.

"I saw the painters were in your apartment last week. Is it all repaired?"

I nodded. "Yeah, all the bullet holes have been patched up and painted over."

"I'm really sorry I wasn't home to offer you my apartment. Mr. Giovoni says you had to go to a hotel."

"Yeah."

"I don't understand why one of the other neighbors didn't offer you a couch for the night."

I smiled. I understood. Two months ago I had slaughtered two killer zombies in my apartment and had a police shootout. The walls and one window had been damaged. Some of the bullets had gone through the walls into other apartments. No one else had been hurt, but none of the neighbors wanted anything to do with me now. I suspected strongly that when my two-year lease was up, I would be asked to leave. I guess I couldn't blame them.

"I heard you were wounded."

I nodded. "Just barely." I didn't bother telling her that the bullet wound hadn't been from the shootout. The mistress of a very bad man had shot me in the right arm. It was healed to a smooth, shiny scar, still a little pink.

"How did your visit with your daughter go?" I asked.

Mrs. Pringle's face went all shiny with a smile. "Oh, wonderful. My last and newest grandchild is perfect. I'll show you pictures later, after you've had some sleep." That disapproving look was back in her eyes. Her teacher face. The one that could make you squirm from ten paces, even if you were innocent. And I hadn't been innocent for years.

I held up my hands. "I give up. I'll go to bed. I promise."

"You see you do," she said. "Come along, Custard, we have to go out for our afternoon stroll." The tiny dog danced at the end of his leash, straining forward like a miniature sled dog.

Mrs. Pringle let three pounds of fluffy fur drag her down the hall. I shook my head. Letting a fuzzball boss you around was not my idea of dog ownership. If I ever had another dog, I'd be boss, or one of us wouldn't survive. It was the principle of the thing.

I opened the door and stepped inside the hush of my apartment. The heater whirred, hot air hissing out of the vents. The aquarium clicked on. The sounds of emptiness. It was wonderful.

The new paint was the same off-white as the old. The carpet was grey; couch and matching chair, white. The kitchenette was pale wood with white and gold linoleum. The two-seater breakfast table in the kitchen was a little darker than the cabinets. A modern print was the only color on the white walls.

The space where most people would have put a full-size kitchen set had the thirty-gallon aquarium against the wall, a stereo catty-corner from it.

Heavy white drapes hid the windows and turned the golden sunlight to a pale twilight. When you sleep during the day, you have to have good curtains.

I flung my coat on the couch, kicked my dress shoes off, and just enjoyed the feeling of my bare feet on the carpet. The panty hose came off next, to lie wrinkled and forlorn by the shoes. Barefoot, I padded over to the fish tank.

The angelfish rose to the surface begging for food. The fish are all wider than my outspread hand. They are the biggest angels I've ever seen outside of the pet store I bought them from. The store had breeding angelfish that were nearly a foot long.

I stripped off the shoulder holster and put the Browning in its second home, a specially made holster in the headboard. If any bad guys snuck up on me, I could pull it and shoot them. That was the idea, anyway. So far it had worked.

When the dry-clean-only suit and blouse were hung neatly in the closet, I flopped down on the bed in my bra and undies, still wearing the silver cross that I wore even in the shower. Never know when a pesky vampire is going to try to take a bite out of you. Always prepared, that was my motto, or was that the Boy Scouts? I shrugged and dialed work. Mary, our daytime secretary, answered on the second ring. "Animators, Incorporated. How may we serve you?"

"Hi, Mary, it's Anita."

"Hi, what's up?"

"I need to talk with Bert."

"He's with a prospective client right now. May I ask what this is pertaining to?"

"Him rescheduling my appointments for tonight."

"Ooh, boy. I'll let you tell him. If he yells at someone, it should be you."

She was only half-kidding.

"Fine," I said.

She lowered her voice and whispered, "Client is on her way to the front door. He'll be with you in a jiffy."

"Thanks, Mary."

She put me on hold before I could tell her not to. Muzak seeped out of the phone. It was a butchered version of the Beatles' "Tomorrow." I'd have rather listened to static. Mercifully, Bert came on the line and saved me.

"Anita, what time can you come in today?"

"I can't."

"Can't what?"

"Can't come in today."

"At all?" His voice had risen an octave.

"You got it."

"Why the hell not?" Cursing at me already, a bad sign.

"I got beeped by the police after my morning meeting. I haven't even been to bed yet."

"You can sleep in, don't worry about meeting new clients in the afternoon. Just come in for your appointments tonight."

He was being generous, understanding. Something was wrong.

"I can't make the appointments tonight, either."

"Anita, we're overbooked here. You have five clients tonight. Five!"

"Divide them up among the other animators," I said.

"Everybody is already maxed."

"Listen, Bert, you're the one who said yes to the police. You're the one who put me on retainer to them. You thought it would be great publicity."

"It has been great publicity," he said.

"Yeah, but it's like working two full-time jobs sometimes. I can't do both."

"Then drop the retainer. I had no idea it'd take up this much of your time."

"It's a murder investigation, Bert. I can't drop it."

"Let the police do their own dirty work," he said.

He was a fine one to talk about that. Him with his squeaky-clean fingernails and nice safe office. "They need my expertise and my contacts. Most of the monsters won't talk to the police."

He was quiet on the other end of the phone. His breathing came harsh and angry. "You can't do this to me. We've taken money, signed contracts."

"I asked you to hire extra help months ago."

"I hired John Burke. He's been handling some of your vampire slayings, as well as raising the dead."

"Yeah, John's a big help, but we need more. In fact, I bet he could take at least one of my zombies tonight."

"Raise five in one night?"

"I'm doing it," I said.

"Yes, but John isn't you."

That was almost a compliment. "You have two choices, Bert; either reschedule or delegate them to someone else."

"I am your boss. I could just say come in tonight or you're fired." His voice was firm and matter-of-fact.

I was tired and cold sitting on the bed in my bra and undies, I didn't have time for this. "Fire me."

"You don't mean that," he said.

"Look, Bert, I've been on my feet for over twenty hours. If I don't get some sleep soon, I'm not going to be able to work for anybody."

He was silent for a long time, his breathing soft and regular in my ear. Finally, he said, "All right, you're free for tonight. But you damn well better be back on the job tomorrow."

"I can't promise that, Bert."

"Dammit, Anita, do you want to be fired?"

"This is the best year we've ever had, Bert. Part of that's due to the articles on me in the *Post-Dispatch*."

"They were about zombie rights and that government study you're on. You didn't do them to help promote our business."

"But it worked, didn't it? How many people call up and ask specifically for me? How many people say they've seen me in the paper? How many heard me on the radio? I may be promoting zombie rights, but it's damn good for business. So cut me some slack."

"You don't think I'd do it, do you?" His voice snarled through the phone. He was pissed.

"No, I don't," I said.

His breath was short and harsh. "You damn well better show up tomorrow night, or I'm going to call your bluff." He slammed the receiver in my ear. Childish.

I hung up the phone and stared at it. The Resurrection Company in California had made me a handsome offer a few months back. But I really didn't want to move to the west coast, or the east coast for that matter. I liked St. Louis. But Bert was going to have to break down and hire more help. I couldn't keep this schedule up. Sure, it'd get better after October, but I just seemed to be going from one emergency to another for this entire year.

I had been stabbed, beaten, shot, strangled, and vampire-bit in the space of four months. There comes a point where you just have too many things happening too close together. I had battle fatigue.

I left a message on my judo instructor's machine. I went twice a week at four o'clock, but I wasn't going to make it today. Three hours of sleep just wouldn't have been enough.

I dialed the number for Guilty Pleasures. It was a vampire strip joint. Chippendale's with fangs. Jean-Claude owned and managed it. Jean-Claude's voice came over the line, soft as silk, caressing down my spine even though I knew it was a recording. "You have reached Guilty Pleasures. I would love to make your darkest fantasy come true. Leave a message, and I will get back to you."

I waited for the beep. "Jean-Claude, this is Anita Blake. I need to see you tonight. It's important. Call me back with a time and place." I gave him my home number, then hesitated, listening to the tape scratch. "Thanks." I hung up, and that was that.

He'd either call back or he wouldn't. He probably would. The question was, did I want him to? No. No, I didn't, but for the police, for all those poor people who would die, I had to try. But for me personally, going to the Master was not a good idea.

Jean-Claude had marked me twice already. Two more marks and I would be his human servant. Did I mention that neither mark was voluntary? His servant for eternity. Didn't sound like a good idea to me. He seemed to lust after my body, too, but that was secondary. I could have handled it if all he wanted was physical, but he was after my soul. That he could not have.

I had managed to avoid him for the last two months. Now I was willingly putting myself within reach again. Stupid. But I remembered the nameless man's hair, soft and mingling with the still-green lawn. The fang marks, the paper-white skin, the fragility of his nude body covered with dew. There would be more bodies to look at, unless we were quick. And quick meant Jean-Claude.

Visions of vampire victims danced in my head. And every one of them was partially my fault, because I was too chickenshit to go see the Master. If I could stop the killings now, with just one dead, I'd risk my soul daily. Guilt is a wonderful motivator.

Chapter 4

I was swimming in black water, strong smooth strokes. The moon hung huge and shining, making a silver pathway on the lake. There was a black fringe of trees. I was almost to shore. The water was so warm, warm as blood. In that moment I knew why the waters were black. It was blood. I was swimming in a lake of fresh, warm blood.

I woke instantly, gasping for breath. Eyes searching the darkness for . . . what? Something that had caressed my leg just before I woke. Something that lived in blood and darkness.

The phone shrilled, and I had to swallow a scream. I wasn't usually this nervous. It was just a nightmare, dammit. Just a dream.

I fumbled for the receiver and managed, "Yeah."

"Anita?" The voice sounded hesitant, as if its owner might hang up.

"Who is this?"

"It's Willie, Willie McCoy." Even as he said the name, the rhythm of the voice sounded familiar. The phone made it distant and charged with an electric hiss, but I recognized it.

"Willie, how are you?" The minute I said it, I wished I hadn't. Willie was a vampire now; how okay could a dead man be?

"I'm doing real well." His voice had a happy lilt to it. He was pleased that I asked.

I sighed. Truth was, I liked Willie. I wasn't supposed to like vampires. Any vampire, not even if I'd known him when he was alive.

"How ya doing yourself?"

"Okay, what's up?"

"Jean-Claude got your message. He says ta meet him at the Circus of the Damned at eight o'clock tonight."

"The Circus? What's he doing over there?"

"He owns it now. Ya didn't know?"

I shook my head, realized he couldn't see it, and said, "No, I didn't."

"He says to meet 'im in a show that starts at eight."

"Which show?"

"He said you'd know which one."

"Well, isn't that cryptic," I said.

"Hey, Anita, I just do what I'm told. Ya know how it is?"

I did know. Jean-Claude owned Willie lock, stock, and soul. "It's okay, Willie, it's not your fault."

"Thanks, Anita." His voice sounded cheerful, like a puppy who expected a kick and got patted instead.

Why had I comforted him? Why did I care whether a vampire got its feelings hurt, or not? Answer: I didn't think of him as a dead man. He was still Willie McCoy with his penchant for loud primary-colored suits, clashing ties, and small, nervous hands. Being dead hadn't changed him that much. I wished it had.

"Tell Jean-Claude I'll be there."

"I will." He was quiet for a minute, his breath soft over the phone. "Watch your back tonight, Anita."

"Do you know something I should know?"

"No, but . . . I don't know."

"What's up, Willie?"

"Nuthin', nuthin'." His voice was high and frightened.

"Am I walking into a trap, Willie?"

"No, no, nuthin' like that." I could almost see his small hands waving in the air. "I swear, Anita, nobody's gunnin' for you."

I let that go. Nobody he knew of was all he could swear to. "Then what are you afraid of, Willie?"

"It's just that there's more vampires around here than usual. Some of em ain't too careful who they hurt. That's all."

"Why are there more vampires, Willie? Where did they come from?"

"I don't know and I don't want to know, ya know? I got ta go, Anita." He hung up before I could ask anything else. There had been real fear in his voice. Fear for me, or for himself? Maybe both.

I glanced at the radio clock on my bedstand: 6:35. I had to hurry if I was going to make the appointment. The covers were toasty warm over my legs. All

I really wanted to do was cuddle back under the blankets, maybe with a certain stuffed toy penguin I knew. Yeah, hiding sounded good.

I threw back the covers and walked into the bathroom. I hit the light switch, and glowing white light filled the small room. My hair stuck up in all directions, a mass of tight black curls. That'd teach me not to sleep on it wet. I ran a brush through the curls and they loosened slightly, turning into a frothing mass of waves. The curls went all over the place and there wasn't a damn thing I could do with it except wash it and start over. There wasn't time for that.

The black hair made my pale skin look deathly, or maybe it was the overhead lighting. My eyes were so dark brown they looked black. Two glittering holes in the pastiness of my face. I looked like I felt; great.

What do you wear to meet the Master of the City? I chose black jeans, a black sweater with bright geometric designs, black Nikes with blue swooshes, and a blue-and-black sport bag clipped around my waist. Color coordination at its best.

The Browning went into its shoulder holster. I put an extra ammo clip in the sport bag along with credit cards, driver's license, money, and a small hairbrush. I slipped on the short leather jacket I'd bought last year. It was the first one I'd ever tried on that didn't make me look like a gorilla. Most leather jackets were so long-sleeved, I could never wear them. The jacket was black, so Bert wouldn't let me wear it to work.

I only zipped the jacket halfway up, leaving room so I could go for my gun if I needed to. The silver cross swung on its long chain, a warm, solid weight between my breasts. The cross would be more help against vampires than the gun, even with silver-coated bullets.

I hesitated at the door. I hadn't seen Jean-Claude in months. I didn't want to see him now. My dream came back to me. Something that lived in blood and darkness. Why the nightmare? Was it Jean-Claude interfering in my dreams again? He had promised to stay out of my dreams. But was his word worth anything? No answer to that.

I flicked off the apartment lights and closed the door behind me. I rattled it to make sure it was locked, and I had nothing left to do but drive to the Circus of the Damned. No more excuses. No more delays. My stomach was so tight it hurt. So I was afraid; so what? I had to go, and the sooner I left, the sooner I could come home. If only I believed that Jean-Claude would make things that simple. Nothing was ever simple where he was concerned. If I learned anything about the murders tonight, I'd pay for it, but not in money. Jean-Claude seemed to have plenty of that. No, his coin was more painful, more intimate, more bloody.

And I had volunteered to go see him. Stupid, Anita, very stupid.

Chapter 5

There was a bouquet of spotlights on the top of the Circus of the Damned. The lights slashed the black night like swords. The multicolored lights that spelled the name seemed dimmer with the huge white lights whirling overhead. Demonic clowns danced around the sign in frozen pantomime.

I walked past the huge cloth signs that covered the walls. One picture showed a man that had no skin; See the Skinless Man. A movie version of a voodoo ceremony covered another banner. Zombies writhed from open graves. The zombie banner had changed since last I'd visited the Circus. I didn't know if that was good or bad; probably neither. I didn't give a damn what they did here, except . . . Except it wasn't right to raise the dead just for entertainment.

Who did they have raising zombies for them? I knew it had to be someone new because I had helped kill their last animator. He had been a serial killer and had nearly killed me twice, the second time by ghoul attack, which was a messy way to die. Of course, the way he died had been messy, too, but I wasn't the one who ripped him open. A vampire had done that. You might say I eased him on his way. A mercy killing. Ri-ight.

It was too cold to be standing outside with my jacket half-unzipped. But if I zipped it all the way, I'd never get to my gun in time. Freeze my butt off, or be able to defend myself. The clowns on the roof had fangs. I decided it wasn't that cold after all.

Heat and noise poured out to meet me at the door. Hundreds of bodies pressed together in an enclosed space. The noise of the crowd was like the ocean, murmurous and large, sound without meaning. A crowd is an elemental thing. A word, a glance, and a crowd becomes a mob. A different being entirely from a group.

There were a lot of families. Mom, Dad, the kiddies. The children had balloons tied to their wrists and cotton candy smeared on their faces and hands. It smelled like a traveling carnival: corn dogs, the cinnamon smell of funnel cakes, snow cones, sweat. The only thing missing was the dust. There was always dust in the air at a summer fair. Dry, choking dust kicked into the air by hundreds of feet. Cars driving over the grass until it is grey-coated with dust.

There was no smell of dirt in the air, but there was something else just as singular. The smell of blood. So faint you'd almost think you dreamed it, but it was there. The sweet copper scent of blood mingled with the smells of cooking food and the sharp smell of a snow cone being made. Who needed dust?

I was hungry, and the corn dogs smelled good. Should I eat first or accuse the Master of the City of murder? Choices, choices.

I didn't get to decide. A man stepped out of the crowd. He was only a little taller than me, with curly blond hair that fell past his shoulders. He was wearing a cornflower-blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up, showing firm, muscular forearms. Jeans no tighter than the skin on a grape showed slender hips. He wore black cowboy boots with blue designs tooled into them. His true-blue eyes matched his shirt.

He smiled, flashing small white teeth. "You're Anita Blake, right?"

I didn't know what to say. It isn't always a good idea to admit who you are.

"Jean-Claude told me to wait for you." His voice was soft, hesitant. There was something about him, an almost childlike appeal. Besides I'm a sucker for a pair of pretty eyes.

"What's your name?" I asked. Always like to know who I'm dealing with.

His smile widened. "Stephen; my name is Stephen." He put out his hand, and I took it. His hand was soft but firm, no manual labor but some weightlifting. Not too much. Enough to firm, not explode. Men my size should not do serious weightlifting. It may look okay in a bathing suit, but in regular clothes you took like a deformed dwarf.

"Follow me, please." He sounded like a waiter, but when he walked into the crowd, I followed him.

He led the way towards a huge blue tent. It was like an old-fashioned circus tent. I'd only seen one in pictures or the movies.

There was a man in a striped coat yelling, "Almost showtime, folks! Present your tickets and come inside! See the world's largest cobra! Watch the fearsome serpent be taken through amazing feats by the beautiful snake charmer Shahaar. We guarantee it will be a show you will never forget."

There was a line of people giving their tickets to a young woman. She tore them in half and handed back the stubs.

Stephen walked confidently along the line without waiting. We got some dirty looks, but the girl nodded to us. And in we went.

Tiers of bleachers ran up to the top of the tent. It was huge. Nearly all the seats were full. A sold-out show. Wowee.

There was a blue rail that formed a circle in the middle. A one-ring circus.

Stephen scooted past the knees of about a dozen people to a set of steps. Since we were at the bottom, up was the only way to go. I followed Stephen up the concrete stairs. The tent may have looked like a circus tent, but the bleachers and stairs were permanent. A mini-coliseum.

I have bad knees, which means that I can run on a flat surface but put me on a hill, or stairs. and it hurts. So I didn't try to keep up with Stephen's smooth, running glide. I did watch the way his jeans fit his snug little behind, though. Looking for clues.

I unzipped the leather jacket but didn't take it off. My gun would show. Sweat glided down my spine. I was going to melt.

Stephen glanced over his shoulder to see if I was following, or maybe for encouragement. He flashed a smile that was just lips curling back from teeth, almost a snarl.

I stopped in the middle of the steps, watching his lithe form glide upward. There was an energy to Stephen as if the air boiled invisibly around him. A shapeshifter. Some lycanthropes are better than others at hiding what they are. Stephen wasn't that good. Or maybe he just didn't care if I knew. Possible.

Lycanthropy was a disease, like AIDS. It was prejudice to mistrust someone for an accident. Most people survived attacks to become shapeshifters. It wasn't a choice. So why didn't I like Stephen as well, now that I knew? Prejudiced, *moi*?

He waited at the top of the stairs, still pretty as a picture, but the air of energy contained in too small a space, like his motor was on high idle, shimmered around him. What was Jean-Claude doing with a shapeshifter on his payroll? Maybe I could ask him.

I stepped up beside Stephen. There must have been something in my face, because he said, "What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

I don't think he believed me. But he smiled and led me towards a booth that was mostly glass with heavy curtains on the inside hiding whatever lay behind. It looked for all the world like a miniature broadcast booth.

Stephen went to the curtained door and opened it. He held it for me, motioning me to go first.

"No, you first," I said.

"I'm being a gentleman here," he said.

"I don't need or want doors opened for me. I'm quite capable, thank you."

"A feminist, my, my."

Truthfully, I just didn't want ol' Stephen at my back. But if he wanted to think I was a hard-core feminist, let him. It was closer to the truth than a lot of things.

He walked through the door. I glanced back to the ring. It looked smaller from up here. Muscular men dressed in glittering loincloths pulled a cart in on their bare shoulders. There were two things in the cart: a huge woven basket and a dark-skinned woman. She was dressed in Hollywood's version of a dancing girl's outfit. Her thick black hair fell like a cloak, sweeping to her ankles. Slender arms, small, dark hands swept the air in graceful curves. She danced in front of the cart. The costume was fake, but she wasn't. She knew how to dance, not for seduction, though it was that, but for power. Dancing was originally an invocation to some god or other; most people forget that.

Goosebumps prickled up the back of my neck, creeping into my hair. I shivered while I stood there and sweated in the heat. What was in the basket? The barker outside had said a giant cobra, but there was no snake in the world that needed a basket that big. Not even the anaconda, the world's heaviest snake, needed a container over ten feet tall and twenty feet wide.

Something touched my shoulder. I jumped and spun. Stephen was standing nearly touching me, smiling.

I swallowed my pulse back into my throat and glared at him. I make a big deal about not wanting him at my back, then let him sneak up behind me. Real swift, Anita, real swift. Because he'd scared me, I was mad at him. Illogical, but it was better to be mad than scared.

"Jean-Claude's just inside," he said. He smiled, but there was a very human glint of laughter in his blue eyes.

I scowled at him, knowing I was being childish, and not caring. "After you, fur-face."

The laughter slipped away. He was very serious as he stared at me. "How did you know?" His voice was uncertain, fragile. A lot of lycanthropes pride themselves on being able to pass for human.

"It was easy," I said. Which wasn't entirely true, but I wanted to hurt him. Childish, unattractive, honest.

His face suddenly looked very young. His eyes filled with uncertainty and pain.

Shit.

"Look, I've spent a lot of time around shapeshifters. I just know what to look for, okay?" Why did I want to reassure him? Because I knew what it was like to be the outsider. Raising the dead makes a lot of people class me with the monsters. There are even days when I agree with them.

He was still staring at me, with his hurt feelings like an open wound in his eyes. If he started to cry, I was leaving.

He turned without another word and walked through the open door. I stared at the door for a minute. There were gasps, screams from the crowd. I whirled and saw it. It was a snake, but it wasn't just the world's biggest cobra, it was the biggest freaking snake I'd ever seen. Its body was banded in dull greyish black and off-white. The scales gleamed under the lights. The head was at least a foot and a half wide. No snake was that big. It flared its hood, and it was the size of a satellite dish. The snake hissed, flicking out a tongue that was like a black whip.

I'd had a semester of herpetology in college. If the snake had been a mere eight feet or less, I would have called it a banded Egyptian cobra. I couldn't remember the scientific name to save myself.

The woman dropped to the ground in front of the snake, forehead to the ground. A mark of obedience from her to the snake. To her god. Sweet Jesus.

The woman stood and began to dance, and the cobra watched her. She'd made herself a living flute for the nearsighted creature to follow. I didn't want to see what would happen if she messed up. The poison wouldn't have time to kill her. The fangs were so damn big they'd spear her like swords. She'd die of shock and blood loss long before the poison kicked in.

Something was growing in the middle of that ring. Magic crawled up my spine. Was it magic that kept the snake safe, or magic that called it up, or was it the snake itself? Did it have power all its own? I didn't even know what to call it. It looked like a cobra, perhaps the world's biggest, yet I didn't even have a word for it. God with a little "g" would do, but it wasn't accurate.

I shook my head and turned away. I didn't want to see the show. I didn't want to stand there with its magic flowing soft and cold over my skin. If the snake wasn't safe, Jean-Claude would have had it caged, right? Right.

I turned away from the snake charmer and the world's biggest cobra. I wanted to talk to Jean-Claude and get the hell out of here.

The open door was filled with darkness. Vampires didn't need lights. Did lycanthropes? I didn't know. Gee, so much to learn. My jacket was unzipped all the way, the better for a fast draw. Though truthfully, if I needed a fast draw tonight, I was in deep shit.

I took a deep breath and let it out. No sense putting it off. I walked through the door into the waiting darkness without looking back. I didn't want to see

what was happening in the ring. Truth was, I didn't want to see what was behind the darkness. Was there another choice? Probably not.

Chapter 6

The room was like a closet with drapes all the way around. There was no one in the curtained darkness but me. Where had Stephen gone? If he had been a vampire, I would have believed the vanishing act, but lycanthropes don't just turn into thin air. So, there had to be a second door.

If I had built this room, where would I put an inner door? Answer: opposite the first door. I swept the drapes aside. The door was there. Elementary, my dear Watson.

The door was heavy wood with some flowering vine carved into it. The doorknob was white with tiny pink flowers in the center of it. It was an awfully feminine door. Of course, no rules against men liking flowers. None at all. It was a sexist comment. Forget I thought it.

I did not draw my gun. See, I'm not completely paranoid.

I turned the doorknob and swung the door inward. I kept pushing until it was flush against the wall. No one was hiding behind it. Good.

The wallpaper was off-white with thin silver, gold, and copper designs running through it. The effect was vaguely oriental. The carpeting was black. I didn't even know carpet came in that color. A canopy bed took up most of one side of the room. Black, gauzy curtains covered it. Made the bed indistinct, misty, like a dream. There was someone asleep in a nest of black covers and crimson sheets. A line of bare chest showed it was a man, but a wave of brown hair covered his face like a shroud. It all looked faintly unreal, as if he was waiting for movie cameras to roll.

A black couch was against the far wall, with blood-red pillows thrown along it. A matching love seat was against the last wall. Stephen was curled up on the love seat. Jean-Claude sat on one corner of the couch. He wore black jeans tucked into knee-high leather boots, dyed a deep, almost velvet black. His shirt had a high lace collar pinned at the neck by a thumb-size ruby pendant. His black hair was just long enough to curl around the lace.

The sleeves were loose and billowing, tight at the wrists with lace spilling over his hands until only his fingertips showed.

"Where do you get your shirts?" I asked.

He smiled. "Don't you like it?" His hands caressed down his chest, fingertips hesitating over his nipples. It was an invitation. I could touch that smooth white cloth and see if the lace was as soft as it looked.

I shook my head. Mustn't get distracted. I glanced at Jean-Claude. He was staring at me with those midnight blue eyes. His eyelashes were like black lace.

"She wants you, Master," Stephen said. There was laughter in his voice, derision. "I can smell her desire."

Jean-Claude turned just his head, staring at Stephen. "As can I." The words were innocent, but the feeling behind them wasn't. His voice slithered around the room, low and full of a terrible promise.

"I meant no harm, Master, no harm." Stephen looked scared. I didn't blame him.

Jean-Claude turned back to me as if nothing had happened. His face was still pleasantly handsome, interested, amused.

"I don't need your protection."

"Oh, I think you do."

I whirled and found another vampire standing at my back. I hadn't heard the door open.

She smiled at me, without flashing fang. A trick that the older vampires learn. She was tall and slender with dark skin and long ebony hair that swung around her waist. She wore crimson Lycra bike pants that clung so tight, you knew she wasn't wearing underwear. Her top was red silk, loose and blousy, with thin spaghetti straps holding it in place. It looked like the top to slinky pajamas. Red high-heeled sandals and a thin gold chain set with a single diamond completed the outfit. The word that came to mind was "exotic." She glided towards me, smiling.

"Is that a threat?" I asked.

She stopped in front of me. "Not yet." There was a hint of some other language in her voice. Something darker with rolling, sibilant sounds.

"That is enough," Jean-Claude said.

The dark lady twirled around, black hair like a veil behind her. "I don't think so."

"Yasmeen." The one word was low and dark with warning.

Yasmeen laughed, a harsh sound like breaking glass. She stopped directly in front of me, blocking my view of Jean-Claude. Her hand stretched towards me, and I stepped back, out of reach.

She smiled wide enough to show fangs and reached for me again. I stepped back, and she was suddenly on me, faster than I could blink, faster than I could breathe. Her hand gripped my hair, bending my neck backwards. Her fingertips brushed my skull. Her other hand held my chin, fingers digging in like fleshy metal. My face was immobile between her hands, trapped.

Short of taking my gun out and shooting her, there was nothing I could do. And if her movement was any clue, I'd never get the gun out in time.

"I see why you like her. So pretty, so delicate." She half-turned towards Jean-Claude, nearly giving me her back, but still holding my head immobile.

"I never thought you'd take in a human." She made it sound like I was a stray puppy.

Yasmeen turned back to me. I pressed my 9mm into her chest. No matter how fast she was, she would be hurt if I wanted it. I can feel how old a vampire is inside my head. It's part natural ability, and part practice. Yasmeen was old, older than Jean-Claude. I was betting she was over five hundred. If she had

been the new dead, high-tech ammo at point-blank range would have shredded her heart, killed her. But over five hundred and a master vampire, it might not kill her. Or then again, it might.

Something flickered over her face; surprise, and maybe just a touch of fear. Her body was statue-still. If she was breathing, I couldn't tell.

My voice sounded strained from the angle she held my neck, but the words were clear. "Very slowly, take your hands away from my face. Put both hands on top of your head and lace your fingers together."

"Jean-Claude, call off your human."

"I'd do what she says, Yasmeen." His voice was pleased. "How many vampires have you killed now, Anita?"

"Eighteen."

Yasmeen's eyes widened just a bit. "I don't believe you."

"Believe this, bitch: I'll pull this trigger and you can kiss your heart good-bye."

"Bullets cannot harm me."

"Silver-plated can. Move off me, now!"

Yasmeen's hand slid away from my hair and jaw.

"Slowly," I said.

She did what I asked. She stood in front of me with her long-fingered hands clasped across her head. I stepped away from her, gun still pointed at her chest.

"Now what?" Yasmeen asked. A smile still curled her lips. Her dark eyes were amused. I didn't like being laughed at, but when tangling with master vampires you let some things slide.

"You can put your hands down," I said.

Yasmeen did, but she continued to stare at me as if I'd sprouted a second head. "Where did you find her, Jean-Claude? The kitten has teeth."

"Tell Yasmeen what the vampires call you, Anita."

It sounded too much like an order, but this didn't seem the time to bitch at him. "The Executioner."

Yasmeen's eyes widened; then she smiled, flashing a lot of fang. "I thought you'd be taller."

"It disappoints me, too, sometimes," I said.

Yasmeen threw back her head and laughed, wild and brittle, with an edge of hysteria. "I like her, Jean-Claude. She's dangerous, like sleeping with a lion."

She glided towards me. I had the gun up and pointed at her. It didn't even slow her down.

"Jean-Claude, tell her I will shoot her if she doesn't back off."

"I promise not to hurt you, Anita. I will be oh so gentle." She swayed over to me, and I wasn't sure what to do. She was playing with me, sadistic but probably not deadly. Could I shoot her for being a pain in the ass? I didn't think so.

"I can taste the heat of your blood, the warmth of your skin on the air like perfume." Her gliding, hip-swinging walk brought her right in front of me. I

pointed the gun at her, and she laughed. She pressed her chest against the tip of my gun.

"So soft, wet, but strong." I wasn't sure who she was talking about, her or me. Neither option sounded pleasant. She rubbed her small breasts against the gun, her nipples caressing the gun barrel. "Dainty, but dangerous." The last word was a whispered hiss that flowed over my skin like ice water. She was the first master I'd ever met who had some of Jean-Claude's voice tricks.

I could see her nipples hardening through the thin material of her shirt. Yikes. I pointed the gun at the floor and stepped away from her. "Jesus, are all vampires over two hundred perverts?"

"I am over two hundred," Jean-Claude said.

"I rest my case."

Yasmeen let a warm trickle of laughter spill out of her mouth. The sound caressed my skin like a warm wind. She stalked towards me. I backed up until I hit the wall. She put a hand on either side of the wall near my shoulders and began to lean in like she was doing a pushup. "I'd like to taste her myself."

I shoved the gun into her ribs, too low for her to rub herself against it. "Nobody lays a fang on me," I said.

"Tough girl." She leaned her face over me, lips brushing my forehead. "I like tough girls."

"Jean-Claude, do something with her before one of us gets killed."

Yasmeen pushed away from me, elbows locked, as far away as she could get without moving her hands. Her tongue flicked over her lips, a hint of fang, but mostly wet lips. She leaned back into me, lips half-parted, but she wasn't going for my neck. She was definitely going for my mouth. She didn't want to *taste* me, she wanted to taste me. I couldn't shoot her, not if she just wanted to kiss me. If she'd been a man, I wouldn't have shot her.

Her hair fell forward over my hands, soft like thick silk. Her face was all I could see. Her eyes were a perfect blackness. Her lips hovered just above my mouth. Her breath was warm, and smelled of breath mints, but under the modern smell was something older: the sweet foulness of blood.

"Your breath smells like old blood," I whispered into her mouth.

She whispered back, lips barely caressing my mouth, "I know." Her lips pressed into mine, a gentle kiss. She smiled with our lips still touching.

The door opened, nearly pinning us to the wall. Yasmeen stood up, but kept her hands around my shoulders. We both looked at the door. A woman with nearly white blond hair looked wildly around the room. Her blue eyes widened as she saw us. She screamed, high and wordless, rage-filled.

"Get off of her!"

I frowned up at Yasmeen. "Is she talking to me?"

"Yes." Yasmeen looked amused.

The woman did not. She ran towards us, hands outstretched, fingers curled into claws. Yasmeen caught her in a blurring moment of pure speed. The woman thrashed and struggled, her hands still reaching for me.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked.

"Marguerite is Yasmeen's human servant," Jean-Claude said. "She thinks you may steal Yasmeen away from her."

"I don't want Yasmeen."

Yasmeen shot me a look of pure anger. Had I hurt her feelings? I hoped so.

"Marguerite, look; she's yours, all right?"

The woman screamed at me, wordless and guttural. What might have been a pretty face was screwed up into something bestial. I'd never seen such instant rage. It was frightening even with a loaded gun in my hand.

Yasmeen had to lift the woman off her feet, holding her struggling in mid-air. "I'm afraid, Jean-Claude, that Marguerite is not going to be satisfied unless she answers the challenge."

"What challenge?" I asked.

"You challenged her claim to me."

"Did not," I said.

Yasmeen smiled. The serpent must have smiled at Eve that way: pleasant, amused, dangerous.

"Jean-Claude, I didn't come here for whatever the hell is going on. I don't want any vampire, let alone a female one," I said.

"If you were my human servant, *ma petite*, there would be no challenge, because once one is bound to a master vampire, it is an unbreakable bond."

"Then what is Marguerite worried about?"

"That Yasmeen may take you as a lover. She does that from time to time to drive Marguerite into jealous rages. For some reason I do not understand, Yasmeen enjoys it."

"Oh, yes, I do enjoy it." Yasmeen turned towards me with the woman still clasped in her arms. She was holding the struggling woman easily, no strain. Of course, vampires can bench press Toyotas. What was one medium-size human to that?

"So what exactly does this mean to me personally?"

Jean-Claude smiled, but there was an edge of tiredness to it. Was he bored? Or angry? Or just tired? "You must fight Marguerite. If you win, then Yasmeen is yours. If you lose, Yasmeen is Marguerite's."

"Wait a minute," I said. "What sort of fight, pistols at dawn?"

"No weapons," Yasmeen said. "My Marguerite is not skilled in weapons. I don't want her hurt."

"Then stop tormenting her," I said.

Yasmeen smiled. "It is part of the fun."

"Sadistic bitch," I said.

"Yes, I am."

Jesus, some people you couldn't even insult. "So you want us to fight bare-handed over Yasmeen?" I couldn't believe I was even asking this question.

"Yes, *ma petite*."

I took a deep breath, looked at my gun, looked back at the screaming woman, then holstered my gun. "Is there any way out of this, besides fighting her?"

"If you admit you are my human servant, then there will be no fight. There will be no need for one." Jean-Claude was watching me, studying my face. His eyes were very still.

"You mean this was a setup," I said. The first warm rumblings of anger chased up my gut.

"A setup, *ma petite*? I had no idea Yasmeen would find you so enticing."

"Bullshit!"

"Admit you are my human servant and all ends here."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you fight Marguerite."

"Fine," I said. "Let's do it."

"What would it cost you to admit what is true, Anita?" Jean-Claude asked.

"I am not your human servant. I will never be your human servant. I wish you'd just accept that and leave me the fuck alone."

He frowned. "*Ma petite*, such language."

"Fuck off."

He smiled then. "As you like, *ma petite*." He sat up on the edge of the couch, maybe so he could see better. "Yasmeen, any time you are ready."

"Wait," I said. I took off my jacket and wasn't sure where to lay it.

The man who had been sleeping on the black-canopied bed reached a hand through the black gauze. "I'll hold it for you," he said.

I stared at him for a minute. He was naked from the waist up. His arms, stomach, chest showed signs of weightlifting, just enough, not too much. He either had a perfect tan or was naturally dark complected. Hair fell in a wavy mass around his shoulders. His eyes were brown and very human. That was nice to see.

I handed him my jacket. He smiled, a quick flash of teeth that chased the last signs of sleep from his face. He sat up with the jacket in one hand, arms encircling his knees that were still hidden under the black and red covers. He laid his cheek on his knees and managed to look winsome.

"Are you quite done, *ma petite*?" Jean-Claude's voice was amused, with an edge of laughter that wasn't humor at all. It was mockery. But whether he was mocking me or himself, I couldn't tell.

"I'm ready, I guess," I said.

"Put her down, Yasmeen. Let us see what happens."

I heard Stephen say, "Twenty on Marguerite."

Yasmeen said, "No fair. I can't bet against my own human servant."

"I'll spot you both twenty that Ms. Blake wins." That came from the man in the bed. I had a second to glance at him, to see him smile at me; then Marguerite was coming.

She slapped at my face, and I blocked it with my forearm. She fought like a girl, all open-handed slaps and fingernails. But she was fast, faster than a human. Maybe she got that from being a human servant, I don't know. Her fingernails raked down my face in a sharp, painful line. That was it: no more Ms. Nice Guy.

I held her off with one hand. She dug her teeth into that hand. I hit her with my right fist as hard as I could, turning my body into it. It was a nice solid hit to the solar plexus.

Marguerite stopped biting my hand and bent over, hands covering her stomach. She was gasping for breath. Good.

My left hand had a bloody imprint of her teeth in it. I touched my left cheek and came away with more blood. Damn, that hurt.

Marguerite knelt on the floor, relearning how to breathe. But she was staring up at me. The look in her blue eyes said the fight wasn't over. As soon as she got her breath back, she would start again.

"Stay down, Marguerite, or I'll hurt you."

She shook her head.

"She can't give up, *ma petite*, or you win Yasmeen's body, if not her heart."

"I don't want her body. I don't want anyone's body."

"Now, that is simply not true, *ma petite*," Jean-Claude said.

"Stop calling me *ma petite*."

"You bear two of my marks, Anita. You are halfway to being my human servant. Admit that, and no one else need suffer tonight."

"Yeah, right," I said.

Marguerite was getting to her feet. I didn't want her on her feet. I moved in before she could stand, and foot-swept her legs out from under her. I forced her shoulders backwards at the same time, and I rode her down. I got her right arm in a joint lock. She tried to get up. I increased the pressure, and she lay back down.

"Give up the fight."

"No." It was only the second coherent thing I'd heard her utter.

"I will break your arm."

"Break it, break it! I don't care." Her face was wild, enraged. God. There was no way to reason with her. Great.

Using the joint lock as a lever, I turned her over on her stomach, increasing the pressure to almost breaking, but not quite. Breaking her arm might not stop the fight. I wanted it over with.

I used my leg and one arm to keep the joint lock on but knelt over her upper body, until my weight would keep her pinned. I took a handful of yellow hair and pulled her neck back. I released her arm and brought my right arm across her neck, with my elbow in front of her Adam's apple and the arm squeezing the arteries on both sides of her neck. I put my right hand on my left wrist and squeezed.

She scratched at my face, but I buried my eyes in her back and she couldn't reach me. She was making small, helpless sounds because she didn't have enough air to make big ones.

Her hands scratched at my right arm, but the sweater was thick. She pushed the sleeve up, exposing my bare arm, and began to shred the skin with her nails. I buried my face deeper into her back and squeezed until my arms

shook and I was gritting my teeth. Everything I had was in that one arm, pressing into her slender throat.

Her hands stopped scratching me. They beat against my arm like dying butterflies.

It takes a long time to choke someone into unconsciousness. The movies make it look easy, quick, clean. It isn't easy, it isn't quick, and it sure as hell isn't clean. You can feel the pulse on either side of the neck pounding against your arm while you squeeze the life out of it. The person struggles a lot more than in the movies. And as far as choking someone to death, you better hold on for a long time after they stop moving.

Marguerite went slowly limp, a body part at a time. When she was just dead weight in my arms, I let her go, slowly. She lay on the floor unmoving. I couldn't even see her breathe. Had I squeezed too long?

I touched her neck and found the carotid pulse strong and even. Just out of it, not dead. Good.

I stood and walked back towards the bed.

Yasmeen went to her knees beside Marguerite's still form. "My love, my only one, has she hurt you?"

"She's just unconscious," I said. "She'll come to in a few minutes."

"If you had killed her, I would have torn your throat out."

I shook my head. "Let's not start this shit again. I've had about all the grandstanding I can take for one night."

The man in bed said, "You're bleeding."

Blood was dripping down my right forearm. Marguerite may not have been able to do any real damage, but the scratches were deep enough that some of them might leave scars. Great; I already had a long, thin scar on the underside of my right arm from a knife. Even with the scratches, my right arm had fewer scars than my left. Work-related injuries.

Blood was dripping down my arm rather steadily. The blood didn't show on the black carpeting. A good color if you planned to bleed much in a room.

Yasmeen was helping Marguerite to her feet. The woman had recovered very quickly. Why? Because she was a human servant, of course. Sure.

Yasmeen walked towards the bed, towards me. Her lovely face had thinned until the bones showed through. Her eyes were bright, almost feverish. "Fresh blood, and I haven't fed tonight."

"Control yourself, Yasmeen."

"You have not taught your servant good manners, Jean-Claude," Yasmeen said. She was looking very unkindly at me.

"Leave her alone, Yasmeen." Jean-Claude was standing now.

"Every servant must be tamed, Jean-Claude. You have let it go far too long."

I looked over Yasmeen's shoulder at him. "Tamed?"

"It is an unfortunate stage in the process," he said. His voice was neutral, as if he were talking about taming a horse.

"Damn you." I pulled my gun. I held it two-handed in a teacup grip. Nobody was taming me tonight.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw someone stand up on the other side of the bed. The man was still under the covers. It was a slender woman, her skin the color of coffee with cream. Her black hair was cut very close to her head. She was naked. Where the hell had she come from?

Yasmeen was about a yard from me, tongue playing over her lips, fangs glistening in the overhead light.

"I'll kill you, do you understand that, I'll kill you," I said.

"You'll try."

"Fun and games aren't worth dying for," I said.

"After a few hundred years, that's all that is worth dying for."

"Jean-Claude, unless you want to lose her, call her off!" My voice was higher than I wanted it to be, afraid.

At this range the bullet should take out her entire chest. If it worked, there would be no resurrecting her as the undead; her heart would be gone. Of course, she was over five hundred years old. One shot might not do it. Lucky I had more than one bullet.

I caught movement from the corner of my eye. I was half-turned towards it when something flattened me to the ground. The black woman was on top of me. I brought the gun around to fire, not giving a damn if she was human or not. But her hand grabbed my wrists, squeezing. She was going to crush my wrists.

She snarled in my face, all teeth and a low growl. The sound should have had fur around it and pointy teeth. Human faces weren't supposed to look that way.

The woman jerked the Browning out of my hands like taking candy from a baby. She held it wrong, like she didn't know which end of the gun went where.

An arm came around her waist and pulled her backwards off me. It was the man on the bed. The woman turned on him, snarling.

Yasmeen leapt for me. I scooted backwards, putting the wall at my back. She smiled. "Not so tough without your weapon, are you?"

She was suddenly kneeling in front of me. I hadn't seen her come, not even a blur of motion. She appeared beside me like magic.

She had her body up against my knees, pinning me to the wall. Yasmeen dug her fingers into my upper arms and jerked me towards her. Her strength was incredible. She made the black shapeshifter seem fragile.

"Yasmeen, no!" It was Jean-Claude coming to my aid at last. But he was going to be too late. Yasmeen bared her teeth, raised her neck back for the strike, and I couldn't do a damn thing.

She pulled me in tight against her, arms locked behind my back. If I'd been pressed any tighter I'd have come out on the other side.

I screamed, "Jean-Claude!"

Heat; something was burning inside my sweater, over my heart. Yasmeen hesitated. I felt her whole body shudder. What the hell was happening?

A tongue of blue-white flame curled up between us. I screamed and Yasmeen echoed it. We screamed together as we burned.

She fell away from me. Blue-white flame crawled over her shirt. Flames licked around a hole in my sweater. I shrugged out of the shoulder holster and pulled the burning sweater off.

My cross still burned with an intense blue-white flame. I jerked the chain and it snapped. I dropped the cross to the carpet, where the flames smoldered, then died.

There was a perfect cross-shaped burn on my chest, just above my breast, over the beat of my heart. The burn was covered in blisters already. A second-degree burn.

Yasmeen had ripped her own blouse off. She had an identical burn, but lower down between her breasts because she was taller than I was.

I knelt on the floor in just my bra and jeans. Tears were trailing down my face. I had a bigger cross-shaped burn scar on my left forearm. A vampire's human followers had branded me, thinking it was funny. They'd laughed right up to the minute I killed them.

A burn is a bitch. Inch for inch, a burn hurts worse than any other injury.

Jean-Claude stood in front of me. The cross glowed a white-hot light, no flames, but then he wasn't touching it. I looked up to find him shielding his eyes with his arm.

"Put it away, *ma petite*. No one else will harm you tonight, I promise you that."

"Why don't you just back off and let me decide what I'm going to do?"

He sighed. "I was childish to let it get so far out of hand, Anita. Forgive me for my foolishness." It was hard to take the apology seriously while he cowered behind his arm, not daring to look at my glowing cross. But it was an apology. From Jean-Claude, that was a lot.

I picked the cross up by its chain. I had broken the clasp getting it off. I'd need a new chain before it could go around my neck again. I picked my sweater up in my other hand. There was a melted hole bigger than my fist in it. Right over the chest area. The sweater was ruined. No help there. Where do you hide a glowing cross when you aren't wearing a shirt?

The man in the bed handed my leather jacket to me. I met his eyes and saw in them concern, a little fear. His brown eyes were very close to me, and very human. It was comforting, and I wasn't even sure why.

The shoulder holster was flopping down around my waist like suspenders. I shrugged back into the straps. They felt strange next to my bare skin.

The man handed me my gun, butt first. The black shapeshifter stood on the other side of the bed, still naked, glaring at us. I didn't care how he'd gotten my gun from her. I was just glad to have it back.

With the Browning in its holster, I felt safer, though I'd never tried wearing a shoulder holster over bare skin. I suspected it was going to chafe. Oh, well, nothing's perfect.

The man held out a handful of Kleenex to me. The red sheets had slid down, exposing a long nude line of his body to about mid-thigh. The sheet was perilously close to failing off him all together. "Your arm," he said.

I stared down at my right arm. It was still bleeding a little. It hurt so much less than the burn, I had forgotten about it.

I took the Kleenex and wondered what he was doing here. Had he been having sex with the naked woman, the shapeshifter? I hadn't seen her in the bed. Had she been hiding under it?

I cleaned up my arm as best I could; didn't want to bleed too heavily on the leather jacket. I slipped the jacket on, and put the stillglowing cross in my left pocket. Once it was hidden, the glow would stop. The only reason Yasmeen and I had gotten in trouble was that the sweater had a loose weave and her top had left a lot of bare flesh. Vampire flesh touching a blessed cross was always volatile.

Jean-Claude stared down at me, now that the cross was safely hidden. "I am sorry, *ma petite*. I did not mean to frighten you tonight." He held one hand down towards me. The skin was paler than the white lace that covered it.

I ignored his outstretched hand and used the bed to help me stand.

He lowered his hand slowly. His dark blue eyes were very still, looking at me. "It never works as I want it to with you, Anita Blake. Why is that?"

"Maybe you should take the hint, and leave me alone."

He smiled, a bare movement of lips. "I'm afraid it is too late for that."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The door swung open, banging against the wall and bouncing back. A man stood in the doorway, eyes wide, sweat running down his face. "Jean-Claude . . . the snake." He seemed to be having trouble breathing, as if he had run all the way up the stairs.

"What about the snake?" Jean-Claude asked.

The man swallowed, his breathing slowing. "It's gone crazy."

"What happened?"

The man shook his head. "I don't know. It attacked Shahar, its trainer. She's dead."

"Is it in the crowd?"

"Not yet."

"We will have to finish this discussion later, *ma petite*." He moved for the door, and the rest of the vampires followed at his heels. Stephen went with them. Well trained.

The slender black woman slipped a loose dress, black with red flowers on it, over her head. A pair of red high heels and she was out the door.

The man was out of the bed, naked. There was no time to be embarrassed. He was struggling into a pair of sweats.

This wasn't my problem, but what if the cobra got into the crowd? Not my problem. I zipped the jacket up enough to hide the fact I was shirtless but not so high up I couldn't draw my gun.

I was out the door and into the bright open space of the tent before the nameless man had slipped on his sweat pants. The vampires and shapeshifters were at the edge of the ring, fanning out into a circle around the snake. It filled the small ring with black-and-white coils. The bottom half of a man in a

glittering loincloth was disappearing down the cobra's throat. That's what had kept it out of the crowd. It was taking time to feed.

Sweet Jesus.

The man's legs twitched, kicking convulsively. He couldn't be alive. He couldn't be. But the legs twitched as they slid out of sight. Please, God, let it just be a reflex. Don't let him still be alive. The thought was worse than any nightmare I could remember. And I have a lot of material for nightmares.

The monster in the ring wasn't my problem. I didn't have to be the bloody hero this time. People were screaming, running, arms full of children. Popcorn bags and cotton candy were getting crushed underfoot. I waded into the crowd and began pushing my way down. A woman carrying a toddler fell at my feet. A man climbed over them. I dragged the woman to her feet, taking the baby in one arm. People shoved past us. We shuddered just trying to stand still. I felt like a rock in the middle of a raging river.

The woman stared at me, eyes too large for her face. I pushed the toddler into her arms and wedged her between the seats. I grabbed the arms of the nearest large male, sexist that I am, and shouted, "Help them!"

The man's face was startled, as if I had spoken in tongues, but some of the panic faded from his face. He took the woman's arm and began to push his way towards the exit.

I couldn't let the snake get into the crowd. Not if I could stop it. Shit. I was going to play hero, dammit. I started fighting against the tide, to go down when everybody else was coming up and over. An elbow caught me in the mouth and I tasted blood. By the time I fought my way through this mess, it would all be over. God, I hoped so.

Chapter 7

I stepped out of the crowd like I was flinging aside a curtain. My skin tingled with the memory of shoving bodies, but I stood alone on the last step. The screaming crowd was still up above me, struggling for the exits. But here, just above the ring, there was nothing. The silence lay in thick folds against my face and hands. It was hard to breathe through the thick air. Magic. But whether vampire or cobra, I didn't know.

Stephen stood closest to me, shirtless, slim and somehow elegant. Yasmeen had on his blue shirt, hiding her naked upper body. She had tied the shirt up to expose a tanned expanse of tummy. Marguerite stood beside her. The black woman stood on Stephen's right. She had kicked off her high heels and stood flat-footed in the ring.

Jean-Claude stood on the far side of the circle with two new blond vampires on either side. He turned and stared at me across the distance. I felt

his touch inside me where no hand was ever meant to go. My throat tightened; sweat broke on my body. Nothing at that moment would have made me go closer to him. He was trying to tell me something. Something private and too intimate for words.

A hoarse scream brought my attention to the center of the ring. Two men lay broken and bleeding to one side. The cobra reared over them. It was like a moving tower of muscle and scale. It hissed at us. The sound was loud, echoing.

The men lay on the ground at its . . . feet? tail? One of them twitched. Was he alive? My hands squeezed the guardrail until my fingers ached. I was so scared I could taste bile at the back of my throat. My skin was cold with it. You ever have those dreams where snakes are everywhere, so thick on the ground you can't walk unless you step on them? It's almost claustrophobic. The dream always ends with me standing in the middle of the trees with snakes dripping down on me, and all I can do is scream.

Jean-Claude held out one slender hand towards me. The lace covered everything but the tips of his fingers. Everyone else was staring at the snake. Jean-Claude was staring at me.

One of the wounded men moved. A soft moan escaped his lips and seemed to echo in the huge tent. Was it illusion or had the sound really echoed? It didn't matter. He was alive, and we had to keep him that way.

We? What was this "we" stuff? I stared into Jean-Claude's deep blue eyes. His face was utterly blank, wiped clean of any emotion I understood. He couldn't trick me with his eyes. His own marks had seen to that, but mind tricks—if he worked at it—were still possible. He was working at it.

It wasn't words, but a compulsion. I wanted to go to him. To run to him. To feel the smooth, solid grip of his hand. The softness of lace against my skin. I leaned against the railing, dizzy. I gripped it to keep from falling. What the hell were these mind games now? We had other problems, didn't we? Or didn't he care about the snake? Maybe it had all been a trick. Maybe he had told the cobra to run amuck. But why?

Every hair on my body raised, as if some invisible finger had just brushed it. I shivered and couldn't stop.

I was staring down at a pair of very nice black boots, high and soft. I looked up and met Jean-Claude's eyes. He had left his place around the cobra to come to me. It beat the hell out of me going to him.

"Join with me, Anita, and we have enough power to stop the creature."

I shook my head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He brushed his fingertips down my arm. Even through the leather jacket I could feel his touch like a line of ice, or was it fire?

"How can you be hot and cold at the same time?" I asked.

He smiled, a bare movement of lips. "*Ma petite*, stop fighting me, and we can tame the creature. We can save the men."

He had me there. A moment of personal weakness against the lives of two people. What a choice.

"Once I let you inside my head that far, it'll be easier for you to come in next time. My soul is not up for grabs for anybody's life."

He sighed. "Very well, it is your choice." He started to turn away from me. I grabbed his arm, and it was warm and firm and very, very real.

He turned to me, eyes large and drowning deep, like the bottom of the ocean, and just as deadly. His own power kept me from falling in; alone I would have been lost.

I swallowed hard enough for it to hurt, and pulled my hand away from him. I had the urge to wipe my hand against my pants, as if I had touched something bad. Maybe I had.

"Will silver bullets hurt it?"

He seemed to think about that for a second. "I do not know."

I took a deep breath. "If you stop trying to hijack my mind, I'll help you."

"You'll face it with a gun, rather than with me?" His voice sounded amused.

"You got it."

He stepped away from me and motioned me towards the ring.

I vaulted the rail and landed beside him. I ignored him as much as I was able and started walking towards the creature. I pulled the Browning out. It was nice and solid in my hand. A comforting weight.

"The ancient Egyptians worshipped it as a god, *ma petite*. She was Edjo, the royal serpent. Cared for, sacrificed to, adored."

"It isn't a god, Jean-Claude."

"Are you so sure?"

"I'm a monotheist, remember. It's just another supernatural creepycrawlie to me."

"As you like, *ma petite*."

I turned back to him. "How the hell did you get it past quarantine?"

He shook his head. "Does it matter?"

I glanced back at the thing in the middle of the ring. The snake charmer lay in a bloody heap to one side of the snake. It hadn't eaten her. Was that a sign of respect, affection, dumb luck?

The cobra pushed towards us, belly scales clenching and unclenching. It made a dry, whispering sound against the ring's floor.

He was right; it didn't matter how the thing had gotten into the country. It was here now. "How are we going to stop it?"

He smiled wide enough to flash fangs. Maybe it was the "we." "If you could disable its mouth, I think we could deal with it."

The snake's body was thicker than a telephone pole. I shook my head. "If you say so."

"Can you injure the mouth?"

I nodded. "If silver bullets work on it, yeah."

"My little marksman," he said.

"Can the sarcasm," I said.

He nodded. "If you are going to try to shoot it, I would hurry, *ma petite*. Once it wades into my people, it will be too late." His face was unreadable. I couldn't tell if he wanted me to do it, or not.

I turned and started walking across the ring. The cobra stopped moving forward. It waited, like a swaying tower. It stood there, if something without legs could stand, and waited for me, whiplike tongue flicking out, tasting the air. Tasting me.

Jean-Claude was suddenly beside me. I hadn't heard him come, hadn't felt him come. Just another mind trick. I had other things to worry about right now.

He spoke, low and urgent; I think only I heard. "I will do my best to protect you, *ma petite*."

"You were doing a great job up in your office."

He stopped walking. I didn't.

"I know you are afraid of it, Anita. Your fear crawls through my belly," he called, soft and faint as wind.

I whispered back, not sure he would even be able to hear me. "Stay the fuck out of my mind."

The cobra watched me. I held the Browning in a two-handed grip, pointed at the thing's head. I thought I was out of striking distance, but I wasn't sure. How far away is safe distance from a snake that's bigger than a Mack truck? Two states away, three? I was close enough to see the snake's flat black eyes, empty as a doll's.

Jean-Claude's words blew through my mind like flower petals. I could even have sworn I smelled flowers. His voice had never held the scent of perfume before. "Force it to follow you, and give us its back before you shoot."

The pulse in my neck was beating so hard, it hurt to breathe. My mouth was so dry I couldn't swallow right. I began to move, ever so slowly, away from the vampires and shapeshifters. The snake's head followed me, as it had followed the snake charmer. If it started to strike, I'd shoot it, but if it would just keep moving with me, I'd give Jean-Claude a chance at its back.

Of course, silver bullets might not hurt it. In fact, the thing was so damn big, the ammo I had in the Browning might not do more than irritate it. I felt like I was trapped in one of those monster movies where the giant slime monster keeps coming no matter how much you shoot it. I hoped that was just a Hollywood invention.

If the bullets didn't hurt it, I was going to die. I flashed on the image of the man's legs kicking as they went down. The lump was still visible in the snake's body, like it had fed on a really big rat.

The tongue flicked out and I gasped, swallowing a scream. God, Anita, control yourself. It's just a snake. A giant man-eating cobra snake, but still only a snake. Yeah, right.

Every hair on my body stood at attention. The power that I'd felt the snake charmer calling up was still here. It wasn't enough that the thing was poisonous and had teeth big enough to spear me with. It had to be magic, too. Great, just great.

The smell of flowers was thicker, closer. It hadn't been Jean-Claude at all. The cobra was filling the air with perfume. Snakes don't smell like flowers. They smell musty, and once you know what they smell like, you never forget it. Nothing with fur ever smelled like that. A vampire's coffin smells a bit like snakes.

The cobra turned its giant head with me. "Come on, just a little farther," I was speaking to the snake. Which is pretty stupid, since they're deaf. The smell of flowers was thick and sweet. I shuffled around the ring, and the snake shadowed me. Maybe it was habit. I was small and had long, dark hair, though not nearly as long as the dead snake charmer. Maybe the beastie wanted someone to follow?

"Come on, pretty girl, come to mama," I whispered so low my lips barely moved. Just me and the snake and my voice. I didn't dare look across the ring at Jean-Claude. Nothing mattered but my feet shuffling over the ground, the snake's movements, the gun in my hands. It was like some kind of dance.

The cobra parted its mouth, tongue flicking, giving me a glimpse of scythelike fangs. Cobras have fixed fangs, not retractable like a rattlesnake's. Nice to know I remembered some of my herpetology. Though I bet Dr. Greenburg had never seen anything like this.

I had a horrible impulse to giggle. Instead, I sighted down my arm at the thing's mouth. The scent of flowers was strong enough to touch. I squeezed the trigger.

The snake's head jerked backwards, blood splattering the floor. I fired again and again. The jaws exploded into bits of flesh and bone. The cobra opened its ruined jaws, hissing. I think it was screaming.

Its telephone-pole body slashed the ground, whipping back and forth. Could I kill it? Could just bullets kill it? I fired three more shots into the head. The body turned on itself in a huge wondrous knot. The black and white scales boiled over each other, frenzied, bloodspattered.

A loop of body rolled out and punched my legs out from under me. I came up on knees and one hand, gun in the other hand ready to point. Another coil smashed into me. It was like being hit by a whale. I lay half-stunned under several hundred pounds of snake. One striped coil pinned me to the ground. The beast reared over me, blood and pale drops of poison running down its shattered jaws. If the poison hit my skin, it would kill me. There was too much of it not to.

I lay flat on my back with the snake writhing across me and fired at it. I just kept squeezing the trigger as the head rushed down on me.

Something hit the snake. Something covered in fur dug teeth and claws into the snake's neck. It was a werewolf with furry, man-shaped arms. The cobra reared, pressing me under its weight. The smooth belly scales pushed at my nearly naked upper body like a giant hand, squeezing. It wasn't going to eat me, it was going to crush me to death.

I screamed and fired into the snake's body. The gun clicked empty. Shit!

Jean-Claude appeared over me. His pale, lace-covered hands lifted the coil off me as if it wasn't a thousand pounds of muscle. I scooted backwards on

hands and feet. I crab-walked until I hit the edge of the ring, then I popped the empty clip and got the extra out of my sport bag. I didn't remember firing all thirteen rounds, but I must have. I jacked a round into the chamber, and I was ready to rock and roll.

Jean-Claude was elbow deep in snake. He pulled a piece of glistening spine out of the meat, splitting the snake apart.

Yasmeen was tearing at the giant snake like a kid with taffy. Her face and upper body were bathed in blood. She pulled a long piece of snake intestine out and laughed.

I had never really seen vampires use every bit of their inhuman strength. I sat on the edge of the ring with my loaded gun and just watched.

The black shapeshifter was still in human form. She had gotten a knife from somewhere and was happily carving the snake up.

The cobra whipped its head into the ground, sending the werewolf rolling. The snake reared and came smashing down. Its ruined jaws plunged into the black woman's shoulder. She screamed. One fang came out the back of her dress. Poison squirted from the fang, splashing onto the ground. Poison and blood soaked into the back of her dress.

I moved forward, gun ready, but I hesitated. The cobra was flinging its head from side to side, trying to shake the woman off. The fang was too deeply imbedded and the mouth too damaged. The cobra was trapped, and so was the woman.

I wasn't sure I could hit the snake's head without hitting her. The woman was screaming, shrieking. Her hands clawed helplessly at the snake. She'd dropped her knife somewhere.

A blond vampire grabbed the black woman. The snake reared back, lifting the woman in his jaws, worrying her like a dog with a toy. She shrieked.

The werewolf jumped on the snake's neck, riding it like a wild horse. There was no way to shoot without hitting someone now. Dammit. I had to just stand there, watching.

The man from the bed was running across the ring. Had it taken him that long to slip into the grey sweat pants and zippered jacket? The jacket was unzipped and flapped as he ran, exposing most of his tanned chest. He was unarmed as far as I could tell. What the hell did he think he could do? Dammit.

He knelt beside the two men who had been alive when all the shit started. He dragged one of them away from the fight. It was good thinking.

Jean-Claude grabbed the woman. He gripped the fang that speared her shoulder and snapped it off. The crack was loud as a rifle shot. The woman's shoulder stretched away from her body, bones and ligaments snapping. She gave one last shriek and went limp. He carried her towards me, laying her on the ground. Her right arm was hanging by strands of muscle. He had freed her from the snake, and damn near pulled her arm off.

"Help her, *ma petite*." He left her at my feet, bleeding and unconscious. I knew some first aid, but Jesus. There was no way to put a tourniquet on the wound. I couldn't splint the arm. It wasn't just broken, it was ripped apart.

A breath of wind oozed through the tent. Something tugged at my gut. I gasped and looked up away from the dying girl. Jean-Claude stood beside the snake. All the vampires were tearing at the body, and still it lived. A wind ruffled the lace on his collar, the black waves of his hair. The wind whispered against my face, pulling my heart up into my throat. The only sound I could hear was the thunder of my own blood beating against my ears.

Jean-Claude moved forward almost gently. And I felt something inside me move with him. It was almost like he held an invisible line to my heart. pulse, blood. My pulse was so fast, I couldn't breathe. What was happening?

He was on the snake, hands digging in the flesh just below the mouth. I felt *my* hands dig into the writhing flesh. *My* hands digging at bone, snapping it. *My* hands shoving in almost to the elbow. It was slick, wet, but not warm. Our hands pushed, then pulled, until our shoulders strained with the effort.

The head tore away to land across the ring. The head flopped, mouth snapping at empty air. The body still struggled, but it was dying now.

I had fallen to the ground beside the wounded woman. The Browning was still in my hand, but it wouldn't have helped me. I could hear again, feel again. My hands weren't covered in blood and gore. They had been Jean-Claude's hands, not mine. Dear God, what was happening to me?

I could still feel the blood on my hands. It was an incredibly powerful sensory memory. God!

Something touched my shoulder. I whirled, gun nearly shoved into the man's face. It was the man in the grey sweats. He was kneeling beside me, hands in the air, his eyes staring at the gun in my hands.

"I'm on your side," he said.

My pulse was still thumping in my throat. I didn't trust myself to speak, so I just nodded and stopped pointing the gun at him.

He took off his sweat jacket. "Maybe we can stop some of the blood with this." He wadded the jacket up and shoved it against the wound.

"She's probably in shock," I said. My voice sounded strange, hollow.

"You don't look so good yourself."

I didn't feel so good either. Jean-Claude had entered my mind, my body. It had been like we were one person. I started to shiver and couldn't stop. Maybe it was shock.

"I called the police and an ambulance," he said.

I stared at him. His face was very strong, high cheekbones, square jaw, but his lips were softer, making it a very sympathetic face. His wavy brown hair fell forward like a curtain around his face. I remembered another man with long brown hair. Another human tied to the vampires. He had died badly, and I hadn't been able to save him.

I caught sight of Marguerite on the far side of the ring, watching. Her eyes were wide, her lips half-parted. She was enjoying herself. God.

The werewolf pulled back from the snake. The shapeshifter looked like a very classy version of every wolfman that had ever stalked the streets of London, except it was naked and had genitalia between its legs. Movie wolfmen were always smooth, sexless as a Barbie doll.

The werewolf's fur was a dark honey color. A blond werewolf? Was it Stephen? If it wasn't, then he had disappeared, and I didn't think Jean-Claude would allow that.

A voice yelled, "Everybody freeze!" Across the ring were two patrol cops with their guns out. One of them said, "Jesus Christ!"

I put my gun away while they were staring at the dead snake. The body was still twitching, but it was dead. It just takes longer for a reptile's body to know it's dead than most mammals.

I felt light and empty as air. Everything had a faintly unreal quality. It wasn't the snake. It was whatever Jean-Claude had done to me. I shook my head, trying to clear it, to think. The cops were here. I had things I needed to do.

I fished the little plastic ID card out of my sport bag and clipped it to the collar of my jacket. It identified me as a member of the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. It was almost as good as a badge.

"Let's go talk to the cops before they start shooting."

"The snake's dead," he said.

The wolfman was tearing at the dead thing with a long pointed muzzle, ripping off chunks of meat. I swallowed hard and looked away. "They may not think the snake is the only monster in the ring."

"Oh." He said it very softly, as if the thought had never occurred to him before. What the hell was he doing with the monsters?

I walked towards the police, smiling. Jean-Claude stood there in the middle of the ring, his white shirt so bloody it clung to him like water, outlining the point of one nipple hard against the cloth. Blood was smeared down one side of his face. His arms were crimson to the elbows. The youngest vampire, a woman, had buried her face in the snake's blood. She was scooping the bloody meat into her mouth and sucking on it. The sounds were wet and seemed louder than they should have been.

"My name's Anita Blake. I work with the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. I've got ID."

"Who's that with you?" The uniform nodded his head in the man's direction. His gun was still pointed vaguely towards the ring.

I whispered out of the corner of my mouth, "What is your name?"

"Richard Zeeman," he said softly.

Out loud I said, "Richard Zeeman, just an innocent bystander." That last was probably a lie. How innocent could a man be who woke up in a bed surrounded by vampires and shapeshifters?

But the uniform nodded. "What about the rest of them?"

I glanced where he was staring. It didn't look any better. "The manager and some of his people. They waded into the thing to keep it out of the crowd."

"But they ain't human, right?" he said.

"No," I said, "they aren't human."

"Jesus H. Christ, the guys back at the station aren't going to believe this one," his partner said.

He was probably right. I had been here, and I almost didn't believe it. A giant man-eating cobra. Jesus H. Christ indeed.

Chapter 8

I was sitting in a small hallway that served as the performers' entrance to the big tent. The lighting was permanently dim, as if some of the things rolling through wouldn't like a lot of light. Big surprise there. There were no chairs, and I was getting a little tired of sitting on the floor. I'd given a statement first to a uniform, then to a detective. Then RPIT had arrived and the questioning started all over again. Dolph nodded to me, and Zerbrowski shot at me with his thumb and forefinger. That had been an hour and fifteen minutes ago. I was getting a wee bit tired of being ignored.

Richard Zeeman and Stephen the Werewolf were sitting across from me. Richard's hands were clasped loosely around one knee. He was wearing white Nikes with a blue swoosh, and no socks. Even his ankles were tan. His thick hair brushed the tops of his naked shoulders. His eyes were closed. I could gaze at his muscular upper body as long as I wanted to. His stomach was flat with a triangle of dark hair peeking above the sweat pants. His upper chest was smooth, perfect, no hair at all. I approved.

Stephen was cuddled on the floor, asleep. Bruises blossomed up the left side of his face, black-purple and that raw red color a really bad bruise gets. His left arm was in a sling, but he'd refused to go to the hospital. He was wrapped in a grey blanket that the paramedics had given him. As far as I could tell, it was all he was wearing. I guess he'd lost his clothes when he shapeshifted. The wolfman had been bigger than he was, and the legs had been a very different shape. So the skin-tight jeans and the beautiful cowboy boots were history. Maybe that was why the black shapeshifter had been naked. Had that been why Richard Zeeman was naked, as well? Was he a shapeshifter?

I didn't think so. If he was, he hid it better than anybody I'd ever been around. Besides, if he had been a shapeshifter, why didn't he join the fight against the cobra? He'd done a sensible thing for an unarmed human being; he'd stayed out of the way.

Stephen, who had started out the night looking scrumptious, looked like shit. The long, blond curls clung to his face, wet with sweat. There were dark smudges under his closed eyes. His breathing was rapid and shallow. His eyes were struggling underneath his closed lids. Dream? Nightmare? Do werewolves dream of shapeshifted sheep?

Richard still looked scrumptious, but then a giant cobra hadn't been slamming him into a concrete floor. He opened his eyes, as if he had felt me

staring at him. He stared back, brown eyes neutral. We stared at each other without saying anything.

His face was all angles, high-sculpted cheekbones, and firm jaw. A dimple softened the lines of his face and made him a little too perfect for my taste. I've never been comfortable around men that are beautiful. Low self-esteem, maybe. Or maybe Jean-Claude's lovely face had made me appreciate the very human quality of imperfection.

"Is he all right?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Stephen."

He glanced down at the sleeping man. Stephen made a small noise in his sleep, helpless, frightened. Definitely a nightmare.

"Should you wake him?"

"You mean from the dream?" he asked.

I nodded.

He smiled. "Nice thought, but he won't wake up for hours. We could burn the place down around him and he wouldn't move."

"Why not?"

"You really want to know?"

"Sure, I've got nothing better to do right now."

He glanced up the silent hallway. "Good point." He settled back against the wall, bare back searching for a more comfortable piece of wall. He frowned; so much for a comfortable wall.

"Stephen changed back from wolfman to human in less than a two-hour time span." He said it like it explained everything. It didn't.

"So?" I asked.

"Usually a shapeshifter stays in animal form for eight to ten hours, then collapses and changes back to human form. It takes a lot of energy to shapeshift early."

I glanced down at the dreaming shapeshifter. "So this collapse is normal?"

Richard nodded. "He'll be out for the rest of the night."

"Not a great survival method," I said.

"A lot of werewolves bite the dust after collapsing. The human hunters come upon them after they've passed out."

"How do you know so much about lycanthropes?"

"It's my job," he said, "I teach science at a local junior high."

I just stared at him. "You're a junior high science teacher?"

"Yes." He was smiling. "You looked shocked."

I shook my head. "What's a school teacher doing messed up with vampires and werewolves?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

I had to smile. "That doesn't explain how you know about lycanthropes."

"I had a class in college."

I shook my head. "So did I, but I didn't know about shapeshifters collapsing."

"You've got a degree in preternatural biology?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Me, too."

"So how do you know more about lycanthropes than I do?" I said.

Stephen moved in his sleep, flinging his good arm outward. The blanket slid off his shoulder, exposing his stomach and part of a thigh.

Richard drew the blanket back over the sleeping man, covering him, like tucking in a child. "Stephen and I have been friends a long time. I bet you know things about zombies that I never learned in college."

"Probably," I said.

"Stephen's not a teacher, is he?"

"No." He smiled, but it wasn't pleasant. "School boards frown on lycanthropes being teachers."

"Legally, they can't stop you."

"Yeah, right," he said. "They fire-bombed the last teacher who dared to teach their precious children. Lycanthropy isn't contagious while in human form."

"I know that," I said.

He shook his head. "Sorry, it's just a sore topic with me."

My pet project was rights for zombies; why shouldn't Richard have a pet project? Fair hiring practices for the furry. It worked for me.

"You are being tactful, *ma petite*. I would not have thought it of you."

Jean-Claude was in the hallway. I hadn't heard him walk up. But I'd been distracted, talking with Richard. Yeah, that was it.

"Could you stamp your feet next time? I'm getting sick of you sneaking up on me."

"I wasn't sneaking, *ma petite*. You were distracted talking to our handsome Mr. Zeeman." His voice was pleasant, mild as honey, and yet there was a threat to it. You could feel it like a cold wind down your spine.

"What's wrong, Jean-Claude?" I asked.

"Wrong? What could possibly be wrong?" Anger and some bitter amusement flowed through his voice.

"Cut it out, Jean-Claude."

"Whatever could be the matter, *ma petite*?"

"You're angry; why?"

"My human servant does not know my every mood. Shameful." He knelt beside me. The blood on his white shirt had dried to a brownish stain that took up most of the shirt front. The lace at his sleeves looked like crumpled brown flowers. "Do you lust after Richard because he's handsome, or because he's human?" His voice was almost a whisper, intimate as if he'd said something entirely different. Jean-Claude whispered better than anyone else I knew.

"I don't lust after him."

"Come, come, *ma petite*. No lies." He leaned towards me, long-fingered hand reaching for my cheek. There was dried blood on his hand.

"You've got blood under your fingernails," I said.

He flinched, his hand squeezing into a fist. Point for my side. "You reject me at every turn. Why do I put up with it?"

"I don't know," I said, truthfully. "I keep hoping you'll get tired of me."

"I am hoping to have you with me forever, *ma petite*. I would not make the offer if I thought I would grow bored."

"I think I would get tired of you," I said.

His eyes widened a bit. I think it was real surprise. "You are trying to taunt me."

I shrugged. "Yes, but it's still the truth. I'm attracted to you, but I don't love you. We don't have stimulating conversations. I don't go through my day saying 'I must remember to share that joke with Jean-Claude, or tell him about what happened at work tonight.' I ignore you when you let me. The only things we have in common are violence and the dead. I don't think that's much to base a relationship on."

"My, aren't we the philosopher tonight." His midnight blue eyes were only inches from mine. The eyelashes looked like black lace.

"Just being honest."

"We wouldn't want you to be less than honest," he said. "I know how you despise lies." He glanced at Richard. "How you despise monsters."

"Why are you angry with Richard?"

"Am I?" he said.

"You know damn well you are."

"Perhaps, Anita, I am realizing that the one thing you want is the one thing I cannot give you."

"And what do I want?"

"Me to be human," he said softly.

I shook my head. "If you think your only shortcoming is being a vampire, you're wrong."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You're an egotistical, overbearing bully."

"A bully?" He sounded genuinely surprised.

"You want me, so you can't believe that I don't want you. Your needs, your desires are more important than anyone else's."

"You are my human servant, *ma petite*. It makes our lives complicated."

"I am not your human servant."

"I have marked you, Anita Blake. You are my human servant."

"No," I said. It was a very firm no, but my stomach was tight with the thought that he was right, and I would never be free of him.

He stared at me. His eyes were as normal as they ever got, dark, blue, lovely. "If you had not been my human servant, I could not have defeated the snake god so easily."

"You mind-raped me, Jean-Claude. I don't care why you did it."

A look of distaste spread across his face. "If you choose the word rape, then you know that I am not guilty of that particular crime. Nikolaos forced herself on you. She tore at your mind, *ma petite*. If you had not carried two of my marks, she would have destroyed you."

Anger was bubbling up from my gut, spreading up my back and into my arms. I had this horrible urge to hit him. "And because of the marks you can

enter my mind, take me over. You told me it made mind games harder on me, not easier. Did you lie about that, too?"

"My need was great tonight, Anita. Many people would have died if the creature had not been stopped. I drew power where I could find it."

"From me."

"Yes, you are my human servant. Just by being near me you increase my power. You know that."

I had known that, but I hadn't known he could channel power through me like an amplifier. "I know I'm some sort of witch's familiar for you."

"If you would allow the last two marks, it would be more than that. It would be a marriage of flesh, blood, and spirit."

"I notice you didn't say soul," I said.

He made an exasperated sound low in his throat. "You are insufferable." He sounded genuinely angry. Goody.

"Don't you ever force your way into my mind again."

"Or what?" The words were a challenge, angry, confused.

I was on my knees beside him nearly spitting into his face. I had to stop and take a few deep breaths to keep from screaming at him. I spoke very calmly, low and angry. "If you ever touch me like that again, I will kill you."

"You will try." His face was nearly pressed against mine. As if when he inhaled, he would bring me to him. Our lips would touch. I remembered how soft his lips were. How it felt to be pressed against his chest. The roughness of his cross-shaped burn under my fingers. I jerked back, and felt almost dizzy.

It had only been one kiss, but the memory of it burned along my body like every bad romance novel you'd ever read. "Leave me alone!" I hissed it in his face, hands balled into fists. "Damn you! Damn you!"

The office door opened, and a uniformed officer stuck his head out. "There a problem out here?"

We turned and stared at him. I opened my mouth to tell him exactly what was wrong, but Jean-Claude spoke first. "No problem, officer."

It was a lie, but what was the truth? That I had two vampire marks on me and was losing my soul a piece at a time. Not something I really wanted to be common knowledge. The police sort of frown on people who have close ties with the monsters.

The officer was looking at us, waiting. I shook my head. "Nothing's wrong, officer. It's just late. Could you ask Sergeant Storr if I can go home now?"

"What's the name?"

"Anita Blake."

"Storr's pet animator?"

I sighed. "Yeah, that Anita Blake."

"I'll ask." The uniform stared at the three of us for a minute. "You got anything to add to this?" He was speaking to Richard.

"No."

The uniform nodded. "Okay, but keep whatever isn't happening to a dull roar."

"Of course. Always glad to cooperate with the police," Jean-Claude said.

He nodded his thanks and went back into the office. We were left kneeling in the hallway. The shapeshifter was still asleep on the floor. His breathing made a quiet noise that didn't so much fill the silence as emphasize it. Richard was motionless, dark eyes staring at Jean-Claude. I was suddenly very aware that Jean-Claude and I were only inches apart. I could feel the line of his body like warmth against my skin. His eyes flicked from my face down my body. I was still wearing only a bra underneath the unzipped jacket.

Goosebumps rolled up my arms and down my chest. My nipples hardened as if he had touched them. My stomach clenched with a need that had nothing to do with blood.

"Stop it!"

"I am doing nothing, *ma petite*. It is your own desire that rolls over your skin, not mine."

I swallowed and had to look away from him. Okay, I lusted after him. Great, fine, it didn't mean a thing. Right. I scooted away from him, putting my back to the wall, not looking at him as I spoke. "I came here tonight for information, not to play footsie with the Master of the City."

Richard was just sitting there, meeting my eyes. There was no embarrassment, just interest, as if he didn't know quite what I was. It wasn't an unfriendly look.

"Fotsie," Jean-Claude said. I didn't need to see his face to hear the smile in his voice.

"You know what I mean."

"I've never heard it called 'fotsie' before."

"Stop doing that."

"What?"

I glared at him, but his eyes were sparkling with laughter. A slow smile touched his lips. He looked very human just then.

"What did you want to discuss, *ma petite*? It must be something very important to make you come near me voluntarily."

I searched his face for mockery, or anger, or anything, but his face was as smooth and pleasant as carved marble. The smile, the sparkling humor in his eyes, was like a mask. I had no way of telling what lay underneath. I wasn't even sure I wanted to know.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly through my mouth. "Alright. Where were you last night?" I looked at his face, trying to catch any change of expression.

"Here," he said.

"All night?"

He smiled. "Yes."

"Can you prove it?"

The smile widened. "Do I need to?"

"Maybe," I said.

He shook his head. "Coyness, from you, *ma petite*. It does not become you."

So much for being slick and trying to pull information from the Master.
"Are you sure you want this discussed in public?"

"You mean Richard?"

"Yes."

"Richard and I have no secrets from one another, *ma petite*. He is my human hands and eyes, since you refuse to be."

"What's that mean? I thought you could only have one human servant at a time."

"So you admit it." His voice held a slow curl of triumph.

"This isn't a game, Jean-Claude. People died tonight."

"Believe me, *ma petite*, whether you take the last marks and become my servant in more than name is no game to me."

"There was a murder last night," I said. Maybe if I concentrated just on the crime, on my job, I could avoid the verbal pitfalls.

"And?" he prompted.

"It was a vampire victim."

"Ah," he said, "my part in this becomes clear."

"I'm glad you find it funny," I said.

"Dying from vampire bites is only temporarily fatal, *ma petite*. Wait until the third night when the victim rises, then question him." The humor died from his eyes. "What is it that you are not telling me?"

"I found at least five different bite radiuses on the victim."

Something flickered behind his eyes. I wasn't sure what, but it was real emotion. Surprise, fear, guilt? Something.

"So you are looking for a rogue master vampire."

"Yep. Know any?"

He laughed. His whole face lit up from the inside, as if someone had lit a candle behind his skin. In one wild moment he was so beautiful, it made my chest ache. But it wasn't a beauty that made me want to touch it. I remembered a Bengal tiger that I'd seen once in a zoo. It was big enough to ride on like a pony. Its fur was orange, black, cream, oyster-shell white. Its eyes were gold. The heavy paws wider than my outspread hand paced, paced, back and forth, back and forth, until it had worn a path in the dirt. Some genius had put one barred wall so close to the fence that held back the crowd, I could have reached through and touched the tiger easily. I had to ball my hands into fists and shove them in my pockets to keep from reaching through those bars and petting that tiger. It was so close, so beautiful, so wild, so . . . tempting.

I hugged my knees to my chest, hands clasped tight together. The tiger would have taken my hand off, and yet there was that small part of me that regretted not reaching through the bars. I watched Jean-Claude's face, felt his laughter like velvet running down my spine. Would part of me always wonder what it would have been like if I had just said yes? Probably. But I could live with it.

He was staring at me, the laughter dying from his eyes like the last bit of light seeping from the sky. "What are you thinking, *ma petite*?"

"Can't you read my mind?" I asked.

"You know I cannot."

"I don't know anything about you, Jean-Claude, not a bloody thing."

"You know more about me than anyone else in the city."

"Yasmeen included?"

He lowered his eyes, almost embarrassed. "We are very old friends."

"How old?"

He met my eyes, but his face was empty, blank. "Old enough."

"That's not an answer," I said.

"No," he said, "it is an evasion."

So he wasn't going to answer my question; what else was new? "Are there any other master vampires in town besides you, Malcolm, and Yasmeen?"

He shook his head. "Not to my knowledge."

I frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said."

"You're the Master of the City. Aren't you supposed to know?"

"Things are a little unsettled, *ma petite*."

"Explain that."

He shrugged, and even in the bloodstained shirt it looked graceful.

"Normally, as Master of the City, all other lesser master vampires would need my permission to stay in the city, but"—he shrugged again—"there are those who think I am not strong enough to hold the city."

"You've been challenged?"

"Let us just say I am expecting to be challenged."

"Why?" I asked.

"The other masters were afraid of Nikolaos," he said.

"And they're not afraid of you." It wasn't a question.

"Unfortunately, no."

"Why not?"

"They are not as easily impressed as you are, *ma petite*."

I started to say I wasn't impressed, but it wasn't true. Jean-Claude could smell it when I lied, so why bother?

"So there could be another master in the city without your knowledge."

"Yes."

"Wouldn't you sort of sense each other?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not."

"Thanks for clearing that up."

He rubbed fingertips across his forehead as if he had a headache. Did vampires get headaches? "I cannot tell you what I do not know."

"Would the . . ." I groped for a word, and couldn't find one—"more mundane vampires be able to kill someone without your permission?"

"Mundane?"

"Just answer the damn question."

"Yes, they could."

"Would five vampires hunt in a pack without a master vampire to referee?"

He nodded. "Very nice choice of word, *ma petite*, and the answer is no. We are solitary hunters, given a choice."

I nodded. "So either you, Malcolm, Yasmeen, or some mysterious master is behind it."

"Not Yasmeen. She is not strong enough."

"Okay, then you, Malcolm, or a mysterious master."

"Do you really think I have gone rogue?" He was smiling at me, but his eyes held something more serious. Did it matter to him what I thought of him? I hoped not.

"I don't know."

"You would confront me, thinking I might be insane? How indiscreet of you."

"If you don't like the answer, you shouldn't have asked the question," I said.

"Very true."

The office door opened. Dolph came out, notebook in hand. "You can go home, Anita. I'll check the statements with you tomorrow."

I nodded. "Thanks."

"Heh, I know where you live." He smiled.

I smiled back. "Thanks, Dolph." I stood up.

Jean-Claude stood in one smooth motion like he was a puppet pulled up by invisible strings. Richard stood slower, using the wall to stand, as if he were stiff. Standing, Richard was taller than Jean-Claude by at least three inches. Which made Richard six-one. Almost too tall for my taste, but no one was asking me.

"And could we talk to you some more, Jean-Claude?" Dolph said.

Jean-Claude said, "Of course, detective." He walked down the hall. There was a stiffness in the way he moved. Did vampires bruise? Had he been hurt in the fight? Did it matter? No, no, it didn't. In a way Jean-Claude was right; if he had been human, even an egotistical son of a bitch, there might have been possibilities. I'm not prejudiced, but God help me, the man has to at least be alive. Walking corpses, no matter how pretty, are just not my cup of tea. Dolph held the door for Jean-Claude.

Dolph looked back at us. "You're free to go, too, Mr. Zeeman."

"What about my friend Stephen?"

Dolph glanced at the sleeping shapeshifter. "Take him home. Let him sleep it off. I'll talk to him tomorrow." He glanced at his wristwatch. "Make that later today."

"I'll tell Stephen when he wakes up."

Dolph nodded and closed the door. We were alone in the buzzing silence of the hallway. Of course, maybe it was just my own ears buzzing.

"Now what?" Richard said.

"We go home," I said.

"Rashida drove."

I frowned. "Who?"

"The other shapeshifter, the woman whose arm was torn up."

I nodded. "Take Stephen's car."

"Rashida drove us both."

I shook my head. "So you're stranded."

"Looks that way."

"You could call a cab," I said.

"No money." He almost smiled.

"Fine; I'll drive you home."

"And Stephen?"

"And Stephen," I said. I was smiling and I didn't know why, but it was better than crying.

"You don't even know where I live. It could be Kansas City."

"If it's a ten-hour drive, you're on your own," I said. "But if it's reasonable, I'll drive you."

"Is Meramec Heights reasonable?"

"Sure."

"Let me get the rest of my clothes," he asked.

"You look fully dressed to me," I said.

"I've got a coat around here somewhere."

"I'll wait here," I said.

"You'll watch Stephen?" Something like fear crossed his face, filled his eyes.

"What are you afraid of?" I asked.

"Airplanes, guns, large predators, and master vampires."

"I agree with two out of four," I said.

"I'll go get my coat."

I slid down to sit beside the sleeping werewolf. "We'll be waiting."

"Then I'll hurry." He smiled when he said it. He had a very nice smile.

Richard came back wearing a long black coat. It looked like real leather. It flapped like a cape around his bare chest. I liked the way the leather framed his chest. He buttoned the coat and tied the leather belt tight. The black leather went with the long hair and handsome face; the grey sweats and Nikes did not. He knelt and picked Stephen up in his arms, then stood. The leather creaked as his upper arms strained. Stephen was my height and probably didn't weigh twenty pounds more than I did. Petite. Richard carried him like he wasn't heavy.

"My, my, grandmother, what strong arms you have."

"Is my line, 'The better to hold you with'?" He was looking at me very steadily.

I felt heat creeping up my face. I hadn't meant to flirt, not on purpose.

"You want a ride, or not?" My voice was rough, angry with embarrassment.

"I want a ride," he said quietly.

"Then can the sarcasm."

"I wasn't being sarcastic."

I stared up at him. His eyes were perfectly brown like chocolate. I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything. A tactic I should probably use more often.

I turned and walked away, fishing my car keys out as I moved. Richard followed behind. Stephen snuffled against his chest, pulling the blanket close in his sleep.

"Is your car very far?"

"A few blocks; why?"

"Stephen isn't dressed for the cold."

I frowned at him. "What, you want me to drive the car around and pick you up?"

"That would be very nice," he said.

I opened my mouth to say no, then closed it. The thin blanket wasn't much protection, and some of Stephen's injuries were from saving my life. I could drive the car around.

I satisfied myself with grumbling under my breath, "I can't believe I'm a door-to-door taxi for a werewolf."

Richard either didn't hear me, or chose to ignore it. Smart, handsome, junior high science teacher, degree in preternatural biology, what more could I ask for? Give me a minute and I'd think of something.

Chapter 9

The car rode in its own tunnel of darkness. The headlights were a moving circle of light. The October night closed behind the car like a door.

Stephen was asleep in the back seat of my Nova. Richard sat in the passenger seat, half-turned in his seat belt to look at me. It was just polite to look at someone when you talk to them. But I felt at a disadvantage because I had to watch the road. All he had to do was stare at me.

"What do you do in your spare time?" Richard asked.

I shook my head. "I don't have spare time."

"Hobbies?"

"I don't think I have any of those, either."

"You must do something besides shoot large snakes in the head," he said.

I smiled and glanced at him. He leaned towards me as much as the seat belt would allow. He was smiling, too, but there was something in his eyes, or his posture, that said he was serious. Interested in what I would say.

"I'm an animator," I said.

He clasped his hands together, left elbow propped on the back of the seat. "Okay, when you're not raising the dead, what do you do?"

"Work on preternatural crimes with the police, mostly murders."

"And?" he said.

"And I execute rogue vampires."

"And?"

"And nothing," I said. I glanced at him again. In the dark I couldn't see his eyes, their color was too dark for that, but I could feel his gaze. Probably imagination. Yeah. I'd been hanging around Jean-Claude too long. The smell of Richard's leather coat mingled with a faint whiff of his cologne. Something expensive and sweet. It went very nicely with the smell of leather.

"I work. I exercise. I go out with friends." I shrugged. "What do you do when you're not teaching?"

"Scuba diving, caving, bird watching, gardening, astronomy." His smile was a dim whiteness in the near dark.

"You must have a lot more free time than I do."

"Actually, the teacher always has more homework than the students," he said.

"Sorry to hear that."

He shrugged, the leather creaked and slithered over his skin. Good leather always moved like it was still alive.

"Do you watch TV?" he asked.

"My television broke two years ago, and I never replaced it."

"You must do something for fun."

I thought about it. "I collect toy penguins." The minute I said it, I wished I hadn't.

He grinned at me. "Now we're getting somewhere. The Executioner collects stuffed toys. I like it."

"Glad to hear it." My voice sounded grumpy even to me.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"I'm not very good at small talk," I said.

"You were doing fine."

No, I wasn't, but I wasn't sure how to explain it to him. I didn't like talking about myself to strangers. Especially strangers with ties to Jean-Claude.

"What do you want from me?" I said.

"I'm just passing the time."

"No, you weren't." His shoulder-length hair had fallen around his face. He was taller, thicker, but the outline was familiar. He looked like Phillip in the shadowed dark. Phillip was the only other human being I'd ever seen with the monsters.

Phillip sagged in the chains. Blood poured in a bright red flood down his chest. It splattered onto the floor, like rain. Torchlight glittered on the wet bone of his spine. Someone had ripped his throat out.

I staggered against the wall as if someone had hit me. I couldn't get enough air. Someone kept whispering, "Oh, God, oh, God," over and over, and it was me. I walked down the steps with my back pressed against the wall. I couldn't take my eyes from him. Couldn't look away. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't cry.

The torchlight reflected in his eyes, giving the illusion of movement. A scream built in my gut and spilled out my throat. "Phillip!"

Something cold slithered up my spine. I was sitting in my car with the ghost of guilty conscience. It hadn't been my fault that Phillip died. I certainly

didn't kill him, but . . . but I still felt guilty. Someone should have saved him, and since I was the last one with a chance to do it, it should have been me. Guilt is a many splendored thing.

"What do you want from me, Richard?" I asked.

"I don't want anything," he said.

"Lies are ugly things, Richard."

"What makes you think I'm lying?"

"Finely honed instinct," I said.

"Has it really been that long since a man tried to make polite small talk with you?"

I started to look at him, and decided not to. It had been that long. "The last person who flirted with me was murdered. It makes a girl a little cautious."

He was quiet for a minute. "Fair enough, but I still want to know more about you."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

He had me there. "How do I know Jean-Claude didn't tell you to make friends?"

"Why would he do that?"

I shrugged.

"Okay, let's start over. Pretend we met at the health club."

"Health club?" I said.

He smiled. "Health club. I thought you looked great in your swimsuit."

"Sweats," I said.

He nodded. "You looked cute in your sweats."

"I liked looking great better."

"If I get to imagine you in a swimsuit, you can look great; sweats only get cute."

"Fair enough."

"We made pleasant small talk and I asked you out."

I had to look at him. "Are you asking me out?"

"Yes, I am."

I shook my head and turned back to the road. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" he asked.

"I told you."

"Just because one person got killed on you doesn't mean everyone will."

I gripped the steering wheel tight enough to make my hands hurt. "I was eight when my mother died. My father remarried when I was ten." I shook my head. "People go away and they don't come back."

"Sounds scary." His voice was soft and low.

I didn't know what had made me say that. I didn't usually talk about my mother to strangers, or anybody else for that matter. "Scary," I said softly. "You could say that."

"If you never let anyone get close to you, you don't get hurt, is that it?"

"There are also a lot of very jerky men in the twenty-one-to-thirty age group," I said.

He grinned. "I'll give you that. Nice-looking, intelligent, independent women are not exactly plentiful either."

"Stop with the compliments, or you'll have me blushing."

"You don't strike me as someone who blushes easily."

A picture flashed in my mind. Richard Zeeman naked beside the bed, struggling into his sweat pants. It hadn't embarrassed me at the time. It was only now, with him so warm and close in the car, that I thought about it. A warm flush crept up my face. I blushed in the dark, glad he couldn't see. I didn't want him to know I was thinking about what he looked like without his clothes on. I don't usually do that. Of course, I don't usually see a man buck naked before I've even gone out on a date. Come to think of it, I didn't see men naked on dates either.

"We're in the health club, sipping fruit juice, and I ask you out."

I stared very hard at the road. I kept flashing on the smooth line of his thigh and lower things. It was embarrassing, but the harder I tried not to think about it, the clearer the picture seemed to get.

"Movies and dinner?" I said.

"No," he said. "Something unique. Caving."

"You mean crawling around in a cave on a first date?"

"Have you ever been caving?"

"Once."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"We were sneaking up on bad guys at the time. I didn't think much about enjoying it."

"Then you have to give it another chance. I go caving at least twice a month. You get to wear your oldest clothes and get really dirty, and no one tells you not to play in the mud."

"Mud?" I said.

"Too messy for you?"

"I was a bio-lab assistant in college; nothing's too messy for me."

"At least you can say you get to use your degree in your work."

I laughed. "True."

"I use my degree, too, but I went in for educating the munchkins."

"Do you like teaching?"

"Very much." Those two words held a warmth and excitement that you didn't hear much when people talked about their work.

"I like my job, too."

"Even when it forces you to play with vampires and zombies?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"We're sitting in the juice bar, and I've just asked you out. What do you say?"

"I should say no."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"You sound suspicious."

"Always," I said.

"Never taking a chance is the worst failure of all, Anita."

"Not dating is a choice, not a failure." I was feeling a wee bit defensive.

"Say you'll go caving this weekend." The leather coat crinkled and moved as he tried to move closer to me than the seat belt would allow. He could have reached out and touched me. Part of me wanted him to, which was sort of embarrassing all on its own.

I started to say no, then realized I wanted to say yes. Which was silly. But I was enjoying sitting in the dark with the smell of leather and cologne. Call it chemistry, instant lust, whatever. I liked Richard. He flipped my switch. It had been a long time since I had liked anybody.

Jean-Claude didn't count. I wasn't sure why, but he didn't. Being dead might have something to do with that.

"Alright, I'll go caving. When and where?"

"Great. Meet in front of my house at, say, ten o'clock on Saturday."

"Ten in the morning?" I said.

"Not a morning person?" he asked.

"Not particularly."

"We have to start early, or we won't get to the end of the cave in one day. "

"What do I wear?"

"Your oldest clothes. I'll be dressed in coveralls over jeans."

"I've got coveralls." I didn't mention that I used my coveralls to keep blood off my clothes. Mud sounded a lot more friendly.

"Great. I'll bring the rest of the equipment you need."

"How much more equipment do I need?"

"A hard hat, a light, maybe knee pads."

"Sounds like a boffo first date," I said.

"It will be," he said. His voice was soft, low, and somehow more private than just sitting in my car. It wasn't Jean-Claude's magical voice, but then what was?

"Turn right here," he said, pointing to a side street. "Third house on the right."

I pulled into a short, blacktopped driveway. The house was half brick and some pale color. It was hard to tell in the dark. There were no streetlights to help you see. You forget how dark the night can be without electricity.

Richard unbuckled his seat belt and opened the door. "Thanks for the ride."

"Do you need help getting him inside?" My hand was on the key as I asked.

"No, I got it. Thanks, though."

"Don't mention it."

He stared at me. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Not yet," I said.

He smiled, a quick flash in the darkness. "Good." He unlocked the back door behind him, and got out of the car. He leaned in and scooped Stephen up,

holding the blanket close so it didn't slide off. He lifted with his legs more than his back; weightlifting will teach you that. A human body is a lot harder to lift than even free weights. A body just isn't balanced as well as a barbell.

Richard shut the car door with his back. The back door clicked shut, and I unbuckled my seat belt so I could lock the doors. Through the still-open passenger side door Richard was watching me. Over the idling of the car's engine his voice carried, "Locking out the boogeymen?"

"You never know," I said.

He nodded. "Yeah." There was something in that one word that was sad, wistful, innocence lost. It was nice to talk with another person who understood. Dolph and Zerbrowski understood the violence and the nearness of death, but they didn't understand the monsters.

I closed the door and scooted back behind the steering wheel. I buckled my seat belt and put the car in gear. The headlights sparkled over Richard, Stephen's hair like a yellow splash in his arms. Richard was still staring at me. I left him in the dark in front of his house with the singing of autumn crickets the only sound.

Chapter 10

I pulled up in front of my apartment building at a little after 2:00 A.M. I'd planned to be in bed a long time before this. The new cross-shaped burn was a burning, acid-eating ache. It made my whole chest hurt. My ribs and stomach were sore, stiff. I turned on the dome light in the car and unzipped the leather jacket. In the yellow light bruises were blossoming across my skin. For a minute I couldn't think how I'd gotten hurt; then I remembered the crushing weight of the snake crawling over me. Jesus. I was lucky it was bruises and not broken ribs.

I clicked off the light and zipped the jacket back up. The shoulder straps were chafing on my bare skin, but the burn hurt so much more that the bruises and the chafing seemed pretty darn minor. A good burn will take your mind off everything else.

The light that usually burned over the stairs was out. Not the first time. I'd have to call the office once it opened for the day and report it, though. If you didn't report it, it didn't get fixed.

I was three steps up before I saw the man. He was sitting at the head of the stairs waiting for me. Short blond hair, pale in the darkness. His hands sat on the top of his knees, palms up to show that he didn't have a weapon. Well, that he didn't have a weapon *in his hands*. Edward always had a weapon unless someone had taken it away from him.

Come to think of it, so did I.

"Long time no see, Edward."

"Three months," he said. "Long enough for my broken arm to heal completely."

I nodded. "I got my stitches out about two months ago."

He just sat on the steps looking down at me.

"What do you want, Edward?"

"Couldn't it be a social call?" He was laughing at me, quietly.

"It's two o'clock in the freaking morning; it better not be a social call."

"Would you rather it was business?" His voice was soft, but it carried.

I shook my head. "No, no." I never wanted to be business for Edward. He specialized in killing lycanthropes, vampires, anything that used to be human and wasn't anymore. He'd gotten bored with killing people. Too easy.

"Is it business?" My voice was steady, no tremble. Good for me. I could draw the Browning, but if we ever drew down on each other for real, he'd kill me. Being friends with Edward was like being friends with a tame leopard. You could pet it and it seemed to like you, but you knew deep down that if it ever got hungry enough, or angry enough, it would kill you. Kill you and eat the flesh from your bones.

"Just information tonight, Anita, no problems."

"What sort of information?" I asked.

He smiled again. Friendly ol' Edward. Ri-ight.

"Can we go inside and talk about it? It's freezing out here," he said.

"The last time you were in town you didn't seem to need an invitation to break into my apartment."

"You've got a new lock."

I grinned. "You couldn't pick it, could you?" I was genuinely pleased.

He shrugged; maybe it was the darkness, but if it hadn't been Edward, I'd have said he was embarrassed.

"The locksmith told me it was burglarproof," I said.

"I didn't bring my battering ram with me," he said.

"Come on up. I'll fix coffee." I stepped around him. He stood and followed me. I turned my back on him without worrying. Edward might shoot me someday, but he wouldn't do it in the back after telling me he was just here to talk. Edward wasn't honorable, but he had rules. If he planned to kill me, he'd have announced it. Told me how much people were paying him to off me. Watched the fear slide through my eyes.

Yeah, Edward had rules. He just had fewer of them than most people did. But he never broke a rule, never betrayed his own skewed sense of honor. If he said I was safe for tonight, he meant it. It would have been nice if Jean-Claude had had rules.

The hallway was middle-of-the-night, middle-of-the-week, had-to-get-up-in-the-morning quiet. My day living neighbors were all asnooze in their beds without care. I unlocked the new locks on my door and ushered Edward inside.

"That's a new look for you, isn't it?" he asked.

"What?"

"What happened to your shirt?"

"Oh." Suave comebacks, that's me. I didn't know what to say, or rather, how much to say.

"You've been playing with vampires again," he said.

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

"The cross-shaped burn on your, ah, chest."

Oh, that. Fine. I unzipped the jacket and folded it over the back of the couch. I stood there in my bra and shoulder holster and met his eyes without blushing. Brownie point for me. I undid the belt and slipped out of the shoulder holster, then took it into the kitchen with me. I laid the gun still in its holster on the countertop and got coffee beans out of the freezer, wearing just my bra and jeans. In front of any other male, alive or dead, I would have been embarrassed, but not Edward. There had never been sexual tension between us. We might shoot each other one fine day, but we'd never sleep together. He was more interested in the fresh burn than my breasts.

"How'd it happen?" he asked.

I ground the beans in the little electric spice mill I'd bought for the occasion. Just the smell of freshly ground coffee made me feel better. I put a filter in my Mr. Coffee, poured the coffee in, poured the water in, and pushed the button. This was about as fancy as my cooking skills got.

"I'm going to get a shirt to throw on," I said.

"The burn won't like anything touching it," Edward said.

"I won't button it, then."

"Are you going to tell me how you got burned?"

"Yes." I took my gun and walked into the bedroom. In the back of my closet I had a long-sleeved shirt that had once been purple but had faded to a soft lilac. It was a man's dress shirt and hung down nearly to my knees, but it was comfortable. I rolled the sleeves up to my elbows and buttoned it halfway up. I left it gapping over the burn. I glanced in the mirror and found that most of my cleavage was covered. Perfect.

I hesitated but finally put the Browning Hi-Power in its holster behind the headboard. Edward and I weren't fighting tonight, and anything that came through the door, with its new locks, would have to go through Edward first. I felt pretty safe.

He was sitting on my couch, legs out in front of him crossed at the ankle. He'd sunk down until the top of his shoulders rested on the couch's arm.

"Make yourself at home," I said.

He just smiled. "Are you going to tell me about the vampires?"

"Yes, but I'm having trouble deciding exactly how much to tell you."

The smile widened. "Naturally."

I set out two mugs, sugar, and real cream from the refrigerator. The coffee dripped into the little glass pot. The smell was rich, warm, and thick enough to wrap your arms around.

"How do you like your coffee?"

"Fix it the way you'd fix it for yourself."

I glanced back at him. "No preference?"

He shook his head, still resting against the couch arm.

"Okay." I poured the coffee into the mugs, added three sugars and a lot of cream to each, stirred, and sat them on the two-seater breakfast table.

"You're not going to bring it to me?"

"You don't drink coffee on a white couch," I said.

"Ah." He got up in one smooth motion, all grace and energy. He'd have been very impressive if I hadn't spent most of the night with vampires.

We sat across from each other. His eyes were the color of spring skies, that warm pale blue that still manages to look cold. His face was pleasant, his eyes neutral and watching everything I did.

I told him about Yasmeen and Marguerite. I left out Jean-Claude, the vampire murder, the giant cobra, Stephen the Werewolf, and Rick Zeeman. Which meant it was a very short story.

When I finished Edward sat there, sipping his coffee and staring at me.

I sipped coffee and stared back.

"That does explain the burn," he said.

"Great," I said.

"But you left out a lot."

"How do you know?"

"Because I was following you."

I stared at him, choking on my coffee. When I could talk without coughing, I said, "You were what?"

"Following you," he said. His eyes were still neutral, smile still pleasant.

"Why?"

"I've been hired to kill the Master of the City."

"You were hired for that three months ago."

"Nikolaos is dead; the new master isn't."

"You didn't kill Nikolaos," I said. "I did."

"True; you want half the money?"

I shook my head.

"Then what's your complaint? I got my arm broken helping you kill her."

"And I got fourteen stitches, and we both got vampire bit," I said.

"And cleansed ourselves with holy water," Edward said.

"Which burns like acid," I said.

Edward nodded, sipped his coffee. Something moved behind his eyes, something liquid and dangerous. His expression hadn't changed, I'd swear to it, but it was suddenly all I could do to meet his eyes.

"Why were you following me, Edward?"

"I was told you would be meeting with the new Master tonight."

"Who told you that?"

He shook his head, that inscrutable smile curling his lips. "I was inside the Circus tonight, Anita. I saw who you were with. You played with the vampires, then you went home, so one of them has to be the Master."

I fought to keep my face blank, too blank, so the effort showed, but the panic didn't show. Edward had been following me, and I hadn't known it. He knew all the vampires I had seen tonight. It wasn't that big a list. He'd figure it out.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You let me go up against that snake without helping me?"

"I came in after the crowd ran out. It was almost over by the time I peeked into the tent."

I drank coffee and tried to think of a way to make this better. He had a contract to kill the Master, and I had led him right to him. I had betrayed Jean-Claude. Why did that bother me?

Edward was watching my face as if he would memorize it. He was waiting for my face to betray me. I worked hard at being blank and inscrutable. He smiled that close, canary-eating grin of his. He was enjoying himself. I was not.

"You only saw four vampires tonight: Jean-Claude, the dark exotic one who must be Yasmeen, and the two blonds. You got names for the blonds?"

I shook my head.

His smile widened. "Would you tell me if you had?"

"Maybe."

"The blonds aren't important," he said. "Neither of them were master vamps."

I stared at him, forcing my face to be neutral, pleasant, attentive, blank. Blank is not one of my better expressions, but maybe if I practiced enough . . .

"That leaves Jean-Claude and Yasmeen. Yasmeen's new in town; that just leaves Jean-Claude."

"Do you really think that the Master of the freaking City would show himself like that?" I put all the scorn I could find into my voice. I wasn't the best actor in the world, but maybe I could learn.

Edward stared at me. "It's Jean-Claude, isn't it?"

"Jean-Claude isn't powerful enough to hold the city. You know that. He's, what, a little over two hundred? Not old enough."

He frowned at me. Good. "It's not Yasmeen."

"True."

"You didn't talk to any other vampires tonight?"

"You may have followed me into the Circus, Edward, but you didn't listen at the door when I met the Master. You couldn't have. The vamps or the shapeshifters would have heard you."

He acknowledged it with a nod.

"I saw the Master tonight, but it wasn't anyone who came down to fight the snake."

"The Master let his people risk their lives and didn't help?" His smile was back.

"The Master of the City doesn't have to be physically present to lend his power, you know that."

"No," he said, "I don't."

I shrugged. "Believe it or not." I prayed, please let him believe.

He was frowning. "You're not usually this good a liar."

"I'm not lying." My voice sounded calm, normal, truthful. Honesty-R-Us.

"If Jean-Claude really isn't the Master, then you know who is?"

The question was a trap. I couldn't answer yes to both questions, but hell, I'd been lying; why stop now? "Yes, I know who it is."

"Tell me," he said.

I shook my head. "The Master would kill me if he knew I talked to you."

"We can kill him together like we did the last one." His voice was terribly reasonable.

I thought about it for a minute. I thought about telling him the truth. Humans First might not be up to tangling with the Master, but Edward was. We could kill him together, a team. My life would be a lot simpler. I shook my head and sighed. Shit.

"I can't, Edward."

"Won't," he said.

I nodded. "Won't."

"If I believe you, Anita, it means I need the name of the Master. It means you are the only human who knows that name." The friendly banter seeped out of his face like melting ice. His eyes were as empty and pitiless as a winter sky. There was no one home that I could talk to.

"You don't want to be the only human who knows the name, Anita."

He was right. I didn't, but what could I say? "Take it or leave it, Edward."

"Save yourself a lot of pain, Anita; tell me the name."

He believed. Hot damn. I lowered my eyes to look down into my coffee so he wouldn't see the flash of triumph in my eyes. When I looked back up, I had my face under control. Me and Meryl Streep.

"I don't give in to threats, you know that."

He nodded. He finished his coffee and sat the mug in the middle of the table. "I will do whatever is necessary to finish this job."

"I never doubted that," I said. He was talking about torturing me for information. He sounded almost regretful, but that wouldn't stop him. One of Edward's primary rules was "Always finish a job."

He wouldn't let a little thing like friendship ruin his perfect record.

"You saved my life, and I saved yours," he said. "It doesn't buy you anything now. You understand that?"

I nodded. "I understand."

"Good." He stood up. I stood up. We looked at each other. He shook his head. "I'll find you tonight, and I'll ask again."

"I won't be bullied, Edward." I was finally getting a little mad. He had come in here asking for information; now he was threatening me. I let the anger show. No acting needed.

"You're tough, Anita, but not that tough." His eyes were neutral, but wary, like those of a wolf I'd seen once in California. I'd just walked around a tree and there it had been, standing. I froze. I had never really understood what neutral meant until then. The wolf didn't give a damn if it hurt me or not. My choice. Threaten it, and the shit hit the fan. Give it room to run, and it would run. But the wolf didn't care; it was prepared either way. I was the one with my pulse in my throat, so startled that I'd stopped breathing. I held my breath and wondered what the wolf would decide. It finally loped off through the trees.

I'd relearned how to breathe and gone back down to the campsite. I had been scared, but I could still close my eyes and see the wolf's pale grey eyes. The wonder of staring at a large predator without any cage bars between us. It had been wonderful.

I stared up at Edward now and knew that this, too, was wonderful in its way. Whether I had known the information or not, I wouldn't have told him. No one bullied me. No one. That was one of my rules.

"I don't want to have to kill you, Edward."

He smiled then. "You kill me?" He was laughing at me.

"You bet," I said.

The laughter seeped out of his eyes, his lips, his face, until he stared at me with his neutral, predator eyes.

I swallowed and remembered to take slow, even breaths. He would kill me. Maybe. Maybe not.

"Is the Master worth one of us dying?" I asked.

"It's a matter of principle," he said.

I nodded. "Me, too."

"We know where we stand, then," he said.

"Yeah."

He walked towards the door. I followed, and unlocked the door for him. He paused in the doorway. "You've got until full dark tonight."

"The answer will be the same."

"I know," he said. He walked out without even glancing back. I watched him until he disappeared down the stairs. Then I shut the door and locked it. I stood leaning my back against the door and tried to think of a way out.

If I told Jean-Claude, he might be able to kill Edward, but I didn't give humans to the monsters. Not for any reason. I could tell Edward about Jean-Claude. He might even be able to kill the Master. I could even help him.

I tried picturing Jean-Claude's perfect body riddled with bullets, covered in blood. His face blown away by a shotgun. I shook my head. I couldn't do it. I didn't know why exactly, but I couldn't hand Jean-Claude over to Edward.

I couldn't betray either of them. Which left me ass-deep in alligators. So what else was new?

Chapter 11

I stood on the shore under a black fringe of trees. The black lake lapped and rolled away into the dark. The moon hung huge and silver in the sky. The moonlight made glittering patterns on the water. Jean-Claude rose from the water. Water was streaming in silver lines from his hair and shirt. His short

black hair was in tight curls from being wet. The white shirt clung to his body, making his nipples clear and hard against the cloth. He held out his hand to me.

I was wearing a long, dark dress. It was heavy and hung around me like a weight. Something inside the skirt made it stick out to either side like a tiny malformed hoop. A heavy cloak was pushed back over my shoulders. It was autumn, and the moon was harvest-full.

Jean-Claude said, "Come to me."

I stepped off the shore and sank into the water. It filled the skirt, soaking into the cloak. I tore the cloak off, letting it sink out of sight. The water was warm as bath water, warm as blood. I raised my hand to the moonlight, and the liquid that streamed down it was thick and dark and had never been water.

I stood in the shallows in a dress that I had never imagined, by a shore I did not know, and stared at the beautiful monster as he moved towards me, graceful and covered in blood.

I woke gasping for air, hands clutching at the sheets like a lifeline. "You promised to stay out of my dreams, you son of a bitch," I whispered.

The radio clock beside the bed read 2:00 P.M. I'd been asleep for ten hours. I should have felt better, but I didn't. It was as if I'd been running from nightmare to nightmare, and hadn't really gotten to rest. The only dream I remembered was the last one. If they had all been that bad, I didn't want to remember the rest.

Why was Jean-Claude haunting my dreams again? He'd given his word, but maybe his word wasn't worth anything. Maybe.

I stripped in front of the bathroom mirror. My ribs and stomach were covered in deep, nearly purple bruises. My chest was tight when I breathed, but nothing was broken. The burn on my chest was raw, the skin blackened where it wasn't covered in blisters. A burn hurts all the way down, as if the pain burrows from the skin down to the bone. A burn is the only injury where I am convinced I have nerve endings below skin level. How could it hurt so damn bad, otherwise?

I was meeting Ronnie at the health club at three. Ronnie was short for Veronica. She said it helped her get more work as a private detective if people assumed she was male. Sad but true. We would lift weights and jog. I slipped a black sports bra very carefully over the burn. The elastic pressed in on the bruises, but everything else was okay. I rubbed the burn with antiseptic cream and taped a piece of gauze over it. A man's red t-shirt with the sleeves and neck cut out went over everything else. Black biker pants, jogging socks with a thin red stripe, and black Nike Airs completed the outfit.

The t-shirt showed the gauze, but it hid the bruises. Most of the regulars at the health club were accustomed to my coming in bruised or worse. They didn't ask a lot of questions anymore. Ronnie says I was grumpy at them. Fine with me. I like to be left alone.

I had my coat on, gym bag in hand, when the phone rang. I debated but finally picked it up. "Talk to me," I said.

"It's Dolph."

My stomach tightened. Was it another murder? "What's up, Dolph?"

"We got an ID on the John Doe you looked at."

"The vampire victim?"

"Yeah."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. No more murders, and we were making progress; what could be better?

"Calvin Barnabas Rupert, friends called him Cal. Twenty-six years old, married to Denise Smythe Rupert for four years. No children. He was an insurance broker. We haven't been able to turn up any ties with the vampire community."

"Maybe Mr. Rupert was just in the right place at the wrong time."

"Random violence?" He made it a question.

"Maybe."

"If it was random, we got no pattern, nothing to look at."

"So you're wondering if I can find out if Cal Rupert had any ties to the monsters?"

"Yes," he said.

I sighed. "I'll try. Is that it? I'm late for an appointment."

"That's it. Call me if you find out anything." His voice sounded positively grim.

"You'd tell me if you found another body, wouldn't you?"

He gave a snort of laughter. "Make you come down and measure the damn bites, yeah. Why?"

"Your voice sounds grim."

The laughter dribbled out of his voice. "You're the one who said there'd be more bodies. You changed your mind on that?"

I wanted to say, yes, I've changed my mind, but I didn't. "If there is a pack of rogue vampires, we'll be seeing more bodies."

"Can you think of anything else it could be besides vampires?" he asked.

I thought about it for a minute, and shook my head. "Not a damn thing."

"Fine, talk to you later." The phone buzzed dead in my hand before I could say anything. Dolph wasn't much on hello and good-bye.

I had my back-up gun, a Firestar 9mm, in the pocket of my jacket. There was just no way to wear a holster in exercise clothes. The Firestar only held eight bullets to the Browning's thirteen, but the Browning tended to stick out of my pocket and make people stare. Besides, if I couldn't get the bad guys with eight bullets, another five probably wouldn't help. Of course, there was an extra clip in the zipper pocket of my gym bag. A girl couldn't be too cautious in these crime-ridden times.

Chapter 12

Ronnie and I were doing power circuits at Vic Tanny's. There were two full sets of machines and no waiting at 3:14 on a Thursday afternoon. I was doing the Hip Abduction/Hip Adduction machine. You pulled a lever on the side and the machine went to different positions. The Hip Adduction position looked vaguely obscene, like a gynecological torture device. It was one of the reasons I never wore shorts when we lifted weights. Ronnie either.

I was concentrating on pressing my thighs together without making the weights clink. Weights clinking means you're not controlling the exercise, or it means you're working with too much weight. I was using sixty pounds. It wasn't too heavy.

Ronnie lay on her stomach using the Leg Curl, flexing her calves over her back, heels nearly touching her butt. The muscles under her calves bunched and coiled under her skin. Neither of us is bulky, but we're solid. Think Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2*.

Ronnie finished before I did and paced around the machines waiting for me. I let the weights ease back with only the slightest clink. It's okay to clink the weights when you're finished.

We eased out from the machines and started running on the oval track. The track was bordered by a glass wall that showed the blue pool. A lone man was doing laps in goggles and a black bathing cap. The other side was bordered by the free weight room and the aerobics studio. The ends of the track were mirrored so you could always see yourself running face on. On bad days I could have done without watching myself; on good days it was kind of fun. A way to make sure your stride was even, arms pumping.

I told Ronnie about the vampire victim as we ran. Which meant we weren't running fast enough. I increased my pace and could still talk. When you routinely do four miles outside in the St. Louis heat, the padded track at Vic Tanny is just not that big a challenge. We did two laps and went back to the machines.

"What did you say the victim's name was again?" She sounded normal, no strain. I increased our pace to a flat-out run. All talking ceased.

Arm machines this time. Regular Pull-over for me, Overhead Press for Ronnie, then two laps of the track, then trade machines.

When I could talk, I answered her question. "Calvin Rupert," I said. I did twelve pullovers with 100 pounds. Of all the machines, this one is easiest for me. Weird, huh?

"Cal Rupert?" she asked.

"That's what his friends called him," I said, "Why?"

She shook her head. "I know a Cal Rupert."

I watched her and let my body do the exercise without me. I was holding my breath, which is bad. I remembered to breathe and said, "Tell me."

"When I was asking questions around Humans Against Vampires during that rash of vampire deaths. Cal Rupert belonged to HAV."

"Describe him for me."

"Blond, blue or grey eyes, not too tall, well built, attractive."

There might be more than one Cal Rupert in St. Louis, but what were the odds that they'd look that much alike? "I'll have Dolph check it out, but if he was a member of HAV, it might mean the vampire kill was an execution."

"What do you mean?"

"Some of HAV thinks the only good vampire is a dead vampire." I was thinking of Humans First, Mr. Jeremy Ruebens's little group. Had they killed a vampire already? Was this retaliation?

"I need to know if Cal was still a member of HAV or if he'd joined a new, more radical group called Humans First."

"Catchy," Ronnie said.

"Can you find out for me? If I go down there asking questions, they'll burn me at the stake."

"Always glad to help my best friend and the police at the same time. A private detective never knows when having the police owe you one may come in handy."

"True," I said.

I got to wait for Ronnie this time. On leg machines she was faster. Upper body was my area. "I'll call Dolph as soon as we're finished here. Maybe it's a pattern? A hell of a coincidence if it's not."

We started around the track and Ronnie said, "So, have you decided what you're wearing to Catherine's Halloween party?"

I glanced at her, nearly stumbling. "Shit," I said.

"I take that to mean you forgot about the party. You were bitching about it only two days ago."

"I've been a little busy, okay?" I said. But it wasn't all right. Catherine Maison-Gillett was one of my best friends. I'd worn a pink prom dress with puff sleeves in her wedding. It had been humiliating. We'd all told the great lie of all bridesmaids. We could cut the dress short and wear it in normal life. No way. Or I could wear it at the next formal occasion I was invited to. How many formals are you invited to once you graduate college? None. At least none where I'd willingly wear a pink, puff-sleeved, hoop-skirted, reject from *Gone With the Wind*.

Catherine was throwing her very first party since the wedding. The Halloween festivities started long before dark so that I could make an appearance. When someone goes to that much trouble, you have to show up. Dammit.

"I made a date for Saturday," I said.

Ronnie stopped running and stared at me in the mirror. I kept running; if she wanted to ask questions she'd have to catch me first. She caught me.

"Did you say date?"

I nodded, saving my breath for running.

"Talk, Anita." Her voice was vaguely threatening.

I grinned at her and told her an edited version of my meeting with Richard Zeeman. I didn't leave out much, though.

"He was naked in a bed the first time you saw him?" She was cheerfully outraged.

I nodded.

"You do meet men in the most interesting places," she said.

We were jogging on the track again. "When's the last time I met a man?"

"What about John Burke?"

"Other than him," Jerks did not count.

She thought about that for a minute. She shook her head. "Too long."

"Yep," I said.

We were on our last machine, the last two laps, then stretching, showers, and done. I didn't really enjoy exercising. Neither did Ronnie. But we both needed to be in good shape so we could run away from the bad guys, or run them down. Though I hadn't chased after many villains lately. I seemed to do a lot more running away.

We moved over to the open area near the racquetball courts and the tanning rooms. It was the only place with enough room to stretch out. I always stretched before and after exercising. I'd had too many injuries not to be careful.

I started rotating the neck slowly; Ronnie followed me. "I guess I'll have to cancel the date."

"Don't you dare," Ronnie said. "Invite him to the party."

I looked at her. "You've got to be kidding. A first date surrounded by people he doesn't know."

"Who do you know besides Catherine?" she asked.

She had a point there. "I've met her new husband."

"You were in the wedding," Ronnie said.

"Oh, yeah."

Ronnie frowned at me. "Be serious, ask him to the party, make plans for the caving next week."

"Two dates with the same man?" I shook my head. "What if we don't like each other?"

"No excuses," Ronnie said. "This is the closest you've been to a date in months. Don't blow it."

"I don't date because I don't have time to date."

"You don't have time to sleep, either, but you manage it," she said.

"I'll do it, but he may say no to the party. I would rather not go myself."

"Why not?"

I gave her a long look. She looked innocent enough. "I'm an animator, a zombie-queen. Having me at a Halloween party is redundant."

"You don't have to tell people what you do for a living."

"I'm not ashamed of it."

"I didn't say you were," Ronnie said.

I shook my head. "Just forget it. I'll make the counteroffer to Richard, then we'll go from there."

"You'll want a sexy outfit for the party now," she said.

"Do not," I said.

She laughed. "Do too."

"All right, all right, a sexy outfit if I can find one in my size three days before Halloween."

"I'll help you. We'll find something."

She'd help me. We'd find something. It sounded sort of ominous. Pre-date jitters. Who, me?

Chapter 13

At 5:15 that afternoon I was on the phone to Richard Zeeman. "Hi, Richard, this is Anita Blake."

"Nice to hear your voice." His voice was smiling over the phone; I could almost feel it.

"I forgot that I've got a Halloween party to go to Saturday afternoon. They started the party during daylight so I could make an appearance. I can't not show up."

"I understand," he said. His voice was very carefully neutral—neutral cheerful.

"Would you like to be my date for the party? I have to work Halloween night, of course, but the day could be ours."

"And the caving?"

"A rain check," I said.

"Two dates; this could be serious."

"You're laughing at me," I said.

"Never."

"Shit, do you want to go or not?"

"If you promise to go caving a week from Saturday."

"My solemn word," I said.

"It's a deal." He was quiet on the phone for a minute. "I don't have to wear a costume for this party, do I?"

"Unfortunately, yes," I said.

He sighed.

"Backing out?"

"No, but you owe me two dates for humiliating myself in front of strangers."

I grinned and was glad he couldn't see it, I was entirely too pleased.

"Deal."

"What costume are you wearing?" he asked.

"I haven't got one yet. I told you I forgot the party; I meant it."

"Hmm," he said. "I think picking out costumes should tell a lot about a person, don't you?"

"This close to Halloween we'll be lucky to find anything in our size."

He laughed. "I might have an ace up my sleeve."

"What?"

He laughed again. "Don't sound so damn suspicious. I've got a friend who's a Civil War buff. He and his wife do re-creations."

"You mean like dress up?"

"Yes."

"Will they have the right sizes?"

"What size dress do you wear?"

That was a personal question for someone who'd never even kissed me. "Seven," I said.

"I would have guessed smaller."

"I'm too chesty for a six, and they don't make six and a halves."

"Chesty, woo, woo."

"Stop it."

"Sorry, couldn't resist," he said.

My beeper went off. "Damn."

"What's that sound?"

"My beeper," I said. I pressed the button and it flashed the number—the police. "I have to take it. Can I call you back in a few minutes, Richard?"

"I'll wait with bated breath."

"I'm frowning at the phone, I hope you know that."

"Thanks for sharing that. I'll wait here by the phone. Call me when you're done with (sob) work."

"Cut it out, Richard."

"What'd I do?"

"Bye, Richard, talk to you soon."

"I'll be waiting," he said.

"Bye, Richard." I hung up before he could make any more "pitiful me" jokes. The really sad part was I thought it was cute. Gag me with a spoon.

I called Dolph's number. "Anita?"

"Yeah."

"We got another vampire victim. Looks the same as the first one, except it's a woman."

"Damn," I said softly.

"Yeah, we're over here at DeSoto."

"That's farther south than Arnold," I said.

"So?" he said.

"Nothing, just give me the directions."

He did.

"It'll take me at least an hour to get there," I said.

"The stiff's not going anywhere, and neither are we." He sounded discouraged.

"Cheer up, Dolph, I may have found a clue."

"Talk."

"Veronica Sims recognized the name Cal Rupert. Description matches."

"What are you doing talking to a private detective?" He sounded suspicious.

"She's my workout partner, and since she just gave us our first clue, I'd sound a little more grateful, if I were you."

"Yeah, yeah. Hurrah for the private sector. Now talk."

"A Cal Rupert was a member of HAV about two months ago. The description matches."

"Revenge killings?" he asked.

"Maybe."

"Half of me hopes it's a pattern. At least we'd have some place to start looking." He made a sound between a laugh and a snort. "I'll tell Zerrowski you found a clue. He'll like that."

"All us Dick Tracy Crimebusters speak police lingo," I said.

"Police lingo?" I could feel the grin over the phone. "You find any more clues, you let us know."

"Aye, aye, Sergeant."

"Can the sarcasm," he said.

"Please, I always use fresh sarcasm, never canned."

He groaned. "Just get your butt out here so we can all go home." The phone went dead. I hung up.

Richard Zeeman answered on the second ring. "Hello."

"It's Anita."

"What's up?"

"The message was from the police. They need my expertise."

"A preternatural crime?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Is it dangerous?"

"To the person who was killed, yeah."

"You know that's not what I meant," he said.

"It's my job, Richard. If you can't deal with it, maybe we shouldn't date at all."

"Hey, don't get defensive. I just wanted to know if you would be in any personal danger." His voice was indignant.

"Fine. I've got to go."

"What about the costumes? Do you want me call my friend?"

"Sure."

"Will you trust me to pick your costume?" he asked.

I thought about that for a few heartbeats. Did I trust him to get me a costume? No. Did I have time to hunt up a costume on my own? Probably not. "Why not?" I said. "Beggars can't be choosers."

"We'll survive the party and then next week we'll go crawl in the mud."

"I can't wait," I said.

He laughed. "Neither can I."

"I've got to go, Richard."

"I'll have the costumes at your apartment for inspection. I'll need directions."

I gave him directions.

"I hope you like your costume."

"Me too. Talk to you later." I hung the receiver on the pay phone's cradle and stared at it. That had been too easy. Too smooth. He'd probably pick out a terrible costume for me. We'd both have a miserable time and be trapped into a second date with each other. Eek!

Ronnie handed me a can of fruit juice and took a sip of her own. She had cranberry and I had ruby red grapefruit. I couldn't stand cranberry.

"What'd cutesie pie say?"

"Please don't call him that," I said.

She shrugged. "Sorry, it just sort of slipped out." She had the grace to look embarrassed.

"I forgive you, this once."

She grinned, and I knew she wasn't repentant. But I'd ribbed her often enough about her dates. Turnabout is fair play. Payback is a bitch.

Chapter 14

The sun was sinking in a slash of crimson like a fresh, bleeding wound. Purple clouds were piling up to the west. The wind was strong and smelled like rain.

Ruffo Lane was a narrow gravel road. Barely wide enough for two cars to pass each other. The reddish gravel crunched underfoot. Wind rustled the tall, dry weeds in the ditch. The road disappeared over the rise of a hill. Police cars, marked and plain, were lined up along one side of the road as far as I could see. The road disappeared over the rise of a hill. There were a lot of hills in Jefferson County.

I was already dressed in a clean pair of overalls, black Nikes, and surgical gloves when my beeper went off. I had to scramble at the zipper and drag the damn thing out into the dying light. I didn't have to see the number. I knew it was Bert. It was only a half hour until full dark, if that. My boss was wondering where I was, and why I wasn't at work. I wondered if Bert would really fire me. I stared down at the corpse and wasn't sure I cared.

The woman was curled on her side, arms shielding her naked breasts, as if even in death she was modest. Violent death is the ultimate invasion. She would be photographed, videotaped, measured, cut open, sewn back up. No part of her, inside or out, would be left untouched. It was wrong. We should have been able to toss a blanket over her and leave her in peace, but that wouldn't help us prevent the next killing. And there would be a next one; the second body was proof of that.

I glanced around at the police and the ambulance team, waiting to take the body away. Except for the body, I was the only woman. I usually was, but tonight, for some reason, it bothered me. Her waist-length hair spilled out into the weeds in a pale flood. Another blonde. Was that coincidence? Or not? Two was a pretty small sample. If the next victim was blond, then we'd have a trend.

If all the victims were caucasian, blond, and members of Humans Against Vampires, we'd have our pattern. Patterns helped solve the crime. I was hoping for a pattern.

I held a penlight in my mouth and measured the bite marks. There were no bite marks on the wrists this time. There were rope burns instead. They'd tied her up, maybe hung her from the ceiling like a side of beef. There is no such thing as a good vampire who feeds off humans. Never believe that a vampire will only take a little. That it won't hurt. That's like believing your date will pull out in time. Just trust him. Yeah, right.

There was a neat puncture wound on either side of the neck. There was a bit of flesh missing from her left breast, as if something had taken a bite out of her just above the heart. The bend of her right arm was torn apart. The ball joint was naked in the thin beam of light. Pinkish ligaments strained to hold the arm together.

The last serial murderer that I'd worked on had torn the victims into pieces. I had walked on carpet so drenched with blood that it squelched underfoot. I had held pieces of intestine in my hand, looking for clues. It was the new worst-thing-I'd-ever-seen.

I stared down at the dead woman and was glad she hadn't been torn apart. And it wasn't because I figured it had been an easier death, though I hoped it had. And it wasn't because there were more clues, because there weren't. It was just that I didn't want to see any more slaughtered people. I'd had my quota for the year.

There is an art to holding a penlight in your mouth and measuring wounds without drooling on yourself. I managed. The secret was sucking on the end of the flashlight from time to time.

The thin beam of the flashlight shone on her thighs. I wanted to see if she had a groin wound like the man. I wanted to be sure this was the work of the same killers. It would be a hell of a coincidence if there were two vampire packs hunting separately, but it was possible. I needed to be as sure as I could that we had just one rogue pack. One was plenty, two was a screaming nightmare. Surely, God would not be that unkind, but just in case . . . I wanted to see if she had a groin wound. The man's hands had shown no rope marks. Either the vampires were getting more organized, or it was a different group.

Her arms had been glued over her chest, tied in place by rigor mortis. Nothing short of an axe was going to move her legs, not until final rigor went away, which would be forty-eight hours or so. I couldn't wait two days, but I didn't want to chop the body into pieces either.

I got down on all fours in front of the corpse. I apologized for what I was about to do, but couldn't think of anything better.

The flashlight's thin beam trembled over her thighs, like a tiny spotlight. I touched the line that separated her legs and pushed my fingers in that line, trying to feel by fingertip if there was a wound there.

It must have looked like I was groping the corpse, but I couldn't think of a more dignified way to do it. I glanced up, trying not to feel the solid rubberiness of her skin. The sun was just a splash of crimson in the west like dying coals. True darkness slipped over the sky like a flood of ink. And the woman's legs moved under my hands.

I jumped. Nearly swallowing the flashlight. Nervous, me? The woman's flesh was soft. It hadn't been a moment ago. The woman's lips were halfparted. Hadn't they been closed before?

This was crazy. Even if she had been a vampire, she wouldn't rise until the third night after death. And she'd died from multiple vampire bites in one massive blood feast. She was dead, just dead.

Her skin shimmered white in the darkness. The sky was black; if the moon was up in those black-purple clouds, I couldn't see it. Yet her skin shimmered as if touched by moonlight. She wasn't exactly glowing, but it was close. Her hair glimmered like spider silk spread over the grass. She'd just been dead a minute ago; now she was . . . beautiful.

Dolph loomed over me. At six-nine he loomed even when I was standing up; with me kneeling he was gigantic. I stood up, peeled off one surgical glove, and took the penlight out of my mouth. Never touch anything you're likely to put in your mouth after touching the open wounds of a stranger. AIDS, you know. I shoved the penlight into the breast pocket of the coveralls. I took off the other glove and crumpled them both into a side pocket.

"Well?" Dolph said.

"Does she look different to you?" I asked.

He frowned. "What?"

"The corpse; does it look different to you?"

He stared down at the pale body. "Now that you mention it. It looks like she's asleep." He shook his head. "We're going to have to call an ambulance and have a doctor pronounce her dead."

"She's not breathing."

"Would you want the fact that you weren't breathing to be the only criterion?"

I thought about that for a minute. "No, I guess not."

Dolph leafed through his notebook. "You said a person who dies of multiple vampire bites can't rise from the dead as a vampire." He was reading my own words back at me. I was hoist on my petard.

"That's true in most cases."

He stared down at the woman. "But not in this one."

"Unfortunately no," I said.

"Explain this, Anita." He didn't sound happy. I didn't blame him.

"Sometimes even one bite can make a corpse rise as a vampire. I've only read a couple of articles about it. A very powerful master vamp can sometimes contaminate every corpse it touches."

"Where'd you read the articles?"

"The *Vampire Quarterly*."

"Never heard of it," he said.

I shrugged. "I have a degree in preternatural biology; I must be on someone's list for stuff like that." A thought came to me that wasn't pleasant at all. "Dolph."

"Yeah."

"The man, the first corpse, this is its third night."

"It didn't glow in the dark," Dolph said.

"The woman's corpse didn't look bad until full dark."

"You think the man's going to rise?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Shit," he said.

"Exactly," I said.

He shook his head. "Wait a minute. He can still tell us who killed him."

"He won't come back as a normal vamp," I said. "He died of multiple wounds, Dolph; he'll come back as more animal than human."

"Explain that."

"If they took the body to St. Louis City Hospital, then it's safe behind reinforced steel, but if they listened to me, then it's at the regular morgue. Call the morgue and tell them to evacuate the building."

"You're serious," he said.

"Absolutely."

He didn't even argue with me. I was his preternatural expert, and what I said was pretty much gospel until proven otherwise. Dolph didn't ask for your opinion unless he was prepared to act upon it. He was a good boss.

He slipped into his car, nearest to the murder scene of course, and called the morgue.

He leaned out the open car door. "The body was sent to St. Louis City Hospital, routine for all vampire victims. Even ones our preternatural expert tells us are safe." He smiled at me when he said it.

"Call St. Louis City and make sure they've got the body in the vault room."

"Why would they transport the body to the vampire morgue and not put the body in the vault room?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. But I'll feel better after you call them."

He took a deep breath and let it go. "Okay." He got back on the phone and dialed the number from memory. Shows what kind of year Dolph's been having.

I stood at the open car door and listened. There wasn't much to hear. No one answered.

Dolph sat there listening to the distant ring of the phone. He stared up at me. His eyes asked the question.

"Somebody should be there," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

"The man will rise like a beast," I said. "It'll slaughter everything in its path unless the master that made it comes back to pick it up, or until it's really dead. They're called animalistic vampires. There's no colloquial term for them. They're too rare for that."

Dolph hung up the phone and surged out of the car, yelling, "Zerbrowski!"

"Here, Sarge." Zerbrowski came at a trot. When Dolph yelled, you came running, or else. "How's it going, Blake?"

What was I supposed to say, terrible? I shrugged and said, "Fine."

My beeper went off again. "Dammit, Bert!"

"Talk to your boss," Dolph said. "Tell him to leave you the fuck alone."

Sounded good to me.

Dolph went off yelling orders. The men scrambled to obey. I slid into Dolph's car and called Bert.

He answered on the first ring; not a good sign. "This better be you, Anita."

"And if it's not?" I said.

"Where the hell are you?"

"Murder scene with a fresh body," I said.

That stopped him for a second. "You're missing your first appointment."

"Yeah."

"But I'm not going to yell."

"You're being reasonable," I said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing except that the newest member of Animators, Inc., is taking your first two appointments. His name is Lawrence Kirkland. Just meet him at the third appointment, and you can take the last three appointments and show him the ropes."

"You hired someone? How'd you find someone so fast? Animators are pretty rare. Especially one who could do two zombies in one night."

"It's my job to find talent."

Dolph slid into the car, and I slid into the passenger seat.

"Tell your boss you've got to go."

"I've got to go, Bert."

"Wait, you have an emergency vampire staking at St. Louis City Hospital."

My stomach clenched up. "What name?"

He paused, reading the name, "Calvin Rupert."

"Shit."

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"When did the call come in?"

"Around three this afternoon, why?"

"Shit, shit, shit."

"What's wrong, Anita?" Bert asked.

"Why was it marked urgent?" Zerbrowski slipped into the back of the unmarked car. Dolph put the car in gear and hit the sirens and lights. A marked car fell into line behind us, lights strobing into the dark. Lights and sirens, wowiee.

"Rupert had one of those dying wills," Bert said. "If he even had one vampire bite, he wanted to be staked."

That was consistent with someone who was a member of HAV. Hell, I had it in my will. "Do we have a court order of execution?"

"You only need that after the guy rises as a vampire. We've got permission from the next of kin; just go stake him."

I grabbed the dashboard as we bounced over the narrow road. Gravel pinged against the underside of the car. I cradled the phone receiver between shoulder and chin and slipped into a seat belt.

"I'm on my way to the morgue now," I said.

"I sent John ahead when I couldn't get you," Bert said.

"How long ago?"

"I called him after you didn't answer your beeper."

"Call him back, tell him not to go."

There must have been something in my voice, because he said, "What's wrong, Anita?"

"We can't get any answer at the morgue, Bert."

"So?"

"The vampire may have already risen and killed everybody, and John's walking right into it."

"I'll call him," Bert said. The connection broke, and I shoved the receiver down as we spilled out onto New Highway 21.

"We can kill the vampire when we get there," I said.

"That's murder," Dolph said.

I shook my head. "Not if Calvin Rupert had a dying will."

"Did he?"

"Yeah."

Zerbrowski slammed his fist into the back of the seat. "Then we'll pop the son of a bitch."

"Yeah," I said.

Dolph just nodded.

Zerbrowski was grinning. He had a shotgun in his hands.

"Does that thing have silver shot in it?" I asked.

Zerbrowski glanced at the gun. "No."

"Please, tell me I'm not the only one in this car with silver bullets."

Zerbrowski grinned. Dolph said, "Silver's more expensive than gold. City doesn't have that kind of money."

I knew that, but I was hoping I was wrong. "What do you do when you're up against vampires and lycanthropes?"

Zerbrowski leaned over the back seat. "Same thing we do when we're up against a gang with Uzi pistols."

"Which is?" I said.

"Be outgunned," he said. He didn't look happy about it. I wasn't too happy about it, either. I was hoping that the morgue attendants had just run, gotten out, but I wasn't counting on it.

Chapter 15

My vampire kit included a sawed-off shotgun with silver shot, stakes, mallet, and enough crosses and holy water to drown a vampire. Unfortunately, my vampire kit was sitting in my bedroom closet. I used to carry it in the trunk, minus the sawed-off shotgun, which has always been illegal. If I was caught carrying the vampire kit without a court order of execution on me, it was an automatic jail term. The new law had kicked in only weeks before. It was to keep certain overzealous executioners from killing someone and saying, "Gee, sorry." I, by the way, am not one of the overzealous. Honest.

Dolph had cut the sirens about a mile from the hospital. We cruised into the parking lot dark and quiet. The marked car behind us had followed our lead. There was already one marked car waiting for us. The two officers were crouched beside the car, guns in hand.

We all spilled out of the dark cars, guns out. I felt like I'd been shanghaied into a Clint Eastwood movie. I couldn't see John Burke's car. Which meant John checked his beeper more than I did. If the vampire was safely behind metal walls, I promised to answer all beeper messages immediately. Please, just don't let me have cost lives. Amen.

One of the uniforms who had been waiting for us duck-walked to Dolph and said, "Nothing's moved since we got here, Sergeant."

Dolph nodded. "Good. Special forces will be here when they can get to it. We're on the list."

"What do you mean, we're on the list?" I asked.

Dolph looked at me. "Special forces has the silver bullets, and they'll get here as soon as they can."

"We're going to wait for them?" I said.

"No."

"Sergeant, we are supposed to wait for special forces when going into a preternatural situation," the uniform said.

"Not if you're the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team," he said.

"You should have silver bullets," I said.

"I've got a requisition in," Dolph said.

"A requisition, that's real helpful."

"You're a civvie. You get to wait outside. So don't bitch," he said.

"I'm also the legal vampire executioner for the State of Missouri. If I'd answered my beeper instead of ignoring it to irritate Bert, the vampire would be staked already, and we wouldn't be doing this. You can't leave me out of it. It's more my job than it is yours."

Dolph stared at me for a minute or two, then nodded very slowly.

"You should have kept your mouth shut," Zerbrowski said. "And you'd get to wait in the car."

"I don't want to wait in the car."

He just looked at me. "I do."

Dolph started walking towards the doors. Zerbrowski followed. I brought up the rear. I was the police's preternatural expert. If things went badly tonight, I'd earn my retainer.

All vampire victims were brought to the basement of the old St. Louis City Hospital, even those who die in a different county. There just aren't that many morgues equipped to handle freshly risen vampires. They've got a special vault room with a steel reinforced everything and crosses laid on the outside of the door. There's even a feeding tank to take the edge off that first blood lust. Rats, rabbits, guinea pigs. Just a snack to calm the newly risen.

Under normal circumstances the man's body would have been in the vampire room, and there would have been no problem, but I had promised them that he was safe. I was their expert, the one they called to stake the dead. If I said a body was safe, they believed me. And I'd been wrong. God help me, I'd been wrong.

Chapter 16

St. Louis City Hospital sat like a stubby brick giant in the middle of a combat zone. Walk a few blocks south and you could see Tony Award-winning musicals straight from Broadway. But here we could have been on the dark side of the moon. If the moon had slums.

Broken windows decorated the ground like shattered teeth.

The hospital, like a lot of inner-city hospitals, had lost money, so they had closed it down. But the morgue stayed open because they couldn't afford to move the vampire room.

The room had been designed in the early 1900s when people still thought they could find a cure for vampirism. Lock a vampire in the vault, watch it rise and try to "cure" it. A lot of vamps cooperated because they wanted to be cured. Dr. Henry Mulligan had pioneered the search for a cure. The program was discontinued when one of the patients ate Dr. Mulligan's face.

So much for helping the poor misunderstood vampire.

But the vault room was still used for most vampire victims. Mostly as a precaution, because these days when a vamp rose there was a vampire counsellor waiting to guide the newly risen to civilized vampirehood.

I had forgotten about the vampire counsellor. It was a pioneer program that'd only been in effect a little over a month. Would an older vampire be able

to control an animalistic vampire, or would it take a master vampire to control it? I didn't know. I just didn't know.

Dolph had his gun out and ready. Without silver-plated bullets, it was better than spitting at the monster, but barely. Zerbrowski held the shotgun like he knew how to use it. There were four uniformed officers at my back. All with guns, all ready to blast undead ass. So why wasn't I comforted? Because nobody else had any freaking silver bullets, except me.

The double glass doors swooshed open automatically. Seven guns were trained on the door as it moved. My fingers were all cramped up trying not to shoot the damn door.

One of the uniforms swallowed a laugh. Nervous, who us?

"All right," Dolph said, "there are civilians in here. Don't shoot any of them."

One of the uniforms was blond. His partner was black and much older. The other two uniforms were in their twenties: one skinny and tall with a prominent Adam's apple, the other short with pale skin and eyes nearly glassy with fear.

Each policeman had a cross-shaped tie tack. They were the latest style and standard issue for the St. Louis police. The crosses would help, maybe even keep them alive.

I hadn't had time to get my crucifix's chain replaced. I was wearing a charm bracelet that dangled with tiny crosses. I was also wearing an anklet chain, not just because it matched the bracelet, but if anything unusual happened tonight, I wanted to have a backup.

It's sort of a tossup which I'd least like to live without, cross or gun. Better to have both.

"You got any suggestions about how we should do this, Anita?" Dolph asked.

It wasn't too long ago that the police wouldn't have been called in at all. The good ol' days when vampires were left to a handful of dedicated experts. Back when you could just stake a vamp and be done with it. I had been one of the few, the proud, the brave, the Executioner.

"We could form a circle, guns pointing out. It would up our chances of not getting snuck up on."

The blond cop said, "Won't we hear it coming?"

"The undead make no noise," I said.

His eyes widened.

"I'm kidding, officer," I said.

"Hey," he said softly. He sounded offended. I guess I didn't blame him.

"Sorry," I said.

Dolph frowned at me.

"I said I was sorry."

"Don't tease the rookies," Zerbrowski said. "I bet this is his first vampire."

The black cop made a sound between a laugh and a snort. "His first day, period."

"Jesus," I said. "Can he wait out in the car?"

"I can handle myself," the blond said.

"It's not that," I said, "but isn't there some kind of union rule against vampires on the first day?"

"I can take it," he said.

I shook my head. His first fucking day. He should have been out directing traffic somewhere, not playing tag with the walking dead.

"I'll take point," Dolph said. "Anita to my right." He pointed two fingers at the black cop and the blond. "You two on my left." He pointed at the last two uniforms. "Behind Ms. Blake. Zerbrowski, take the back."

"Gee, thanks, Sarge," he muttered.

I almost let it go, but I couldn't. "I'm the only one with silver ammo. I should have point," I said.

"You're a civvie, Anita," Dolph said.

"I haven't been a civvie for years and you know it."

He looked at me for a long second, then nodded. "Take point, but if you get killed, my ass is grass."

I smiled. "I'll try to remember that."

I stepped out in front, a little ahead of the others. They formed a rough circle behind me. Zerbrowski gave me a thumbs-up sign. It made me smile. Dolph gave the barest of nods. It was time to go inside. Time to stalk the monster.

Chapter 17

The walls were two-tone green. Dark khaki on the bottom, puke green on top. Institutional green, as charming as a sore tooth. Huge steam pipes, higher than my head, covered the walls. The pipes were painted green, too. They narrowed the hallway to a thin passageway.

Electrical conduit pipes were a thinner silver shadow to the steam pipes. Hard to put electricity in a building never designed for it.

The walls were lumpy where they'd been painted over without being scraped first. If you dug at the walls, layer after layer of different color would come up, like the strata in an archaeological dig. Each color had its own history, its own memories of pain.

It was like being in the belly of a great ship. Except instead of the roar of engines, you had the beat of nearly perfect silence. There are some places where silence hangs in heavy folds. St. Louis City Hospital was one of those places.

If I'd been superstitious, which I am not, I would have said the hospital was the perfect place for ghosts. There are different kinds of ghosts. The regular kind are spirits of the dead left behind when they should have gone to

Heaven or Hell. Theologians had been arguing over what the existence of ghosts meant for God and the church for centuries. I don't think God is particularly bothered by it, but the church is.

Enough people had died in this place to make it thick with real ghosts, but I'd never seen any personally. Until a ghost wraps its cold arms around me, I'd just as soon not believe in it.

But there is another kind of ghost. Psychic impressions, strong emotions, soak into the walls and floors of a building. It's like an emotional tape recorder. Sometimes with video images, sometimes just sound, sometimes just a shiver down your spine when you walk over a certain spot.

The old hospital was thick with shivery places. I personally had never seen or heard anything, but walking down the hallway you knew somewhere, near at hand, there was something. Something waiting just out of sight, just out of hearing, just out of reach. Tonight it was probably a vampire.

The only sounds were the scrape of feet, the brush of cloth, us moving. There was no other sound. When it's really quiet you start hearing things even if it's just the buzz of your own blood pounding in your ears.

The first corner loomed before me. I was point. I'd volunteered to be point. I had to go around the corner first. Whatever lay around the bend, it was mine. I hate it when I play hero.

I went down on one knee, gun held in both hands, pointing up. It didn't do any good to stick my gun around the corner first. I couldn't shoot what I couldn't see. There are a variety of ways to go around blind corners, none of them foolproof. It mostly matters whether you're more afraid of getting shot or getting grabbed. Since this was a vampire I was more worried about being grabbed and having my throat ripped out.

I pressed my right shoulder against the wall, took a deep breath, and threw myself forward. I didn't do a neat shoulder roll into the hallway. I just sort of fell on my left side with the gun held two-handed out in front of me. Trust me, this is the fastest way to be able to aim around a corner. I wouldn't necessarily advise it if the monsters were shooting back.

I lay in the hallway, heart pounding in my ears. The good news was there was no vampire. The bad news was that there was a body.

I came up to one knee, still searching the shadowed hallway for hints of movement. Sometimes with a vampire you don't see anything, you don't even hear it, you feel it in your shoulders and back, the fine hairs on the back of your neck. Your body responds to rhythms older than thought. In fact, thinking instead of doing can get you dead.

"It's clear," I said. I was still kneeling in the middle of the hallway, gun out, ready for bear.

"You through rolling around on the floor?" Dolph asked.

I glanced at him, then back to the hallway. There was nothing there. It was all right. Really.

The body was wearing a pale blue uniform. A gold and black patch on the sleeve said "Security." The man's hair was white. Heavy jowls, a thick nose, his eyelashes like grey lace against his pale cheeks. His throat was just so much

raw meat. The spine glistened wetly in the overhead lights. Blood splashed the green walls like a macabre Christmas card.

There was a gun in the man's right hand. I put my back to the left-hand wall and watched the corridor to either side until the corners cut my view. Let the police investigate the body. My job tonight was to keep us alive.

Dolph crouched beside the body. He leaned forward, doing a sort of push-up to bring his face close to the gun. "It's been fired."

"I don't smell any powder near the body," I said. I didn't look at Dolph when I said it. I was too busy watching the corridor for movement.

"The gun's been fired," he said. His voice sounded rough, clogged.

I glanced down at him. His shoulders were stiff, his body rigid with some kind of pain.

"You know him, don't you?" I said.

Dolph nodded. "Jimmy Dugan. He was my partner for a few months when I was younger than you are. He retired and couldn't make it on the pension, so he got a job here." Dolph shook his head. "Shit."

What could I say? "I'm sorry" didn't cut it. "I'm sorry as hell" was a little better but it still wasn't enough. Nothing I could think of to say was adequate. Nothing I could do would make it better. So I stood there in the blood-spattered hall and did nothing, said nothing.

Zerbrowski knelt beside Dolph. He put a hand on his arm. Dolph looked up. There was a flash of some strong emotion in his eyes; anger, pain, sadness. All the above, none of the above. I stared down at the dead man, gun still clasped tight in his hand, and thought of something useful to say.

"Do they give the guards here silver bullets?"

Dolph glanced up at me. No guessing this time; it was anger. "Why?"

"The guards should have silver bullets. One of you take it, and we'll have two guns with silver bullets."

Dolph just stared at the gun. "Zerbrowski."

Zerbrowski took the gun gently, as if afraid of waking the man. But this vampire victim wasn't going to rise. His head lolled to one side, muscles and tendons snapped. It looked like somebody had scooped out the meat and skin around his spine with a big spoon.

Zerbrowski checked the cylinder. "Silver." He rolled the cylinder into the revolver and stood up, gun in his right hand. The shotgun he held loosely in his left hand.

"Extra ammo?" I asked.

Zerbrowski started to kneel back down, but Dolph shook his head. He searched the dead man. His hands were candy-coated in blood when he was done. He tried to wipe the drying blood onto a white handkerchief but the blood stained the lines in his hands, gathered around his fingernails. Only soap and scrubbing would get it off.

He said, softly, "Sorry, Jimmy." He still didn't cry. I would have cried. But then, women have more chemicals in their tear ducts. It makes us tear up easier than men. Honest.

"No extra ammo. Guess Jimmy thought five'd be enough for some dumb-ass security job." His voice was warm with anger. Anger was better than crying. If you can manage it.

I kept checking the corridor, but my eyes kept going to the dead man. He was dead because I hadn't done my job. If I hadn't told the ambulance drivers that the body was safe, they'd have put him in the vault, and Jimmy Dugan wouldn't have died.

I hate it when things are my fault.

"Go," Dolph said.

I took the lead. There was another corner. I did my little kneel-and-roll routine again. I lay half on my side, gun pointed two-handed down the hallway. Nothing moved in the long, green hallway. There was something lying in the floor. I saw the lower part of the guard first. Legs in pale blue, blood drenched pants. A head with a long brown ponytail lay to one side of the body like a forgotten lump of meat.

I got to my feet, gun still hovering, looking for something to aim at. Nothing moved except the blood that was still dripping down the walls. The blood dripped slowly like rain at the end of the day, thickening, congealing as it moved.

"Jesus!" I wasn't sure which uniform said it, but I agreed.

The upper body had been ripped apart as if the vampire had plunged both hands into her chest and pulled. Her spine had shattered like Tinkertoys. Gobbets of flesh, blood, and bone sprinkled the hallway like gruesome flower petals.

I could taste bile at the back of my throat. I breathed through my mouth in deep, even breaths. Mistake. The air tasted like blood—thick, warm, faintly salty. There was an underlying sourness where the upper intestine and stomach had been broken open. Fresh death smells like a cross between a slaughterhouse and an outhouse. Shit and blood is what death smells like.

Zerbrowski was scanning the hallway, borrowed gun in hand. He had four bullets. I had thirteen, plus an extra clip in my sport bag. Where was the second guard's gun?

"Where's her gun?" I asked.

Zerbrowski's eyes flicked to me, then to the corpse, then back to scanning the hallway. "I don't see it."

I'd never met a vampire that used a gun, but there was always a first time. "Dolph, where's the guard's gun?"

Dolph knelt in the blood and tried to search the body. He moved the bloody flesh and pieces of cloth around, like you'd stir it with a spoon. Once the sight would have made me lose my lunch, but it didn't anymore. Was it a bad sign that I didn't throw up on the corpses anymore? Maybe.

"Spread out, look for the gun," Dolph said.

The four uniforms spread out and searched. The blond was pasty and swallowed convulsively, but he was making it. Good for him. It was the tall one with the prominent Adam's apple that broke first. He slid on a piece of

meat that set him down hard on his butt in a pool of congealed blood. He scrambled to his knees and vomited against the wall.

I was breathing quick, shallow breaths. The blood and carnage hadn't been enough, but the sound of someone else throwing up just might be.

I pressed my shoulders into the wall and moved towards the next corner. I will not throw up. I will not throw up. Oh, God, please don't let me throw up. Have you ever tried to aim a gun while throwing your guts up? It's damn near impossible. You're helpless until you're finished. After seeing the guards, I didn't want to be helpless.

The blond cop was leaning against the wall. His face was shiny with a sick sweat. He looked at me and I could read it in his eyes. "Don't," I whispered, "please don't."

The rookie fell to his knees and that was it. I lost everything I'd eaten that day. At least I didn't throw up on the corpse. I'd done that once, and Zerbrowski had never let me live it down. On that particular case, the complaint was that I'd tampered with evidence.

If I'd been the vampire, I would have come then while half of us were vomiting our guts out. But nothing slithered around the corner. Nothing came screaming out of the darkness. Lucky us.

"If you're all done," Dolph said, "we need to find her gun and what did this."

I wiped my mouth on the sleeve of my coveralls. I was sweating, but there hadn't been time to take them off. My black Nikes stuck to the floor with little squeech sounds. There was blood on the bottom of my shoes. Maybe the coverall wasn't such a bad idea.

What I wanted was a cool cloth. What I got was to continue down the green hallway, making little bloody footprints behind me. I scanned the floor and there it was, footprints going away from the body, back down the hall towards the first guard.

"Dolph?"

"I see them," he said.

The faint footprints walked through the carnage and down the corner, away from us. Away sounded good, but I knew better. We were here to get up close and personal. Dammit.

Dolph knelt by the largest piece of the body. "Anita."

I walked over to him, avoiding the bloody footprints. Never step on clues. The police don't like it.

Dolph pointed at a blackened piece of cloth. I knelt carefully, glad that I was still in my overalls. I could kneel in all the blood I wanted without messing my clothes. Always prepared, like a good Boy Scout.

The woman's shirt was charred and blackened. Dolph touched the material with the tip of his pencil. The cloth flaked in heavy layers, cracking like stale bread. Dolph poked a hole through one of the layers. It crumbled. A burst of ash and a sharp acrid smell came up from the body.

"What the hell happened to her?" Dolph asked.

I swallowed, still tasting vomit at the back of my throat. This wasn't helping. "It's not cloth."

"What is it, then?"

"Flesh."

Dolph just looked at me. He held the pencil like it might break. "You're serious."

"Third-degree burn," I said.

"What caused this?"

"Can I borrow your pencil?" I asked.

He handed it to me without a word.

I dug at what was left of her chest. The flesh was so badly fried that her shirt melted into it. I pushed the layers aside, digging downward with the pencil. The body felt horribly light, and crisp like the burned skin of a chicken. When I'd plunged half the length of the pencil into the burn, I touched something solid. I used the pencil to pry it upward. When it was almost at the surface I put fingers inside the hole and pulled a lump of twisted metal from the burned flesh.

"What is it?" Dolph asked.

"It's what's left of her cross."

"No," he said.

The lump of melted silver glinted through the black ash. "This was her cross, Dolph. It melted into her chest, caught her clothing on fire. What I don't understand is why the vampire kept contact with the burning metal. The vampire should be nearly as burned as she is, but it's not here."

"Explain that," he said.

"Animalistic vampires are like PCP addicts. They don't feel pain. I think the vampire crushed her to his chest, the cross touched him, burst into flames, and the vampire stayed against her, tearing her apart while they burned. Against any normal vampire, she would have been safe."

"So crosses can't stop this one," he said.

I stared at the lump of metal. "Apparently not."

The four uniforms were looking at the dim hallway, a little frantically. They hadn't bargained on the crosses not working. Neither had I. The bit about not feeling pain had been a small footnote to one article. No one had theorized that that would mean crosses didn't protect you. If I survived, I'd have to work up a little article for the *Vampire Quarterly*. Crosses melting into flesh, wowee.

Dolph stood up. "Keep together, people."

"The crosses don't work," one uniform said. "We gotta go back and wait for special teams."

Dolph just looked at him. "You can go back if you want to." He glanced down at the dead guard. "It's volunteer only. The rest of you go back outside and wait for special teams."

The tall one nodded and touched his partner's arm. His partner swallowed hard, his eyes flicking to Dolph, then to the guard's crispy-crittered body. He let his partner drag him away down the hall. Back to safety and sanity. Wouldn't it have been nice if we all could have gone? But we couldn't let something like

this escape. Even if I hadn't had an order of execution, we would have had to kill it, rather than take the risk of letting it get outside.

"What about you and the rookie?" Dolph asked the black cop.

"I've never run from the monsters. He's free to go back with the others."

The blond shook his head, gun in hand, fingers mottled with tension. "I'm staying."

The black cop gave him a smile that meant more than words. He'd made a man's choice. Or would that be a mature person's choice? Whatever, he was staying.

"One more corner and the vault should be in sight," I said.

Dolph glanced at the last corner. His eyes met mine and I shrugged. I didn't know what was going to be around the corner. This vampire was doing things that I would have said were impossible. The rules had been changed, and not in our favor.

I hesitated on the wall farthest from the corner. I pushed my back into the wall and slid slowly into sight, around the corner. I was staring down a short, straight hallway. There was a gun lying in the middle of the floor. The second guard's gun? Maybe. On the left-hand wall there should have been a big steel door with crosses hanging on it. The steel had exploded outward in a twisted silver mess. They'd put the body in the vault after all. I hadn't gotten the guards killed. They should have been safe. Nothing moved. There was no light in the vault. It was just a blasted darkness. If there was a vampire waiting in the room, I couldn't see it. Of course, I wasn't all that close, either. Close did not seem to be a good idea.

"Clear, as far as I can see," I said.

"You don't sound sure," Dolph said.

"I'm not," I said. "Peek around the corner at what's left of the vault."

He didn't peek, but he looked. He let out a soft whistle. Zerbrowski said, "Je-sus."

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Is it in there?" Dolph asked.

"I think so."

"You're our expert. Why don't you sound sure?" Dolph asked.

"If you would have asked me if a vampire could plow through five feet of silver-steel with crosses hung all over the damn place, I'd have said no way." I stared into the black hole. "But there it is."

"Does this mean you're as confused as we are?" Zerbrowski asked.

"Yep."

"Then we're in deep shit," he said.

Unfortunately, I agreed.

Chapter 18

The vault loomed up before us. Pitch black with a crazy vampire waiting inside; just my cup of tea. Ri-ight.

"I'll take point now," Dolph said. He had the second guard's gun in his hands. His own gun was tucked out of sight. He had silver bullets now; he'd go first. Dolph was good about that. He'd never order one of his men to do something he wouldn't do himself. Wish Bert was like that. Bert was more likely to promise your first-born child, then ask if it was all right with you.

Dolph hesitated at the open mouth of the vault. The darkness was thick enough to cut. It was the absolute darkness of a cave. The kind where you can touch your eyeballs with your fingers and not blink.

He motioned us forward with the gun, but he went past the darkness, farther down the hallway. The bloody footprints entered the darkness and came back out. Bloody footprints going down the hall, around the corner. I was getting tired of corners.

Zerbrowski and I moved up to stand on either side of Dolph. The tension slid along my neck, shoulders. I took a deep breath and let it out, slowly. Better. Look, my hand's not even shaking.

Dolph didn't roll around on the floor to clear the corner. He just went around back to the wall, two-handed aim, ready for bear.

A voice said, "Don't shoot, I'm not dead."

I knew the voice.

"It's John Burke. He's with me."

Dolph glanced back at me. "I remember him."

I shrugged; better safe than sorry. I trusted Dolph not to shoot John by accident, but there were two cops here I'd never met. Always err on the side of caution when it comes to firearms. Words to survive by.

John was tall, slender, dark complected. His short hair was perfectly black with a broad white streak in front. It was a startling combination. He'd always been handsome, but now that he'd shaved off his beard, he looked less like a Hollywood villain and more like a leading man. Tall, dark, and handsome, and knew how to kill vampires. What more could you ask for? Plenty, but that's another story.

John came around the corner smiling. He had a gun out, and better yet, he had his vampire kit in one hand. "I came ahead to make sure the vampire didn't get loose while you were en route."

"Thanks, John," I said.

He shrugged. "Just protecting the public welfare."

It was my turn to shrug. "Anything you say."

"Where's the vampire?" Dolph asked.

"I was tracking it," John said.

"How?" I asked.

"Bloody bare footprints."

Bare footprints. Sweet Jesus. The corpse didn't have shoes, but John did. I turned towards the vault. Too late, too slow, too damn bad.

The vampire came out of the darkness, moving too fast to see. It was just a blur that smashed into the rookie, driving him into the wall. He screamed, gun pressed to the vampire's chest. The gun was loud in the hallway, echoing in the pipes. The bullets came out the back of the vampire like they'd hit mist. Magic.

I moved forward, trying to aim without hitting the rookie. He was screaming, one continuous sound. Blood sprayed in a warm rain. I shot at the thing's head but it moved, incredibly fast, tossing the man against the other wall, tearing at him. There was a lot of yelling and movement, but it all seemed far away, slowed down. It would all be over in a matter of moments. I was the only one close enough with silver bullets. I stepped in, body brushing the vampire, and put the barrel to the back of its skull. A normal vampire wouldn't have let me do it. I pulled the trigger, but the vampire whirled, lifting the man off his feet, throwing him into me. The bullet went wide and we crashed to the floor. The air was knocked out of me for a second with the weight of two adult males on my chest. The rookie was on top of me, screaming, bleeding, dying.

I wedged the gun against the back of the vamp's skull and fired. The back of the head exploded outward in a fine spray of blood, bone, and heavier, wetter things. The vampire kept digging at the man's throat. It should have been dead, but it wasn't.

The vampire reared back, blood-clotted teeth straining. It had paused like a man breathing between swallows. I shoved the barrel in its mouth. The teeth grated on the metal. The face exploded from the upper lip to the top of the head. The lower teeth mouthed the air but couldn't get a bite. The headless body raised up on its hands, as if trying to get up. I touched the gun to its chest and pulled the trigger. At this distance I might be able to take out its heart. I'd never actually tried to take out a vampire using just a pistol. I wondered if it would work. I wondered what would happen to me if it didn't.

A shudder ran through the thing's body. It breathed outward in a long, wordless sigh.

Dolph and Zerbrowski were there dragging the thing backwards. I think it was dead already, but just in case, the help was appreciated. John splashed the vampire with holy water. The liquid bubbled and fizzed on the dying vampire. It was dying. It really was.

The rookie wasn't moving. His partner dragged him off me, cradling him against his chest like a child. Blood plastered the blond hair to his face. The pale eyes were wide open, staring at nothing. The dead are always blind, one way or another.

He'd been brave, a good kid, though he wasn't that much younger than me. But I felt about a million years old staring into his pale, dead face. He was dead, just like that. Being brave doesn't save you from the monsters. It just ups your chances.

Dolph and Zerbrowski had taken the vampire to the floor. John was actually straddling the body with a stake and mallet in hand. I hadn't used a stake in years. Shotgun was my choice. But then, I was a progressive vampire slayer.

The vampire was dead. It didn't need to be staked, but I just sat against the wall and watched. Better safe than sorry. The stake went in easier than normal because I'd made a hole for it. My gun was still in my hand. No need to put it up yet. The vault was still an empty blackness; where there was one vampire there were often more. I'd keep the gun out.

Dolph and Zerbrowski went to the ruined vault, guns out. I should have gotten up and gone with them, but it seemed very important right now just to breathe. I could feel the blood pumping through my veins; every pulse in my body was loud. It was good to be alive; too bad I hadn't been able to save the kid. Yeah, too bad.

John knelt beside me. "You all right?"

I nodded. "Sure."

He looked at me like he didn't believe it, but he let it go. Smart man.

The light flashed on in the vault. Rich, yellow light, warm as a summer's day. "Jesus," Zerbrowski said.

I stood up, and nearly fell; my legs were shaky. John caught my arm, and I stared at him until he let go. He gave a half-smile. "Still a hard case."

"Always," I said.

There had been two dates between us. Mistake. It made working together more awkward, and he couldn't cope with me being a female version of him. He had this old southern idea of what a lady should be. A lady should not carry a gun and spend most of her time covered in blood and corpses. I had two words for that attitude. Yeah, those are the words.

There was a large fish tank smashed against one wall. It had held guinea pigs, or rats, or rabbits. All it held now were bright splashes of blood and bits of fur. Vampires don't eat meat, but if you put small animals in a glass container, then throw it against the wall, you get diced small animals. There wasn't enough left to scoop up with a spoon.

There was a head near the glass mess, probably male, judging from the short hair and style. I didn't go any closer to check. I didn't want to see the face. I'd have been brave tonight. I had nothing left to prove.

The body was in one piece, barely. It looked like the vampire had shoved both hands into the chest, grabbed a handful of ribs and pulled. The chest was nearly torn in two, but a band of pink muscle tissue and intestine held it together.

"The head's got fangs," Zerbrowski said.

"It's the vampire counsellor," I said.

"What happened?"

I shrugged. "At a guess, the counsellor was leaning over the vamp when it rose. It killed him, quick and messy."

"Why'd it kill the vampire counsellor?" Dolph asked.

I shrugged. "It was more animal than human, Dolph. It woke up in a strange place with a strange vampire leaning over it. It reacted like any trapped animal and protected itself."

"Why couldn't the counsellor control it? That's what he was here for."

"The only person who can control an animalistic vampire is the master who made it. The counsellor wasn't powerful enough to control it."

"Now what?" John asked. He'd put up his gun. I still hadn't. I felt better with it out for some reason.

"Now I go make my third animation appointment of the evening."

"Just like that?"

I looked up at him, ready to be angry at somebody. "What do you want me to do, John? Fall into a screaming fit? That wouldn't bring back the dead, and it would annoy the hell out of me."

He sighed. "If you only matched your packaging."

I put my gun back in the shoulder holster, smiled at him, and said, "Fuck you."

Yeah, those are the words.

Chapter 19

I had washed most of the blood off my face and hands in the bathroom at the morgue. The bloodstained coveralls were in my trunk. I was clean and presentable, or as presentable as I was going to get tonight. Bert had said to meet the new guy at my third appointment for the night. Oakglen Cemetery, ten o'clock. The theory was that the new man already raised two zombies and would just watch me raise the third one. Fine with me.

It was 10:35 before I pulled into Oakglen Cemetery. Late. Dammit. It'd make a great impression on the new animator, not to mention my client. Mrs. Doughal was a recent widow. Like five days recent. Her dearly departed husband had left no will. He'd always meant to get around to it, but you know how it is, just kept putting it off. I was to raise Mr. Doughal in front of two lawyers, two witnesses, the Doughals' three grown children, and a partridge in a pear tree. They'd made a ruling just last month that the newly dead, a week or less, could be raised and verbally order a will. It would save the Doughals half their inheritance. Minus lawyer fees, of course.

There was a line of cars pulled over to the side of the narrow gravel road. The tires were playing hell with the grass, but if you didn't park off to one side, nobody could use the road. Of course, how many people needed to use a cemetery road at 10:30 at night? Animators, voodoo priests, pot-smoking teenagers, necrophiliacs, satanists. You had to be a member of a legitimate religion and have a permit to worship in a cemetery after dark. Or be an animator. We didn't need a permit. Mainly because we didn't have a reputation for human sacrifice. A few bad apples have really given voodooists a bad name. Being Christian, I sort of frown on satanism. I mean, they are, after all, the bad guys. Right?

As soon as my foot hit the road, I felt it. Magic. Someone was trying to raise the dead, and they were very near at hand.

The new guy had already raised two zombies. Could he do a third?

Charles and Jamison could only do two a night. Where had Bert found someone this powerful on such short notice?

I walked past five cars, not counting my own. There were nearly a dozen people pressed around the grave. The women were in skirt-suits; the men all wore ties. It was amazing how many people dressed up to come to the graveyard. The only reason most people come to the graveyard is for a funeral. A lot of clients dress for one, semiformal, basic black.

It was a man's voice leading the mourners in rising calls of, "Andrew Doughal, arise. Come to us, Andrew Doughal, come to us."

The magic built on the air until it pressed against me like a weight. It was hard to get a full breath. His magic rode the air, and it was strong, but uncertain. I could feel his hesitation like a touch of cold air. He would be powerful, but he was young. His magic tasted untried, undisciplined. If he wasn't under twenty-one, I'd eat my hat.

That's how Bert had found him. He was a baby, a powerful baby. And he was raising his third zombie of the night. Hot damn.

I stayed in the shadows under the tall trees. He was short, maybe an inch or two taller than me, which made him five-four at best. He wore a white dress shirt and dark slacks. Blood had dried on the shirt in nearly black stains. I'd have to teach him how to dress, as Manny had taught me. Animating is still on an informal apprenticeship. There are no college courses to teach you how to raise the dead.

He was very earnest as he stood there calling Andrew Doughal from the grave. The crowd of lawyers and relatives huddled at the foot of the grave. There was no family member inside the blood circle with the new animator. Normally, you put a family member behind the tombstone so he or she could control the zombie. This way, only the animator could control it. But it wasn't an oversight, it was the law. The dead could be raised to request and dictate a will but only if the animator, or some neutral party, had control of it.

The mound of flowers shuddered and a pale hand shot upward, grabbing at the air. Two hands, the top of a head. The zombie spilled from the grave like it was being pulled by strings.

The new animator stumbled. He fell to his knees in the soft dirt and dying flowers. The magic stuttered, wavering. He'd bitten off one zombie more than he could finish. The dead man was still struggling from the grave. Still trying to get its legs free, but there was no one controlling it. Lawrence Kirkland had raised the zombie, but he couldn't control it. The zombie would be on its own with no one to make it mind. Uncontrolled zombies give animators a bad name.

One of the lawyers was saying, "Are you all right?"

Lawrence Kirkland nodded his head, but he was too exhausted to speak. Did he even now realize what he'd done? I didn't think so. He wasn't scared enough.

I walked up to the huddled group. "Ms. Blake, we missed you," the lawyer said. "Your . . . associate seems to be ill."

I gave them my best professional smile. See nothing wrong. A zombie isn't about to go amuck. Trust me.

I walked to the edge of the blood circle. I could feel it like a wind pushing me back. The circle was shut, and I was on the outside. I couldn't get in unless Lawrence asked me in.

He was on all fours, hands lost in the flowers of the grave. His head hung down, as if he was too tired to raise it. He probably was.

"Lawrence," I said softly, "Lawrence Kirkland."

He turned his head in slow motion. Even in the dark I could see the exhaustion in his pale eyes. His arms were trembling. God, help us.

I leaned in close so the audience couldn't hear what I said. We'd try to keep the illusion that this was just business as usual, as long as I could. If we were lucky, the zombie would just wander away. If we weren't lucky, it would hurt someone. The dead are usually pretty forgiving of the living, but not always. If Andrew Doughal hated one of his relatives, it would be a long night.

"Lawrence, you have to break the circle and let me in," I said.

He just stared at me, eyes dull, no glimmer of understanding. Shit.

"Break the circle, Lawrence, now."

The zombie was free to its knees. Its white dress shirt gleamed against the darkness of the burial suit. Uncomfortable for all eternity. Doughal looked pretty good for the walking dead. He was pale with thick grey hair. The skin was wavy, pale, but there were no signs of rot. The kid had done a good job for the third zombie of the night. Now if only I could control it, we were home free.

"Lawrence, break the circle, please!"

He said something, too low for me to hear. I leaned as close as the blood would let me get and said, "What?"

"Larry, name's Larry."

I smiled, it was too ridiculous. He was worried about me calling him Lawrence instead of Larry with a rogue zombie climbing out of the dirt. Maybe he'd snapped under the pressure. Naw.

"Open the circle, Larry," I said.

He crawled forward, nearly falling face first into the flowers. He scraped his hand across the line of blood. The magic snapped. The circle of power was gone, just like that. Now it was just me.

"Where's your knife?"

He tried to look back over his shoulder but couldn't manage it. I saw the blade gleam in the moonlight on the other side of the grave.

"Just rest," I said. "I'll take care of it."

He collapsed into a little ball, hugging his arms around himself, as if he was cold. I let him go, for now. The first order of business had to be the zombie.

The knife was lying beside the gutted chicken he'd used to call the zombie. I grabbed the knife and faced the zombie over the grave. Andrew Doughal was leaning against his own tombstone, trying to orient himself.

It's hard on a person, being dead; it takes a few minutes to wake up the dead brain cells. The mind doesn't quite believe that it should work. But it will, eventually.

I pushed back the sleeve of my leather jacket and took a deep breath. It was the only way, but I didn't have to like it. I drew the blade across my wrist. A thin, dark line appeared. The skin split and blood trickled out, nearly black in the moonlight. The pain was sharp, stinging. Small wounds always felt worse than big ones . . . at first.

The wound was small and wouldn't leave a scar. Short of slitting my wrist, or someone else's, I couldn't remake the blood circle. It was too late in the ceremony to get another chicken and start over. I had to salvage this ceremony, or the zombie would be free with no boss. Zombies without bosses tended to eat people.

The zombie was still sitting on its tombstone. It stared at nothing with empty eyes. If Larry had been strong enough, Andrew Doughal might have been able to talk, to reason on his own. Now he was just a corpse waiting for orders, or a stray thought.

I climbed onto the mound of gladioluses, chrysanthemums, carnations. The perfume of flowers mixed with the stale smell of the corpse. I stood knee-deep in dying flowers and waved my bleeding wrist in front of the zombie's face.

The pale eyes followed my hand, flat and dead as day-old fish. Andrew Doughal was not home, but something was, something that smelled blood and knew its worth.

I know that zombies don't have souls. In fact, I can only raise the dead after three days. It takes that long for the soul to leave. Incidentally, the same amount of time it takes for vampires to rise. Fancy that.

But if it isn't the soul reanimating the corpse, then what is it? Magic, my magic, or Larry's. Maybe. But there was something in the corpse. If the soul was gone, something filled the void. In an animation that worked, magic filled it. Now? Now I didn't know. I wasn't even sure I wanted to know. What did it matter as long as I pulled the fat out of the fire? Yeah. Maybe if I kept repeating that, I'd even believe it.

I offered the corpse my bleeding wrist. The thing hesitated for a second. If it refused, I was out of options.

The zombie stared at me. I dropped the knife and squeezed the skin around the wound. Blood welled out, thick and viscous. The zombie snatched at my hand. Its pale hands were cold and strong. Its head bowed over the wound, mouth sucking. It fed at my wrist, jaws working convulsively, swallowing as hard and as fast as it could. I was going to have the world's worst hickey. But at least it hurt.

I tried to draw my hand away, but the zombie just sucked harder. It didn't want to let go. Great.

"Larry, can you stand?" I asked softly. We were still trying to pretend that nothing had gone wrong. The zombie had accepted blood. I controlled it now, if I could get it to let go.

Larry looked up at me in slow motion. "Sure," he said. He got to his feet using the burial mound for support. When he was standing, he asked, "What now?"

Good question. "Help me get it loose." I tried to pull my wrist free, but the thing hung on for dear life.

Larry wrapped his arms around the corpse and pulled. It didn't help.

"Try the head," I said.

He tried pulling back on the corpse's hair, but zombies don't feel pain. Larry pried a finger along the corpse's mouth, breaking the suction with a little pop. Larry looked like he was going to be sick. Poor him; it was my arm.

He wiped his finger on his dress slacks, as if he had touched something slimy. I wasn't sympathetic.

The knife wound was already red. It would be a hell of a bruise tomorrow.

The zombie stood on top of its grave, staring at me. There was life in the eyes; someone was home. The trick was, was it the right someone?

"Are you Andrew Doughal?" I asked.

He licked his lips and said, "I am." It was a rough voice. A voice for ordering people about. I wasn't impressed. It was my blood that gave him the voice. The dead really are mute, really do forget who and what they are, until they taste fresh blood. Homer was right; makes you wonder what else was true in the Iliad.

I put pressure on the knife wound with my other hand and stepped back, off the grave. "He'll answer your questions now," I said. "But keep them simple. He's been mostly dead all day."

The lawyers didn't smile. I guess I didn't blame them. I waved them forward. They hung back. Squeamish lawyers? Surely not.

Mrs. Doughal poked her lawyer in the arm. "Get on with it. This is costing a fortune."

I started to say we don't charge by the minute, but for all I knew Bert had arranged for the longer the corpse was up, the more expensive it was. That actually was a good idea. Andrew Doughal was fine tonight. He answered questions in his cultured, articulate voice. If you ignored the way his skin glistened in the moonlight, he looked alive. But give it a few days, or weeks. He'd rot; they all rotted. If Bert had figured out a way to make clients put the dead back in their graves before pieces started to fall off, so much the better.

There were few things as sad as the family bringing dear old mom back to the cemetery with expensive perfume covering up the smell of decay. The worst was the client who had bathed her husband before bringing him back. She had to bring most of his flesh in a plastic garbage sack. The meat had just slid off the bone in the warm water.

Larry moved back, stumbling over a flowerpot. I caught him, and he fell against me, still unsteady.

He smiled. "Thanks . . . for everything." He stared at me, our faces inches apart. A trickle of sweat oozed down his face in the cold October night.

"You got a coat?"

"In my car."

"Get it and put it on. You'll catch your death sweating in this cold."

His smile flashed into a grin. "Anything you say, boss." His eyes were bigger than they should have been, a lot of white showing. "You pulled me back from the edge. I won't forget."

"Gratitude is great, kid, but go get your coat. You can't work if you're home sick with the flu."

Larry nodded and started slowly towards the cars. He was still unsteady, but he was moving. The flow of blood had almost stopped on my wrist. I wondered if I had a Band-Aid in my car big enough to cover it. I shrugged and started to follow Larry towards the cars. The lawyers' deep, courtroom voices filled the October dark. Words echoing against the trees. Who the hell were they trying to impress? The corpse didn't care.

Chapter 20

Larry and I sat on the cool autumn grass watching the lawyers draw up the will. "They're so serious," he said.

"It's their job to be serious," I said.

"Being a lawyer means you can't have a sense of humor?"

"Absolutely," I said.

He grinned. His short, curly hair was a red so bright, it was nearly orange. His eyes were blue and soft as a spring sky. I'd seen both hair and eyes in the dome light from our cars. Back in the dark he looked grey-eyed and brown-haired. I'd hate to have to give a witness description of someone I only saw in the dark.

Larry Kirkland had that milk-pale complexion of some redheads. A thick sprinkling of golden freckles completed the look. He looked like an overgrown Howdy Doody puppet. I mean that in a cute way. Being short, really short for a man, I was sure he wouldn't like being called cute. It was one of my least favorite endearments. I think if all short people could vote, the word "cute" would be stricken from the English language. I know it would get my vote.

"How long have you been an animator?" I asked.

He glanced at the luminous dial of his watch. "About eight hours."

I stared at him. "This is your first job, anywhere?"

He nodded. "Didn't Mr. Vaughn tell you about me?"

"Bert just said he'd hired another animator named Lawrence Kirkland."

"I'm in my senior year at Washington University, and this is my semester of job co-op."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty; why?"

"You're not even legal," I said.

"So I can't drink or go in porno theaters. No big loss, unless the job takes us to places like that." He looked at me and leaned in. "Does the job take us to porno theaters?" His face was neutrally pleasant, and I couldn't tell if he was teasing or not. I gambled that he was kidding.

"Twenty is fine." I shook my head.

"You don't look like twenty's fine," he said.

"It's not your age that bothers me," I said.

"But something bothers you."

I wasn't sure how to put it into words, but there was something pleasant and humorous in his face. It was a face that laughed more often than it cried. He looked bright and clean as a new penny, and I didn't want that to change. I didn't want to be the one who forced him to get down in the dirt and roll.

"Have you ever lost someone close to you? Family, I mean?"

The humor slipped away from his face. He looked like a solemn little boy. "You're serious."

"Deadly," I said.

He shook his head. "I don't understand."

"Just answer the question. Have you ever lost someone close to you?"

He shook his head. "I've even got all my grandparents."

"Have you ever seen violence up close and personal?"

"I got into fights in high school."

"Why?"

He grinned. "They thought short meant weak."

I had to smile. "And you showed them different."

"Hell, no; they beat the crap out of me for four years." He smiled.

"You ever win a fight?"

"Sometimes," he said.

"But the winning's not the important part," I said.

He looked very steadily at me, eyes serious. "No, it's not."

There was a moment of nearly perfect understanding between us. A shared history of being the smallest kid in class. Years of being the last picked for sports. Being the automatic victim for bullies. Being short can make you mean. I was sure that we understood each other but, being female, I had to verbalize it. Men do a lot of this mind-reading shit, but sometimes you're wrong. I needed to know.

"The important part is taking the beating and not giving up," I said.

He nodded. "Takes a beating and keeps on ticking."

Now that I'd spoiled our first moment of perfect understanding by making us both verbalize, I was happy. "Other than school fights, you've never seen violence?"

"I go to rock concerts."

I shook my head. "Not the same."

"You got a point to make?" he asked.

"You should never have tried to raise a third zombie."

"I did it, didn't I?" He sounded defensive, but I pressed on. When I have a point to make, I may not be graceful, but I'm relentless.

"You raised and lost control of it. If I hadn't come along, the zombie would have broken free and hurt someone."

"It's just a zombie. They don't attack people."

I stared at him, trying to see if he was kidding. He wasn't. Shit. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

I covered my face with my hands and counted to ten, slowly. It wasn't Larry I was mad at, it was Bert, but Larry was so convenient for yelling. I'd have to wait until tomorrow to yell at Bert, but Larry was right here. How lucky.

"The zombie had broken free of your control, Larry. If I hadn't come along and fed it blood, it would have found blood on its own. Do you understand?"

"I don't think so."

I sighed. "The zombie would have attacked someone. Taken a bite out of someone."

"Zombies attacking humans is just superstition, ghost stories."

"Is that what they're teaching in college now?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I'll loan you some back copies of *The Animator*. Trust me, Larry, zombies do attack people. I've seen people killed by them."

"You're just trying to scare me," he said.

"Scared would be better than stupid."

"I raised it. What do you want from me?" He looked completely baffled.

"I want you to understand what nearly happened here tonight. I want you to understand that what we do isn't a game. It's not parlor tricks. It's real, and it can be dangerous."

"All right," he said. He'd given in too easily. He didn't really believe. He was humoring me. But there are some things you can't tell someone. He, or she, has to learn some things in person. I wished I could wrap Larry up in cellophane and keep him on a shelf, all safe and secure and untouched, but life didn't work that way. If he stayed in this business long enough, the new would wear off. But you can't tell someone who's reached twenty and never been touched by death. They don't believe in the boogeyman.

At twenty I'd believed in everything. I suddenly felt old.

Larry pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his coat pocket.

"Please tell me you don't smoke," I said.

He looked up at me, eyes sort of wide and startled. "You don't smoke?"

"No."

"You don't like people to smoke around you?" He made it a question.

"No," I said.

"Look, I feel pretty awful right now. I need the cigarette, okay?"

"Need it?"

"Yeah, need it." He had one slender white cigarette between two fingers of his right hand. The pack had disappeared back into his pocket. A disposable lighter had appeared. He looked at me very steadily. His hands were shaking just a bit.

Shit. He'd raised three zombies on his first night out, and I was going to be talking to Bert about the wisdom of sending Larry out on his own.

Besides, we were outside. "Go ahead."

"Thanks."

He lit the cigarette and drew a deep breath of nicotine and tar. Smoke curled out of his mouth and nose, like pale ghosts. "Feel better already," he said.

I shrugged. "Just so you don't smoke in the car with me."

"No problem," he said. The tip of his cigarette pulsed orange in the dark as he sucked on it. He looked past me, letting smoke curl from his lips as he said, "We're being paged."

I turned and, sure enough, the lawyers were waving at us. I felt like a janitor being called in to clean up the messy necessities. I stood up, and Larry followed me.

"You sure you feel well enough for this?" I asked.

"I couldn't raise a dead ant, but I think I'm up to watching you do it."

There were bruises under his eyes and the skin was too tight around his mouth, but if he wanted to play macho man who was I to stop him? "Great; let's do it."

I got salt out of my trunk. It was perfectly legal to carry zombie-raising supplies. I suppose the machete that I used for beheading chickens could be used as a weapon, but the rest of the stuff was considered harmless. Shows you what the legal system knows about zombies.

Andrew Doughal had recovered himself. He still looked a little waxy, but his face was serious, concerned, alive. He smoothed a hand down the stylish lapel of his suit coat. He looked down at me, not just because he was taller but because he was good at looking down. Some people have a real talent for being condescending.

"Do you know what's happening, Mr. Doughal?" I asked the zombie.

He looked down his narrow patrician nose. "I am going home with my wife."

I sighed. I hated it when zombies didn't realize they were dead. They acted so . . . human.

"Mr. Doughal, do you know why you're in a cemetery?"

"What's happening?" one of the lawyers asked.

"He's forgotten that he's dead," I said softly.

The zombie stared at me, perfectly arrogant. He must have been a real pain in the ass when he was alive, but even assholes are piteous once in a while.

"I don't know what you are babbling about," the zombie said. "You obviously are suffering from some delusion."

"Can you explain why you are here in a cemetery?" I asked.

"I don't have to explain anything to you."

"Do you remember how you got to the cemetery?"

"We . . . we drove, of course." The first hint of unease wavered through his voice.

"You're guessing, Mr. Doughal. You don't really remember driving to the cemetery, do you?"

"I . . . I . . ." He looked at his wife, his grown children, but they were walking to their cars. No one even looked back. He was dead, no getting around that, but most families didn't just walk away. They might be horrified, or saddened, or even sickened, but they were never neutral. The Doughals had gotten the will signed, and they were leaving. They had their inheritance. Let good ol' dad crawl back into his grave.

He called, "Emily?"

She hesitated, stiffening, but one of her sons grabbed her arm and hurried her toward the cars. Was he embarrassed, or scared?

"I want to go home," he yelled after them. The arrogance had leaked away, and all that was left was that sickening fear, the desperate need not to believe. He felt so alive. How could he possibly be dead?

His wife half-turned. "Andrew, I'm sorry." Her grown children hustled her into the nearest car. You would have thought they were the getaway drivers for a bank robbery, they peeled out so fast.

The lawyers and secretaries left as fast as was decent. Everybody had what they'd come for. They were done with the corpse. The trouble was that the "corpse" was staring after them like a child who was left in the dark.

Why couldn't he have stayed an arrogant SOB?

"Why are they leaving me?" he asked.

"You died, Mr. Doughal, nearly a week ago."

"No, it's not true."

Larry moved up beside me. "You really are dead, Mr. Doughal. I raised you from the dead myself."

He stared from one to the other of us. He was beginning to run out of excuses. "I don't feel dead."

"Trust us, Mr. Doughal, you are dead," I said.

"Will it hurt?"

A lot of zombies asked that; will it hurt to go back into the grave? "No, Mr. Doughal, it doesn't hurt. I promise."

He took a deep, shaking breath and nodded. "I'm dead, really dead?"

"Yes."

"Then put me back, please." He had rallied and found his dignity. It was nightmarish when the zombie refused to believe. You could still lay them to rest, but the clients had to hold them down on the grave while they screamed. I'd only had that happen twice, but I remembered each time as if it had happened last night. Some things don't dim with time.

I threw salt against his chest. It sounded like sleet hitting a roof. "With salt I bind you to your grave."

I had the still-bloody knife in my hand. I wiped the gelling blood across his lips. He didn't jerk away. He believed. "With blood and steel I bind you to your grave, Andrew Doughal. Be at peace, and walk no more."

The zombie laid full length on the mound of flowers. The flowers seemed to flow over him like quicksand, and just like that he was swallowed back into the grave.

We stood there a minute in the empty graveyard. The only sounds were the wind sighing high up in the trees and the melancholy song of the year's last crickets. In *Charlotte's Web*, the crickets sang, "Summer is over and gone. Over and gone, over and gone. Summer is dying, dying." The first hard frost, and the crickets would be dying. They were like Chicken Little, who told everyone the sky was falling; except in this case, the crickets were right.

The crickets stopped suddenly like someone had turned a switch. I held my breath, straining to hear. There was nothing but the wind, and yet . . . My shoulders were so tight they hurt. "Larry?"

He turned innocent eyes to me. "What?"

There, three trees to our left, a man's figure was silhouetted against the moonlight. I caught movement out of the corner of my eye, on the right side. More than one. The darkness felt alive with eyes. More than two.

I used Larry's body to shield me from the eyes, drawing my gun, holding it along my leg so it wouldn't be obvious.

Larry's eyes widened. "Jesus, what's wrong?" His voice was a hoarse whisper. He didn't give us away. Good for him. I started herding him towards the cars, slowly, just your friendly neighborhood animators finished with their night's work and going home to a well-deserved rest.

"There are people out here."

"After us?"

"After me, more likely," I said.

"Why?"

I shook my head. "No time for explanations. When I say run, run like hell for the cars."

"How do you know they mean to hurt us?" His eyes were flashing a lot of white. He saw them now, too. Shadows moving closer, people out in the dark.

"How do you know they don't mean to hurt us?" I asked.

"Good point," he said. His breathing was fast and shallow. We were maybe twenty feet from the cars.

"Run," I said.

"What?" his voice sounded startled.

I grabbed his arm and dragged him into a run for the cars. I pointed the gun at the ground, still hoping whoever it was wouldn't be prepared for a gun.

Larry was running on his own, puffing a little from fear, smoking, and maybe he didn't run four miles every other day.

A man stepped in front of the cars. He brought up a large revolver. The Browning was already moving. It fired before my aim was steady. The muzzle flashed brilliant in the dark. The man jumped, not used to being shot at. His

shot whined into the darkness to our left. He froze for the seconds it took me to aim and fire again. Then he crumpled to the ground and didn't get up again.

"Shit." Larry breathed it like a sigh.

A voice yelled, "She's got a gun."

"Where's Martin?"

"She shot him."

I guess Martin was the one with the gun. He still wasn't moving. I didn't know if I killed him or not. I wasn't sure I cared, as long as he didn't get up and shoot at us again.

My car was closer. I shoved car keys into Larry's hands. "Open the door, open the passenger side door, then start the car. Do you understand me?"

He nodded, freckles standing out in the pale circle of his face. I had to trust that he wouldn't panic and take off without me. He wouldn't do it out of malice, just fear.

Figures were converging from all directions. There had to be a dozen or more. The sound of running feet whispering on grass came over the wind.

Larry stepped over the body. I kicked a .45 away from the limp hand. The gun slid out of sight under the car. If I hadn't been pressed for time, I'd have checked his pulse. I always like to know if I've killed someone. Makes the police report go so much smoother.

Larry had the car door open and was leaning over to unlock the passenger side door. I aimed at one of the running figures and pulled the trigger. The figure stumbled, fell, and started screaming. The others hesitated. They weren't used to being shot at. Poor babies.

I slid into the car and yelled, "Drive, drive, drive!"

Larry peeled out in a spray of gravel. The car fishtailed, headlights swaying crazily. "Don't wrap us around a tree, Larry."

His eyes flicked to me. "Sorry." The car slowed from stomach-turning speed to grab-the-door-handle-and-hold-on speed. We were staying between the trees; that was something.

The headlights bounced off trees; tombstones flashed white. The car skidded around a curve, gravel spitting. A man stood framed in the middle of the road. Jeremy Ruebens of Humans First stood pale and shining in the lights. He stood in the middle of a flat stretch of road. If we could make the turn beyond him, we'd be out on the highway and safe.

The car was slowing down.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I can't just hit him," Larry said.

"The hell you can't."

"I can't!" His voice wasn't outraged, it was scared.

"He's just playing chicken with us, Larry. He'll move."

"Are you sure?" A little boy's voice asking if there really was a monster in the closet.

"I'm sure; now floor it and get us out of here."

He pressed down on the accelerator. The car jumped forward, rushing toward the small, straight figure of Jeremy Ruebens.

"He's not moving," Larry said.

"He'll move," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Trust me."

His eyes flicked to me, then back to the road. "You better be right," he whispered.

I believed Ruebens would move. Honest. But even if he wasn't bluffing, the only way out was either past him or through him. It was Ruebens's choice.

The headlights bathed him in glaring white light. His small, dark features glared at us. He wasn't moving.

"He isn't moving," Larry said.

"He'll move," I said.

"Shit," Larry said. I couldn't have agreed more.

The headlights roared up onto Jeremy Ruebens, and he threw himself to one side. There was the sound of brushing cloth as his coat slid along the car's side. Close, damn close.

Larry picked up speed and swung us around the last corner and into the last straight stretch. We spilled out onto the highway in a shower of gravel and spinning tires. But we were out of the cemetery. We'd made it. Thank you, God.

Larry's hands were white on the steering wheel. "You can ease down now," I said. "We're safe."

He swallowed hard enough for me to hear it, then nodded. The car started gradually approaching the speed limit. His face was beaded with sweat that had nothing to do with the cool October evening.

"You all right?"

"I don't know." His voice sounded sort of hollow. Shock.

"You did good back there."

"I thought I was going to run over him. I thought I was going to kill him with the car."

"He thought so, too, or he wouldn't have moved," I said.

He looked at me. "What if he hadn't moved?"

"He did move."

"But what if he hadn't?"

"Then we would have gone over him, and we'd still be on the highway, safe."

"You would have let me run him down, wouldn't you?"

"Survival is the name of the game, Larry. If you can't deal with that, find another business to be in."

"Animators don't get shot at."

"Those were members of Humans First, a right-wing fanatic group that hates anything to do with the supernatural." So I was leaving out about the personal visit from Jeremy Ruebens. What the kid didn't know might not hurt him.

I stared at his pale face. He looked hollow-eyed. He'd met the dragon, a little dragon as dragons go, but once you've seen violence, you're never the

same again. The first time you have to decide, live or die, us or them, it changes you forever. No going back. I stared at Larry's shocked face and wished it could have been different. I wished I could have kept him shining, new, and hopeful. But as my Grandmother Blake used to say, "If wishes were horses, we'd all ride."

Larry had had his first taste of my world. The only question was, would he want a second dose, or would he run? Run or go, stay or fight, age-old questions. I wasn't sure which way I wanted Larry to choose. He might live longer if he got the hell away from me, but then again maybe he wouldn't. Heads they win, tails you lose.

Chapter 21

"What about my car?" Larry asked.

I shrugged. "You've got insurance, right?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Since they couldn't trash us, they may decide to trash your car."

He looked at me as if he wasn't sure whether I was kidding. I wasn't.

There was a bicycle in front of us suddenly, out of the dark. A child's pale face flashed in the headlights. "Watch out!"

Larry's eyes flicked back to the road in time to see the kid's wide, startled eyes. The brakes squealed, and the child vanished from the narrow arch of lights. There was a crunch and a bump before the car skidded to a stop. Larry was breathing heavy; I wasn't breathing at all.

The cemetery was just on our right. We were too close to stop, but . . . but, shit, it was a kid.

I stared out the back window. The bicycle was a crumpled mess. The child lay in a very still heap. God, please don't let him be dead.

I didn't think Humans First had enough imagination to have a child in reserve as bait. If it was a trap, it was a good one, because I couldn't leave the tiny figure crumpled by the road.

Larry was gripping the steering wheel so hard his arms shook. If I thought he'd been pale before, I'd been wrong. He looked like a sick ghost.

"Is he . . . hurt?" His voice squeezed out deep and rough with something like tears. It wasn't hurt he'd wanted to say. He just couldn't bring himself to use the big "D" word. Not yet, not if he could help it.

"Stay in the car," I said.

Larry didn't answer. He just sat there staring at his hands. He wouldn't look at me. But, dammit, this wasn't my fault. The fact that he'd lost his cherry tonight was not my fault. So why did it feel like it was?

I got out of the car, Browning ready in case the crazies decided to chase us onto the road. They could have gotten the .45 and be coming to shoot us.

The child hadn't moved. I was just too far away to see the chest rise and fall. Yeah, that was it. I was maybe a yard away.

Please be alive.

The child lay sprawled on its stomach, one arm trapped underneath, probably broken. I scanned the dark cemetery as I knelt by the child. No right-wing crazies came swarming out of the darkness. The child was dressed in the proverbial little boy's outfit of striped shirt, shorts, and tiny running shoes. Who had sent him out dressed for summer on this cold night? His mother. Had some woman dressed him, loved him, sent him out to die?

His curly brown hair was silken, baby-fine. The skin of his neck was cool to the touch. Shock? It was too soon to be cold from death. I waited for the big pulse in his neck, but nothing happened. Dead. Please, God, please.

His head raised up, and a soft sound came out of his mouth. Alive. Thank you, God.

He tried to roll over but fell back against the road. He cried out.

Larry was out of the car, coming towards us. "Is he all right?"

"He's alive," I said.

The boy was determined to roll over, so I grabbed his shoulders and helped. I tried to keep his right arm in against his body. I had a glimpse of huge brown eyes, round baby face, and in his right hand was a knife bigger than he was. He whispered, "Tell him to come help move me." Tiny little fangs showed between baby lips. The knife pressed against my stomach over the sport bag. The point slid underneath the leather jacket to touch the shirt underneath. I had one of those frozen moments when time stretches out in slow-mo nightmare. I had all the time in the world to decide whether to betray Larry, or die. Never give anyone to the monsters; it's a rule. I opened my mouth and screamed, "Run!"

The vampire didn't stab me. He just froze. He wanted me alive; that's why the knife and not fangs. I stood up, and the vampire just stared up at me. He didn't have a backup plan. Great.

The car stood, open doors spilling light out into the darkness. The headlights made a wide theatrical swash. Larry was just standing there, frozen, undecided. I yelled, "Get in the car!"

He moved towards the open car door. A woman was standing in the glare of the headlights. She was dressed in a long white coat open over the cream and tan of a very nice pants suit. She opened her mouth and snarled into the light, fangs glistening.

I was running, screaming, "Behind you!"

Larry stared at me; his gaze went past me. His eyes widened. I could hear the patter of little feet behind me. Terror spread across Larry's face. Was this the first vampire he'd ever seen?

I drew my gun, but was still running. You can't hit shit when you're running. I had a vampire in front and behind. Coin toss.

The female vampire bounded onto the hood of the car and propelled herself in a long, graceful leap that carried her into Larry and sent them tumbling across the road.

I couldn't shoot her without risking Larry. I whirled at the last second and put the gun point-blank into the child-vampire's face.

His eyes widened. I squeezed the trigger. Something hit me from behind. The shot went wild and I was on the road, flat on my stomach with something bigger than a bread box on top of me.

The air was knocked out of me. But I turned, trying to point the gun back at the thing on my back. If I didn't do something now, I might never have to worry about breathing again.

The boy came up on me, knife flashing downward. The gun was turning, but too slowly. I would have screamed if I'd had air. The knife buried into the sleeve of my jacket. I felt the blade bite into the road underneath. My arm was pinned. I squeezed the trigger and the shot went harmlessly off into the dark.

I twisted my neck to try to see who, or what, was straddling me. It was a what. In the red glow of the rear car lights his face was all flat, high cheekbones with narrow, almost slanted eyes and long, straight hair. If he'd been any more ethnic, he'd have been carved in stone, surrounded by snakes and Aztec gods.

He reached over me and encircled my right hand, the one that was pinned, the one that was still holding the gun. He pressed the bones of my hand into the metal. His voice was deep and soft. "Drop the gun or I'll crush your hand." He squeezed until I gasped.

Larry screamed, high and mournful.

Screaming was for when you didn't have anything better to do. I scraped my left sleeve against the road, baring my watch and the charm bracelet. The three tiny crosses glinted in the moonlight. The vampire hissed but didn't let go of my gun hand. I dragged the bracelet across his hand. A sharp smell of burning flesh; then he used his free hand to drag at my left sleeve. Holding onto just the sleeve, he held my left hand back, so I couldn't touch him with the crosses.

If he'd been the new dead, just the sight of the crosses would have sent him screaming; but he wasn't just old dead, he was ancient. It was going to take more than blessed crosses to get him off my back.

Larry screamed again.

I screamed, too, because I couldn't do anything else, except hold onto the gun and make him crush my hand. Not productive. They didn't want me dead, but hurt, hurt was okay. He could crush my hand into bloody pulp. I gave up my gun, screaming, tugging at the knife that held my arm pinned, trying to jerk my left sleeve free of his hand so I could plunge the crosses into his flesh.

A shot exploded above our heads. We all froze and stared back at the cemetery. Jeremy Ruebens and company had recovered their gun and were shooting at us. Did they think we were in cahoots with the monsters? Did they care who they shot?

A woman screamed, "Alejandro, help me!" The scream was from behind us. The vampire on my back was suddenly gone. I didn't know why, and I

didn't care. I was left with the child-monster looming over me, staring at me with large dark eyes.

"Doesn't it hurt?" he asked.

It was such an unexpected question that I answered it. "No."

He looked disappointed. He squatted down beside me, hands on his small thighs. "I meant to cut you so I could lick the blood." His voice was still a little boy's voice, would always be a little boy's voice, but the knowledge in his eyes beat down on my skin like heat. He was older than Jean-Claude, much older.

A bullet smashed into the rear light of my car, just above the boy's head. He turned towards the fanatics with a very unchildlike snarl. I tried to pull the knife out of the road, but it was imbedded. I couldn't budge it.

The boy crawled into the darkness, vanishing with a backwash of wind. He was going for the fanatics. God help them.

I looked back over my shoulder. Larry was on the ground with a woman with long, waving brown hair on top of him. The man who'd been on top of me, Alejandro, and another woman were struggling with the vampire on Larry. She wanted to kill him, and they were trying to stop her. It seemed like a good plan to me.

Another bullet whined towards us. It didn't come close. A half-strangled scream, and then no more gunshots. Had the boy gotten him? Was Larry hurt? And what the hell could I do to help him, and me?

The vampires seemed to have their hands full. Whatever I was going to do, now was the time. I tried unzipping the leather jacket left-handed, but it stuck halfway down. Great. I bit the side of the jacket, using my teeth in place of the trapped hand. Unzipped; now what?

I pulled the sleeve off my left hand with my teeth, then put the sleeve under my hip and wiggled out of it. Slipping my right hand free of the pinned sleeve was the easy part.

Alejandro picked up the brown-haired woman and threw her over the car. She sailed into the darkness, but I didn't hear her hit the ground. Maybe she could fly. If she could, I didn't want to know.

Larry was nearly lost to sight behind a curtain of pale hair. The second female was bending over him like a prince about to bestow the magic kiss. Alejandro got a handful of that long, long hair and jerked her to her feet. He flung her into the side of the car. She staggered but didn't go down, snapping at him like a dog on a leash.

I went wide around them, holding the crosses out in front like every old movie you've ever seen. Except I'd never seen a vampire hunter with a charm bracelet.

Larry was on his hands and knees, swaying ever so slightly. His voice was high, nearly hysterical. He just kept repeating, "I'm bleeding, I'm bleeding."

I touched his arm, and he jumped like I'd bit him. His eyes flashed white.

Blood was welling down his neck, black in the moonlight. She'd bit him, Jesus help us, she'd bit him.

The pale female was still fighting to get to Larry. "Can't you smell the blood?" It was a plea.

"Control yourself, or I'll do it for you." Alejandro's voice was a low scream. The anger in his voice cut and sliced. The pale woman went very still.

"I'm all right now." Her voice held fear. I'd never heard one vampire be scared to . . . death of another. Let them fight it out. I had better things to do. Like figuring out how to get us past the remaining vampires and into the car.

Alejandro had the female shoved against the car with one hand. My gun was in his left hand. I unsnapped the anklet with its matching crosses. You can't sneak up on a vampire. Even the new dead are jumpier than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Since I had no chance of sneaking up on him, I tried the direct approach.

"She bit him, you son of a bitch. She bit him!" I pulled the back of his shirt as if to get his attention. I dropped the crosses down his back.

He screamed.

I brushed the bracelet crosses across his hand. He dropped the gun. I caught it. A tongue of blue flame licked up his back. He clawed and scrambled, but he couldn't reach the crosses. Burn, baby, burn.

He whirled, shrieking. His open hand caught me on the side of the head. I was airborne. I slammed back-first into the road. I tried to take as much of the impact as I could with my arms, but my head rocked back, slamming into the road.

The world swam with black spots. When my vision cleared, I was staring up into a pale face; long, yellow-white hair the color of corn silk traced over my cheek as the vampire knelt to feed.

I still had the Browning in my right hand. I pulled the trigger. Her body jerked backwards like someone had shoved her. She fell back onto the road, blood pouring out of a hole in her stomach that was nothing compared to the wound in her back. I hoped I'd shattered her spine.

I staggered to my feet.

The male vampire, Alejandro, tore off his shirt. The crosses fell to the road in a little pool of molten blue fire. His back was burned black, with blisters here and there to add color. He whirled on me, and I shot him once in the chest. The shot was rushed, and he didn't go down.

Larry grabbed the vampire's ankle. Still Alejandro kept coming, dragging Larry across the blacktop like a child. He grabbed Larry's arm, jerking him to his feet. Larry threw a chain over the vampire's head. The heavy silver cross burst into flame. Alejandro screamed.

I yelled, "Get in the car, now!"

Larry slid into the driver's seat and kept sliding until he was in the passenger seat. He slammed the passenger side door shut and locked it, for what good it would do. The vampire tore the chain and threw the cross end over end into the roadside trees. The cross winked out of sight like a falling star.

I slid into the car, slamming the door and locking it. I clicked the safety on the Browning and shoved it between my legs.

The vampire, Alejandro, was huddled around his pain, too hurt to give chase right that second. Goodie.

I shoved the car in gear and gunned it. The car fishtailed. I slowed to the speed of light, and the car straightened out on the road. We poured down the dark tunnel in a circle of flickering light and tree shadows. And down at the end of our tunnel was a figure in white with long, brown hair spilling in the wind. It was the vampire that had jumped Larry. She was just standing there in the middle of the road. Just standing there. We were about to find out if vampires played chicken. I was about to take my own advice. I put the gas pedal to the floorboards. The car lurched forward. The vampire just stood there while we barreled down at her.

At the last second I realized she wasn't going to move, and I didn't have time to. We were about to test my theory about cars and vampiric flesh. Where's a silver car when you need one?

Chapter 22

The headlights flashed on the vampire like a spotlight. I had an image of pale face, brown hair, fangs stretched wide. We hit her going sixty. The car shuddered. She rolled in painful slow motion up over the hood, and yet it was happening too fast for me to do anything. She hit the windshield with a sharp, crackling sound. Metal screamed.

The windshield crumbled into a mass of spiderweb cracks. I was suddenly trying to see through the wrong end of a smashed prism. The safety glass had done its job. It hadn't shattered and cut us to ribbons. It had just cracked all to hell, and I couldn't see to drive. I stamped down on the brakes. An arm shot through the glass, raining glittering shards down on Larry.

He screamed. The hand closed on his shirt, pulling him into the broken teeth of the windshield.

I turned the wheel to the left as hard as I could. The car spun out and all I could do was let off the gas, not touch the brake, and ride.

Larry had a death grip on the door arm and the headrest. He was screaming, fighting not to be pulled through the jagged glass. I said a quick prayer and let go of the wheel. The car spun helplessly. I shoved a cross against the hand. It smoked and bubbled. The hand let go of Larry and vanished through the hole in the crumbled glass.

I grabbed at the steering wheel, but it was too little too late. The car careened off the road into the ditch. Metal screamed as something under the car broke, something large. I was slammed into the driver's side door. Larry was suddenly on top of me; then we were both tumbling to the other side. Then it was over. The silence was startling. It was as if I'd gone deaf. There was a great roaring whiteness in my ears.

Someone said, "Thank God," and it was me.

The passenger side door peeled open like the shell of a nut. I scrambled back away from the opening. Larry was left stranded and staring. He was jerked out of the car. I slid into the front floorboard, aiming where Larry had vanished.

I was staring up at Larry's body with a dark hand clamped so tight on his throat, I didn't know if he could breathe. I stared down the barrel of my gun at the dark face of the vampire, Alejandro. His face was unreadable as he said, "I will tear his throat out."

"I'll blow your head off," I said. A hand came fishing through the broken windshield. "Back off or you lose that pretty face."

"He will die first," the vampire said. But the hand vanished back through the hole. There was the sound of some other language in the vampire's English. Emotion gave him an accent.

Larry's eyes were too wide, showing too much white. He was breathing shallow and too fast. He'd hyperventilate, if he lived that long.

"Decide," the vampire said. His voice was flat, empty of everything. Larry's terror-filled eyes were eloquent enough for both of them.

I hit the safety on the gun and handed it butt-first to his outstretched hand. It was a mistake, I knew that, but I also knew I couldn't sit here and watch Larry's throat be ripped out. There are some things that are more important than physical survival. You gotta be able to look at yourself in the mirror. I gave up my gun for the same reason I'd stopped for the child. There was no choice. I was one of the good guys. Good guys were self-sacrificing. It was a rule somewhere.

Chapter 23

Larry's face was a bloody mask. No single cut seemed to be serious, but nothing bleeds like a shallow scalp wound. Safety glass was not designed to be vampire-proof. Maybe I could write in and suggest it.

Blood trickled over Alejandro's hand, still gripping Larry's throat. The vampire had stuffed my gun in the back of his pants. He handled the gun like he knew how to use one. Pity. Some vampires were technophobes. It gave you an edge, sometimes.

Larry's blood flowed over the vampire's hand. Sticky and warm like barely solid Jell-O. The vampire didn't react to the blood. Iron self-control. I stared into his nearly black eyes and felt the pull of centuries like monstrous wings unfolding in his eyes. The world swam. The inside of my head was sinking, expanding. I reached out to touch something, anything to keep from falling. A hand gripped mine. The skin was cool and smooth. I jerked back, falling against the car.

"Don't touch me! Don't ever touch me!"

The vampire stood uncertainly, Larry's throat gripped in one blood-streaked hand, holding his other hand out towards me. It was a very human gesture. Larry's eyes were bugging out.

"You're choking him," I said.

"Sorry," the vampire said. He released him.

Larry fell to his knees, gasping. His first breath was a hissing scream for air.

I wanted to ask Larry how he was, but I didn't. My job was to get us out of here alive, if possible. Besides, I had an idea how Larry felt. Hurt. No need to ask stupid questions.

Well, maybe one stupid question. "What do you want?" I asked.

Alejandro looked at me, and I fought the urge to look at his face while I talked to him. It was hard. I ended up staring at the hole my bullet had made in the side of his chest. It was a very small hole, and had already stopped bleeding. Was he healing that fast? Shit. I stared at the wound as hard as I could. To fight the urge for eye contact. It's hard to be tough when you're staring at someone's chest. But I'd had years of practice before Jean-Claude decided to share his "gift" with me. Practice makes . . . well, you know.

The vampire hadn't answered me, so I asked again, voice steady and low. I didn't sound like someone who was afraid. Bully for me. "What do you want?"

I felt the vampire look at me, almost as if he'd run a finger down my body. I shivered and couldn't stop. Larry crawled to me, head hanging, dripping blood as he moved.

I knelt beside him. And before I could stop myself, the stupid question popped out. "Are you all right?"

His eyes raised to me through a mask of blood. He finally said, "Nothing a few stitches wouldn't cure." He was trying to make a joke. I wanted to hug him and promise the worst was over. Never make promises you can't keep.

The vampire didn't exactly move, but something brought my attention back to him. He stood knee-deep in autumn weeds. My eyes were on a level with his belt buckle, which made him about my height. Short for a man. A white, Anglo-Saxon, twentieth-century man. The belt buckle glinted gold and was carved into a blocky, stylized human figure. The carving, like the vampire's face, was straight out of an Aztec calendar.

The urge to look upward and meet his eyes crawled over my skin. My chin had actually risen an inch or so before I realized what I was doing. Shit. The vamp was messing with my mind, and I couldn't feel it. Even now, knowing he had to be doing something to me, I couldn't sense it. I was blind and deaf just like every other tourist.

Well, maybe not every tourist. I hadn't been munched on yet, which probably meant they wanted something more than just blood. I'd be dead otherwise, and so would Larry. Of course, I was still wearing blessed crosses. What could this creature do once I was stripped of crosses? I did not want to find out.

We were alive. It meant they wanted something that we couldn't give them dead. But what?

"What in the hell do you want?"

His hand came into view. He was offering his hand to help me stand. I stood without help, putting myself a little in front of Larry.

"Tell me who your master is, girl, and I won't hurt you."

"Who else will, then?" I asked.

"Clever, but I swear you will leave here in safety if you give me the name."

"First of all, I don't have a master. I'm not even sure I have an equal." I fought the urge to glance at his face, see if he got the joke. Jean-Claude would have gotten it.

"You stand before me, making jokes?" His voice sounded surprised, nearly outraged. Good, I think.

"I don't have a master," I said. Master vampires can smell truth or lies.

"If you truly believe that, you are deluding yourself. You bear two master signs. Give me the name and I will destroy him for you. I will free you of this . . . problem."

I hesitated. He was older than Jean-Claude. A lot older. He might be able to kill the Master of the City. Of course, that would leave this master vampire in control of the city. He and his three helpers. Four vampires, one less than were killing people, but I was willing to bet there was a fifth vamp around here somewhere. You couldn't have that many rogue master vampires running around one medium-size city.

Any master that was slaughtering civilians would be a bad thing to have in charge of all the vampires in the area. Just call it a feeling.

I shook my head. "I can't."

"You want free of him, do you not?"

"Very much."

"Let me free you, Ms. Blake. Let me help you."

"Like you helped the man and woman you murdered?"

"I did not murder them," he said. His voice sounded very reasonable. His eyes were powerful enough to drown in but the voice wasn't as good. There was no magic to the voice. Jean-Claude's was better. Or Yasmine's, for that matter. Nice to know that not every talent came equally with time. Ancient wasn't everything.

"So you didn't strike the fatal blow. So what? Your flunkies do your will, not their own."

"You'd be surprised how much free will we have."

"Stop it," I said.

"What?"

"Sounding so damn reasonable."

There was laughter in his voice. "You would rather I rant and rave?"

Yes, actually, but I didn't say it out loud. "I won't give you the name. Now what?"

There was a rush of wind at my back. I tried to turn, to face the wind. The woman in white rushed at me. Fangs straining, hands clawing, spattered with other people's blood, the vampire smashed into me. We fell backwards into the weeds with her on top. She darted towards my neck like a snake. I shoved my left wrist into her face. One cross brushed her lips. A flash of light, the stench of burning flesh, and the vampire was gone, screaming into the darkness. I had never seen any vampire move that fast. Had it been mind-magic? Had she tricked me that badly even with a blessed cross? How many over-five-hundred-year-old vamps can you have in one pack? Two, I hoped. Any more than that and they'd have us outnumbered.

I scrambled to my feet. The master vampire was on his hands and knees beside the remains of my car. Larry was nowhere in sight. A flutter of panic clawed at my chest; then I realized Larry had crawled underneath the car so the vampire couldn't make him a hostage again. When all else fails, hide. It works for rabbits.

The vampire's blistered back was bent at a painful angle as he tried to pull Larry out from under the car. "I will pull this arm out of its socket, if you do not come here!"

"You sound like you've got a kitten under the bed," I said.

Alejandro whirled around. He flinched, like it hurt. Great.

I felt something move behind me. I didn't argue with the sensation. Say it was nerves; I turned, crosses ready. Two vampires behind me. One was the pale-haired female. I guess the shot had missed her spine; pity. The other vampire could have been her male twin. They both hissed and cowered from the crosses. Nice to see someone was bothered.

The master came at me from the back, but I heard him. Either the burn was making him clumsy, or the crosses were helping me. I stood halfway between the three vampires, crosses sort of pointed at both groups. The blonds peered over their arms, but the crosses had them well and truly scared. The master never hesitated. He came in a rushing burst of speed. I backpedaled, tried to keep the crosses between us, but he grabbed my left forearm. With the crosses dangling inches from his flesh, he held on.

I pulled, getting as much distance from him as I could, then hit him in the solar plexus with everything I had. He made an "umph" sound, then flicked his hand at my face. I rocked back and tasted blood. He'd barely touched me, but he'd proven his point. If I wanted to exchange blows, he'd beat the crap out of me.

I hit him in the throat. He gagged and looked surprised. Beaten to snot was still a hell of a lot better than being bitten. I'd rather be dead than have pointy teeth.

His fist closed over my right fist, squeezing just enough to let me feel his strength. He was still trying to warn me off rather than hurt me. Bully for him.

He raised both his arms, drawing me closer into his body. I didn't want closer, but there didn't seem to be a hell of a lot I could do about it. Unless, of course, vampires had testicles. The throat shot had hurt. I glanced at his face,

almost close enough to kiss. I leaned into him, getting as much room as I could. He just kept drawing me closer. His own momentum helped.

My knee hit him hard, and I ground it up and into him. It was not a glancing blow. He crumpled forward but didn't let go of my hands. I wasn't loose, but it was a start, and I'd answered an age-old question. Vampires did have balls.

He jerked my hands behind my back, pinning me between his arms and his body. His body felt wooden, stiff, and unyielding as stone. It had been warm and soft and hurtable only a second before. What had happened?

"Take the things off her wrist," he said. He wasn't talking to me.

I tried to crane my head around to see what was coming up behind me. I couldn't see anything. The two pale vampires were still huddled in the face of the naked crosses.

Something touched my wrist. I jerked, but he held me still. "If you struggle, he will cut you."

I turned my head as far back as I could, and was staring into the round eyes of the boy vampire. He'd recovered his knife and was using it to poke at the bracelet.

The master vampire's hands squeezed my arms until I thought they'd pop from the pressure like shaken soda pop. I must have made some sound, because he said, "I did not mean to hurt you tonight." His mouth was pressed against my ear, lost in my hair. "This was your choice."

The bracelet broke with a small snap. I felt it fall away into the weeds. The master vampire drew a deep breath, as if it were easier to breathe now. He was only an inch or two taller than I was, but he held both my wrists in one small hand, fingers squeezing to make the grip tight. It hurt, and I fought not to make small, helpless noises.

He stroked his free hand through my hair, then grabbed a handful and pulled my head backwards so he could see my eyes. His eyes were solid, absolute black; the whites had drowned. "I will have his name, Anita, one way or another."

I spit in his face.

He screamed, tightening his grip on my wrists until I cried out. "I could have made this pleasant, but now I think I want you to hurt. Look into my eyes, mortal, and despair. Taste of my eyes, and there will be no secrets between us." His voice dropped to the barest of whispers. "Perhaps I will drink your mind like others drink blood, and leave nothing behind but your mindless husk."

I stared into the darkness that was his eyes and felt myself fall, forward, impossibly forward, and down, down into a blackness that was pure and total, and had never known light.

Chapter 24

I was staring up into a face I didn't know. The face was holding a bloody handkerchief to its forehead. Short hair, pale eyes, freckles. "Hi, Larry," I said. My voice sounded distant and strange. I couldn't remember why.

It was still dark. Larry's face had been cleaned up a little, but the wound was still bleeding. I couldn't have been out that long. Out? Where had I been out to? All I could remember was eyes, black eyes. I sat up too fast. Larry caught my arm or I would have fallen.

"Where are the . . ."

"Vampires," he finished for me.

I leaned into his arm and whispered, "Yeah."

There were people all around us in the dark, huddled in little whispering groups. The lights of a police car strobed the darkness. Two uniforms were standing quietly next to the car, talking with a man whose name wouldn't come to me.

"Karl," I said.

"What?" Larry asked.

"Karl Inger, the tall man talking to the police."

Larry nodded. "That's right."

A small, dark man knelt beside us. Jeremy Ruebens of Humans First, who last I knew had been shooting at us. What the hell was going on?

Jeremy smiled at me. It looked genuine.

"What makes you my friend all of a sudden?"

His smile broadened. "We saved you."

I pushed away from Larry to sit on my own. A moment of dizziness and I was fine. Yeah, right. "Talk to me, Larry."

He glanced at Jeremy Ruebens, then back to me. "They saved us."

"How?"

"They threw holy water on the one who bit me." He touched his throat with his free hand, an unconscious gesture, but he noticed me watching. "Is she going to have control over me?"

"Did she enter your mind at the same time as she bit you?"

"I don't know," he said. "How can you tell?"

I opened my mouth to explain, then closed it. How to explain the unexplainable? "If Alejandro, the master vampire, had bitten me at the same time he rolled my mind, I'd be under his power now."

"Alejandro?"

"That's what the other vampires called the master."

I shook my head, but the world swam in black waves and I had to swallow hard not to vomit. What had he done to me? I'd had mind games played on me before, but I'd never had a reaction like this.

"There's an ambulance coming," Larry said.

"I don't need one."

"You've been unconscious for over an hour, Ms. Blake," Ruebens said.

"We had the police call an ambulance when we couldn't wake you."

Ruebens was close enough for me to reach out and touch him. He looked friendly, positively radiant, like a bride on her big day. Why was I suddenly his favorite person? "So they threw holy water on the vamp that bit you; what then?" I asked Larry.

"They drove the rest of them off with crosses and charms."

"Charms?"

Ruebens pulled out a chain with two miniature metal-faced books hanging on it. Both books would have fit in the palm of my hand with room to spare.

"They aren't charms, Larry. They're tiny Jewish Holy Books."

"I thought a Star of David."

"The star doesn't work, because it's a racial symbol, not really a religious symbol."

"So it's like miniature Bibles?"

I raised my eyebrows. "The Torah contains the Old Testament, so yeah, it's like miniature Bibles."

"Would the Bible work for us Christians?"

"I don't know. Probably, I've just never been attacked by vampires while carrying a Bible." That was probably my fault. In fact, when was the last time I'd read the Bible? Was I becoming a Sunday Christian? I'd worry about my soul later, after my body felt a little better.

"Cancel the ambulance; I'm fine."

"You are not fine," Ruebens said. He reached out as if to touch me. I looked at him. He stopped in mid-motion. "Let us help you, Ms. Blake. We share common enemies."

The police were walking towards us over the dark grass. Karl Inger was coming, too, talking softly to the police as they moved.

"Do the police know you were shooting at us first?"

Something passed over Ruebens's face.

"They don't know, do they?"

"We saved you, Ms. Blake, from a fate worse than death. I was wrong to try and hurt you. You raise the dead, but if you are truly enemies with the vampires, then we are allies."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend, huh?"

He nodded.

The police were almost here, almost within earshot. "All right, but you ever point a gun at me again and I'll forget you saved me."

"It will never happen again, Ms. Blake; you have my word."

I wanted to say something disparaging, but the police were there. They'd hear. I wasn't going to tell on Ruebens and Humans First, so I had to save my smart alec comebacks for later use. Knowing Ruebens, I'd get another chance.

I lied to the police about what Humans First had done, and I lied about what Alejandro had wanted from me. It was just another of those mindless attacks that had happened twice already. Later, to Dolph and Zerbrowski, I'd tell the truth, but right now I just didn't feel like explaining the entire mess to strangers. I wasn't even sure Dolph would get the whole story. Like the fact that I was almost assuredly Jean-Claude's human servant.

Nope, no need to mention that.

Chapter 25

Larry's car was a late-model Mazda. The vampires had kept Humans First so busy they hadn't had time to trash the car. Lucky for us, since my car was totaled. Oh, I'd have to go through the insurance company and let them tell me the car was totaled, but there was something large broken underneath the car; fluids darker than blood were leaking out. The front end looked like we'd hit an elephant. I knew totaled when I saw it.

We'd spent the last several hours at the emergency room. The ambulance attendants insisted I see a doctor, and Larry needed three small stitches in his forehead. His orangey hair fell forward and hid the wound. His first scar. The first of many if he stayed in this business and hung around me.

"You've been on the job, what, fourteen hours? What do you think so far?" I asked.

He glanced at me sideways, then back to the road. He smiled, but it didn't look funny. "I don't know."

"Do you want to be an animator when you graduate?"

"I thought I did," he said.

Honesty; a rare talent. "Not sure now?"

"Not really."

I let it rest there. My instinct was to talk him out of it. To tell him to go into some sane, normal business. But I knew that raising the dead wasn't just a job choice. If your "talent" was strong enough, you had to raise the dead or risk the power coming out at odd moments. Does the term roadkill mean anything to you? It meant something to my stepmother Judith. Of course, she wasn't pleased with my job. She thought it was gruesome. What could I say? She was right.

"There are other job choices for a preternatural biology degree."

"What? A zoo, exterminator?"

"Teacher," I said, "park ranger, naturalist, field biologist, researcher."

"And which of those jobs can make you this kind of money?" he asked.

"Is money the only reason you want to be an animator?" I was disappointed.

"I want to do something to help people. What better than using my specialized skills to rid the world of dangerous undead?"

I stared at him. All I could see was his profile in the darkened car, face underlit from the dashboard. "You want to be a vampire executioner, not an animator." I didn't try to keep the surprise out of my voice.

"My ultimate goal, yes."

"Why?"

"Why do you do it?"

I shook my head. "Answer the question, Larry."

"I want to help people."

"Then be a policeman; they need people on the force who know preternatural creatures."

"I thought I did pretty good tonight."

"You did."

"Then what's wrong?"

I tried to think how to phrase it in fifty convincing words or less. "What happened tonight was awful, but it gets worse."

"Olive's coming up; which way do I turn?"

"Left."

The car took the exit and slid into the turning lane. We sat at the light with the turn signal blinking in the dark.

"You don't know what you're getting into," I said.

"Then tell me," he said.

"I'll do better than that. I'll show you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Turn right at the third light."

We rolled into the parking lot. "First building on the right."

Larry slid into the only open space he could find. My parking space. My poor little Nova wouldn't be coming back to it.

I took off my jacket in the darkness of the car. "Hit the overhead light," I said.

He did as he was told. He was better at following orders than I was. Which, since he'd be following my orders, was fine.

I showed him the scars on my arms. "The cross-shaped burn is from human servants who thought it was funny. The mound of scar tissue at the bend of my arm is where a vampire tore my arm to pieces. Physical therapist says it's a miracle that I got full use of my arm back. Fourteen stitches from a human servant, and that's just my arms."

"There's more?" His face looked pale and strange in the dome light.

"A vampire shoved the broken end of a stake in my back."

He winced.

"And my collarbone was broken at the same time my arm got chewed up."

"You're trying to scare me."

"You bet," I said.

"I won't be scared off."

Tonight should have scared him off without my showing him my scars. But it hadn't. Dammit, he'd stick, if he didn't get killed first. "All right, you're staying for the rest of the semester, great, but promise me you won't go hunting vampires without me."

"But Mr. Burke . . ."

"He helps execute vampires, but he doesn't hunt them alone."

"What's the difference between an execution and a hunt?"

"An execution just means a body that needs staking, or a vampire that's all nice and chained up waiting for the final stroke."

"Then what's a hunt?" he asked.

"When I go back out after the vampires that nearly killed us tonight, that's a hunt."

"And you don't trust Mr. Burke to teach me to hunt?"

"I don't trust Mr. Burke to keep you alive."

Larry's eyes widened.

"I don't mean he'd deliberately hurt you. I mean I don't trust anybody but me with your life."

"You think it'll come down to that?"

"It damn near did."

He was quiet for a handful of minutes. He stared down at his hands that were smoothing back and forth over the steering wheel. "I promise not to go vampire hunting with anybody but you." He stared at me, blue, blue eyes studying my face. "Not even Mr. Rodriguez? Mr. Vaughn said he taught you."

"Manny did teach me, but he doesn't hunt vampires anymore."

"Why not?"

I met his true-blue eyes and said, "His wife's too afraid, and he's got four kids."

"You and Mr. Burke aren't married and don't have kids."

"That's right."

"Neither do I," he said.

I had to smile. Had I ever been this eager? Naw. "No one likes a smart Alec, Larry."

He grinned, and it made him look about thirteen. Jesus, why wasn't he running for cover after tonight? Why wasn't I? No answers, at least none that made sense. Why did I do it? Because I was good at it, came the answer. Maybe Larry could be good at it, too. Maybe, or maybe he'd just get dead.

I got out of the car and leaned back in the open door. "Go straight home, and if you don't have an extra cross, buy one tomorrow."

"Okay," he said.

I shut the door on his solemn, earnest face. I walked up the stairs and didn't look back. I didn't watch him drive away, still alive, still eager after his first brush with the monsters. I was only four years older than he was. Four years. It felt like centuries. I had never been that green. My mother's death when I was eight saw to that. It takes the edge off the shiny brightness to lose a parent early.

I was still going to try to talk Larry out of being a vampire executioner, but if all else failed, I'd work with him. There are only two kinds of vampire hunters: good ones and dead ones. Maybe I could make Larry one of the good ones. It beat the hell out of the alternative.

Chapter 26

It was 3:34, Friday morning. It had been a long week. Of course, when hadn't it been a long week this year? I had told Bert to hire more help. He hired Larry. Why didn't that make me happy? Because Larry was just another victim waiting for the right monster. Please keep him safe, God, please. I'd had about as many innocents die on me as I thought I could handle.

The hallway had that middle-of-the-night feel to it. The only sounds were the hush of the heating vents, the muffled sound of my Nike Airs on the carpeting. It was too late for my day-living neighbors to stay up, and too early for them to get up. Two hours before dawn, you get privacy.

I opened my brand-new burglarproof lock and stepped into the darkness of my apartment. I hit the lights and flooded the white walls, carpet, couch, and chair with bright light. No matter how good your night vision is, everyone likes light. We're creatures of the daylight, no matter what we do for a living.

I threw my jacket on the kitchen counter. It was too dirty to toss on the white couch. I had mud and bits of weed plastered all over me. But very little blood; the night had turned out all right.

I was slipping out of the shoulder holster when I felt it. The air currents had moved, as if something had moved through them. Just like that I knew I wasn't alone.

My hand was on the gun butt when Edward's voice came out of the darkness of my bedroom. "Don't, Anita."

I hesitated, fingers touching the gun. "And if I do?"

"I'll shoot you. You know I'll do it." His voice was that soft, sure predatory sound. I'd seen him use flamethrowers when his voice sounded like that. Smooth and calm as the road to Hell.

I eased away from my gun. Edward would shoot me if I forced him to. Better not to force it, not yet. Not yet.

I clasped my hands on top of my head without waiting for him to tell me. Maybe I'd get brownie points for being a cooperative prisoner. Naw.

Edward stepped out of the darkness like a blond ghost. He was dressed all in black except for his short hair and pale face. His black-gloved hands held a Beretta 9mm pointed very steadily at my chest.

"New gun?" I asked.

The ghost of a smile curled his lips. "Yes, like it?"

"Beretta's a nice gun, but you know me."

"A Browning fan," he said.

I smiled at him. Just two ol' buddies talking shop.

He pressed the gun barrel against my body while he took the Browning from me. "Lean and spread it."

I leaned on the back of the couch while he patted me down. There was nothing to find, but Edward didn't know that. He was never careless. That was one of the reasons he was still alive. That, and the fact that he was very, very good.

"You said you couldn't pick my lock," I said.

"I brought better tools," he said.

"So it's not burglarproof."

"It would be to most people."

"But not to you."

He stared at me, his eyes as empty and dead as winter's sky. "I am not most people."

I had to smile. "You can say that again."

He frowned at me. "Give me the master's name, and we don't have to do this." The gun never wavered. My Browning stuck out of the front of his belt. I hoped he'd remembered the safety. Or maybe I didn't.

I opened my mouth, closed it, and just looked at him. I couldn't give Jean-Claude over to Edward. I was the Executioner, but the vampires called Edward Death. He'd earned the name.

"I thought you'd be following me tonight."

"I went home after watching you raise the zombie. Guess I should have stayed around. Who bloodied your mouth?"

"I'm not going to tell you a bloody thing. You know that."

"Everyone breaks, Anita, everyone."

"Even you?"

That ghost of a smile was back again. "Even me."

"Someone got the better of Death? Tell, tell."

The smile widened. "Some other time."

"Nice to know there'll be another time," I said.

"I'm not here to kill you."

"Just to frighten or torture me into revealing the master's name, right?"

"Right," he said, voice soft and low.

"I was hoping you'd say wrong."

He almost shrugged. "Give me the Master of the City, Anita, and I'll go away."

"You know I can't do that."

"I know you have to, or it's going to be a very long night."

"Then it's going to be a long night, because I'm not going to give you shit."

"You won't be bullied," he said.

"Nope."

He shook his head. "Turn around, lean your waist up against the couch, and put your hands behind your back."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

"So you can tie my hands?"

"Do it, now."

"I don't think so."

The frown was back. "Do you want me to shoot you?"

"No, but I'm not going to just stand here while you tie me up, either."

"The tying up doesn't hurt."

"It's what comes after that I'm worried about."

"You knew what I'd do if you didn't help me."

"Then do it," I said.

"You're not cooperating."

"So sorry."

"Anita."

"I just don't believe in helping people who are going to torture me. Though I don't see any bamboo slivers. How can you possibly torture someone without bamboo slivers?"

"Stop it." He sounded angry.

"Stop what?" I widened my eyes and tried to look innocent and harmless, me and Kermit the Frog.

Edward laughed, a soft chuckle that rolled and expanded until he squatted on the floor, gun loose in his hands, staring up at me. His eyes were shiny.

"How can I torture you when you keep making me laugh?"

"You can't; that was the plan."

He shook his head. "No, it wasn't. You were just being a smartass. You're always a smartass."

"Nice of you to notice."

He held up his hand. "No more, please."

"I'll make you laugh until you beg for mercy."

"Just tell me the damn name. Please, Anita. Help me." The laughter drained from his eyes like the sun slipping out of the sky. I watched the humor, the humanity, slip away, until his eyes were as cold and empty as a doll's.

"Don't make me hurt you," he said.

I think I was Edward's only friend, but that wouldn't stop him from hurting me. Edward had one rule: do whatever it takes to get the job done. If I forced him to torture me, he would, but he didn't want to.

"Now that you've asked nicely, try the first question again," I said.

His eyes narrowed, then he said, "Who hit you in the mouth?"

"A master vampire," I said softly.

"Tell me what happened." It was too much like an order for my taste, but he did have both the guns.

I told him everything that had happened. All about Alejandro. Alejandro who felt so old inside my head, it made my bones ache. I added one tiny lie, lost in all that truth. I told him Alejandro was Master of the City. One of my better ideas, heh?

"You really don't know where his daytime resting place is, do you?"

I shook my head. "I'd give it to you if I had it."

"Why this change of heart?"

"He tried to kill me tonight. All bets are off."

"I don't believe that."

It was too good a lie to waste, so I tried salvaging it. "He's also gone rogue. It's him and his flunkies that have been killing innocent citizens."

Edward smirked at the innocent, but he let it go. "An altruistic motive, that I believe. If you weren't such a damn bleeding heart, you'd be dangerous."

"I kill my share, Edward."

His empty, blue eyes stared at me; then he nodded, slowly. "True."
He handed me back my gun, butt first. A tight, clenched ball in my stomach unrolled. I could breathe deep, long sighs of relief.

"If I find out where this Alejandro stays, you want in on it?"

I thought about that for a minute. Did I want to go after five rogue vampires, two of them over five hundred years old? I did not. Did I want to send even Edward after them alone? No, I did not. Which meant . . .

"Yeah, I want a piece of them."

Edward smiled, broad and shining. "I love my work."

I smiled back. "Me, too."

Chapter 27

Jean-Claude lay in the middle of a white canopied bed. His skin was only slightly less white than the sheets. He was dressed in a nightshirt. Lace fell down the low collar, forming a lace window around his chest. Lace flowed from the sleeves, nearly hiding his hands. It should have looked feminine, but Jean-Claude made it utterly masculine. How could any man wear a white lace gown and not look silly? Of course, he wasn't a man. That must be it. His black hair curled in the lace collar. Touchable. I shook my head. Not even in my dreams. I was dressed in something long and silky. It was a shade of blue almost as dark as his eyes. My arms looked very white against it. Jean-Claude got to his knees and reached his hand out to me. An invitation.

I shook my head.

"It is only a dream, *ma petite*. Will you not come to me even here?"

"It's never just a dream with you. It always means more."

His hand fell to the sheets, fingertips caressing the cloth.

"What are you trying to do to me, Jean-Claude?"

He looked very steadily at me. "Seduce you, of course."

Of course. Silly me.

The phone beside the bed rang. It was one of those white princess phones with lots of gold on it. There hadn't been a telephone a second before. It rang again, and the dream fell to shreds. I came awake grabbing for the phone.

"Hello."

"Hey, did I wake you?" Irving Griswold asked.

I blinked at the phone. "Yeah, what time is it?"

"It's ten o'clock. I know better than to call early."

"What do you want, Irving?"

"Grouchy."

"I got in late. Can we skip the sarcasm?"

"I, your true-blue reporter friend, will forgive you that grumpy hello, if you answer a few questions."

"Questions?" I sat up, hugging the phone to me. "What are you talking about?"

"Is it true that Humans First saved you last night, as they're claiming?"

"Claiming? Can you talk in complete sentences, Irving?"

"The morning news had Jeremy Ruebens on it. Channel five. He claimed that he and Humans First saved your life last night. Saved you from the Master Vampire of the City."

"Oh, he did not."

"May I quote you?"

I thought about that for a minute. "No."

"I need a quote for the paper. I'm trying to give a chance for a rebuttal."

"A rebuttal?"

"Hey, I was an English major."

"That explains so much."

"Can you give me your side of the story, or not?"

I thought about that for a minute. Irving was a friend and a good reporter. If Ruebens was already on the morning news with the story, I needed to get my side out. "Can you give me fifteen minutes to make coffee and get dressed?"

"For an exclusive, you bet."

"Talk to you then." I hung up and went straight for the coffeemaker. I was wearing jogging socks, jeans, and the oversized t-shirt I'd slept in when Irving called back. I had a steaming cup of coffee on the bedside table beside the phone. Cinnamon hazelnut coffee from V. J.'s Tea and Spice Shop over on Olive. Mornings didn't get much better than this.

"Okay, spill it," he said.

"Gee, Irving, no foreplay?"

"Get to it, Blake, I've got a deadline."

I told him everything. I had to admit that Humans First had saved my cookies. Darn. "I can't confirm that the vampire they ran off was the Master of the City."

"Hey, I know Jean-Claude is the master. I interviewed him, remember?"

"I remember."

"I know this Indian guy was not Jean-Claude."

"But Humans First doesn't know that."

"A double exclusive, wowee."

"No, don't say that Alejandro isn't the master."

"Why not?"

"I'd clear it with Jean-Claude first, if I were you."

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, not a bad idea." He sounded nervous.

"Is Jean-Claude giving you trouble?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"For a reporter you lie badly."

"Jean-Claude and I got business just between us. It doesn't concern The Executioner."

"Fine; just watch your back, okay?"

"I'm flattered that you're worried about me, Anita, but trust me, I can handle it."

I didn't argue with that. I must have been in a good mood. "Anything you say, Irving."

He let it go, so I did, too. No one could handle Jean-Claude, but it wasn't my business. Irving had been the one hot for the interview. So there were strings attached; not a big surprise, and not my business. Really.

"This'll be on the front page of the morning paper. I'll check with Jean-Claude about whether to mention this new vamp isn't the master."

"I'd really appreciate it if you could hold off on that."

"Why?" He sounded suspicious.

"Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea for Humans First to believe Alejandro is the master."

"Why?"

"So they don't kill Jean-Claude," I said.

"Oh," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"I'll bear that in mind," he said.

"You do that."

"Gotta go; deadline calls."

"Okay, Irving, talk to you later."

"Bye, Anita, thanks." He hung up.

I sipped the still-steaming coffee, slowly. The first cup of the day should never be rushed. If I could get Humans First to believe the same lie Edward bought, then no one would be hunting Jean-Claude. They'd be hunting Alejandro. The master that was slaughtering humans. Put the police on the case, and we had the rogue vamps outnumbered. Yeah, I liked it.

The trick was, would everyone buy it? Never know until you try.

Chapter 28

I had finished a pot of coffee and managed to get dressed when the phone rang again. One of those mornings.

"Yeah," I said.

"Ms. Blake?" the voice sounded very uncertain.

"Speaking."

"This is Karl Inger."

"Sorry if I sounded abrupt. What's up, Mr. Inger?"

"You said you'd speak to me again if we had a better plan. I have a better plan," he said.

"For killing the Master of the City?" I made it a question.

"Yes."

I took a deep breath and let it out slow, away from the phone. Didn't want him to think I was heavy breathing at him. "Mr. Inger . . ."

"Please, hear me out. We saved your life last night. That must be worth something."

He had me there. "What's your plan, Mr. Inger?"

"I'd rather tell you in person."

"I'm not going to my office for some hours yet."

"Could I come to your home?"

"No." It was automatic.

"You don't bring business home?"

"Not when I can help it," I said.

"Suspicious of you."

"Always," I said.

"Can we meet somewhere else? There's someone I want you to meet."

"Who, and why?"

"The name won't mean anything to you."

"Try me."

"Mr. Oliver."

"First name?"

"I don't know it."

"Okay, then why should I meet him?"

"He has a good plan for killing the Master of the City."

"What?"

"No, I think it will be better if Mr. Oliver explains it in person. He's much more persuasive than I am."

"You're doing okay," I said.

"Then you'll meet me?"

"Sure, why not?"

"That's wonderful. Do you know where Arnold is?"

"Yes."

"There's a pay fishing lake just outside of Arnold on Tesson Ferry Road. Do you know it?"

I had an impression that I had driven by it on the way to two murders. All roads led to Arnold. "I can find it."

"How soon can you meet me there?" he asked.

"An hour."

"Great; I'll be waiting."

"Is this Mr. Oliver going to be at the lake?"

"No, I'll drive you from there."

"Why all the secrecy?"

"Not secrecy," he said, his voice dropped, embarrassed. "I'm just not very good at giving directions. It'll be easier if I just take you."

"I can follow you in my car."

"Why, Ms. Blake, I don't think you entirely trust me."

"I don't entirely trust anybody, Mr. Inger, nothing personal."

"Not even people who save your life?"

"Not even."

He let that drop, probably for the best, and said, "I'll meet you at the lake in an hour."

"Sure."

"Thank you for coming, Ms. Blake."

"I owe you. You've made sure I'm aware of that."

"You sound defensive, Ms. Blake. I did not mean to offend you."

I sighed. "I'm not offended, Mr. Inger. I just don't like owing people."

"Visiting Mr. Oliver today will clear the slate between us. I promise that."

"I'll hold you to that, Inger."

"I'll meet you in an hour," he said.

"I'll be there," I said. We hung up. "Damn." I'd forgotten I hadn't gotten to eat yet today. If I'd remembered, I'd have said two hours. Now I'd have to literally grab something on the way. I hated eating in the car. But, heh, what's a little mess between friends? Or even between people who've saved your life? Why did it bother me so much that I owed Inger?

Because he was a right-wing fruitcake. A zealot. I didn't like doing business with zealots. And I certainly didn't like owing my life to one.

Ah, well; I'd meet him, then we'd be square. He had said so. Why didn't I believe it?

Chapter 29

Chip-Away Lake was about half an acre of man-made water and thin, raised man-made bank. There was a little shed that sold bait and food. It was surrounded by a flat gravel parking lot. A late-model car sat near the road with a sign that read, "For Sale." A pay fishing lake and a used car lot combined; how clever.

An expanse of grass spread out to the right of the parking lot. A small, ramshackle shed and what looked like the remains of some large industrial barbecue. A fringe of woods edged the grass, rising higher into a wooded hill. The Meramec River edged the left side of the lake. It seemed funny to have free-flowing water so close to the man-made lake.

There were only three cars in the parking lot this cool autumn afternoon. Beside a shiny burgundy Chrysler Le Baron stood Inger. A handful of fishermen had bundled up and put poles in the water. Fishing must be good to get people out in the cold.

I parked beside Inger's car. He strode towards me smiling, hand out like a real estate salesman who was happy I'd come to see the property. Whatever he was selling, I didn't want. I was almost sure of that.

"Ms. Blake, so glad you came." He clasped my hand with both of his, hearty, good-natured, insincere.

"What do you want, Mr. Inger?"

His smile faded around the edges. "I don't know what you mean, Ms. Blake."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I really don't."

I stared into his puzzled face. Maybe I spent too much time with slimeballs. After a while you forget that not everyone in the world is a slimeball. It just saves so much time to assume the worst.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Inger. I . . . I've been spending too much time looking for criminals. It makes you cynical."

He still looked puzzled.

"Never mind, Mr. Inger; just take me to see this Oliver."

"Mr. Oliver," he said.

"Sure."

"Shall we take my car?" He motioned towards his car.

"I'll follow you in mine."

"You don't trust me." He looked hurt. I guess most people aren't used to being suspected of wrongdoing before they've done anything wrong. The law says innocent until proven guilty, but the truth is, if you see enough pain and death, it's guilty until proven innocent.

"All right, you drive."

He looked very pleased. Heartwarming.

Besides I was carrying two knives, three crosses, and a gun. Innocent or guilty, I was prepared. I didn't expect to need the weaponry with Mr. Oliver, but later, I might need it later. It was time to go armed to the teeth, ready for bear, or dragon, or vampire.

Chapter 30

Inger drove down Old Highway 21 to East Rock Creek. Rock Creek was a narrow, winding road barely wide enough for two cars to pass. Inger drove slow enough for the curves, but fast enough so you didn't get bored.

There were farmhouses that had stood for years and new houses in subdivisions where the earth was raw and red as a wound. Inger turned into one of those new subdivisions. It was full of large, expensive-looking houses, very modern. Thin, spindly trees were tied to stakes along the gravel road.

The pitiful trees trembled in the autumn wind, a few surprised leaves still clinging to the spider-thin limbs. This area had been a forest before they bulldozed it. Why do developers destroy all the mature trees, then plant new trees that won't look good for decades?

We pulled up in front of a fake log cabin that was bigger than any real cabin had ever been. Too much glass, the yard naked dirt the color of rust. The white gravel that made up the driveway had to have been brought in from miles away. All the native gravel was as red as the dirt.

Inger started to go around the car, to open my door I think. I opened my own door. Inger seemed a little lost, but he'd get over it. I'd never seen the sense in perfectly healthy people not opening their own doors. Especially car doors where the man had to walk all the way around the car, and the woman just waited like a . . . a lump.

Inger led the way up the porch steps. It was a nice porch, wide enough to sit on come summer evenings. Right now it was all bare wood and a huge picture window with closed drapes in a barn-red design with wagon wheels drawn all over it. Very rustic.

He knocked on the carved wooden door. A pane of leaded glass decorated the center of the door, high up and sparkling, more for decoration than for seeing through. He didn't wait for the door to be opened, but used a key and walked in. He didn't seem to expect an answer, so why knock?

The house was in a thick twilight of really nice drapes, all closed against the syrup-heavy sunlight. The polished wood floors were utterly bare. The mantel of the heavy fireplace was naked, the fireplace cold. The place smelled new and unused, like new toys on Christmas. Inger never hesitated. I followed his broad back into the wooden hallway. He didn't look behind to see if I was keeping up. Apparently when I'd decided not to let him open my door for me, he seemed to have decided that no further courtesy was necessary.

Fine with me.

There were doors at widely spaced intervals along the hallway. Inger knocked at the third door on the left. A voice said, "Enter."

Inger opened the door and went inside. He held the door for me, standing very straight by the door. It wasn't courtesy. He stood like a soldier at attention. Who was in the room to make Inger toe the line? One way to find out.

I went into the room.

There was a bank of windows to the north with heavy drapes pulled across them. A thin line of sunlight cut across the room, bisecting a large, clean desk. A man sat in a large chair behind the desk.

He was a small man, almost a midget or a dwarf. I wanted to say dwarf, but he didn't have the jaw or the shortened arms. He looked well formed under his tailored suit. He had almost no chin and a sloping forehead, which drew attention to the wide nose and the prominent eyebrow ridge. There was something familiar about his face, as if I'd seen it somewhere else before. Yet I knew I'd never met a person who looked just like him. It was a very singular face.

I was staring at him. I was embarrassed and didn't like it. I met his eyes; they were perfectly brown and smiling. His dark hair was cut one hair at a time, expensive and blow-dried. He sat in his chair behind the clean polished desk and smiled at me.

"Mr. Oliver, this is Anita Blake," Inger said, still standing stiffly by the door.

He got out of his chair and came around the desk to offer me his small well-formed hand. He was four feet tall, not an inch more. His handshake was firm and much stronger than he looked. A brief squeeze, and I could feel the strength in his small frame. He didn't look musclebound, but that easy strength was there, in his face, hand, stance.

He was small, but he didn't think it was a defect. I liked that. I felt the same way.

He gave a close-lipped smile and sat back down in his big chair. Inger brought a chair from the corner and put it facing the desk. I took the chair. Inger remained standing by the now-closed door. He was definitely at attention. He respected the man in the chair. I was willing to like him. That was a first for me. I'm more likely to instantly mistrust than like someone.

I realized that I was smiling. I felt warm and comfortable facing him, like he was a favorite and trusted uncle. I frowned at him; what the hell was happening to me?

"What's going on?" I said.

He smiled, his eyes sparkling warmly at me. "Whatever do you mean, Ms. Blake?"

His voice was soft, low, rich, like cream in coffee. You could almost taste it. A comforting warmth to your ears. I only knew one other voice that could do similar things.

I stared at the thin band of sunlight only inches from Oliver's arm. It was broad daylight. He couldn't be. Could he?

I stared at his very alive face. There was no trace of that otherness that vampires gave off. And yet, his voice, this warm cosy feeling, none of it was natural. I'd never liked and trusted anyone instantly. I wasn't about to start now.

"You're good," I said. "Very good."

"Whatever do you mean, Ms. Blake?" You could have cuddled into the warm fuzziness of his voice like a favorite blanket.

"Stop it."

He looked quizzically at me, as if confused. The act was perfect, and I realized why; it wasn't an act. I'd been around ancient vampires, but never one that had been able to pass for human, not like this. You could have taken him anywhere and no one would have known. Well, almost no one.

"Believe me, Ms. Blake, I'm not trying to do anything."

I swallowed hard. Was that true? Was he so damn powerful that the mind tricks and the voice were automatic? No; if Jean-Claude could control it, this thing could, too.

"Cut the mind tricks, and curb the voice, okay? If you want to talk business, talk, but cut the games."

His smile widened, still not enough to show fangs. After a few hundred years, you must get really good at smiling like that.

He laughed then; it was wonderful, like warm water falling from a great height. You could have jumped into it and bathed, and felt good.

"Stop it, stop it!"

Fangs flashed as he finished chuckling at me. "It isn't the vampire marks that allowed you to see through my, as you call them, games. It is natural talent, isn't it?"

I nodded. "Most animators have it."

"But not to the degree you do, Ms. Blake. You have power, too. It crawls along my skin. You are a necromancer."

I started to deny it, but stopped. Lying to something like this was useless. He was older than anything I'd ever dreamed of, older than any nightmare I'd ever had. But he didn't make my bones ache; he felt good, better than Jean-Claude, better than anything.

"I could be a necromancer. I choose not to be."

"No, Ms. Blake, the dead respond to you, all the dead. Even I feel the pull."

"You mean I have a sort of power over vampires, too?"

"If you could learn to harness your talents, Ms. Blake, yes, you have a certain power over all the dead, in their many guises."

I wanted to ask how to do that, but stopped myself. A master vampire wasn't likely to help me gain power over his followers. "You're taunting me."

"I assure you, Ms. Blake, that I am very serious. It is your potential power that has drawn the Master of the City to you. He wants to control that emerging power, for fear it will be turned against him."

"How do you know that?"

"I can taste him through the marks he has laid upon you."

I just stared at him. He could taste Jean-Claude. Shit.

"What do you want from me?"

"Very direct; I like that. Human lives are too short to waste in trivialities."

Was that a threat? Staring into his smiling face, I couldn't tell. His eyes were still sparkling, and I was still feeling very warm and fuzzy towards him. Eye contact. I knew better than that. I stared at the top of his desk and felt better, or worse. I could be scared now.

"Inger said you had a plan for taking out the Master of the City. What is it?" I spoke staring at his desk. My skin crawled with the desire to look up. To meet his eyes, to let the warmth and comfort wash over me. Make all the decisions easy.

I shook my head. "Stay out of my mind or this interview is over."

He laughed again, warm and real. It raised goose bumps on my arms. "You really are good. I haven't met a human in centuries that rivaled you. A necromancer; do you realize how rare that talent is?"

Really I didn't, but I said, "Yes."

"Lies, Ms. Blake, to me, please don't bother."

"We're not here to talk about me. Either state your plan or I'm leaving."

"I am the plan, Ms. Blake. You can feel my powers, the ebb and flow of more centuries than your little master has ever dreamed of. I am older than time itself."

That I didn't believe, but I let it go. He was old enough; I wasn't going to argue with him, not if I could help it.

"Give me your master and I will free you of his marks."

I glanced up, then quickly down. He was still smiling at me, but the smile didn't look real anymore. It was an act like everything else. It was just a very good act.

"If you can taste my master in the marks, can't you just find him yourself?"

"I can taste his power, judge how worthy a foe he would be, but not his name and not where he lies; that is hidden." His voice was very serious now, not trying to trick me. Or at least I didn't think it was; maybe that was a trick, too.

"What do you want from me?"

"His name and his daytime resting place."

"I don't know the daytime resting place." I was glad it was the truth, because he would smell a lie.

"Then his name, give me his name."

"Why should I?"

"Because I wish to be Master of the City, Ms. Blake."

"Why?"

"So many questions. Is it not enough that I would free you from his power?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Why should you care about what happens to the other vampires?"

"I don't, but before I hand you the power to control every vampire in the immediate area, I'd like to know what you intend to do with all that power."

He laughed again. This time it was just a laugh. He was trying.

"You are the most stubborn human I have met in a very long time. I like stubborn people; they get things done."

"Answer my question."

"I think it is wrong to have vampires as legal citizens. I wish to put things back as they were."

"Why should you want vampires to be hunted again?"

"They are too powerful to be allowed to spread unchecked. They will take over the human race much quicker through legislation and voting rights than they ever could through violence."

I remembered the Church of Eternal Life, the fastest-growing denomination in the country. "Say you're right; how would you stop it?"

"By forbidding the vampires to vote, or take part in any legislation."

"There are other master vampires in town."

"You mean Malcolm, the head of the Church of Eternal Life."

"Yes."

"I have observed him. He will not be able to continue his one-man crusade to make vampires legitimate. I shall forbid it and dismantle his church. Surely you see the church as the larger danger, as I do."

I did, but I hated agreeing with an ancient master vampire. It seemed wrong somehow.

"St. Louis is a hotbed of political activity and entrepreneurial vampires. They must be stopped. We are predators, Ms. Blake; nothing we do can change that. We must go back to being hunted or the human race is doomed. Surely you see that."

I did see that. I believed that. "Why would you care if the human race is doomed? You're not part of it anymore."

"As the oldest living vampire, it is my duty to keep us in check, Ms. Blake. These new rights are getting out of hand and must be stopped. We are too powerful to be allowed such freedom. Humans have their right to be human. In the olden days only the strongest, smartest, or luckiest vampires survived. The human vampire hunters weeded out the stupid, the careless, the violent. Without that check-and-balance system, I fear what will happen in a few decades."

I agreed, wholeheartedly; it was sorta scary. I agreed with the oldest living thing I'd ever met. He was right. Could I give him Jean-Claude? Should I give him Jean-Claude?

"I agree with you, Mr. Oliver, but I can't just give him up, just like that. I don't know why really, but I can't."

"Loyalty; I admire that. Think upon it, Ms. Blake, but do not take too long. I need to put my plan into action as soon as possible."

I nodded. "I understand. I . . . I'll give you an answer within a couple of days. How do I reach you?"

"Inger will give you a card with a number on it. You may safely speak to him as to me."

I turned and looked at Inger, still standing at attention beside the door. "You're his human servant, aren't you?"

"I have that honor."

I shook my head. "I need to leave now."

"Do not feel badly that you could not recognize Inger as my human servant. It is not a mark which shows; otherwise how could they be our human ears and eyes and hands, if everyone knew they were ours?"

He had a point. He had a lot of points. I stood up. He stood up, too. He offered me his hand.

"I'm sorry, but I know that touching makes the mind games easier."

The hand dropped back to his side. "I do not need to touch you to play mind games, Ms. Blake." The voice was wonderful, shining and bright as Christmas morning. My throat was tight, and the warmth of tears filled my eyes. Shit, shit, shit, shit.

I backed for the door, and Inger opened it for me. They were just going to let me leave. He wasn't going to mind-rape me and get the name. He was really

going to let me walk away. That did more to prove him a good guy than anything else. Because he could have squeezed my mind dry. But he let me go.

Inger closed the door behind us, slowly, reverently.

"How old is he?" I asked.

"You couldn't tell?"

I shook my head. "How old?"

Inger smiled. "I am over seven hundred years old. Mr. Oliver was ancient when I met him."

"He's older than a thousand years."

"Why do you say that?"

"I've met a vampire that was a little over a thousand. She was scary, but she didn't have that kind of power."

He smiled. "If you wish to know his true age, then you must ask him yourself."

I stared up at Inger's smiling face for a minute. I remembered where I'd seen a face like Oliver's. I'd had one anthropology class in college. There'd been a drawing that looked just like Oliver. It had been a reconstruction of a *Homo erectus* skull. Which made Oliver about a million years old.

"My God," I said.

"What's wrong, Ms. Blake?"

I shook my head. "He can't be that old."

"How old is that?"

I didn't want to say it out loud, as if that would make it real. A million years. How powerful would a vampire grow in a million years?

A woman walked up the hallway towards us, coming from deeper in the house. She swayed on bare feet, toenails painted a bright scarlet that matched her fingernails. The belted dress she wore matched the nail polish. Her legs were long and pale, but it was that kind of paleness that promised to tan if it ever got enough sunlight. Her hair fell past her waist, thick and absolute black. Her makeup was perfect, her lips scarlet. She smiled at me; fangs showed below her lips.

But she wasn't a vampire. I didn't know what the hell she was, but I knew what she wasn't. I glanced at Inger. He didn't look happy.

"Shouldn't we be going?" I said.

"Yes," he said. He backed towards the front door and I backed behind him. Neither of us took our eyes off the fanged beauty slinking down the hall towards us.

She moved in a liquid run that was almost too fast to follow. Lycanthropes could move like that, but that wasn't what she was, either.

She was around Inger and coming for me. I gave up being cool and sort of ran backwards towards the front door. But she was too fast for me, too fast for any human.

She grabbed my right forearm. She looked puzzled. She could feel the knife sheath on my arm. She didn't seem to know what it was. Bully for me.

"What are you?" My voice was steady. Not afraid. Heap big vampire slayer. Yeah, right.

She opened her mouth wider, tongue caressing the fangs. The fangs were longer than a vampire's; she'd never be able to close her mouth around them.

"Where do the fangs go when you close your mouth?" I said.

She blinked at me, the smile slipping away from her face. She ran her tongue over them, then they folded back into the roof of her mouth.

"Retractable fangs. Cool," I said.

Her face was very solemn. "I'm glad you enjoyed the show, but there's so much more to see." The fangs unfolded again. She widened her jaws, almost a yawn, flashing the fangs nicely in the dim beams of sunlight that got around the drapes.

"Mr. Oliver will not like you threatening her," Inger said.

"He grows weak, sentimental." Her fingers dug into my arm stronger than she should have been.

She was holding my right arm, so I couldn't go for the gun. The knives were out for similar reasons. Maybe I should wear more guns.

She hissed at me, a violent explosion of air that no human throat ever made. The tongue that flicked out was forked.

"Sweet Jesus, what are you?"

She laughed, but it didn't sound right now; maybe the split tongue. Her pupils had narrowed to slits, her irises turned a golden yellow while I watched.

I tugged on my arm but her fingers were like steel. I dropped to the floor. She lowered my arm but didn't let go.

I leaned back on my left side, drew my legs up under me, and kicked her right kneecap with everything I had. The leg crumpled. She screamed and fell to the floor, but she let my arm go.

Something was happening to her legs. They seemed to be growing together, the skin spreading. I'd never seen anything like it, and I didn't want to now.

"Melanie, what are you doing?" The voice was behind us. Oliver stood in the hallway just short of the brighter light of the living room. His voice was the sound of rocks falling, trees breaking. A storm that was just words but seemed to cut and slash.

The thing on the floor cringed from the voice. Her lower body was becoming serpentine. A snake of some kind. Jesus.

"She's a lamia," I said softly. I backed away, putting the outside door to my back, hand on the door knob. "I thought they were extinct."

"She is the last one," Oliver said. "I keep her with me because I fear what she would do left to her own desires."

"Your creature that you can call, what is it?" I asked.

He sighed, and I felt the years of sadness in that one sound. A regret too deep for words. "Snakes, I can call snakes."

I nodded my head. "Sure." I opened the door and backed out onto the sunny porch. No one tried to stop me.

The door shut behind me and after a few minutes Inger came out. He was stiff with anger. "We most humbly apologize for her. She is an animal."

"Oliver needs to keep her on a tighter leash."

"He tries."

I nodded. I knew about trying. Doing your best, but anything that could control a lamia could play mind games with me all day, and I might never know it. How much of my trust and good wishes was real and how much of it was manufactured by Oliver?

"I'll drive you back."

"Please."

And away we went. I'd met my first lamia and perhaps the oldest living creature in the world. A red-fucking-letter day.

Chapter 31

The phone was ringing as I unlocked the apartment door. I shoved the door open with my shoulder and ran for the phone. I got it on the fifth ring and nearly yelled, "Hello."

"Anita?" Ronnie made it a question.

"Yeah, it's me."

"You sound out of breath."

"I had to run for the phone. What's up?"

"I remembered where I knew Cal Rupert from."

It took me a minute to remember who she was talking about. The first vampire victim. I'd forgotten, just for a moment, that there was a murder investigation going on. I was a little ashamed of that. "Talk to me, Ronnie."

"I was doing some work for a local law firm last year. One of the lawyers specialized in drawing up dying wills."

"I know that Rupert had a dying will. That's how I could stake him without waiting for an order of execution."

"But did you also know that Reba Baker had a dying will with the same lawyer?"

"Who's Reba Baker?"

"It may be the female victim."

My stomach tightened. A clue, a real live clue. "What makes you think so?"

"Reba Baker was young, blond, and missed an appointment. She doesn't answer her phone. They called her at work, and she hasn't been in for two days."

"The length of time she'd have been dead," I said.

"Exactly."

"Call Sergeant Rudolf Storr. Tell him what you just told me. Use my name to get to him."

"You don't want to check it out ourselves?"

"Not on your life. This is police business. They're good at it. Let 'em earn their paychecks."

"Shucks, you're no fun."

"Ronnie, call Dolph. Give it to the police. I've met the vampires that are killing these people. We don't want to make ourselves targets."

"You what!"

I sighed. I'd forgotten that Ronnie didn't know. I told her the shortest version that would make any sense. "I'll fill you in on everything Saturday morning when we work out."

"You going to be all right?"

"So far, so good."

"Watch your back, okay?"

"Always; you too."

"I never seem to have as many people after my back as you do."

"Be thankful," I said.

"I am." She hung up.

We had a clue. Maybe a pattern, except for the attack on me. I didn't fit any pattern. They'd come after me to get Jean-Claude. Everybody wanted Jean-Claude's job. The trouble was, you couldn't abdicate; you could only die. I liked what Oliver had had to say. I agreed with him, but could I sacrifice Jean-Claude on the altar of good sense? Dammit.

I just didn't know.

Chapter 32

Bert's office was small and painted pale blue. He thought it was soothing to the clients. I thought it was cold, but that fit Bert, too. He was six feet tall with the broad shoulders and build of an ex-college football player. His stomach was moving a little south with too much food and not enough exercise, but he carried it well in his seven-hundred-dollar suits. For that kind of money, the suits should have carried the Taj Mahal.

He was tanned, grey-eyed, with a buzz haircut that was nearly white. Not age, his natural hair color.

I was sitting across from his desk in work clothes. A red skirt, matching jacket, and a blouse that was so close to scarlet I'd had to put on a little makeup so that my face didn't seem ghostly. The jacket was tailored so that my shoulder holster didn't show.

Larry sat in the chair beside me in a blue suit, white shirt, and blue-on-blue tie. The skin around his stitches had blossomed into a multicolored bruise across his forehead. His short red hair couldn't hide it. It looked like someone had hit him in the head with a baseball bat.

"You could have gotten him killed, Bert," I said.

"He wasn't in any danger until you showed up. The vampires wanted you, not him."

He was right, and I didn't like it. "He tried to raise a third zombie."

Bert's cold little eyes lit up. "You can do three in a night?"

Larry had the grace to look embarrassed. "Almost."

Bert frowned. "What's 'almost' mean?"

"It means he raised it, but lost control of it. If I hadn't been there to fix things, we'd have had a rampaging zombie on our hands."

He leaned forward, hands folded on his desk, small eyes very serious. "Is this true, Larry?"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Vaughn."

"That could have been very serious, Larry. You understand that?"

"Serious?" I said. "It would have been a bloody disaster. The zombie could have eaten one of our clients!"

"Now, Anita, no reason to frighten the boy."

I stood up. "Yes, there is."

Bert frowned at me. "If you hadn't been late, he wouldn't have tried to raise the last zombie."

"No, Bert. You are not making this all my fault. You sent him out on his first night alone. Alone, Bert."

"And he handled himself well," Bert said.

I fought the urge to scream, because it wouldn't help. "Bert, he's a twenty-year-old college student. This is a freaking seminar for him. If you get him killed, it's gonna look sorta bad."

"May I say something?" Larry asked.

I said, "No."

Bert said, "Certainly."

"I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself."

I wanted to argue that, but looking into his true-blue eyes I couldn't say it. He was twenty. I remembered twenty. I'd known everything at twenty. It took me another year to realize I knew nothing. I was still hoping to learn something before I hit thirty, but I wasn't holding my breath.

"How old were you when you started working for me?" Bert said.

"What?"

"How old were you?"

"Twenty-one; I'd just graduated college."

"When will you turn twenty-one, Larry?" Bert asked.

"March."

"See, Anita, he's just a few months younger. He's the same age you were."

"That was different."

"Why?" Bert said.

I couldn't put it into words. Larry still had all his grandparents. He'd never seen death and violence up close and personal. I had. He was an innocent, and I hadn't been innocent for years. But how to explain that to Bert without hurting

Larry's feelings? No twenty-year-old man likes to hear that a woman knows more about the world than he does. Some cultural fables die hard.

"You sent me out with Manny, not alone."

"He was supposed to go out with you, but you had police business to handle."

"That's not fair, Bert, and you know it."

He shrugged. "If you'd been doing your job, he wouldn't have been alone."

"There've been two murders. What am I supposed to do? Say sorry, folks, I've got to babysit a new animator. Sorry about the murders."

"Nobody has to babysit me," Larry said.

We both ignored him.

"You have a full time job here with Animators, Inc."

"We've had this argument before, Bert."

"Too many times," he said.

"You're my boss, Bert. Do what you think best."

"Don't tempt me."

"Hey, guys," Larry said, "I'm getting the feeling that you're using me for an excuse to fight. Don't get carried away, okay?"

We both glared at him. He didn't back down, just stared at us. Point for him.

"If you don't like the way I do my job, Bert, fire me, but stop yanking my chain."

Bert stood up, slowly, like a leviathan rising from the waves. "Anita . . ."

The phone rang. We all stared at it for a minute. Bert finally picked it up and growled, "Yeah, what is it?"

He listened for a minute, then glared at me. "It's for you." His voice was incredibly mild as he said it. "Detective Sergeant Storr, police business."

Bert's face was smiling, butter wouldn't have melted in his mouth.

I held out my hand for the phone without another word. He handed me the receiver. He was still smiling, his tiny grey eyes warm and sparkling. It was a bad sign.

"Hi, Dolph, what's up?"

"We're at the lawyer's office that your friend Veronica Sims gave us. Nice that she called you first and not us."

"She called you second, didn't she?"

"Yeah."

"What have you found out?" I didn't bother to keep my voice down. If you're careful, one side of a conversation isn't very enlightening.

"Reba Baker is the dead woman. They identified her from morgue photos."

"Pleasant way to end the work week," I said.

Dolph ignored that. "Both victims were clients with dying wills. If they died by vampire bite, they wanted to be staked, then cremated."

"Sounds like a pattern to me," I said.

"But how did the vampires find out that they had dying wills?"

"Is this a trick question, Dolph? Someone told them."

"I know that," he said. He sounded disgusted.

I was missing something. "What do you want from me, Dolph?"

"I've questioned everyone, and I'd swear they were all telling the truth. Could someone have been giving the information and not remember?"

"You mean could the vampire have played mind games, so that the traitor wouldn't know afterwards?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Sure," I said.

"Could you tell which one the vampire got to if you were here?"

I glanced at my boss's face. If I missed another night during our busiest season, he might fire me. There were days when I didn't think I'd care. This wasn't one of them. "Look for memory losses; hours, or even entire nights."

"Anything else?"

"If someone has been feeding info to the vampires, they may not remember it, but a good hypnotist will be able to raise the memory."

"The lawyer is screaming about rights and warrants. We've only got a warrant for the files, not for their minds."

"Ask him if he wants to be responsible for tonight's murder victim, one of his own clients?"

"She; the lawyer's a woman," he said.

How embarrassing and how sexist of me. "Ask her if she's willing to explain to her client's family why she obstructed your investigation."

"The clients won't know unless we let it out," he said.

"That's true," I said.

"Why, that would be blackmail, Ms. Blake."

"Isn't it, though?" I said.

"You had to be a cop in a past life," he said. "You're too devious not to be."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"Any hypnotists you'd recommend?"

"Alvin Thormund. Wait a sec and I'll get his number for you." I got out my thin business card holder. I tried to only keep cards I wanted to refer to from time to time. We'd used Alvin for several cases of vampire victims with amnesia. I gave Dolph the number.

"Thanks, Anita."

"Let me know what you find out. I might be able to identify the vampire involved."

"You want to be there when we put them under?"

I glanced at Bert. His face was still relaxed, pleasant. Bert at his most dangerous.

"I don't think so. Just make a recording of the session. If I need to, I'll listen to it later."

"Later may mean another body," he said. "Your boss giving you trouble again?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You want me to talk to him?" Dolph asked.

"I don't think so."

"He being a real bastard about it?"

"The usual."

"Okay, I'll call this Thormund and record the sessions. I'll let you know if we find out anything."

"Beep me."

"You got it." He hung up. I didn't bother to say good-bye. Dolph never did.

I handed the phone back to Bert. He hung it up still staring at me with his pleasant, threatening eyes. "You have to go out for the police tonight?"

"No."

"How did we merit this honor?"

"Cut the sarcasm, Bert." I turned to Larry. "You ready to go, kid?"

"How old are you?" he asked.

Bert grinned.

"What difference does it make?" I asked.

"Just answer the question, okay?"

I shrugged. "Twenty-four."

"You're only four years older than me. Don't call me kid."

I had to smile. "Deal, but we better be going. We have dead to raise, money to make." I glanced at Bert.

He was leaning back in his chair, blunt-fingered hands clasped over his belly. He was grinning.

I wanted to wipe the grin off his face with a fist. I resisted the urge. Who says I have no self-control?

Chapter 33

It was an hour before dawn. When all the Whos down in Whoville were asnooze in their beds without care. Sorry, wrong book. If I get to stay awake until dawn, I get just a tad slaphappy. I'd been up all night teaching Larry how to be a good, law-abiding animator. I wasn't sure Bert would appreciate the last, but I knew I would.

The cemetery was small. A family plot with pretensions. A narrow two-lane road rounded a hill, and suddenly there it was, a swathe of gravel beside the road. You had seconds to decide to turn in, that this was it. Tombstones climbed up the hill. The angle was so steep, it looked like the coffins should have slid downhill.

We stood in the dark with a canopy of trees whispering overhead. The woods were thick on either side of the road. The little plot was just a narrow space beside the road, but it was well cared for. There were still-living family

members to see to the upkeep. I didn't even want to imagine how they mowed the hillside. Maybe a rope-and-pulley system to make sure the mower didn't roll over and add another corpse.

Our last clients of the night had just driven away back to civilization. I'd raised five zombies. Larry had raised one. Yeah, he could have raised two, but we just ran out of darkness. It doesn't take that long to raise a zombie, at least for me, but there's travel time included. In four years I'd only had two zombies in the same cemetery on the same night. Most of the time you were driving like a maniac to make all the appointments.

My poor car had been towed to a service station, but the insurance people hadn't seen it yet. It would take days or weeks for them to tell me it was totaled. There hadn't been time to rent a car for the night, so Larry was driving. He'd have been with me even if I'd had the car. I was the one bitching about not having enough help, so I got to train him. It was only fair, I guessed.

The wind rushed through the trees. Dry leaves scurried across the road. The night was full of small, hurried noises. Rushing, rushing, towards . . . what? All Hallows Eve. You could feel Halloween on the air.

"I love nights like this," Larry said.

I glanced over at him. We were both standing with our hands in our pockets staring out into the darkness. Enjoying the evening. We were also both covered in dried chicken blood. Just a nice, normal night.

My beeper went off. The high-pitched beep sounded very wrong in the quiet, windswept night. I hit the button. Mercifully, the noise stopped. The little light flashed a phone number at me. I didn't recognize the number. I hoped it wasn't Dolph, because an unfamiliar number this late at night, or early in the morning, meant another murder. Another body.

"Come on, we gotta get to a phone."

"Who is it?"

"I'm not sure." I started down the hill.

He followed me and asked, "Who do you think it is?"

"Maybe the police."

"The murders you're working on?"

I glanced back at him and rammed my knee into a tombstone. I stood there for a few seconds, holding my breath while the pain ran through me. "Shiiit!" I said softly and with feeling.

"Are you all right?" Larry touched my arm.

I drew away from his hand, and he let his hand drop. I wasn't much into casual touching. "I'm fine." Truth was, it still hurt, but what the hell? I needed to get to a phone, and the pain would get better the more I walked on it. Honest.

I stared carefully ahead to avoid other hard objects. "What do you know about the murders?"

"Just that you're helping the police on a preternatural crime, and that it's taking you away from your animating jobs."

"Bert told you that."

"Mr. Vaughn, yes."

We were at the car. "Look, Larry, if you're going to work for Animators, Inc., you've got to drop all this Mr. and Ms. stuff. We aren't your professors. We're coworkers."

He smiled, a flash of white in the dark. "All right, Ms . . . Anita."

"That's better. Now let's go find a phone."

We drove into Chesterfield on the theory that, as the closest town, it would have the closest phone. We ended up at a bank of pay phones in the parking lot of a closed service station. The station glowed softly in the dark, but a halogen streetlight beamed over the pay phones, turning night into day. Insects and moths danced around the light. The swift, flitting shapes of bats swam in and out of the light, eating the insects.

I dialed the number while Larry waited in the car. Give him a point for discretion. The phone rang twice; then a voice said, "Anita, is that you?"

It was Irving Griswold, reporter and friend. "Irving, what in blazes are you doing paging me at this hour?"

"Jean-Claude wants to see you tonight, now." His voice sounded rushed and uncertain.

"Why are you delivering the message?" I was afraid I wasn't going to like the answer.

"I'm a werewolf," he said.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"You didn't know." He sounded surprised.

"Know what?" I was getting angry. I hate twenty questions.

"Jean-Claude's animal is a wolf."

That explained Stephen the Werewolf and the black woman. "Why weren't you there the other night, Irving? Did he let you off your leash?"

"That's not fair."

He was right. It wasn't. "I'm sorry, Irving. I'm just feeling guilty because I introduced the two of you."

"I wanted to interview the Master of the City. I got my interview."

"Was it worth the price?" I said.

"No comment."

"That's my line."

He laughed. "Can you come to the Circus of the Damned? Jean-Claude has some information on the master vampire that jumped you."

"Alejandro?"

"That's the one."

"We'll be there as soon as we can, but it's going to be damn close to dawn before we can get to the Riverfront."

"Who's we?"

"A new animator I'm breaking in. He's driving." I hesitated. "Tell Jean-Claude no rough stuff tonight."

"Tell him yourself."

"Coward."

"Yes, ma'am. See you as soon as you can get here. Bye."

"Bye, Irving." I held the buzzing receiver for a few seconds, then hung up. Irving was Jean-Claude's creature. Jean-Claude could call wolves the way Mr. Oliver called snakes. The way Nikolaos had called rats, and wererats. They were all monsters. It was just a choice of flavors.

I slid back into the car. "You wanted more experience with vampires, right?" I buckled the seat belt.

"Of course," Larry said.

"Well, you're going to get it tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain while you drive. We don't have much time before dawn."

Larry threw the car in gear and peeled out of the parking lot. He looked eager in the dim glow of the dashboard. Eager and very, very young.

Chapter 34

The Circus of the Damned had closed down for the night, or would that be morning? It was still dark, but there was a wash of lightness to the east as we parked in front of the warehouse. An hour earlier, and there wouldn't have been a parking place even close to the Circus. But the tourists leave as the vampires fold down for the night.

I glanced at Larry. His face was smeared with dried blood. So was mine. It hadn't occurred to me until just now to find some place to clean up first. I glanced up at the eastern sky and shook my head. There was no time. Dawn was coming.

The toothed clowns still glowed and twirled atop the marquee, but it was a tired dance. Or maybe I was the one who was tired.

"Follow my lead in here, Larry. Never forget that they are monsters; no matter how human they look, they aren't. Don't take off your cross, don't let them touch you, and don't stare directly into their eyes."

"I know that from class. I had two semesters of Vampire Studies."

I shook my head. "Class is nothing, Larry. This is the real thing. Reading about it doesn't prepare you for it."

"We had guest speakers. Some of them were vampires."

I sighed and let it go. He'd have to learn on his own. Like everybody else did. Like I had.

The big doors were locked. I knocked. The door opened a moment later. Irving stood there. He wasn't smiling. He looked like a chubby cherub with soft, curling hair in a fringe over his ears, and a big bald spot in the middle. Round, wire-framed glasses perched on a round little nose. His eyes widened a little as we stepped inside. The blood looked like what it was in the light.

"What have you been doing tonight?" he asked.

"Raising the dead," I said.

"This the new animator?"

"Larry Kirkland, Irving Griswold. He's a reporter, so everything you say can be used against you."

"Hey, Blake, I've never quoted you when you said not to. Give me that."

I nodded. "Given."

"He's waiting for you downstairs," Irving said.

"Downstairs?" I said.

"It is almost dawn. He needs to be underground."

Ah. "Sure," I said, but my stomach clenched tight. The last time I'd gone downstairs at the Circus, it had been to kill Nikolaos. There had been a lot of killing that morning. A lot of blood. Some of it mine.

Irving led the way through the silent midway. Someone had hit the switch, and the lights were dull. The fronts of the games had been shut and locked down, covers thrown over the stuffed animals. The scent of corn dogs and cotton candy hung on the air like aromatic ghosts, but the smells were dim and tired.

We passed the haunted house with its life-size witch on top, standing silent and staring with bulging eyes. She was green and had a wart on her nose. I'd never met a witch that looked anything but normal. They certainly weren't green, and warts could always be surgically removed.

The glass house was next. The darkened Ferris wheel towered over everything. "I feel like one, / Who treads alone / Some banquet hall deserted, / Whose lights are fled, / Whose garlands dead, / And all but he departed," I said.

Irving glanced back to me. "Thomas Moore, *Oft in the Stilly Night*."

I smiled. "I couldn't remember the title to save myself. I'll just have to agree with you."

"Double major, journalism and English literature."

"I bet that last comes in handy as a reporter," I said.

"Hey, I slip a little culture in when I can." He sounded offended, but I knew he was pretending. It made me feel better to have Irving joking with me. It was nice and normal. I needed all the nice I could get tonight.

It was an hour until dawn. What harm could Jean-Claude do in an hour? Better not to ask.

The door in the wall was heavy and wooden with a sign reading, "Authorized Personnel Only Beyond This Point." For once I wished I wasn't authorized.

The little room beyond was just a small storage room with a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling. A second door led down the stairs. The stairs were almost wide enough for the three of us to walk abreast, but not quite. Irving walked ahead of us, as if we still needed leading. There was nowhere to go but down. Prophetic, that.

There was a sharp bend to the stairs. There was a brush of cloth, the sensation of movement. I had my gun out and ready. No thought necessary, just lots and lots of practice.

"You won't need that," Irving said.

"Says you."

"I thought the Master was a friend of yours," Larry said.

"Vampires don't have friends."

"How about junior high science teachers?" Richard Zeeman walked around the corner. He was wearing a forest-green sweater with a lighter green and brown forest woven into it. The sweater hung down nearly to his knees. On me it would have been a dress. The sleeves were pushed back over his forearms. Jeans and the same pair of white Nikes completed the outfit. "Jean-Claude sent me up to wait for you."

"Why?" I asked.

He shrugged. "He seems nervous. I didn't ask questions."

"Smart man," I said.

"Let's keep moving," Irving said.

"You sound nervous, too, Irving."

"He calls and I obey, Anita. I'm his animal."

I reached out to touch Irving's arm, but he moved away. "I thought I could play human, but he's shown me that I'm an animal. Just an animal."

"Don't let him do that to you," I said.

He stared at me, his eyes filled with tears. "I can't stop him."

"We better get moving. It's almost dawn," Richard said.

I glared at him for saying it.

He shrugged. "It'll be better if we don't keep the master waiting. You know that."

I did know that. I nodded. "You're right. I don't have any right to get mad at you."

"Thanks."

I shook my head. "Let's do it."

"You can put the gun up," he said.

I stared at the Browning. I liked having it out. For security it beat the hell out of a teddy bear. I put the gun away. I could always get it out again later.

At the end of the stairs there was one last door—smaller, rounded with a heavy iron lock. Irving took out a huge black key and slipped it into the door. The lock gave a well-oiled click, and he pushed it forward. Irving was trusted with the key to below the stairs. How deep was he in, and could I get him out?

"Wait a minute," I said.

Everyone turned to me. I was the center of attention. Great. "I don't want Larry to meet the Master, or even know who he is."

"Anita . . ." Larry started.

"No, Larry, I've been attacked twice for the information. It is definitely on a need-to-know basis. You don't need to know."

"I don't need you to protect me," he said.

"Listen to her," Irving said. "She told me to stay away from the Master. I said I could handle myself. I was wrong, real wrong."

Larry crossed his arms over his chest, a stubborn set to his bloodstained cheeks. "I can take care of myself."

"Irving, Richard, I want a promise on this. The less he knows, the safer he'll be."

They both nodded.

"Doesn't anyone care what I think?" Larry asked.

"No," I said.

"Dammit, I'm not a child."

"You two can fight later," Irving said. "The Master's waiting."

Larry started to say something; I raised my hand. "Lesson number one; never keep a nervous master vampire waiting."

Larry opened his mouth to argue, then stopped. "Okay, we'll argue later."

I wasn't looking forward to later, but arguing with Larry over whether I was being overprotective beat the hell out of what lay beyond the door. I knew that. Larry didn't, but he was about to learn, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to stop it.

Chapter 35

The ceiling stretched upward into the darkness. Huge drapes of silky material fell in white and black, forming cloth walls. Minimalist chairs in black and silver formed a small conversation group. A glass and dark wood coffee table took up the center of the room. A black vase with a bouquet of white lilies was the only decoration. The room looked half-finished, as if it needed paintings hung on the walls. But how do you hang paintings on cloth walls? I was sure Jean-Claude would figure it out eventually.

I knew the rest of the room was a huge cavernous warehouse made of stone, but the only thing left of that was the high ceiling. There was even black carpeting on the floor, soft and cushioned.

Jean-Claude sat in one of the black chairs. He was slumped in the chair, ankles crossed, hands clasped across his stomach. His white shirt was plain, just a simple dress shirt except for the fact that the front sides were sheer. The line of buttons, cuffs, and collar was solid, but the chest was laid bare through a film of gauze. His cross-shaped burn was brown and clear against the pale skin.

Marguerite sat at his feet, head laid on his knee like an obedient dog. Her blond hair and pale pink pants suit seemed out of place in the black-and-white room.

"You've redecorated," I said.

"A few comforts," Jean-Claude said.

"I'm ready to meet the Master of the City," I said.

His eyes widened, a question forming on his face.

"I don't want my new coworker to meet the Master. It seems to be dangerous information right now."

Jean-Claude never moved. He just stared at me, one hand absently rubbing Marguerite's hair. Where was Yasmeen? In a coffin somewhere, tucked safely away from the coming dawn.

"I will take you alone to meet . . . the Master," he said at last. His voice was neutral, but I could detect a hint of laughter underneath the words. It wasn't the first time Jean-Claude had found me funny, and it probably wouldn't be the last.

He stood in one graceful movement, leaving Marguerite kneeling beside the empty chair. She looked displeased. I smiled at her, and she glared at me. Baiting Marguerite was childish, but it made me feel better. Everyone needs a hobby.

Jean-Claude swept the curtains aside to show darkness. I realized then that there was discreet electric light in the room, indirect lighting set in the walls themselves. There was nothing but the flicker of torches beyond the curtains. It was like that one piece of cloth held back the modern world with all its comforts. Beyond lay stone and fire and secrets best whispered in the dark.

"Anita?" Larry called after me. He looked uncertain, maybe even scared. But I was taking the most dangerous thing in the room with me. He'd be safe with Irving and Richard. I didn't think Marguerite was a danger without Yasmeen to hold her leash.

"Stay here, Larry, please. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Be careful," he said.

I smiled. "Always."

He grinned. "Yeah, sure."

Jean-Claude motioned me through and I went, following the sweep of his pale hand. The curtain fell behind us, cutting off the light. Darkness closed around us like a fist. Torches sparked against the far wall but couldn't touch the swelling dark.

Jean-Claude led the way into the dark. "We wouldn't want your coworker to overhear us." His voice whispered in the dark, growing like a wind to beat against the curtains.

My heart hammered against my rib cage. How the hell did he do that? "Save the dramatics for someone you can impress."

"Brave words, *ma petite*, but I taste your heartbeat in my mouth." The last word breathed over my skin as if his lips had passed just over the nape of my neck. Goosebumps marched down my arms.

"If you want to play games until after dawn, that's fine with me, but Irving told me that you had information on the master vampire that attacked me. Do you, or was it a lie?"

"I have never lied to you, *ma petite*."

"Oh, come on."

"Partial truths are not the same thing as lies."

"I guess that depends on where you're sitting," I said.

He acknowledged that with a nod. "Shall we sit against the far wall, out of hearing range?"

"Sure."

He knelt in the thin circle of a torch's light. The light was for my benefit and I appreciated it. But no sense telling him that.

I sat across from him, back to the wall. "So, what do you know about Alejandro?"

He was staring at me, a peculiar look on his face.

"What?" I asked.

"Tell me everything that happened last night, *ma petite*, everything about Alejandro."

It was too much like an order for my tastes, but there was something in his eyes, his face; uneasiness, almost fear. Which was silly. What did Jean-Claude have to fear from Alejandro? What indeed? I told him everything I remembered.

His face went carefully blank, beautiful and unreal like a painting. The colors were still there, but the life, the movement, had fled. He put one finger between his lips and slowly slid it out of sight. The finger came glistening back to the light. He extended that wet finger towards me. I scooted away from him.

"What are you trying to do?"

"Wash the blood off of your cheek. Nothing more."

"I don't think so."

He sighed, the barest of sounds, but it slithered over my skin like air. "You make everything so difficult."

"Glad you noticed."

"I need to touch you, *ma petite*. I believe Alejandro has done something to you."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Something impossible."

"No riddles, Jean-Claude."

"I believe he has marked you."

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Marked you, Anita Blake, marked you with the first mark, just as I have."

I shook my head. "That's not possible. Two vampires can't have the same human servant."

"Exactly," he said. He moved towards me. "Let me test the theory, *ma petite*, please."

"What does testing the theory mean?"

He said something soft and harsh in French. I'd never heard him curse before. "It is after dawn and I am tired. Your questions will make something simple last all bloody day." There was real anger in his voice, but under that was tiredness and that thread of fear. The fear scared me. He was supposed to be some untouchable monster. Monsters weren't afraid of other monsters.

I sighed. Was it better to just get it over with, like a shot? Maybe. "All right, in the interest of time. But give me some idea of what to expect. You know I don't like surprises."

"I must touch you to search first for my marks, then for his. You should not have fallen so easily into his eyes. That should not have happened."

"Get it over with," I said.

"Is my touch so repulsive that you must prepare yourself as for pain?"
Since that was almost exactly what I was doing, I wasn't sure what to say.
"Just do it, Jean-Claude, before I change my mind."

He slid his finger between his lips again.

"Do you have to do it that way?"

"*Ma petite*, please."

I squirmed against the cool stone wall. "All right, no more interruptions."

"Good." He knelt in front of me. His fingertip traced my right cheek, leaving a line of wetness down my skin. The dried blood was gritty under his touch. He leaned into me, as if he was going to kiss me. I put my hands on his chest to keep him from touching me. His skin was hard and smooth under the gauze of his shirt.

I jerked away and hit my head against the wall. "Dammit."

He smiled. His eyes glinted blue in the torchlight. "Trust me." He moved in, lips hovering over my mouth. "I won't hurt you." The words whispered into my mouth, a soft push of air.

"Yeah, right," I said, but the words came out soft and uncertain.

His lips brushed mine, then pressed gently against my mouth. The kiss moved from my lips to my cheek. His lips were soft as silk, gentle as marigold petals, hot as the noonday sun. They worked down my skin until his mouth hovered over the pulse in my neck.

"Jean-Claude?"

"Alejandro was alive when the Aztec empire was just a dream." He whispered it against my skin. "He was there to greet the Spaniards and watch the Aztecs fall. He has survived when others have died or gone mad." His tongue flicked out, hot and wet.

"Stop it." I pushed against him. His heart beat against my hands. I pushed my hands upward to his throat. The big pulse in his throat fluttered against my skin. I placed a thumb over the smoothness of one of his eyelids. "Move it or lose it," I said. My voice was breathy with panic, and something worse . . . desire.

The feel of his body against me, under my hands, his lips touching me—some hidden part of me wanted it. Wanted him. So I lusted after the Master; so what? Nothing new. His eyeball trembled under my thumb, and I wondered if I could do it. Could I blank out one of those midnight-blue orbs? Could I blind him?

His lips moved against my skin. Teeth brushed my skin, the hard brush of fangs rubbed against my throat. And the answer was, suddenly, yes. I tensed to press inward, and he was gone like a dream, or a nightmare.

He stood in front of me, looking down, his eyes all dark, no white showing. His lips had drawn back from his teeth to expose glistening fangs. His skin was marble-white and seemed to glow from inside, and still he was beautiful.

"Alejandro has given you the first mark, *ma petite*. We share you. I do not know how, but we do. Two more marks and you are mine. Three more and you are his. Would it not be better to be mine?"

He knelt in front of me again, but was careful not to touch me. "You desire me as a woman desires a man. Is that not better than some stranger taking you by force?"

"You didn't ask my permission for the first two marks. They weren't by choice."

"I am asking permission now. Let me share with you the third mark."

"No."

"You would rather serve Alejandro?"

"I'm not going to serve anyone," I said.

"This is a war, Anita. You cannot be neutral."

"Why not?"

He stood up and paced a tight circle. "Don't you understand? The killings are a challenge to my authority, and his marking you is another challenge. He will take you from me if he can."

"I don't belong to you, or to him."

"What I have tried to get you to believe, to accept, he will shove down your throat."

"So I'm in the middle of an undead turf war because of your marks."

He blinked, opened his mouth, then closed it. Finally, "Yes."

I stood up. "Thanks a lot." I walked past him. "If you have any more info on Alejandro, send me a letter."

"This will not go away just because you wish it to."

I stopped in front of the curtain. "Hell, I knew that. I've wished hard enough for you to leave me alone."

"You would miss me if I were not here."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"And do not lie to yourself, *ma petite*. I would give you a partnership. He will give you slavery."

"If you really believed this partnership crap, you wouldn't have forced the first two marks on me. You would have asked. For all I know, the third mark can't be given without my cooperation." I stared at him. "That's it, isn't it? You need my help or something for the third mark. It's different from the first two. You son of a bitch."

"The third mark without your . . . help would be like rape to making love. You would hate me for all eternity if I took you by force."

I turned my back on him and grabbed the curtain. "You got that right."

"Alejandro will not care if you hate him. He wants only to hurt me. He will not ask your permission. He will simply take you."

"I can take care of myself."

"Like you took care last night?"

Alejandro had rolled me under and over and I hadn't even known it. What protection did I have against something like that? I shook my head and jerked back the curtain. The light was so bright, I was blind. I stood in the glare waiting for my eyes to adjust. The cool darkness blew against my back. The light was hot and intrusive after the darkness, but anything was better than

whispers in the night. Blinded by the light or blinded by darkness; I'd take light every time.

Chapter 36

Larry was lying on the floor, head cradled in Yasmeen's lap. She held his wrists. Marguerite had pinned his body under her own. She was licking the blood off his face with long, lingering strokes of her tongue. Richard lay in a crumpled heap, blood running down his face. There was something on the floor. It writhed and moved. Grey fur flowed over it like water. A hand reached skyward, then shrank like a dying flower, bones glistening, shoving upward through the flesh. The fingers shrank, flesh rolling over the nubs of raw flesh. All that raw meat and no blood. The bones slid in and out with wet, sucking noises. Drops of clear fluid splattered the black rug. But no blood.

I drew the Browning and moved so I could point it somewhere between Yasmeen and the thing on the floor. I had my back to the curtain but moved away from it. Too easy for something to reach through.

"Let him go, now."

"We haven't hurt him," Yasmeen said.

Marguerite leaned into Larry's body; one hand cupped his groin, massaging.

"Anita!" His eyes were wide, skin pale; freckles stood out like ink spots.

I fired a shot inches from Yasmeen's head. The sound was sharp and echoed. Yasmeen snarled at me. "I can rip his throat out before you squeeze that trigger again."

I aimed for Marguerite's head, right over one blue eye. "You kill him, I kill Marguerite. You willing to make the trade?"

"Yasmeen, what are you doing?" Jean-Claude came in at my back. My eyes flicked to him, then back to Marguerite. Jean-Claude wasn't the danger, not now.

The thing on the floor rose on four shaky legs and shook itself like a dog after a bath. It was a huge wolf. Thick grey-brown fur covered the animal, fluffy and dry as if the wolf had been freshly washed and blow dried. Liquid formed a thick puddle on the carpet. Bits of clothing were scattered around. The wolf had emerged from the mess newly formed, reborn.

A pair of round wire-framed glasses sat on the glass and black coffee table, neatly folded.

"Irving?"

The wolf gave a small half-growl, half-bark. Was that a yes?

I had always known that Irving was a werewolf, but seeing it was something else entirely. Until just that moment I hadn't really believed, not really. Staring into the wolf's pale brown eyes, I believed.

Marguerite lay on the ground behind Larry now. Her arms wrapped around his chest, legs wrapping his waist. Most of her was hidden behind him, shielded.

I had spent too much time gazing at Irving. I couldn't shoot Marguerite without risking Larry. Yasmeen was kneeling beside them, one hand gripping a handful of Larry's hair. "I will snap his neck."

"You will not harm him, Yasmeen," Jean-Claude said. He stood beside the coffee table. The wolf moved up beside him, growling softly. His fingers brushed the top of the wolf's head.

"Call off your dogs, Jean-Claude, or this one dies." She stretched Larry's throat into one straining pale line to emphasize her point. The Band-Aid that had been hiding his vampire bite had been removed. Marguerite's tongue flicked out, touching the straining flesh.

I was betting that I could shoot Marguerite in the forehead while she licked Larry's neck, but Yasmeen could, and might, break his neck. I couldn't take the chance.

"Do something, Jean-Claude," I said. "You're the Master of the City. She's supposed to take your orders."

"Yes, Jean-Claude, order me."

"What's going on here, Jean-Claude?" I asked.

"She is testing me."

"Why?"

"Yasmeen wants to be Master of the City. But she isn't strong enough."

"I was strong enough to keep you and your servant from hearing this one's screams. Richard called your name, and you heard nothing because I kept you from it."

Richard stood just behind Jean-Claude. Blood was smeared from the corner of his mouth. There was a small cut on his right cheek that trickled blood down his face. "I tried to stop her."

"You did not try hard enough," Jean-Claude said.

"Argue amongst yourselves later," I said. "Right now, we have a problem."

Yasmeen laughed. The sound wriggled down my spine like someone had spilled a can of worms. I shuddered, and decided then and there that I'd shoot Yasmeen first. We'd find out if a master vampire was really faster than a speeding bullet.

She released Larry with a laugh and stood. Marguerite still clung to him. He got to his hands and knees with the woman riding him like a horse, arms and legs still clamped around him. She was laughing, kissing his neck.

I kicked her in the face as hard as I could. She slid off Larry and lay dazed on the floor. Yasmeen started forward and I fired at her chest. Jean-Claude hit my arm, and the shot went wide.

"I need her alive, Anita."

I jerked away from him. "She's crazy."

"But he needs my assistance to combat the other masters," Yasmeen said.

"She'll betray you if she can," I said.

"But I still need her."

"If you can't control Yasmeen, then how in the hell are you going to fight Alejandro?"

"I don't know," he said. "Is that what you wanted to hear? I do not know."

Larry was still huddled by our feet.

"Can you get up?"

He looked up at me, eyes shiny with unshed tears. He used one of the chairs to brace himself and almost fell. I grabbed his arm, gun still in my right hand. "Come on, Larry, we're getting out of here."

"Sounds great to me." His voice was incredibly breathless, straining not to cry.

We worked our way towards the door, me helping Larry walk, gun still out pointed vaguely at everything in the room.

"Go with them, Richard. See them safely to their car. And do not fail me again like you did today."

Richard ignored the threat and walked around us to hold the door open. We walked through without turning our backs on the vampires or the werewolf. When the door closed, I let out a breath I hadn't even known I was holding.

"I can walk now," Larry said.

I let go of his arm. He put a hand against the wall but otherwise seemed okay. The first slow tear trailed down his cheek. "Get me out of here."

I put my gun up. It wouldn't help now. Richard and I both pretended not to notice Larry's tears. They were very quiet. If you hadn't been looking directly at him, you wouldn't have known he was crying.

I tried to think of something to say, anything. But what could I say? He had seen the monsters, and they had scared the shit out of him. They scared the shit out of me. They scared the shit out of everybody. Now Larry knew that. Maybe it was worth the pain. Maybe not.

Chapter 37

Early-morning light lay heavy and golden on the street outside. The air was cool and misty. You couldn't see the river from here, but you could feel it; that sense of water on the air that made every breath fresher, cleaner.

Larry got out his car keys.

"You okay to drive?" I asked.

He nodded. The tears had dried in thin tracks down his face. He hadn't bothered to wipe them away. He wasn't crying anymore. He was as grim-faced

as you could be and still look like an overgrown Howdy Doody. He opened his door and got in, sliding across to unlock the passenger side.

Richard stood there. The cool wind blew his hair across his face. He ran fingers through it to keep it from his face. The gesture was achingly familiar. Phillip had always been doing that. Richard smiled at me, and it wasn't Phillip's smile. It was bright and open, and there was nothing hidden in his brown eyes.

Blood had started to dry at the corner of his mouth, and on his cheek.

"Get out while you still can, Richard."

"Out from what?"

"There's going to be an undead war. You don't want to be caught in the middle."

"I don't think Jean-Claude would let me walk away," he said. He wasn't smiling when he said it. I couldn't decide whether he was handsomer smiling or solemn.

"Humans don't do too well in the middle of the monsters, Richard. Get out if you can."

"You're human."

I shrugged. "Some people would argue that."

"Not me." He reached out to touch me. I stood my ground and didn't move away. His fingertips brushed the side of my face, warm and very alive.

"See you at three o'clock this afternoon, unless you're going to be too tired."

I shook my head, and his hand dropped away from my face. "Wouldn't miss it," I said.

He smiled again. His hair blew in a tangle across his face. I kept the front of my own hair cut short enough so that it stayed out of my eyes, most of the time. Layering was a wonderful thing.

I opened the passenger side door. "I'll see you this afternoon."

"I'll bring your costume with me."

"What am I going to be dressed as?"

"A Civil War bride," he said.

"Does that mean a hoop skirt?"

"Probably."

I frowned. "And what are you going to be?"

"A Confederate officer."

"You get to wear pants," I said.

"I don't think the dress would fit me."

I sighed. "It's not that I'm not grateful, Richard, but . . ."

"Hoop skirts aren't your style?"

"Not hardly."

"My offer was grubbies and all the mud we could crawl in. The party was your idea."

"I'd get out of it if I could."

"It might be worth all the trouble just to see you dressed up. I get the feeling it's a rarity."

Larry leaned across the seat, and said, "Can we get a move on? I need a cigarette and some sleep."

"I'll be right there." I turned back to Richard but suddenly didn't know what to say. "See you later."

He nodded. "Later."

I got in the car, and Larry pulled away before I got my seat belt fastened. "What's the rush?"

"I want to get as far away from this place as I can."

I looked at him. He still looked pale.

"You all right?"

"No, I'm not all right." He looked at me, blue eyes bright with anger.

"How can you be so casual after what just happened?"

"You were calm after last night. You got bitten last night."

"But that was different," he said. "That woman sucked on the bite. She . . ." His hands clenched the steering wheel so tightly his hands shook.

"You were hurt worse last night; what makes this tougher?"

"Last night was violent, but it wasn't . . . perverted. The vampires last night wanted something. The name of the Master. The ones tonight didn't want anything, they were just being . . ."

"Cruel," I offered.

"Yes, cruel."

"They're vampires, Larry. They aren't human. They don't have the same rules."

"She would have killed me tonight on a whim."

"Yes, she would have," I said.

"How can you bear to be around them?"

I shrugged. "It's my job."

"And my job, too."

"It doesn't have to be, Larry. Just refuse to work on vampire cases. Most of the rest of the animators do."

He shook his head. "No, I won't give up."

"Why not?" I asked.

He didn't say anything for a minute. He pulled onto 270 headed south.

"How could you talk about a date this afternoon after what just happened?"

"You have to have a life, Larry. If you let this business eat you alive, you'll never make it." I studied his face. "And you never answered my question."

"What question?"

"Why won't you give up the idea of being a vampire executioner?"

Larry hesitated, concentrating on driving. He suddenly seemed very interested in passing cars. We drove under a railroad bridge, warehouses on either side. Many of the windows were broken or missing. Rust dripped down the bridge overpass.

"Nice section of town," he said.

"You're avoiding the question. Why?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I asked about your family; you said they were all alive. What about friends? You lose a friend to the vamps?"

He glanced at me. "Why ask that?"

"I know the signs, Larry. You're determined to kill the monsters because you've got a grudge, don't you?"

He hunched his shoulders and stared straight ahead. The muscles in his jaws clenched and unclenched.

"Talk to me, Larry," I said.

"The town I come from is small, fifteen hundred people. While I was away at college my freshman year, twelve people were murdered by a pack of vampires. I didn't know them, any of them, really. I knew them to say hi to, but that was it."

"Go on."

He glanced at me. "I went to the funerals over Christmas break. All those coffins, all those families. My dad was a doctor, but he couldn't help them. Nobody could help them."

"I remember the case," I said. "Elbert, Wisconsin, three years ago, right?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Twelve people is a lot for a single vampire kill. It made the papers. Brett Colby was the vampire hunter they got for the job."

"I never met him, but my parents told me about him. They made him sound like a cowboy riding into town to take down the bad guys. He found and killed five vampires. He helped the town when nobody else could."

"If you just want to help people, Larry, be a social worker, or a doctor."

"I'm an animator; I've got a built-in resistance to vampires. I think God meant for me to hunt them."

"Geez Louise, Larry, don't go on a holy crusade, you'll end up dead."

"You can teach me."

I shook my head. "Larry, this isn't personal. It can't be personal. If you let your emotions get in the way, you'll either get killed or go stark raving mad."

"I'll learn, Anita."

I stared at his profile. He looked so stubborn. "Larry . . ." I stopped. What could I say? What brought any of us into this business? Maybe his reasons were as good as my own, maybe better. It wasn't just love of killing, like with Edward. And heaven knew I needed help. There were getting to be too many vampires for just little ol' me.

"All right, I'll teach you, but you do what I say, when I say it. No arguments."

"Anything you say, boss." He grinned at me briefly, then turned back to the road. He looked determined and relieved, and young.

But we were all young once. It passes, like innocence and a sense of fair play. The only thing left in the end is a good instinct for survival. Could I teach Larry that? Could I teach him how to survive? Please, God, let me teach him, and don't let him die on me.

Chapter 38

Larry, dropped me off in front of my apartment building at 9:05. It was way past my bedtime. I got my gym bag out of the back seat. Didn't want to leave my animating equipment behind. I locked and shut the door, then leaned in the passenger side door. "I'll see you tonight at five o'clock back here, Larry. You're designated driver until I get a new car."

He nodded.

"If I'm late getting home, don't let Bert send you out alone, okay?"

He looked at me then. His face was full of some deep thought that I couldn't read. "You think I can't handle myself?"

I knew he couldn't handle himself, but I didn't say that out loud. "It's only your second night on the job. Give yourself and me a break. I'll teach you how to hunt vampires, but our primary job is raising the dead. Try to remember that."

He nodded.

"Larry, if you have bad dreams, don't worry. I have them too sometimes."

"Sure," he said. He put the car in gear, and I had to close the door. Guess he didn't want to talk anymore. Nothing we'd seen yet would give me nightmares, but I wanted Larry to be prepared, if mere words could prepare anyone for what we do.

A family was loading up a grey van with coolers and a picnic hamper. The man smiled. "I don't think we'll get many more days like this."

"I think you're right." It was that pleasant small talk that you use with people whose names you don't know but whose faces you keep seeing. We were neighbors, so we said hello and good-bye to each other, but nothing else. That was the way I liked it. When I came home, I didn't want someone coming over to borrow a cup of sugar.

The only exception I made was Mrs. Pringle, and she understood my need for privacy.

The apartment was warm and quiet inside. I locked the door and leaned against it. Home, ah. I tossed the leather jacket on the back of the couch and smelled perfume. It was flowery and delicate with a powdery undertaste that only the really expensive ones have. It wasn't my brand.

I pulled the Browning and put my back to the door. A man stepped around the corner from the dining room area. He was tall, thin, with black hair cut short in front, long in back, the latest style. He just stood there, leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, smiling at me.

A second man came up from behind the couch, shorter, more muscular, blond, smiling. He sat on the couch, hands where I could see them. Nobody had any weapons, or none that I could see.

"Who the hell are you?"

A tall black man came out of the bedroom. He had a neat mustache, and dark sunglasses hid his eyes.

The lamia stepped out beside him. She was in human form, in the same red dress as yesterday. She wore scarlet high heels today, but nothing else had changed.

"We've been waiting for you, Ms. Blake."

"Who are the men?"

"My harem."

"I don't understand."

"They belong to me." She trailed red nails down the black man's hand hard enough to leave a thin line of blood. He just smiled.

"What do you want?"

"Mr. Oliver wants to see you. He sent us to fetch you."

"I know where the house is. I can drive there on my own."

"Oh, no, we've had to move," she said, swaying into the room. "Some nasty bounty hunter tried to kill Oliver yesterday."

"What bounty hunter?" Had it been Edward?

She waved a hand. "We were never formally introduced. Oliver wouldn't let me kill him, so he escaped, and we had to move."

It sounded reasonable, but . . . "Where is he now?"

"We'll take you to him. We've got a car waiting outside."

"Why didn't Inger come for me?"

She shrugged. "Oliver gives orders and I follow them." A look passed over her lovely face—hatred.

"How long has he been your master?"

"Too long," she said.

I stared at them all, gun still out but not pointed at anyone. They hadn't offered to hurt me. So why didn't I want to put the gun up? Because I'd seen what the lamia changed into, and it had scared me.

"Why does Oliver need to see me so soon?"

"He wants your answer."

"I haven't decided yet whether to give him the Master of the City."

"All I know is that I was told to bring you. If I don't, he'll be angry. I don't want to be punished, Ms. Blake; please come with us."

How do you punish a lamia? Only one way to find out. "How does he punish you?"

The lamia stared at me. "That is a very personal question."

"I didn't mean it to be."

"Forget it." She swayed towards me. "Shall we go?" She had stopped just in front of me, close enough to touch.

I was beginning to feel silly with the gun out, so I put it up. Nobody was threatening me. A novel approach.

Normally, I still would have offered to follow them in my car, but my car was dead. So . . . if I wanted to meet Oliver, I had to go with them.

I wanted to meet Oliver. I wasn't willing to give him Jean-Claude, but I was willing to give him Alejandro. Or at least enlist his aid against Alejandro. I

also wanted to know if it was Edward who had tried to kill him. There weren't that many of us in the business. Who else could it be?

"All right, let's go," I said. I got my leather jacket from the couch and opened the door. I motioned them all out the door. The men went without a word, the lamia last.

I locked the door behind us. They waited politely out in the hall for me. The lamia took the tall black man's arm. She smiled. "Boys, one of you offer the lady your arm."

Blondie and black-hair turned to look at me. Black-hair smiled. I hadn't been with this many smiling people since I bought my last used car.

They both offered me their arms, like in some late movie. "Sorry, guys, I don't need an escort."

"I've trained them to be gentlemen, Ms. Blake; take advantage of it. There are precious few gentlemen around these days."

I couldn't argue with that, but I also didn't need help down the stairs. "I appreciate it, but I'm fine."

"As you like, Ms. Blake." She turned to the two men. "You two are to take special care of Ms. Blake." She turned back to me. "A woman should always have more than one man."

I fought the urge to shrug. "Anything you say."

She gave a brilliant smile and strutted down the hall on her man's arm. The two men sort of fell in beside me. The lamia spoke back over her shoulder, "Ronald here is my special beau. I don't share him; sorry."

I had to smile. "That's fine, I'm not greedy."

She laughed, a high-pitched delighted sound with an edge of giggle to it. "Not greedy; oh, that's very good, Ms. Blake, or may I call you Anita?"

"Anita's fine."

"Then you must call me Melanie."

"Sure," I said. I followed her and Ronald down the hall. Blondie and Smiley hovered on either side of me, lest I trip and stub my toe. We'd never get down the stairs without one of us falling.

I turned to Blondie. "I believe I will take your arm." I smiled back at Smiley. "Could we have a little room here?"

He frowned, but he stepped back. I slipped my left hand through Blondie's waiting arm. His forearm swelled under my hand. I couldn't tell if he was flexing or was just that musclebound. But we all made it down the stairs safely with lonely Smiley bringing up the rear.

The lamia and Ronald were waiting by a large black Lincoln Continental. Ronald held the door for the lamia, then slid into the driver's seat.

Smiley rushed forward to open the door for me. How had I known he would? Usually I complain about things like that, but the whole thing was too strange. If the worst thing that happened to me today was having overzealous men open doors for me, I'd be doing fine.

Blondie slid into the seat next to me, sliding me to the middle of the seat. The other one had run around and was getting in the other side. I was going to end up sandwiched between them. No big surprise.

The lamia named Melanie turned around in her seat, propping her chin on her arm. "Feel free to make out on the way. They're both very good."

I stared into her cheerful eyes. She seemed to be serious. Smiley put his arm across the back of the seat, brushing my shoulders. Blondie tried to take my hand, but I eluded him. He settled for touching my knee. Not an improvement.

"I'm really not into public sex," I said. I moved Blondie's hand back to his own lap.

Smiley's hand slid around my shoulder. I moved up in the seat away from both of them. "Call them off," I said.

"Boys, she's not interested."

The men scooted back from me, as close to their sides of the car as they could get. Their legs still gently touched mine, but at least nothing else was touching.

"Thank you," I said.

"If you change your mind during the drive, just tell them. They love taking orders, don't you, boys?"

The two men nodded, smiling. My, weren't we a happy little bunch? "I don't think I'll change my mind."

The lamia shrugged. "As you like, Anita, but the boys will be sorely disappointed if you don't at least give them a good-bye kiss."

This was getting weird; cancel that, weirder. "I never kiss on the first date."

She laughed. "Oh, I like it. Don't we, boys?" All three men made appreciative sounds. I had the feeling they'd have sat up and begged if she'd told them to. Arf, arf. Gag me with a spoon.

Chapter 39

We drove south on 270. Steep, grassy ditches and small trees lined the road. Identical houses sat up on the hills, fences separating the small yards from the next small yard. Tall trees took up many yards. Two-seventy was the major highway that ran through St. Louis, but there was almost always a feeling of green nature, open spaces; the gentle roll of the land was never completely lost.

We took 70 West heading towards St. Charles. The land opened up on either side to long, flat fields. Corn stretched tall and golden, ready to be harvested. Behind the field was a modern glass building that advertised pianos and an indoor golf range. An abandoned SAM's Wholesale and a used-car lot led up to the Blanchette bridge.

The left side of the road was crisscrossed by water-filled dikes to keep the land from flooding. Industry had moved in with tall glass buildings. An Omni Hotel complete with fountain was nearest the road.

A stand of woods that still flooded too often to be torn down and turned into buildings bordered the left-hand side of the road until the trees met the Missouri River. Trees continued on the other bank as we entered St. Charles.

St. Charles didn't flood, so there were apartment buildings, strip malls, a deluxe pet supermarket, a movie theater, Drug Emporium, Old Country Buffet, and Appleby's. The land vanished behind billboards and Red Roof Inns. It was hard to remember that the Missouri River was just behind you. and this had once been forest. Hard to see the land for the buildings.

Sitting in the warm car with only the sound of wheels on pavement and the murmur of voices from the front seat, I realized how tired I was. Even stuck between the two men, I was ready for a nap. I yawned.

"How much farther?" I asked.

The lamia turned in her seat. "Bored?"

"I haven't been to sleep yet. I just want to know how much longer the ride is going to take."

"So sorry to inconvenience you," she said. "It isn't much farther, is it, Ronald?"

He shook his head. He hadn't said a word since I'd met him. Could he talk?

"Exactly where are we going?" They didn't seem to want to answer the question, but maybe if I phrased it differently.

"About forty-five minutes outside of St. Peters."

"Near Wentzville?" I asked.

She nodded.

An hour to get there and nearly two hours back. Which would make it around 1:00 when I got home. Two hours of sleep. Great.

We left St. Charles behind, and the land reappeared—fields on either side behind well-tended barbed-wire fences. Cattle grazed on the low, rolling hills. The only sign of civilization was a gas station close to the highway. There was a large house set far back from the road with a perfect expanse of grass stretching to the road. Horses moved gracefully over the grass. I kept waiting for us to pull into one of the gracious estates, but we passed them all by.

We finally turned onto a narrow road with a street sign that was so rusted and bent, that I couldn't read it. The road was narrow and instant rustic. Ditches crowded in on either side. Grass, weeds, the year's last goldenrod, grew head-high and gave the road a wild look. A field of beans gone dry and yellow waited to be harvested. Narrow gravel driveways appeared out of the weeds with rusted mailboxes that showed that there were houses. But most of the houses were just glimpses through the trees. Barn swallows dipped and dived over the road. The pavement ended abruptly, spilling the car onto gravel.

Gravel pinged and clattered under the car. Wooded hills crowded the gravel road. There was still an occasional house, but they were getting few and far between. Where were we going?

The gravel ended, and the road was only bare reddish dirt with large reddish rocks studded in it. Deep ruts swallowed the car's tires. The car bounced and fought its way down the dirt. It was their car. If they wanted to ruin it driving over wagon tracks, that was their business.

Finally, even the dirt road ended in a rough circle of rock. Some of the rocks were nearly as big as the car. The car stopped. I was relieved that there were some things even Ronald wouldn't drive a car over.

The lamia turned around to face me. She was smiling, positively beaming. She was too damn cheerful. Something was wrong. Nobody was this cheery unless they wanted something. Something big. What did the lamia want? What did Oliver want?

She got out of the car. The men followed her like well-trained dogs. I hesitated, but I'd come this far; might as well see what Oliver wanted. I could always say no.

The lamia took Ronald's arm again. In high heels on the rocky ground, it was a sensible precaution. I in my little Nikes didn't need help. Blondie and Smiley offered an arm apiece; I ignored them. Enough of this play-acting. I was tired and didn't like being dragged to the edge of the world. Even Jean-Claude had never dragged me to some forsaken backwoods area. He was a city boy. Of course, Oliver had struck me as a city boy, too. Shows that you can't judge a vampire by one meeting.

The rocky ground led up to a hillside. More boulders had crashed down the side of the hill to lie in crumbled, broken heaps. Ronald actually picked Melanie up and carried her over the worst of the ground.

I stopped the men before they could offer. "I can make it myself; thanks anyway."

They looked disappointed. The blond said, "Melanie has told us to look after you. If you trip and fall in the rocks, she'll be unhappy with us."

The brunette nodded.

"I'll be fine, boys, really." I went ahead of them, not waiting to see what they'd do. The ground was treacherous with small rocks. I scrambled over a rock bigger than I was. The men were right behind me, hands extended ready to catch me if I fell. I'd never even had a date who was this paranoid.

Someone cursed, and I turned to see the brunette sprawled on the ground. I had to smile. I didn't wait for them to catch up. I'd had enough nursemaiding, and the thought of getting no sleep today had put me in a bad mood. Our biggest night of the year, and I was going to be wasted. Oliver better have something important to say.

Around a tall pile of rubble was a slash of black opening, a cave. Ronald carried the lamia inside without waiting for me. A cave? Oliver had moved to a cave? Somehow it didn't fit my picture of him in his modern, sunlit study.

Light hovered at the entrance to the cave, but a few feet in the darkness was thick. I waited at the edge of the light, unsure what to do. My two caretakers came in behind me. They pulled small penlights out of their pockets. The beams seemed pitifully small against the darkness.

Blondie took the lead; Smiley brought up the rear. I walked in the middle of their thin strings of light. A faint pool followed my feet and kept me from tripping over stray bits of rock, but most of the tunnel was smooth and perfect. A thin trickle of water took up the center of the floor, working its patient way through the stone. I stared up at the ceiling lost in darkness. All this had been done by water. Impressive.

The air was cool and moist against my face. I was glad I had the leather jacket on. It'd never get warm here, but it'd never get really cold either. That's why our ancestors lived in caves. Year-round temperature control.

A wide passage branched to the left. The deep sound of water gurgled and bumped in the darkness. A lot of water. Blondie ran his light over a stream that filled most of the left passage. It was black, and looked deep and cold.

"I didn't bring my wading boots," I said.

"We follow the main passage," Smiley said. "Don't tease her. The mistress will not like it." His face looked very serious in the half-light.

The blond shrugged, then moved his light straight ahead. The trickle of water spread in a thin fan pattern on the rock but there was still plenty of dry rock on either side. I wasn't going to have to get my feet wet, yet.

We took the left-hand side of the wall. I touched it to keep my balance and jerked away. The walls were slimy with water and melting minerals.

Smiley laughed at me. I guess laughing was allowed.

I glanced back at him, frowning, then put my hand back on the wall. It wasn't that icky. It had just surprised me. I'd touched worse.

The sound of water thundering from a great height filled the darkness. There was a waterfall up ahead; I didn't need my eyes to tell me that.

"How tall do you think the waterfall is?" Blondie asked.

The thundering filled the darkness. Surrounded us. I shrugged. "Ten, twenty feet, maybe more."

He shone his light on a trickle of water that fell about five inches. The tiny waterfall was what fed the thin stream. "The cave magnifies the sound and makes it sound like thunder," he said.

"Neat trick," I said.

A wide shelf of rock led in a series of tiny waterfalls up to a wide base of stone. The lamia sat on the edge of the shelf, high-heeled feet dangling over the edge. Maybe a rise of eight feet, but the ceiling soared overhead into blackness. That was what made the water echo.

Ronald stood at her back, like a good bodyguard, hands clasped in front of him. There was a wide opening near them that led farther into the cave towards the source of the little stream.

Blondie climbed up and offered me a hand.

"Where's Oliver?"

"Just ahead," the lamia said. There was an edge of laughter to her voice, as if there was some joke I wasn't getting. It was probably going to be at my expense.

I ignored Blondie's hand and made it up to the shelf by myself. My hands were covered with a thin coat of pale brown mud and water, a perfect recipe for

slime. I fought the urge to wipe them on my jeans and knelt by the small pool of water that fed the waterfalls. The water was ice-cold, but I washed my hands in it and felt better. I dried them on my jeans.

The lamia sat with her men grouped around her as if they were posing for a family photo. They were waiting on someone. Oliver. Where was he?

"Where's Oliver?"

"I'm afraid he won't be coming." The voice came from ahead of me farther into the cave. I stepped back but couldn't go far without stepping off the edge.

The two flashlights turned on the opening like tiny spotlights. Alejandro stepped into the thin beam of lights. "You won't be meeting Oliver tonight, Ms. Blake."

I went for my gun before anything else could happen. The lights went out, and I was left in the absolute dark with a master vampire, a lamia, and three hostile men. Not one of my better days.

Chapter 40

I dropped to my knees, gun ready, close to my body. The darkness was thick as velvet. I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate on hearing. There; the scrape of shoes on stone. The movement of air as someone moved closer to me. I had thirteen silver bullets. We were about to find out if silver would hurt a lamia. Alejandro had already taken a silver bullet in the chest and didn't look much the worse for it.

I was in very deep shit.

The footsteps were almost on top of me. I could feel the body close to me. I opened my eyes. It was like looking inside a ball of ebonite, utterly black. But I could feel someone standing over me. I raised the gun to gut or lower chest level and fired still on my knees.

The flashes were like lightning in the darkness, blue-flame lightning. Smiley fell backwards in the flash of light. I heard him fall over the edge, then nothing. Nothing but darkness.

Hands grabbed my forearms, and I hadn't heard a thing. It was Alejandro. I screamed as he dragged me to my feet.

"Your little gun cannot hurt me," he said. His voice was soft and close. He hadn't taken my gun away. He wasn't afraid of it. He should have been.

"I have offered Melanie her freedom once Oliver and the city's Master are dead. I offer you eternal life, eternal youth, and you may live."

"You did give me the first mark."

"Tonight I will give you the second," he said. His voice was soft and ordinary compared to Jean-Claude's, but the intimacy of the dark and his hands on me made the words more than they should have been.

"And if I don't want to be your human servant?"

"Then I will take you anyway, Anita. Your loss will damage the Master. It will lose him followers, confidence. Oh, yes, Anita, I will have you. Join with me willingly, and it will be pleasure. Fight me, and it will be agony."

I used his voice to aim the gun at his throat. If I could sever his spine, a thousand years and more old or not, he might die. Might. Please, God.

I fired. The bullet took him in the throat. He jerked backwards but didn't let go of my arms. Two more bullets into his throat, one into his jaw, and he threw me away from him, shrieking.

I ended on my back in the ice-cold water.

A flashlight cut through the dark. Blondie stood there, a perfect target. I fired at it and the light went out, but there was no scream. I'd rushed the shot and missed. Damn.

I couldn't climb down the rock in the dark. I'd fall and break a leg. So the only way left was deeper into the cave, if I could get there.

Alejandro was still screaming, wordless, rage-filled. The screams echoed and bounced on the rock walls until I was deaf as well as blind.

I scrambled through the water, putting a wall at my back. If I couldn't hear them, maybe they couldn't hear me.

"Get that gun away from her," the lamia said. She had moved and seemed to be beside the wounded vampire.

I waited in the dark for some clue that they were coming for me. There was a rush of cool air against my face. It wasn't them moving. Was I that close to the opening that led deeper into the cave? Could I just slip away? In the dark, not knowing if there were pits, or water deep enough to drown in? Didn't sound like a good idea. Maybe I could just kill them all here. Fat chance.

Through the echoes of Alejandro's shrieks was another sound, a highpitched hissing, like that of a giant snake. The lamia was shapechanging. I had to get away before she finished. Water splashed almost on top of me. I looked up, and there was nothing to see, just the solid blackness.

I couldn't feel anything, but the water splashed again. I pointed up and fired. The flash of light revealed Ronald's face. The dark glasses were gone. His eyes were yellow with slitted pupils. I saw all that in the lightning flash of the gun. I fired twice more into that slit-eyed face. He screamed, and fangs showed below his teeth. God. What was he?

Whatever Ronald was, he fell backwards. I heard him hit the water in a splash that was much too loud for the shallow pool. I didn't hear him move after he fell. Was he dead?

Alejandro's screams had stopped. Was he dead, too? Was he creeping closer? Was he even now almost on top of me? I held the gun out in front of me and tried to feel something, anything, in the darkness.

Something heavy dragged across the rock. My stomach clenched tight. The lamia. Shit.

That was it. I eased my shoulder around the corner into the opening. I crept along on knees and one hand. I didn't want to run if I didn't have to. I'd brain myself on a stalactite or drop into some bottomless pit. Alright, maybe

not bottomless, but if I fell thirty feet or so, it wouldn't have to be bottomless. Dead is dead.

Icy water soaked through my jeans and shoes. The rock was slick under my hand. I crawled as fast as I could, hand searching for some drop-off, some danger that my eyes couldn't see.

The heavy, sliding sound filled the blackness. It was the lamia. She'd already changed. Would her scales be quicker over the slick rocks, or would I be quicker? I wanted to get up and run. Run as far and as fast as I could. My shoulders tightened with the need to get away.

A loud splash announced she'd entered the water. She could move faster than I could crawl; I was betting on that. And if I ran . . . and fell or knocked myself silly? Well, better to have tried than to be caught crawling in the cold like a mouse.

I scrambled to my feet and started to run. I kept my left hand out in front of me to protect my face, but the rest I left to chance. I couldn't see shit. I was running full out, blind as a bat, my stomach tight with anticipation of some pit opening up under my feet.

The sounds of sliding scales was getting farther away. I was outrunning her. Great.

A piece of rock slammed into my right shoulder. The impact spun me into the other wall. My arm was numb from shoulder to fingertips. I'd dropped the gun. Three bullets left, but that had been better than nothing. I leaned into the wall, cradling my arm, waiting for the feeling to return, wondering if I could find my gun in the dark, wondering if I had time.

A light bobbed towards me down the tunnel. Blondie was coming; risking himself, if I'd had my gun. But I didn't have my gun. I could have broken my arm ramming into that ledge. The feeling was coming back in a painful wash of prickles and a throbbing ache where the rock had hit me. I needed a flashlight. What if I hid and got Blondie's light? I had two knives. As far as I knew, Blondie wasn't armed. It had possibilities.

The light was going slowly, sweeping from side to side. I had time, maybe. I got to my feet and felt for the rock that had nearly taken my arm off. It was a shelf with an opening behind it. Cool air blew against my face. It was a small tunnel. It was shoulder level to me, which made it about face level for Blondie. Perfect.

I placed my hands palm down and pushed up. My right arm protested, but it was doable. I crawled into the tunnel, hands out in front searching for stalactites or more rock shelves. Nothing but small, empty space. If I'd been much bigger, I wouldn't have fit at all. Hurray for being petite.

I got out the knife for my left hand. The right was still trembling. I was better right-handed, like most right-handed people, but I practiced left-handed, too—ever since a vampire broke my right arm and using my left had been the only thing that saved me. Nothing like near death to get you to practice.

I crouched on my knees in the tunnel, knife gripped, using my right hand for balance. I would only get one chance at this. I had no illusions about my chances against an athletic man who outweighed me by at least a hundred

pounds. If the first rush didn't work, he'd beat me to a pulp or give me to the lamia. I'd rather be beaten.

I waited in the dark with my knife and prepared to slit someone's throat. Not pretty when you think of it that way. But necessary, wasn't it?

He was almost here. The thin penlight looked bright after the darkness. If he shone the light in the direction of my hiding place before he got beside it, I was sunk. Or if he passed close to the left-hand side of the tunnel, and not under me . . . Stop it. The light was almost underneath me. I heard his feet wade through the water, coming closer. He was hugging the right-hand side of the wall, just like I wanted him to.

His pale hair came into sight nearly even with my knees. I moved forward and he turned. His mouth made a little "O" of surprise; then the blade plunged into the side of his neck. Fangs flicked from behind his teeth. The blade snicked on his spine. I grabbed his long hair in my right hand, bowing his neck, and tore the knife out the front of his throat. Blood splashed outward in a surprised shower. The knife and my left hand were slick with it.

He fell to the tunnel floor with a loud splash. I scrambled off the ledge and landed beside his body. The light had rolled into the water, still glowing. I fished it out. Lying almost under Blondie's hand was the Browning. It was wet, but that didn't matter. You could shoot most modern guns underwater and they worked fine. That was one of the things that made terrorism so easy.

Blood turned the stream dark. I shone the light back down the tunnel. The lamia was framed in the small light. Her long black hair spilled over her pale upper body. Her breasts were high and prominent with deep, nearly reddish nipples. From the waist down she was ivory-white with zigzags of pale gold. The long belly scales were white speckled with black. She reared on that long, hard tail and flicked her forked tongue at me.

Alejandro stood up behind her, covered in blood but walking, moving. I wanted to shout, "Why don't you die" but it wouldn't help; maybe nothing would help.

The lamia pushed onward down the tunnel. The gun had killed her men with their fangs, Ronald with his snake eyes. I hadn't tried it on her yet. What did I have to lose?

I kept the light on her pale chest and raised the gun.

"I am immortal. Your little bullets will not harm me."

"Come a little closer and let's test the theory," I said.

She slid towards me, arms moving as if in time with legs. Her whole body moved with the muscular thrusts of the tail. It looked curiously natural.

Alejandro stayed leaning against the wall. He was hurt. Yippee.

I let her get within ten feet; close enough to hit her, far enough away to run like hell if it didn't work.

The first bullet took her just above the left breast. She staggered. It hit her, but the hole closed like water, smooth and unblemished. She smiled.

I raised the gun, just a little, and fired just above the bridge of her perfect nose. Again she staggered, but the hole didn't even bleed. It just healed. Normal bullets had about as much effect on vampires.

I put the gun in the shoulder holster, turned, and ran.

A wide crack led off from the main tunnel. I'd have to take off my jacket to squeeze through. The last thing I wanted was to get stuck with the lamia able to work her way through to me. I stayed with the main tunnel.

The tunnel was smooth and straight as far as I could see. Shelves projected out at angles, some with water trickling out of them, but crawling on my belly with a snake after me wasn't my idea of a good time.

I could run faster than she could move. Snakes, even giant snakes, just weren't that fast. As long as I didn't hit a dead end, I'd be fine. God, I wished I believed that.

The stream was ankle-deep now. The water was so cold, I had trouble feeling my feet. Running helped. Concentrating on my body, moving, running, trying not to fall, trying not to think about what was behind me. The real trick would be, was there another way out? If I couldn't kill them and couldn't get past them and there was only one way out, I was going to lose.

I kept running. I did four miles three times a week, plus a little extra. I could keep running. Besides, what choice did I have?

The water was filling the passageway and growing deeper. I was knee-deep in water. It was slowing me down. Could she move faster in water than I could? I didn't know. I just didn't know.

A rush of air blew against my back. I turned, and there was nothing there. The air was warm and smelled faintly of flowers. Was it the lamia? Did she have other ways of catching me besides just chasing? No; lamias could perform illusions only on men. That was their power. I wasn't male, so I was safe.

The wind touched my face, gently, warm and fragrant with a rich, green smell like freshly dug roots. What was happening?

"Anita."

I whirled, but there was no one there. The circle of light showed only tunnel and water. There was no sound but the lapping of water. Yet . . . the warm wind blew against my cheek, and the smell of flowers was growing stronger.

Suddenly, I knew what it was. I remembered being chased up the stairs by a wind that couldn't have been there, the glow of blue fire like free-floating eyes. The second mark.

It had been different, no smell of flowers, but I knew that was it. Alejandro didn't have to touch me to give me the mark, no more than Jean-Claude had.

I slipped on the slick stones and fell neck-deep in water. I scrambled to my feet, thigh-deep in water. My jeans were soaked and heavy. I slogged forward, trying to run, but the water was too deep for running. It'd be quicker to swim.

I dove into the water, flashlight grasped in one hand. The leather jacket dragged at me, slowed me down. I stood up and stripped it off and let it float with the current. I hated to lose the jacket, but if I survived, I could buy more.

I was glad I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt and not a sweater. It was too damn cold to strip down anymore. It was faster swimming. The warm wind tickled down my face, hot after the chill of the water.

I don't know what made me look behind me, just a feeling. Two pinpoints of blackness were floating towards me in the air. If blackness could burn, then that's what it was: black flame coming for me on the warm, flower-scented breeze.

A rock wall loomed ahead. The stream ran under it. I held onto the wall and found there was maybe an inch of air space between the water and the roof of the tunnel. It looked like a good way to drown.

I treaded water and shone the flashlight around the passage. There; a narrow shelf of rock to climb out on, and blessed be, another tunnel. A dry one.

I pulled myself up on the shelf, but the wind hit me like a warm hand. It felt good and safe, and it was a lie.

I turned, and the black flames hovered over me like demonic fireflies. "Anita, accept it."

"Go to hell!" I pressed my back to the wall, surrounded by the warm tropical wind. "Please, don't do this," but it was a whisper.

The flames descended slowly. I hit at them. The flames passed through my hands like ghosts. The smell of flowers was almost chokingly sweet. The flames passed into my eyes, and for an instant I could see the world through bits of colored flame and a blackness that was a kind of light.

Then nothing. My vision was my own. The warm breeze died slowly away. The scent of flowers clung to me like some expensive perfume.

There was the sound of something large moving in the dark. I brought the flashlight up slowly into the dark-skinned face of a nightmare.

Straight, black hair was cut short and smooth around a thin face. Golden eyes with pupils like slits stared at me unblinking, immobile. His slender upper body dragged his useless lower body closer to me.

From the waist down he was all translucent skin. You could still see his legs and genitals, but they were all blending together to form a rough snakelike shape. Where do little lamias come from when there are no male lamias? I stared at what had once been a human being and screamed.

He opened his mouth, and fangs flicked into sight. He hissed, and spit dribbled down his chin. There was nothing human left in those slitted eyes. The lamia was more human than he was, but if I was changing into a snake maybe I'd be crazy, too. Maybe crazy was a blessing.

I drew the Browning and fired point-blank into his mouth. He jerked back, shrieking, but no blood, no dying. Dammit.

There was a scream from farther away, echoing towards us. "Raju!" The lamia was screaming for her mate, or warning him.

"Anita, don't hurt him." This from Alejandro. At least he had to yell. He couldn't whisper in my mind anymore.

The thing pulled itself towards me, mouth gaping, fangs straining.

"Tell him not to hurt me!" I yelled back.

The Browning was safely in its holster, and I was out of bullets anyway.

Flashlight in one hand, knife in the other, I waited. If they got here in time to call him off, fine. I didn't have much faith in silver knives if silver bullets didn't harm him, but I wasn't going down without a fight.

His hands were bloody from dragging his body over the rocks. I never thought I'd see anything that was worse than being changed into a vampire, but there it was, crawling towards me.

It was between me and the dry tunnel, but it was moving agonizingly slowly. I pressed my back to the wall and got to my feet. He—it—moved faster, definitely after me. I ran past it, but a hand closed on my ankle, yanked me to the ground.

The creature grabbed my legs and started to pull me towards it. I sat up and plunged the knife into its shoulder. It screamed, blood spilling down its arm. The knife stuck in the bone, and the monster jerked it out of my hand.

Then it reared back and struck my calf, fangs sinking in. I screamed and drew the second knife.

It raised its face, blood trickling down its mouth, heavy yellow drops clinging to its fangs.

I plunged the blade into one golden eye. The creature shrieked, drowning us in echoes. It rolled onto its back, lower body thrashing, hands clawing. I rolled with it and pushed the knife in with everything I had.

I felt the tip of the knife scrape on its skull. The monster continued to thrash and fight, but it was as hurt as I could make it. I left the knife in its eye but jerked the one free of its shoulder.

"Raju, no!"

I flashed the light on the lamia. Her pale upper body gleamed wet in the light. Alejandro was beside her. He looked nearly healed. I'd never seen a vampire that could heal that fast.

"I will kill you for their deaths," the lamia said.

"No, the girl is mine."

"She has killed my mate. She must die!"

"I will give her the third mark tonight. She will be my servant. That is revenge enough."

"No!" she screamed.

I was waiting for the poison to start working, but so far the bite just hurt, no burning, no nothing. I stared at the dry tunnel, but they'd just follow me and I couldn't kill them, not like this, not today. But there'd be other days.

I slipped back into the stream. There was still only an inch of air space. Risk drowning, or stay, and either be killed by a lamia or enslaved by a vampire. Choices, choices.

I slipped into the tunnel, mouth pressed near the wet roof. I could breathe. I might survive the day. Miracles do happen.

Small waves began to slosh through the tunnel. A wave washed over my face, and I swallowed water. I treaded water as gently as I could. It was my movements that were making the waves. I was going to drown myself.

I stayed very still until the water calmed, then took a deep breath, hyperventilating to expand the lungs and take in as much air as I could. I dunked under the water and kicked. It was too narrow for anything but a scissor kick. My chest was tight, throat aching with the need to breathe. I surfaced and kissed rock. There wasn't even an inch of air. Water splashed into my nose and

I coughed, swallowing more water. I pressed as close to the ceiling as I could, taking small shallow breaths, then under again, kicking, kicking for all I was worth. If the tunnel filled completely before I was through it, I was going to die.

What if the tunnel didn't end? What if it was all water? I panicked, kicking furiously, flashlight bouncing crazily off the walls, hovering in the water like a prayer.

Please, God, please, don't let me die here like this.

My chest burned, throat bursting with the need to breathe. The light was dimming, and I realized it was my eyes that were losing the light. I was going to pass out and drown. I pushed for the surface and my hands touched empty air.

I took a gasping breath that hurt all the way down. There was a rocky shore and one bright line of sunlight. There was a hole up in the wall. The sunlight formed a misty haze in the air. I crawled onto the rock, coughing and relearning how to breathe.

I still had the flashlight and knife in my hands. I didn't remember holding onto them. The rock was covered in a thin sheet of grey mud. I crawled through it towards the rockslide that had opened the hole in the wall.

If I could make it through the tunnel, maybe they could, too. I didn't wait to feel better. I put the knife back in its sheath, slid the flashlight in my pocket, and started crawling.

I was covered in mud, hands scraped raw, but I was at the opening. It was a thin crack, but through it I could see trees and a hill. God, it looked good.

Something surfaced behind me.

I turned.

Alejandro rose from the water into the sunlight. His skin burst into flame, and he shrieked, diving into the water away from the burning sun.

"Burn, you son of bitch, burn."

The lamia surfaced.

I slipped into the crack and stuck. I pulled with my hands and pushed with my feet, but the mud slid and I couldn't get through.

"I will kill you."

I wrenched my back and put everything I had into wriggling free of that damn hole. The rock scraped along my back and I knew I was bleeding. I fell out onto the hill and rolled until a tree stopped me.

The lamia came to the crack. Sunlight didn't hurt her. She struggled to get through, tearing at the rock, but her ample chest wasn't going to fit. Her snake body might be narrowable, but the human part wasn't.

But just in case, I got to my feet and started down the hill. It was steep enough that I had to walk from tree to tree, trying not to fall down the hill. The whoosh of cars was just ahead. A road; a busy one by the sound of it.

I started to run, letting the momentum of the hill take me faster and faster towards the sounds of cars. I could glimpse the road through the trees.

I stumbled out onto the edge of the road, covered in grey mud, slimy, wet to the bone, shivering in the autumn air. I'd never felt better. Two cars wheezed by, ignoring my waving arms. Maybe it was the gun in the shoulder holster.

A green Mazda pulled up and stopped. The driver leaned across and opened the passenger side door. "Hop in."

It was Edward.

I stared into his blue eyes, and his face was as blank and unreadable as a cat's, and just as self-satisfied. I didn't give a damn. I slid into the seat and locked the door behind me.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Home."

"You don't need a hospital?"

I shook my head. "You were following me again."

He smiled. "I lost you in the woods."

"City boy," I said.

His smile widened. "No name-calling. You look like you flunked your Girl Scout exam."

I started to say something, then stopped. He was right, and I was too tired to argue.

Chapter 41

I was sitting on the edge of my bathtub in nothing but a large beach towel. I had showered and shampooed and washed the mud and blood down the drain. Except for the blood that was still seeping out of the deep scrape on my back. Edward held a smaller towel to the cut, putting pressure on it.

"When the bleeding stops, I'll bandage it up for you," he said.

"Thanks."

"I seem to always be patching you up."

I glanced over my shoulder at him and winced. "I've returned the favor."

He smiled. "True."

The cuts on my hands had already been bandaged. I looked like a tan version of the mummy's hand.

He touched the fang marks on my calf gently. "This worries me."

"Me, too."

"There's no discoloration." He looked up at me. "No pain?"

"None. It wasn't a full lamia, maybe it wasn't that poisonous. Besides, you think anywhere in St. Louis is going to have lamia antivenom? They've been listed extinct for over two hundred years."

Edward palpated the wound. "I can't feel any swelling."

"It's been over an hour, Edward. If poison was going to kick in, it would have by now."

"Yeah." He stared at the bite. "Just keep an eye on it."

"I didn't know you cared," I said.

His face was blank, empty. "It would be a lot less interesting world without you in it." The voice was flat, unemotional. It was like he wasn't there at all. Yet it was a compliment. From Edward, it was a huge compliment.

"Gee whiz, Edward, contain your excitement."

He gave a small smile that left his eyes blue and distant as winter skies.

We were friends of a sort, good friends, but I would never really understand him. There was too much of Edward that you couldn't touch, or even see.

I used to believe that if it came to it, he'd kill me, if it were necessary. Now, I wasn't sure. How could you be friends with someone who you suspected might kill you? Another mystery of life.

"The bleeding's stopped," he said. He smeared antiseptic on the wound, then started taping bandages in place. The doorbell rang.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Three o'clock."

"Shit."

"What is it?"

"I have a date coming over."

"You? Have a date?"

I frowned at him. "It's not that big a deal."

Edward was grinning like the proverbial cat. He stood up. "You're all fixed up. I'll go let him in."

"Edward, be nice."

"Me, nice?"

"All right, just don't shoot him."

"I think I can manage that." Edward walked out of the bathroom to let Richard in.

What would Richard think being met at the door by another man? Edward certainly wasn't going to help matters. He'd probably offer him a seat without explaining who he was. I wasn't even sure I could explain that.

"This is my friend the assassin." Nope. A fellow vampire slayer, maybe.

The bedroom door was closed so I could get dressed in privacy. I tried to put on a bra and found that my back hurt a lot. No bra. That limited what I could wear, unless I wanted to give Richard more of a look-see than I had planned on. I also wanted to keep an eye on the bite wound. So pants were out.

Most of the time I slept in oversize t-shirts, and slipping on a pair of jeans was my idea of a robe. But I did own one real robe. It was comfortable, a nice solid black, silky to the touch and absolutely not see-through.

A black silk teddy went with it, but I decided that was a little friendlier than I wanted to be; besides, the teddy wasn't comfortable. Lingerie seldom is.

I pulled the robe out of the back of my closet and slipped it on. It was smooth and wonderful next to my skin. I crossed the front so the bordered edge

was high up on my chest and tied the black belt tight in place. Didn't want any slippage.

I listened at the door for a second and heard nothing. No talking, no moving around, nothing. I opened the door and walked out.

Richard was sitting on the couch with an armful of costumes hung over the back. Edward was making coffee in the kitchen like he owned the place.

Richard turned at my entrance. His eyes widened just a little. The hair still damp from the shower, and the slinky robe—what was he thinking?

"Nice robe," Edward said.

"It was a present from an overly optimistic date."

"I like it," Richard said.

"No smart remarks or you can just leave."

His eyes flicked to Edward. "Did I interrupt something?"

"He's a coworker, nothing more." I frowned at Edward, daring him to say anything. He smiled and poured coffee for all three of us.

"Let's sit at the table," I said. "I don't drink coffee on a white couch."

Edward sat the mugs on the small table. He leaned against the cabinets, leaving the two chairs for us.

Richard left his coat on the couch and sat down across from me. He was wearing a bluish-green sweater with darker blue designs worked across the chest. The color brought out the perfect brown of his eyes. His cheekbones seemed higher. A small Band-Aid marred his right cheek. His hair had gentle auburn highlights. Wondrous what the right color can do for a person.

The fact that I looked great in black had not escaped my notice. From the look on Richard's face, he was noticing, but his eyes kept slipping back to Edward.

"Edward and I were out hunting down the vampires that have been doing the killings."

His eyes widened. "Did you find out anything?"

I looked at Edward.

He shrugged. It was my call.

Richard hung around with Jean-Claude. Was he Jean-Claude's creature? I didn't think so, but then again . . . Caution is always better. If I was wrong, I'd apologize later. If I was right, I'd be disappointed in Richard but glad I hadn't told.

"Let's just say we lost today."

"You're alive," Edward said.

He had a point.

"Did you almost die today?" Richard's voice was outraged.

What could I say? "It's been a rough day."

He glanced at Edward, then back to me. "How bad was it?"

I motioned my bandaged hands at him. "Scrapes and cuts; nothing much."

Edward hid a smile in his coffee mug.

"Tell me the truth, Anita," Richard said.

"I don't owe you any explanations." My voice sounded just a tad defensive.

Richard stared down at his hands, then looked up at me. There was a look in his eyes that made my throat tight. "You're right. You don't owe me anything."

I found an explanation slipping out of my mouth. "You might say I went caving without you."

"What do you mean?"

"I ended up going through a water-filled tunnel to escape the bad guys."

"How water-filled?"

"All the way to the top."

"You could have drowned." He touched my hand with his fingertips.

I sipped coffee and moved my hand away from his, but I could feel where he had touched me like a lingering smell. "But I didn't drown."

"That's not the point," he said.

"Yes," I said, "it is. If you're going to date me, you have to get used to the way I work."

He nodded. "You're right, you're right." His voice was soft. "It just caught me off guard. You nearly died today and you're sitting there drinking coffee like it's ordinary."

"For me, it is, Richard. If you can't deal with that, maybe we shouldn't even try." I caught Edward's expression. "What are you grinning at?"

"Your suave and debonair way with men."

"If you're not going to be helpful, then leave."

He put his mug down on the counter. "I'll leave you two lovebirds alone."

"Edward," I said.

"I'm going."

I walked him to the door. "Thanks again for being there, even if you were following me."

He pulled out a plain white business card with a phone number done in black on it. That was all, no name, no logo; but what would have been appropriate, a bloody dagger, or maybe a smoking gun? "If you need me, call this number."

Edward had never given me a number before. He was like the phantom—there when he wanted to be, or not there, as he chose. A number could be traced. He was trusting me a lot with the number. Maybe he wouldn't kill me.

"Thank you, Edward."

"One bit of advice. People in our line of work don't make good significant others."

"I know that."

"What's he do for a living?"

"He's a junior high science teacher," I said.

Edward just shook his head. "Good luck." With that parting shot, he left.

I slipped the business card into the robe pocket and went back to Richard. He was a science teacher, but he also hung out with the monsters. He'd seen it get messy, and it hadn't fazed him, much. Could he handle it? Could I? One date and I was already borrowing trouble that might never come up. We might dislike each other after only one evening together. I'd had it happen before.

I stared at the back of Richard's head and wondered if the curls could be as soft as they looked. Instant lust; embarrassing, but not that uncommon. All right, it was uncommon for me.

A sharp pain ran up my leg. The leg that the lamia-thing had bitten. Please, no. I leaned against the counter divider. Richard was watching me, puzzled.

I swept the robe aside. The leg was swelling and turning purplish. How had I not noticed it? "Did I mention I got bitten by a lamia today?"

"You're joking," he said.

I shook my head. "I think you're going to have to take me to the hospital."

He stood up and saw my leg. "God! Sit down."

I was starting to sweat. It wasn't hot in the apartment.

Richard helped me to the couch. "Anita, lamias have been extinct for two hundred years. No one's going to have any antivenom."

I stared at him. "I guess we're not going to get that date."

"No dammit, I won't sit here and watch you die. Lycanthropes can't be poisoned."

"You mean you want to rush me to Stephen and let him bite me?"

"Something like that."

"I'd rather die."

Something flickered through his eyes, something I couldn't read; pain, maybe. "You mean that?"

"Yes." A rush of nausea flowed over me like a wave. "I'm going to be sick." I tried to get up and go for the bathroom but collapsed on the white carpet and vomited blood. Red and bright and fresh. I was bleeding to death inside.

Richard's hand was cool on my forehead, his arm around my waist. I vomited until I was empty and exhausted. Richard lifted me to the couch. There was a narrow tunnel of light edged by darkness. The darkness was eating the light, and I couldn't stop it. I could feel myself begin to float away. It didn't hurt. I wasn't even scared.

The last thing I heard was Richard's voice. "I won't let you die." It was a nice thought.

Chapter 42

The dream began. I was sitting in the middle of a huge canopied bed. The drapes were heavy blue velvet, the color of midnight skies. The velvet bedspread was soft under my hands. I was wearing a long white gown with lace at the collar and sleeves. I'd never owned anything like it. No one had in this century.

The walls were blue and gold wallpaper. A huge fireplace blazed, sending shadows dancing around the room. Jean-Claude stood in the corner of the room, bathed in orange and black shadows. He was wearing the same shirt I'd last seen him in, the one with the peekaboo front.

He walked towards me, fire-shadows shining in his hair, on his face, glittering in his eyes.

"Why don't you ever dress me in anything normal in these dreams?"

He hesitated. "You don't like the gown?"

"Hell, no."

He gave a slight smile. "You always did have a way with words, *ma petite*.

"

"Stop calling me that, dammit."

"As you like, Anita." There was something in the way he said my name that I didn't like at all.

"What are you up to, Jean-Claude?"

He stood beside the bed and unbuttoned the first button of his shirt.

"What are you doing?"

Another button, and another, then he was pulling the shirt out of his pants and letting it slide to the floor. His bare chest was only a little less white than my gown. His nipples were pale and hard. The strand of dark hair that started low on his belly and disappeared into his pants fascinated me.

He crawled up on the bed.

I backed away, clutching the white gown to me like some heroine in a bad Victorian novel. "I don't seduce this easy."

"I can taste your lust on the back of my tongue, Anita. You want to know what my skin feels like next to your naked body."

I scrambled off the bed. "Leave me the fuck alone. I mean it."

"It's just a dream. Can't you even let yourself lust in a dream?"

"It's never just a dream with you."

He was suddenly standing in front of me. I hadn't seen him move. His arms locked behind my back, and we were on the floor in front of the fire. Fire-shadows danced on the naked skin of his shoulders. His skin was fragile, smooth, and unblemished—so soft I wanted to touch it forever. He was on top of me, his weight pressing against me, pushing me into the floor. I could feel the line of his body molded against mine.

"One kiss and I'll let you up."

I stared into his midnight-blue eyes from inches away. I couldn't talk. I turned my face away so I wouldn't have to look into the perfection of his face.

"One kiss?"

"My word," he whispered.

I turned back to him. "Your word isn't worth shit."

His face leaned over mine, lips almost touching. "One kiss."

His lips were soft, gentle. He kissed my cheek, lips brushing down the line of my cheek, touching my neck. His hair brushed my face. I thought that all curly hair was coarse, but his was baby fine, silken soft. "One kiss," he whispered against the skin of my throat, tongue tasting the pulse in my neck.

"Stop it."

"You want it."

"Stop it, now!"

He grabbed a handful of hair, forcing my neck backwards. His lips had thinned back, exposing fangs. His eyes were drowning blue without any white at all.

"NO!"

"I will have you, *ma petite*, even if it is to save your life." His head came downward, striking like a snake. I woke up staring at a ceiling I didn't recognize.

Black and white drapes were suspended from the ceiling in a soft fan. The bed was black satin with too many pillows thrown all over the place. The pillows were all black or white. I was wearing a black gown with spaghetti straps. It felt like a real silk and fit me perfectly.

The floor was ankle-deep white carpet. A black lacquer vanity and chest of drawers were placed at far corners of the room. I sat up and could see myself in the mirror. My neck was smooth, no bite marks. Just a dream, just a dream, but I knew better. The bedroom had the unmistakable touch of Jean-Claude.

I had been dying of poison. How had I gotten here? Was I underneath the Circus of the Damned, or somewhere else altogether? My right wrist hurt.

There was a white swathe of bandages around my wrist. I didn't remember hurting it in the cave.

I stared at myself in the vanity mirror. In the black negligee my skin was white, my hair long and black as the gown. I laughed. I matched the decor. I matched the damn decor.

A door opened behind a white curtain. I got a glimpse of stone walls behind the drapes. He was wearing nothing but the silky bottoms of men's pajamas. He padded towards me on bare feet. His bare chest looked like it had in my dream, except for the cross-shaped scar; it hadn't been there in the dream. It marred the marble perfection of him, made him seem more real somehow.

"Hell," I said. "Definitely Hell."

"What, *ma petite*?"

"I was wondering where I was. If you're here, it has to be Hell."

He smiled. He looked entirely too satisfied, like a snake that had been well-fed.

"How did I get here?"

"Richard brought you."

"So I really was poisoned. That wasn't part of the dream?"

He sat on the far edge of the bed, as far away from me as he could get and still sit down. There were no other places to sit. "I'm afraid the poison was very real."

"Not that I'm complaining, but why aren't I dead?"

He hugged his knees to his chest, a strangely vulnerable gesture. "I saved you."

"Explain that."

"You know."

I shook my head. "Say it."

"The third mark."

"I don't have any bite marks."

"But your wrist is cut and bandaged."

"You bastard."

"I saved your life."

"You drank my blood while I was unconscious."

He gave the slightest nod.

"You son of a bitch."

The door opened again, and it was Richard. "You bastard, how could you give me to him?"

"She doesn't seem very grateful to us, Richard."

"You said you'd rather die than be a lycanthrope."

"I'd rather die than be a vampire."

"He didn't bite you. You're not going to be a vampire."

"I'll be his slave for eternity; great choice."

"It's only the third mark, Anita. You aren't his servant yet."

"That's not the point." I stared at him. "Don't you understand? I'd rather you let me die than have done this."

"It is hardly a fate worse than death," Jean-Claude said.

"You were bleeding from your nose and eyes. You were bleeding to death in my arms." Richard took a few steps towards the bed, then stopped. "I couldn't just let you die." His hands reached outward in a helpless gesture.

I stood up in the silky gown and stared at them both. "Maybe Richard didn't know any better, but you knew how I felt, Jean-Claude. You don't have any excuses."

"Perhaps I could not stand to watch you die, either. Have you thought of that?"

I shook my head. "What does the third mark mean? What extra powers does it give you over me?"

"I can whisper in your mind outside of dreams now. And you have gained power as well, *ma petite*. You are very hard to kill now. Poison won't work at all."

I kept shaking my head. "I don't want to hear it. I won't forgive you for this, Jean-Claude."

"I did not think you would," he said. He seemed wistful.

"I need clothes and a ride home. I've got to work tonight."

"Anita, you've almost died twice today. How can you . . ."

"Can it, Richard. I need to go to work tonight. I need something that's mine and not his. You invasive bastard."

"Find her some clothes and take her home, Richard. She needs time to adjust to this new change."

I stared at Jean-Claude still huddled on the corner of the bed. He looked adorable, and if I'd had a gun, I'd have shot him on the spot. Fear was a hard, cold lump in my gut. He meant to make me his servant, whether I liked it or not. I could scream and protest, and he'd ignore it.

"Come near me again, Jean-Claude, for any reason, and I'll kill you."

"Three marks bind us now. It would harm you, too."

I laughed, and it was bitter. "Do you really think I give a damn?"

He stared at me, face calm, unreadable, lovely. "No." He turned his back on us both and said, "Take her home, Richard. Though I do not envy you the ride there." He glanced back with a smile. "She can be quite vocal when she's angry."

I wanted to spit at him, but that wouldn't have been enough. I couldn't kill him, not right then and there, so I let it go. Grace under pressure. I followed Richard out the door and didn't look back. I didn't want to see his perfect profile in the vanity mirror.

Vampires weren't supposed to have reflections, or souls. He had one. Did he have the other? Did it matter? No, I decided, it didn't matter at all. I was going to give Jean-Claude to Oliver. I was going to give the city to Mr. Oliver. I was going to set the Master of the City up for assassination. One more mark and I'd be his forever. No way. I'd see him dead first, even if it meant I died with him. No one forced me into anything, not even eternity.

Chapter 43

I ended up wearing one of those dresses with the waist that hit you about at the hips. The fact that the dress was about three sizes too big didn't help matters. The shoes fit even if they were high heels. It was better than going barefoot. Richard turned up the heat in the car because I'd refused his coat.

We were fighting, and we hadn't even had one date. That was a record even for me.

"You're alive," he said for the seventieth time.

"But at what price?"

"I believe that all life is precious. Don't you?"

"Don't go all philosophical on me, Richard. You handed me over to the monsters, and they used me. Don't you understand that Jean-Claude has been looking for an excuse to do this to me?"

"He saved your life."

That seemed to be the extent of his argument. "But he didn't do it to save my life. He did it because he wants me as his slave."

"A human servant isn't a slave. It's almost the opposite. He'll have almost no power over you."

"But he'll be able to talk inside my head, invade my dreams." I shook my head. "Don't let him sucker you."

"You're being unreasonable," he said.

That was it. "I'm the one with my wrist slit open where the Master of the City fed. He drank my blood, Richard."

"I know."

There was something about the way he said it. "You watched, you sick son of a bitch."

"No, it wasn't like that."

"How was it?" I sat with my arms crossed over my stomach, glaring at him. So that was the hold Jean-Claude had on him. Richard was a voyeur.

"I wanted to make sure he only did enough to save your life."

"What else could he have done? He drank my blood, dammit."

Richard concentrated on the road suddenly, not looking at me. "He could have raped you."

"I was bleeding from my eyes and nose, you said. Doesn't sound very romantic to me."

"All the blood, it seemed to excite him."

I stared at him. "You're serious?"

He nodded.

I sat there feeling cold down to my toes. "What made you think he was going to rape me?"

"You woke up on a black bedspread. The first one was white. He laid you on it and started to strip down. He took your robe off. There was blood everywhere. He smeared his face in it, tasted it. Another vampire handed him a small gold knife."

"There were more vamps there?"

"It was like a ritual. The audience seemed to be important. He slit your wrist and drank at it, but his hands . . . he was touching your breasts. I told him that I had brought you so you could live, not so he could rape you."

"That must have gone over real big."

Richard was very quiet all of a sudden.

"What?"

He shook his head.

"Tell me, Richard. I mean it."

"Jean-Claude looked up with blood all over his face and said, 'I have not waited this long to take what I want her to give freely. It is a temptation.' Then he looked down at you, and there was something in his face, Anita. It was scary as hell. He really believes you'll come around. That you'll . . . love him."

"Vampires don't love."

"Are you sure?"

I glanced at him, then away. I stared at the window at the daylight that was just now beginning to fade. "Vampires don't love. They can't."

"How do you know that?"

"Jean-Claude does not love me."

"Maybe he does, as much as he can."

I shook my head. "He bathed in my blood. He slit my wrist. That isn't my idea of love."

"Maybe it's his."

"Then it's too damn weird for me."

"Fine, but admit that he may love you, as much as he's able."

"No."

"It scares you to think that he loves you, doesn't it?"

I stared out the window as hard as I could. I didn't want to be talking about this. I wanted to undo this whole damn day.

"Or is it something else that you're afraid of?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do." He sounded so sure of himself. He didn't know me well enough to be that certain.

"Say it out loud, Anita. Say it just once and it won't seem so scary."

"I don't have anything to say."

"You're telling me that no part of you wants him. Not a piece of you might love him back."

"I don't love him; that much I'm sure of."

"But?"

"You are persistent," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"All right, I'm attracted to him. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"How attracted?"

"That's none of your damn business."

"Jean-Claude warned me to stay away from you. I just want to know if I'm really interfering. If you're attracted to him, maybe I should stay out of it."

"He's a monster, Richard. You've seen him. I can't love a monster."

"If he was human?"

"He's an egotistical, controlling bastard."

"But if he was human?"

I sighed. "If he was human, we might work something out, but even alive, Jean-Claude can be such an SOB. I don't think it would work."

"But you're not even going to try because he's a monster."

"He's dead, Richard, a walking corpse. It doesn't matter how pretty he is, or how compelling, he's still dead. I don't date corpses. A girl's got to have some standards."

"So no corpses," he said.

"No corpses."

"What about lycanthropes?"

"Why? You thinking of fixing me up with your friend?"

"Just curious about where you draw the line."

"Lycanthropy is a disease. The person's already survived a vicious attack. It'd be like blaming the rape victim."

"You ever date a shapeshifter?"

"It's never come up."

"What else wouldn't you date?"

"Things that were never human to begin with, I guess. I really haven't thought about it. Why the interest?"

He shook his head. "Just curious."

"Why aren't I still pissed at you?"

"Maybe because you're glad to be alive, no matter what the cost."

He pulled into the parking lot of my apartment building. Larry's car was idling in my parking space. "Maybe I am glad to be alive, but I'll let you know about the cost when I find out what it really is."

"You don't believe Jean-Claude?"

"I wouldn't believe Jean-Claude if he told me moonlight was silver."

Richard smiled. "Sorry about the date."

"Maybe we can try again sometime."

"I'd like that," he said.

I opened the door and stood shivering in the cool air. "Whatever happens, Richard, thanks for watching out for me." I hesitated, then said, "And whatever hold Jean-Claude's got on you, break it. Get away from him. He'll get you killed."

He just nodded. "Good advice."

"Which you're not going to take," I said.

"I would if I could, Anita. Please believe that."

"What does he have on you, Richard?"

He shook his head. "He ordered me not to tell you."

"He ordered you not to date me, too."

He shrugged. "You better get going. You're going to be late for work."

I smiled. "Besides, I'm freezing my butt off."

He smiled. "You do have a way with words."

"I spend too much time hanging around with cops."

He put the car in gear. "Have a safe night at work."

"I'll do my best."

He nodded. I closed the door. Richard didn't seem to want to talk about what Jean-Claude had on him. Well, no rule said we had to play honesty on the first date. Besides, he was right. I was going to be late for work.

I tapped on Larry's window. "I've got to change, then I'll be right back down."

"Who was that dropping you off?"

"A date." I left it at that. It was a much easier explanation than the truth. Besides, it was almost true.

Chapter 44

This is the only night of the year that Bert allows us to wear black to work. He thinks the color is too harsh for normal business hours. I had black jeans and a Halloween sweater with huge grinning jack o' lanterns in a stomach-high line. I topped it off with a black zipper sweatshirt and black Nikes. Even my

shoulder holster and the Browning matched. I had my backup gun in an inner pants holster. I also had two extra clips in my sport bag. I had replaced the knife I'd had to leave in the cave. There was a derringer in my jacket pocket and two extra knives, one down the spine, the other in an ankle holster. Don't laugh. I left the shotgun home.

If Jean-Claude found out I'd betrayed him, he'd kill me. Would I know when he died? Would I feel it? Something told me that I would.

I took the card that Karl Inger had given me and called the number. If it had to be done, it best be done quickly.

"Hello?"

"Is this Karl Inger?"

"Yes, it is. Who is this?"

"It's Anita Blake. I need to speak with Oliver."

"Have you decided to give us the Master of the City?"

"Yes."

"If you'll hold for a moment, I'll fetch Mr. Oliver." He laid the receiver down. I heard him walking away until there was nothing but silence on the phone. Better than Muzak.

Footsteps coming back, then: "Hello, Ms. Blake, so good of you to call."

I swallowed, and it hurt. "The Master of the City is Jean-Claude."

"I had discounted him. He isn't very powerful."

"He hides his powers. Trust me, he's a lot more than he seems."

"Why the change of heart, Ms. Blake?"

"He gave me the third mark. I want free of him."

"Ms. Blake, to be bound thrice to a vampire, and then have that vampire die, can be quite a shock to the system. It could kill you."

"I want free of him, Mr. Oliver."

"Even if you die?" he said.

"Even if I die."

"I would have liked to have met you under different circumstances, Anita Blake. You are a remarkable person."

"No, I've just seen too much. I won't let him have me."

"I will not fail you, Ms. Blake. I will see him dead."

"If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't have told you."

"I appreciate your confidence."

"One other thing you should know. The lamia tried to betray you today. She's in league with another master named Alejandro."

"Really?" His voice sounded amused. "What did he offer her?"

"Her freedom."

"Yes, that would tempt Melanie. I keep her on such a short rein."

"She's been trying to breed. Did you know that?"

"What do you mean?" I told him about the men, especially the last one that had been nearly changed. He was quiet for a moment. "I have been most inattentive. I will deal with Melanie and Alejandro."

"Fine. I'd appreciate a call tomorrow to let me know how things went."

"To be sure he's dead," Oliver said.

"Yes," I said.

"You'll get a call from Karl or myself. But first, where can we find Jean-Claude?"

"The Circus of the Damned."

"How appropriate."

"That's all I can tell you."

"Thank you, Ms. Blake, and Happy Halloween."

I had to laugh. "It's going to be a hell of a night."

He chuckled softly. "Indeed. Good-bye, Ms. Blake."

The phone went dead in my hand. I stared at the phone. I'd had to do it. Had to. So why did my stomach feel tight? Why did I have the urge to call Jean-Claude and warn him? Was it the marks, or was Richard right? Did I love Jean-Claude in some strange, twisted way? God help me, I hoped not.

Chapter 45

It was full dark on All Hallows Eve. Larry and I had made two appointments. He'd raised one, and I'd raised the other. He had one more to go, and I had three. A nice normal night.

What Larry was wearing was not normal. Bert had encouraged us to wear something fitting for the holiday. I'd chosen the sweater. Larry had chosen a costume. He was wearing blue denim overalls, a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a straw hat, and work boots. When asked, he'd said, "I'm Huck Finn. Don't I fit the part?"

With his red hair and freckles, he did fit the part. There was blood on the shirt now, but it was Halloween. There were a lot of people out with fake blood on them. We fitted right in tonight.

My beeper went off. I checked the number, and it was Dolph. Damn.

"Who is it?" Larry asked.

"The police. We've got to find a phone."

He glanced at the dashboard clock. "We're ahead of schedule. How about the McDonald's just off the highway?"

"Great." I prayed that it wasn't another murder. I needed a nice normal night. At the back of my head like a bit of remembered song, two sentences kept playing: "Jean-Claude is going to die tonight. You set him up."

It seemed wrong to kill him from a safe distance. To not look him in the eyes and pull the trigger myself, to not give him a chance to kill me first. Fair play and all that. Fuck fair play; it was him or me. Wasn't it?

Larry parked in the McDonald's lot. "I'm gonna get a Coke while you call in. You want something?"

I shook my head.

"You all right?"

"Sure. I'm just hoping it's not another murder."

"Jesus, I hadn't thought of that."

We got out of the car. Larry went into the dining room. I stayed in the little entrance area with the pay phone.

Dolph picked up on the third ring. "Sergeant Storr."

"It's Anita. What's up?"

"We finally broke the paralegal that was feeding information to the vampires."

"Great; I thought it might be another murder."

"Not tonight; the vamp's got more important business."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He's planning on getting every vampire in the city to slaughter humans for Halloween."

"He can't. Only the Master of the City could do that, and then only if he was incredibly powerful."

"That's what I thought. Could be the vampire's crazy."

I had a thought, an awful thought. "You got a description of the vampire?"

"Vampires," he said.

"Read it to me."

I heard paper rustling, then: "Short, dark, very polite. Saw one other vampire twice with the boss vamp. He was medium height, Indian or Mexican, longish black hair."

I clutched the phone so tight my hand trembled. "Did the vampire say why he was going to slaughter humans?"

"Wanted to discredit legalized vampirism. Now isn't that a weird motive for a vampire?"

"Yeah," I said. "Dolph, this could happen."

"What are you saying?"

"If this master vampire could kill the Master of the City and take over before dawn, he might pull it off."

"What can we do?"

I hesitated, almost telling him to protect Jean-Claude, but it wasn't a matter for the police. They had to worry about laws and police brutality. There was no way to take something like Oliver alive. Whatever was going to happen tonight had to be permanent.

"Talk to me, Anita."

"I've gotta go, Dolph."

"You know something; tell me."

I hung up. I also turned off my beeper. I dialed Circus of the Damned. A pleasant-voiced woman answered, "Circus of the Damned, where all your nightmares come true."

"I need to speak to Jean-Claude. It's an emergency."

"He's busy right now. May I take a message?"

I swallowed hard, tried not to yell. "This is Anita Blake, Jean-Claude's human servant. Tell him to get his ass to the phone now."

"I . . ."

"People are going to die if I don't talk to him."

"Okay, okay." She put me on hold with a butchered version of "High Flying" by Tom Petty.

Larry came out with his Coke. "What's up?"

I shook my head. I fought the urge to jump up and down, but that wouldn't get Jean-Claude to the phone any sooner. I stood very still, hugging one arm across my stomach. What had I done? Please don't let it be too late.

"*Ma petite?*"

"Thank God."

"What has happened?"

"Just listen. There's a master vampire on his way to the Circus. I gave him your name and your resting place. His name is Mr. Oliver and he's older than anything. He's older than Alejandro. In fact, I think he's Alejandro's master. It's all been a plan to get me to betray the city to him, and I fell for it."

He was quiet so long that I asked, "Did you hear me?"

"You really meant to kill me."

"I told you I would."

"But now you warn me. Why?"

"Oliver wants control of the city so he can send all the vampires out to slaughter humans. He wants it back to the old days when vampires were hunted. He said legalized vampirism was spreading too fast. I agree, but I didn't know what he meant to do."

"So to save your precious humans you will betray Oliver now."

"It isn't like that. Dammit, Jean-Claude, concentrate on the important thing here. They're on their way. They may be there already. You've got to protect yourself."

"To keep the humans safe."

"To keep your vampires safe, too. Do you really want them under Oliver's control?"

"No. I will take steps, *ma petite*. We will at least give him a fight." He hung up.

Larry was staring at me with wide eyes. "What the hell is happening, Anita?"

"Not now, Larry." I fished Edward's card out of my bag. I didn't have another quarter. "Do you have a quarter?"

"Sure." He handed it to me without any more questions. Good man.

I dialed the number. "Please, be there. Please, be there."

He answered on the seventh ring.

"Edward, it's Anita."

"What's happened?"

"How would you like to take on two master vampires older than Nikolaos?"

I heard him swallow. "I always have so much fun when you're around. Where should we meet?"

"The Circus of the Damned. You got an extra shotgun?"

"Not with me."

"Shit. Meet me out front ASAP. The shit's going to really hit the fan tonight, Edward."

"Sounds like a great way to spend Halloween."

"See you there."

"Bye, and thanks for inviting me." He meant it. Edward had started out as a normal assassin, but humans had been too easy, so he went for vamps and shapeshifters. He hadn't met anything he couldn't kill, and what was life without a little challenge?

I looked at Larry. "I need to borrow your car."

"You're not going anywhere without me. I've heard just your side of the conversations, and I'm not getting left out."

I started to argue, but there wasn't time. "Okay, let's do it."

He grinned. He was pleased. He didn't know what was going to happen tonight, what we were up against. I did. And I wasn't happy at all.

Chapter 46

I stood just inside the door of the Circus staring at the wave of costumes and glittering humanity. I'd never seen the place so crowded. Edward stood beside me in a long black cloak with a death's-head mask. Death dressed up as death; funny, huh? He also had a flamethrower strapped to his back, an Uzi pistol, and heaven knew how many other weapons secreted about his person. Larry looked pale but determined. He had my derringer in his pocket. He knew nothing about guns. The derringer was an emergency measure only, but he wouldn't stay in the car. Next week, if we were still alive, I'd take him out to the shooting range.

A woman in a bird costume passed us in a scent of feathers and perfume. I had to look twice to make sure that it was just a costume. Tonight was the night when all shapeshifters could be out and people would just say, "Neat costume."

It was Halloween night at the Circus of the Damned. Anything was possible.

A slender black woman stepped up to us wearing nothing but a bikini and an elaborate mask. She had to step close to me to be heard over the murmur of the crowd. "Jean-Claude sent me to bring you."

"Who are you?"

"Rashida."

I shook my head. "Rashida had her arm torn off two days ago." I stared at the perfect flesh of her arm. "You can't be her."

She raised her mask so I could see her face, then smiled. "We heal fast."

I had known lycanthropes healed fast, but not that fast, not that much damage. Live and learn.

We followed her swaying hips into the crowd. I grabbed hold of Larry's hand with my left hand. "Stay right with me tonight."

He nodded. I threaded through the crowd holding his hand like a child or a lover. I couldn't stand the thought of him getting hurt. No, that wasn't true. I couldn't stand the thought of him getting killed. Death was the big boogeyman tonight.

Edward followed at our heels. Silent as his namesake, trusting that he'd get to kill something soon.

Rashida led us towards the big, striped circus tent. Back to Jean-Claude's office, I supposed. A man in a straw hat and striped coat said, "Sorry, the show's sold out."

"It's me, Perry. These are the ones the Master's been waiting for." She hiked her thumb in our direction.

The man drew aside the tent flap and motioned us through. There was a line of sweat on his upper lip. It was warm, but I had the feeling it wasn't that kind of sweat. What was happening inside the tent? It couldn't be too bad if they were letting the crowd in to watch. Could it?

The lights were bright and hot. I started to sweat under the sweatshirt, but if I took it off, people would stare at my gun. I hated that.

Circular curtains had been rigged to the ceiling, creating two curtained-off areas in the large circus ring. Spotlights surrounded the two hidden areas. The curtains were like prisms. With every step we took, the colors changed and flowed over the cloth. I wasn't sure if it was the cloth or some trick of the lights. Whatever, it was a nifty effect.

Rashida stopped just short of the rail that kept the crowd back. "Jean-Claude wanted everybody to be in costume, but we're out of time." She pulled at my sweater. "Lose the jacket and it'll have to do."

I pulled my sweater out of her hand. "What are you talking about, costumes?"

"You're holding up the show. Drop the jacket and come on." She did a long, lazy leap over the railing and strode barefoot and beautiful across the white floor. She looked back at us, motioning for us to follow.

I stayed where I was. I wasn't going anywhere until somebody explained things. Larry and Edward waited with me. The audience near us was staring intently, waiting for us to do something interesting.

We stood there.

Rashida disappeared into one of the curtained circles. "Anita."

I turned, but Larry was staring at the ring. "Did you say something?"

He shook his head.

"Anita?"

I glanced at Edward, but it hadn't been his voice. I whispered, "Jean-Claude?"

"Yes, *ma petite*, it is I."

"Where are you?"

"Behind the curtain where Rashida went."

I shook my head. His voice had resonance, a slight echo, but otherwise it was as normal as his voice ever got. I could probably talk to him without moving my lips, but if so, I didn't want to know. I whispered, "What's going on?"

"Mr. Oliver and I have a gentleman's agreement."

"I don't understand."

"Who are you talking to?" Edward asked.

I shook my head. "I'll explain later."

"Come into my circle, Anita, and I will explain everything to you at the same time I explain it to our audience."

"What have you done?"

"I have done the best I could to spare lives, *ma petite*, but some will die tonight. But it will be in the circle with only the soldiers called to task. No innocents will die tonight, whoever wins. We have given our words."

"You're going to fight it out in the ring like a show?"

"It was the best I could do on such short notice. If you had warned me days ago, perhaps something else could have been arranged."

I ignored that. Besides, I was feeling guilty.

I took off the sweatshirt and laid it across the railing. There were gasps from the people near enough to see my gun.

"The fight's going to take place out in the ring."

"In front of the audience?" Edward said.

"Yep."

"I don't get it," Larry said.

"I want you to stay here, Larry."

"No way."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Larry, you don't have any weapons. You don't know how to use a gun. You're just cannon fodder until you get some training. Stay here."

He shook his head.

I touched his arm. "Please, Larry."

Maybe it was the please, or the look in my eyes—whatever, he nodded. I could breathe a little easier. Whatever happened tonight, Larry wouldn't die because I'd brought him into it. It wouldn't be my fault.

I climbed over the railing and dropped to the ring. Edward followed me with a swish of black cape. I glanced back once. Larry stood gripping the rail. There was something forlorn about him standing there alone, but he was safe; that was what counted.

I touched the shimmering curtain, and it was the lights. The cloth was white up close. I lifted it to one side, and entered, Edward at my back.

There was a multilayered dais complete with throne in the center of the circle. Rashida stood with Stephen near the foot of the dais. I recognized Richard's hair and his naked chest before he lifted the mask off his face. It was a white mask with a blue star on one cheek. He was wearing glittering blue harem pants with a matching vest and shoes. Everyone was in costume but me.

"I was hoping you wouldn't make it in time," Richard said.

"What, and miss the Halloween blowout of all time?"

"Who's that with you?" Stephen asked.

"Death," I said.

Edward bowed.

"Trust you to bring death to the ball, *ma petite*."

I looked up the dais, to the very top. Jean-Claude stood in front of the throne. He was finally wearing what his shirts hinted at, but this was the real thing. The real French courtier. I didn't know what to call half of the costume. The coat was black with tasteful silver here and there. A short half-cloak was worn over one shoulder only. The pants were billowy and tucked into calf-high boots. Lace edged the foldover tops of the boots. A wide white collar lay at his throat. Lace spilled out of the coat sleeves. It was topped off by a wide, almost floppy hat with a curving arch of black and white feathers.

The costumed throng moved to either side, clearing the stairs up to the throne for me. I somehow didn't want to go. There were sounds outside the curtains. Heavy things being moved around. More scenery and props being moved up.

I glanced at Edward. He was staring at the crowd, eyes taking in everything. Hunting for victims, or for familiar faces?

Everyone was in costume, but very few people were actually wearing masks. Yasmeen and Marguerite stood about halfway up the stairs. Yasmeen was in a scarlet sari, all veils and sequins. Her dark face looked very natural in the red silk. Marguerite was in a long dress with puffed sleeves and a wide lace collar. The dress was of some dark blue cloth. It was simple, unadorned. Her blond hair was in complicated curls with one large mass over each ear and a small bun atop her head. Hers, like Jean-Claude's, looked less like a costume and more like antique clothing.

I walked up the stairs towards them. Yasmeen dropped her veils enough to expose the cross-shaped scar I'd given her. "Someone will pay you back for this tonight."

"Not you personally?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"You don't care who wins, do you?"

She smiled. "I am loyal to Jean-Claude, of course."

"Like hell."

"As loyal as you were, *ma petite*." She drew out each syllable, biting each sound off.

I left her to laugh at my back. I guess I wasn't the one to complain about loyalties.

There were a pair of wolves sitting at Jean-Claude's feet. They stared at me with strange pale eyes. There was nothing human in the gaze. Real wolves. Where had he gotten real wolves?

I stood two steps down from him and his pet wolves. His face was unreadable, empty and perfect.

"You look like something out of *The Three Musketeers*," I said.

"Accurate, ma *petite*."

"Is it your original century?"

He smiled a smile that could have meant anything, or nothing.

"What's going to happen tonight, Jean-Claude?"

"Come, stand beside me, where my human servant belongs." He extended a pale hand.

I ignored the hand and stepped up. He'd talked inside my head. It was getting silly to argue. Arguing didn't make it not true.

One of the wolves growled low in its chest. I hesitated.

"They will not harm you. They are my creatures."

Like me, I thought.

Jean-Claude put his hand down towards the wolf. It cringed and licked his hand. I stepped carefully around the wolf. But it ignored me, all its attention on Jean-Claude. It was sorry it had growled at me. It would do anything to make up for it. It groveled like a dog.

I stood at his right side, a little behind the wolf.

"I had picked out a lovely costume for you."

"If it was anything that would have matched yours, I wouldn't have worn it."

He laughed, soft and low. The sound tugged at something low in my gut. "Stay here by the throne with the wolves while I make my speech."

"We really are going to fight in front of the crowd."

He stood. "Of course. This is the Circus of the Damned, and tonight is Halloween. We will show them a spectacle the likes of which they have never seen."

"This is crazy."

"Probably, but it keeps Oliver from bringing the building down around us."

"Could he do that?"

"That and much more, *ma petite*, if we had not agreed to limit our use of such powers."

"Could you bring the building down?"

He smiled, and for once gave me a straight answer. "No, but Oliver does not know that."

I had to smile.

He draped himself over the throne, one leg thrown over a chair arm. He tucked his hat low until all I could see was his mouth. "I still cannot believe that you betrayed me, Anita."

"You gave me no choice."

"You would really see me dead rather than have the fourth mark."

"Yep."

He whispered, "Showtime, Anita."

The lights suddenly went off. There were screams from the audience as it sat in the sudden dark. The curtain pulled back on either side. I was suddenly on the edge of the spotlight. The light shone like a star in the dark. Jean-Claude

and his wolves were bathed in a soft light. I had to agree that my pumpkin sweater didn't exactly fit the motif.

Jean-Claude stood in one boneless movement. He swept his hat off and gave a low, sweeping bow. "Ladies and gentlemen, tonight you will witness a great battle." He began to move slowly down the steps. The spotlight moved with him. He kept the hat off, using it for emphasis in his hand. "The battle for the soul of this city."

He stopped, and the light spread wider to include two blond vampires. The two women were dressed as 1920s flappers, one in blue, the other in red. The women flashed fangs, and there were gasps from the audience. "Tonight you will see vampires, werewolves, gods, devils." He filled each word with something. When he said "vampires," there was a ruffling at your neck. "Werewolves" slashed from the dark, and there were screams. "Gods" breathed along the skin. "Devils" were a hot wind that scalded your face.

Gasps and stifled screams filled the dark.

"Some of what you see tonight will be real, some illusion; which is which will be for you to decide." "Illusion" echoed in the mind like a vision through glass, repeating over and over. The last sound died away with a whisper that sounded like a different word altogether. "Real," the voice whispered.

"The monsters of this city fight for control of it this Halloween. If we win, then all goes peaceful as before. If our enemies win . . ." A second spotlight picked out the top of a second dais. There was no throne. Oliver stood at the top with the lamia in full serpent glory. Oliver was dressed in a baggy white jump suit with large polka dots on it. His face was white with a sad smile drawn on it. One heavily lined eye dropped a sparkling tear. A tiny pointed hat with a bright blue pom-pom topped his head.

A clown? He had chosen to be a clown? It wasn't what I had pictured him in. But the lamia was impressive with her striped coils curled around him, her naked breasts caressed by his gloved hand.

"If our enemies win, then tomorrow night will see a bloodbath such as no city in the world has ever seen. They will feed upon the flesh and blood of this city until it is drained dry and lifeless." He had stopped about halfway down. Now he began to come back up the stairs. "We fight for your lives, your very souls. Pray that we win, dear humans; pray very, very hard."

He sat in the throne. One of the wolves put a paw on his leg. He stroked its head absently.

"Death comes to all humans," Oliver said.

The spotlight died on Jean-Claude, leaving Oliver as the only light in the darkness. Symbolism at its best.

"You will all die someday. In some small accident, or long disease. Pain and agony await you." The audience rustled uneasily in their seats.

"Are you protecting me from his voice?" I asked.

"The marks are," Jean-Claude said.

"What is the audience feeling?"

"A sharp pain over the heart. Age slowing their bodies. The quick horror of some remembered accident."

Gasps, screams, cries filled the dark as Oliver's words sought out each person and made them feel their mortality.

It was obscene. Something that had seen a million years was reminding mere humans how very fragile life was.

"If you must die, would it not be better to die in our glorious embrace?" The lamia crawled around the dais to show herself to all the audience. "She could take you, oh, so sweetly, soft, gentle into that dark night. We make death a celebration, a joyful passing. No lingering doubts. You will want her hands upon you in the end. She will show you joys that few mortals ever dream of. Is death such a high price to pay, when you will die anyway? Wouldn't it be better to die with our lips upon your skin than by time's slowly ticking clock?"

There were a few cries of "Yes . . . Please . . ."

"Stop him," I said.

"This is his moment, *ma petite*. I cannot stop him."

"I offer you all your darkest dreams come true in our arms, my friends. Come to us now."

The darkness rustled with movement. The lights came up, and there were people coming out of the seats. People climbing over the railing. People coming to embrace death.

They all froze in the light. They stared around like sleepers waking from a dream. Some looked embarrassed, but one man close to the rail looked near tears, as if some bright vision had been ripped away. He collapsed to his knees, shoulders shaking. He was sobbing. What had he seen in Oliver's words? What had he felt in the air? God, save us from it.

With the lights I could see what they had moved in while we waited behind the curtains. It looked like a marble altar with steps leading up to it. It sat between the two daises, waiting. For what? I turned to ask Jean-Claude, but something was happening.

Rashida walked away from the dais, putting herself close to the railing, and the people. Stephen, wearing what looked like a thong bathing suit, stalked to the other side of the ring. His nearly naked body was just as smooth and flawless as Rashida's "We heal fast," she'd said.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will give you a few moments to recover yourselves from the first magic of the evening. Then we will show you some of our secrets."

The crowd settled back into their seats. An usher helped the crying man back to his seat. A hush fell over the people. I had never heard so large a crowd be so silent. You could have dropped a pin.

"Vampires are able to call animals to their aid. My animal is the wolf." He walked around the top of the dais displaying the wolves. I stood there in the spotlight and wasn't sure what to do. I wasn't on display. I was just visible.

"But I can also call the wolf's human cousin. The werewolf." He made a wide, sweeping gesture with his arm. Music began. Soft and low at first, then rising in a shimmering crescendo.

Stephen fell to his knees. I turned, and Rashida was on the ground as well. They were going to change right here in front of the crowd. I'd never seen a shapeshifter shift before. I had to admit a certain . . . curiosity.

Stephen was on all fours. His bare back was bowed with pain. His long yellow hair trailed on the ground. The skin on his back rippled like water, his spine standing like a ridge in the middle. He stretched out his hands as if he were bowing, face pressed to the ground. Bones broke through his hands. He groaned. Things moved under his skin like crawling animals. His spine bowed upward as if rising like a tent all on its own. Fur started to flow out of the skin on his back, spreading impossibly fast like a timelapse photo. Bones and some heavy, clear liquid poured out of his skin. Shapes strained and ripped through his skin. Muscles writhed like snakes. Heavy, wet sounds came as bone shifted in and out of flesh. It was as if the wolf's shape was punching its way out of the man's body. Fur flowed fast and faster, the color of dark honey. The fur hid some of the changes, and I was glad.

Something between a howl and a scream tore from his throat. Finally, there was that same manwolf form as the night we fought the giant cobra. The wolfman threw his muzzle skyward and howled. The sound raised the hairs on my body.

A second howl echoed from the other side. I whirled, and there was a second wolfman form, but this one was as black as pitch. Rashida?

The audience applauded wildly, stamping and shouting.

The werewolves crept back to the dais. They crouched at the bottom, one on each side.

"I have nothing so showy to offer you." The lights were back on Oliver. "The snake is my creature." The lamia twined around him, hissing loud enough to carry to the audience. She flicked a forked tongue to lick his white-coated ear.

He motioned to the foot of the dais. Two black-cloaked figures stood on either side, hoods hiding their faces. "These are my creatures, but let us keep them for a surprise." He looked across at us. "Let it begin."

The lights went out again. I fought the urge to reach for Jean-Claude in the thick dark. "What's happening?"

"The battle begins," he said.

"How?"

"We have not planned the rest of the evening, Anita. It will be like every battle, chaotic, violent, bloody."

The lights came up gradually until the tent was bathed in a dim glow, like dusk or twilight. "It begins," Jean-Claude whispered.

The lamia flowed down the steps, and each side ran for the other. It wasn't a battle. It was a free-for-all, more like a bar brawl than a war.

The cloaked things ran forward. I had a glimpse of something vaguely snakelike but not. A spatter of machine-gun fire and the thing staggered back. Edward.

I started down the steps, gun in hand. Jean-Claude never moved. "Aren't you coming down?"

"The real battle will happen up here, *ma petite*. Do what you can, but in the end it will come down to Oliver's power and mine."

"He's a million years old. You can't beat him."

"I know."

We stared at each other for a moment. "I'm sorry," I said.

"So am I, *ma petite*, Anita, so am I."

I ran down the steps to join the fight. The snake-thing had collapsed, bisected by the machine-gun fire. Edward was standing back to back with Richard, who had a revolver in his hands. He was shooting it into one of the cloaked things and wasn't even slowing it down. I sighted down my arm and fired at the cloaked head. The thing stumbled and turned towards me. The hood fell backwards, revealing a cobra's head the size of a horse's. From the neck down it was a woman, but from the neck up . . . Neither my shot nor Richard's had made a dent. The thing came up the steps towards me. I didn't know what it was, or how to stop it. Happy Halloween.

Chapter 47

The thing rushed towards me. I dropped the Browning and had one of the knives halfway out when it hit me. I was on the steps with the thing on top of me. It reared back to strike. I got the knife free. It plunged its fangs into my shoulder. I screamed and shoved the knife into its body. The knife went in, but no blood, no pain. It gnawed on my shoulder, pumping poison in, and the knife did nothing.

I screamed again. Jean-Claude's voice sounded in my head, "Poison cannot harm you now."

It hurt like hell, but I wasn't going to die from it. I plunged the knife into its throat, screaming, not knowing what else to do. It gagged. Blood ran down my hand. I hit it again, and it reared back, blood on its fangs. It gave a frantic hiss and pushed itself off me. But I understood now. The weak spot was where the snake part met human flesh.

I groped for the Browning left-handed; my right shoulder was torn up. I squeezed and watched blood spurt from the thing's neck. It turned and ran, and I let it go.

I lay on the steps holding my right arm against my body. I didn't think anything was broken, but it hurt like hell. It wasn't even bleeding as badly as it should have been. I glanced up at Jean-Claude. He was standing motionless, but something moved, like a shimmer of heat. Oliver was just as motionless on his dais. That was the real battle; the dying down here didn't mean much except to the people who were going to die.

I cradled my arm against my stomach and walked down the steps towards Edward and Richard. By the time I was at the bottom of the steps, the arm felt better. Good enough to change the gun to my right hand. I stared at the bite wound, and damned if it wasn't healing. The third mark. I was healing like a shapeshifter.

"Are you all right?" Richard asked.

"I seem to be."

Edward was staring at me. "You should be dying."

"Explanations later," I said.

The cobra thing lay at the foot of the dais, its head bisected by machine-gun fire. Edward caught on quick.

There was a scream, high and piercing. Alejandro had Yasmeen twisted around in his arms, one arm behind her back, his other arm pinning her shoulders to his chest. It was Marguerite who had screamed. She was struggling in Karl Inger's arms. She was outmatched. Apparently, so was Yasmeen.

Alejandro tore into her throat. She screamed. He snapped her spine with his teeth, blood splattering his face. She sagged in his arms. Movement, and his hand came out through the other side of her chest, the heart crushed to a bloody pulp.

Marguerite shrieked over and over again. Karl let her go, but she didn't seem to notice. She scratched fingernails down her cheeks until blood ran. She collapsed to her knees, still clawing at her face.

"Jesus," I said, "stop her."

Karl stared across at me. I raised the Browning, but he ducked behind Oliver's dais. I went towards Marguerite. Alejandro stepped between us.

"Do you want to help her?"

"Yes."

"Let me lay the last two marks upon you, and I will get out of your way."

I shook my head. "The city for one crazy human servant? I don't think so."

"Anita, down!" I dropped flat to the floor, and Edward shot a jet of flame over my head. I could feel the wash of heat bubbling overhead.

Alejandro shrieked. I raised my eyes only enough to see him burning. He motioned outward with one burning hand, and I felt something wash over me back towards . . . Edward.

I rolled over, and Edward was on his back, struggling to his feet. The nozzle of the flamethrower was pointed this way again. I dropped without being told.

Alejandro motioned, and the flame peeled backwards, flowing towards Edward.

He rolled frantically to put out the flames on his cloak. He threw the burning death's-head mask onto the ground. The flamethrower's tank was on fire. Richard helped him struggle out of it, and they ran. I hugged the ground, hands over my head. The explosion shook the ground. When I looked up, tiny burning pieces were raining down, but that was all. Richard and Edward were peering around the other side of the dais.

Alejandro stood there with his clothes charred, his skin blistered. He began walking towards me.

I scrambled to my feet, pointing my gun at him. Of course, the gun hadn't done a whole lot of good before. I backed up until I bumped the steps.

I started shooting. The bullets went in. He even bled, but he didn't stop. The gun clicked on empty. I turned and ran.

Something hit me in the back, slamming me to the ground. Alejandro was suddenly on my back, one hand in my hair, bending my neck backwards.

"Put down the machine gun or I'll break her neck."

"Shoot him!" I screamed.

But Edward threw the machine gun on the floor. Dammit. He got out a pistol and took careful aim. Alejandro's body jerked, then he laughed. "You can't kill me with silver bullets."

He put a knee in my back to hold me down; then a knife flashed in his hand.

"No," Richard said, "he won't kill her."

"I'll slit her throat if you interfere, but if you leave us alone, I won't harm her."

"Edward, kill him!"

A vampire jumped Edward, riding him to the ground. Richard tried to pull her off him, but a tiny vampire leaped on his back. It was the woman and the little boy from that first night.

"Now that your friends are busy, we will finish our business."

"NO!"

The knife just nicked the surface, sharp, painful, but such a little cut. He leaned over me. "It won't hurt, I promise."

I screamed.

His lips touched the cut, locked on it, sucking. He was wrong. It did hurt. Then the smell of flowers surrounded me. I was drowning in perfume. I couldn't see. The world was warm and sweet-scented.

When I could see again, think again, I was lying on my back, staring up at the tent roof. Arms drew me upward, cradled me. Alejandro held me close. He'd cut a line of blood on his chest, just above the nipple. "Drink."

I put my hands flat against him, fighting him. His hand squeezed the back of my neck, forcing me closer to the wound.

"NO!"

I drew the other knife and plunged it into his chest, searching for the heart. He grunted and grabbed my hand, squeezed until I dropped the knife. "Silver is not the way. I am past silver."

He pushed my face towards the wound, and I couldn't fight him. I just wasn't strong enough. He could have crushed my skull in one hand, but all he did was press my face to the cut on his chest.

I struggled, but he kept my mouth pressed to the wound. The blood was salty sweet, vaguely metallic. It was only blood.

"Anita!" Jean-Claude screamed my name. I wasn't sure if it was aloud or in my head.

"Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh, the two shall be as one. One flesh, one blood, one soul." Somewhere deep inside me, something broke. I could feel it. A wave of liquid warmth rushed up and over me. My skin danced with it. My fingertips tingled. My spine spasmed, and I jerked upright. Strong arms caught me, held me, rocked me.

A hand smoothed my hair from my face. I opened my eyes to see Alejandro. I wasn't afraid of him anymore. I was calm and floating.

"Anita?" It was Edward. I turned towards the sound, slowly.

"Edward."

"What did he do to you?"

I tried to think how to explain it, but my mind wouldn't bring up the words. I sat up, pushing gently away from Alejandro.

There was a pile of dead vampires around Edward's feet. Maybe silver didn't hurt Alejandro, but it had hurt his people.

"We will make more," Alejandro said. "Can you not read this in my mind?"

And I could, now that I thought about it, but it wasn't like telepathy. Not words. I—knew he was thinking about the power I'd just given him. He felt no regret about the vampires that had died.

The crowd screamed.

Alejandro looked up. I followed his gaze. Jean-Claude was on his knees, blood pouring down his side. Alejandro envied Oliver the ability to draw blood from a distance. When I became Alejandro's servant, Jean-Claude had been weakened. Oliver had him.

That had been the plan all along.

Alejandro held me close, and I didn't try to stop him. He whispered against my cheek, "You are a necromancer, Anita. You have power over the dead. That is why Jean-Claude wanted you as his servant. Oliver thinks to control you through controlling me, but I know that you are a necromancer. Even as a servant, you have free will. You do not have to obey as the others do. As a human servant, you are yourself a weapon. You can strike one of us and draw blood."

"What are you saying?"

"They have arranged that the loser be stretched over the altar and staked by you."

"What . . ."

"Jean-Claude, as affirmation of his power. Oliver, as a gesture to show how well he controlled what once belonged to Jean-Claude."

There was a gasp from the crowd. Oliver was levitating ever so slowly. He floated to the ground. Then he raised his arms, and Jean-Claude floated upward.

"Shit," I said.

Jean-Claude hung nearly unconscious in empty, shining air. Oliver laid him gently on the ground, and fresh blood splattered the white floor.

Karl Inger came into sight. He picked Jean-Claude up under the arms.

Where was everybody? I looked around for some help. The black werewolf was torn apart, parts still twitching. I didn't think even a lycanthrope could heal the mess. The blond werewolf wasn't much better, but Stephen was dragging himself towards the altar. With one leg completely ripped away, he was trying.

Karl laid Jean-Claude on the marble altar. Blood began to seep down the side. He held him lightly at the shoulder. Jean-Claude could bench press a car. How could Karl hold him down?

"He shares Oliver's strength."

"Quit doing that," I said.

"What?"

"Answering questions I haven't asked yet."

He smiled. "It saves so much time."

Oliver picked up a white, polished stake and a padded hammer. He held them out towards me. "It's time."

Alejandro tried to help me stand, but I pushed him away. Fourth mark or no fourth mark, I could stand on my own.

Richard screamed, "No!" He ran past us towards the altar. It all seemed to happen in slow motion. He jumped at Oliver, and the little man grabbed him by the throat and tore his windpipe out.

"Richard!" I was running, but it was too late. He lay bleeding on the ground, still trying to breathe when he didn't have anything to breathe with.

I knelt by him, tried to stop the flow of blood. His eyes were wide and panic-filled. Edward was with me. "There's nothing you can do. Nothing any of us can do."

"No."

"Anita." He pulled me away from Richard. "It's too late."

I was crying and hadn't known it.

"Come, Anita; destroy your old master, as you wanted me to." Oliver was holding the hammer and stake out towards me.

I shook my head.

Alejandro helped me stand. I reached for Edward, but it was too late. Edward couldn't help. No one could help me. There was no way to take back the fourth mark, or heal Richard, or save Jean-Claude. But at least I wouldn't put the stake through Jean-Claude. That I could stop. That I would not do.

Alejandro was leading me towards the altar.

Marguerite had crawled to one side of the dais. She was kneeling, rocking gently back and fourth. Her face was a bloody mask. She'd clawed her eyes out.

Oliver held the stake and mallet out to me with his white-gloved hands, still wet with Richard's blood. I shook my head.

"You will take it. You will do as I say." His little clown face was frowning at me.

"Fuck you," I said.

"Alejandro, you control her now."

"She is my servant, master, yes."

Oliver held the stake out towards me. "Then have her finish him."

"I cannot force her, master." Alejandro smiled as he said it.

"Why not?"

"She is a necromancer. I told you she would have free will."

"I will not have my grand gesture spoiled by one stubborn woman."

He tried to roll my mind. I felt him rush over me like a wind inside my head, but it rolled off and away. I was a full human servant; vampire tricks didn't work on me, not even Oliver's.

I laughed, and he slapped me. I tasted fresh blood in my mouth. He stood beside me, and I could feel him tremble. He was so angry. I was ruining his moment.

Alejandro was pleased. I could feel his pleasure like a warm hand in my stomach.

"Finish him, or I promise you I'll beat you to a bloody pulp. You don't die easily now. I can hurt you worse than you can imagine, and you'll heal. But it will still hurt just as badly. Do you understand me?"

I stared down at Jean-Claude. He was staring at me. His dark blue eyes were as lovely as ever.

"I won't do it," I said.

"You still care about him? After all he has done to you?"

I nodded.

"Do him, now, or I will kill him slowly. I will pick pieces of flesh from his bones but never kill him. As long as his heart and head are intact, he won't die, no matter what I do to him."

I looked at Jean-Claude. I couldn't stand by and let Oliver torture him, not if I could help it. Wasn't a clean death better? Wasn't it?

I took the stake from Oliver. "I'll do it."

Oliver smiled. "You've made a wise decision. Jean-Claude would thank you if he could."

I stared down at Jean-Claude, stake in one hand. I touched his chest just over the burn scar. My hand came away smeared with blood.

"Do it, now!" Oliver said.

I turned to Oliver, reaching my left hand out for the hammer. As he handed it to me, I shoved the ash stake through his chest.

Karl screamed. Blood poured out of Oliver's mouth. He seemed frozen, as if he couldn't move with the stake in his heart, but he wasn't dead, not yet. My fingers tore into the meat of his throat and pulled, pulled great gobbets of flesh, until I saw spine, glistening and wet. I wrapped my hand around his spine and jerked it free. His head lolled to one side, held by a few strips of meat. I jerked his head clear and tossed it across the ring.

Karl Inger was lying beside the altar. I knelt by him and tried to find a pulse, but there wasn't one. Oliver's death had killed him too.

Alejandro came to stand by me. "You've done it, Anita. I knew you could kill him. I knew you could."

I stared up at him. "Now you kill Jean-Claude, and we rule the city together."

"Yes."

I shoved upward before I could think about it, before he could read my mind. I shoved my hands into his chest. Ribs cracked and scraped my skin. I grabbed his beating heart and crushed it.

I couldn't breathe. My chest was tight, and it hurt. I pulled his heart out of the hole. He fell, eyes wide and surprised. I fell with him.

I was gasping for air. Couldn't breathe, couldn't breathe. I lay on top of my master and felt my heart beating for both of us. He wouldn't die. I laid my fingers against his throat and started to dig. I put my hands around his throat and squeezed. I felt my hands dig into flesh, but the pain was overwhelming. I was choking on blood, our blood.

My hands went numb. I couldn't tell if I was still squeezing or not. I couldn't feel anything except the pain. Then even that slipped away, and I was falling, falling into a darkness that had never known light, and never would.

Chapter 48

I woke up staring into an off-white ceiling. I blinked at the ceiling for a minute. Sunlight lay in warm squares across the blanket. There were metal rails on the bed. An IV dripped to my arm.

A hospital—then I wasn't dead. Surprise, surprise.

There were flowers and a bunch of shiny balloons on a small bedside table. I lay there a moment, enjoying the fact that I wasn't dead.

The door opened, and all I could see was a huge bunch of flowers. Then the flowers lowered, and it was Richard.

I think I stopped breathing. I could feel all the blood rushing through my skin. There was a soft roaring in my head. No. I wasn't going to faint. I never fainted. I finally managed to say, "You're dead."

His smile faded. "I'm not dead."

"I saw Oliver tear out your throat." I could see it in front of me like an overlay in my mind. I saw him gasping, dying. I found I could sit up. I braced myself, and the IV needle moved under my skin, the tape pulling. It was real. Nothing else seemed real.

He raised a hand towards his throat, then stopped himself. He swallowed hard enough for me to hear it. "You saw Oliver tear out my throat, but it didn't kill me."

I stared at him. There was no bandage on his cheek. The circle cut had healed. "No human being could survive that," I said softly.

"I know." He looked incredibly sad as he said it.

Panic filled my throat until I could barely breathe. "What are you?"

"I'm a lycanthrope."

I shook my head. "I know what a lycanthrope feels like, moves like. You aren't one."

"Yes, I am."

I kept shaking my head. "No."

He came to stand beside the bed. He held the flowers awkwardly, as if he didn't know what to do with them. "I'm next in line to be pack leader. I can pass for human, Anita. I'm good at it."

"You lied to me."

He shook his head. "I didn't want to."

"Then why did you?"

"Jean-Claude ordered me not to tell you."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I think because he knew you'd hate it. You don't forgive deceit. He knows that."

Would Jean-Claude deliberately try to ruin a potential relationship between Richard and me? Yep.

"You asked what hold Jean-Claude had on me. That was it. My pack leader loaned me to Jean-Claude on the condition that no one find out what I was."

"Why are you a special case?"

"They won't let lycanthropes teach kids, or anybody else for that matter."

"You're a werewolf."

"Isn't that better than being dead?"

I stared up at him. His eyes were still the same perfect brown. His hair fell forward around his face. I wanted to ask him to sit down, to let me run my fingers through his hair, to keep it from that wonderful face.

"Yeah, it's better than being dead."

He let out a breath, as if he'd been holding it. He smiled and held the flowers out to me.

I took them because I didn't know what else to do. They were red carnations with enough baby's breath to form a white mist over the red. The carnations smelled like sweet cloves. Richard was a werewolf. Next in line for pack leader. He could pass for human. I stared up at him. I held out my hand to him. He took it, and his hand was warm and solid, and alive.

"Now that we've established why you're not dead, why aren't I dead?"

"Edward did CPR on you until the ambulances came. The doctors don't know what caused your heart to stop, but there's no permanent damage."

"What did you tell the police about all the bodies?"

"What bodies?"

"Come off it, Richard."

"By the time the ambulance got there, there were no extra bodies."

"The audience saw it all."

"But what was real and what was illusion? The police got a hundred different versions from the audience. They're suspicious, but they can't prove anything. The Circus has been shut down until the authorities can be sure it's safe."

"Safe?" I laughed.

He shrugged. "As safe as it ever was."

I slipped my hand out of Richard's grasp, using both hands to smell the flowers again. "Is Jean-Claude . . . alive?"

"Yes."

A great sense of relief washed over me. I didn't want him dead. I didn't want Jean-Claude dead. Shit. "He's still Master of the City, then. And I'm still bound to him."

"No," Richard said, "Jean-Claude told me to tell you. You're free. Alejandro's marks sort of canceled his out. You can't serve two masters, he said."

Free? I was free? I stared at Richard. "It can't be that easy."

Richard laughed. "You call this easy?"

I looked up. I had to smile. "All right, it wasn't easy, but I didn't think anything short of death would get Jean-Claude off my back."

"Are you happy the marks are gone?"

I started to say, "Of course," then stopped myself. There was something very serious in Richard's face. He knew what it was to be offered power. To be one with the monsters. It could be horrible, and wonderful.

Finally I said "Yes."

"Really?"

I nodded.

"You don't seem too enthused," he said.

"I know I should be jumping for joy, or something, but I just feel empty."

"You've been through a lot the last few days. You're entitled to be a little numb."

Why wasn't I happier to be rid of Jean-Claude? Why wasn't I relieved to be no one's human servant? Because I'd miss him? Stupid. Ridiculous. True.

When something gets too hard to think about, think about something else. "So now everyone knows you're a werewolf."

"No."

"You were hospitalized, and you've already healed. I think they'll guess."

"Jean-Claude had me hidden away until I healed. This is my first day up and around."

"How long have I been out?"

"A week."

"You're joking."

"You were in a coma for three days. The doctors still don't know what made you start breathing on your own."

I had come that close to the great beyond. I couldn't remember any tunnel of light, or soothing voices. I felt cheated. "I don't remember."

"You were unconscious; you're not supposed to remember."

"Sit down, before I get a crick looking up at you."

He pulled up a chair and sat down by the bed, smiling at me. It was a nice smile.

"So you're a werewolf."

He nodded.

"How did it happen?"

He stared down at the floor, then up. His face looked so solemn, I was sorry I'd asked. I was expecting some great tale of a savage attack survived. "I got a bad batch of lycanthropy serum."

"You what?"

"You heard me." He seemed embarrassed.

"You got a bad shot?"

"Yes."

My smile got wider and wider.

"It's not funny," he said.

I shook my head. "Not at all." I knew my eyes were shiny, and it was all I could do not to laugh out loud. "You've got to admit it's nicely ironic."

He sighed. "You're going to hurt yourself. Go ahead and laugh."

I did. I laughed until it hurt, and Richard joined in. Laughter is contagious, too.

Chapter 49

A dozen white roses came later that day with a note from Jean-Claude. The note read, "You are free of me, if you choose. But I hope you want to see me as much as I want to see you. It is your choice. Jean-Claude."

I stared at the flowers for a long time. I finally had a nurse give them to someone else, or throw them away, or whatever the hell she wanted to do with them. I just wanted them out of my sight. So I was still attracted to Jean-Claude. I might even, in some dark corner, love him a little. It didn't matter. Loving the monsters always ends badly for the human. It's a rule.

That brought me to Richard. He was one of the monsters, but he was alive. That was an improvement over Jean-Claude. And was he any less human than I was: zombie queen, vampire slayer, necromancer? Who was I to complain?

I don't know where they put all the body parts, but no police ever came asking. Whether I'd saved the city or not, it was still murder. Legally, Oliver had done nothing to deserve death.

I got out of the hospital and went back to work. Larry stayed on. He's learning how to hunt vampires, God save him.

The lamia was truly immortal. Which I guess means lamias can't have been extinct. They just must always have been rare. Jean-Claude got the lamia a green card and gave her a job at the Circus of the Damned. I don't know if he's letting her breed, or not. I haven't been near the Circus since I got out of the hospital.

Richard and I finally had that first date. We went for something fairly traditional: dinner and a movie. We're going caving next week. He promised no underwater tunnels. His lips are the softest I've ever kissed. So he gets furry once a month. No one's perfect.

Jean-Claude hasn't given up. He keeps sending me gifts. I keep refusing them. I have to keep saying no until he gives up, or until hell freezes over, whichever comes first.

Most women complain that there are no single, straight men left. I'd just like to meet one who's human.

The Lunatic Cafe

by

Laurell K. Hamilton

Book 4 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Chapter 1

It was two weeks before Christmas. A slow time of year for raising the dead. My last client of the night sat across from me. There had been no notation by his name. No note saying zombie raising or vampire slaying. Nothing. Which probably meant whatever he wanted me to do was something I wouldn't, or couldn't, do. Pre-Christmas was a dead time of year, no pun intended. My boss, Bert, took any job that would have us.

George Smitz was a tall man, well over six feet. He was broad shouldered, and muscular. Not the muscles you get from lifting weights and running around indoor tracks. The muscles you get from hard physical labor. I would have bet money that Mr. Smitz was a construction worker, farmer, or something similar. He was shaped large and square with grime embedded under his fingernails that soap would not touch.

He sat in front of me, crushing his toboggan hat, kneading it in his big hands. The coffee that he'd accepted sat cooling on the edge of my desk. He hadn't taken so much as a sip.

I was drinking my coffee out of the Christmas mug that Bert, my boss, had insisted everyone bring in. A personalized holiday mug to add a personal touch to the office. My mug had a reindeer in a bathrobe and slippers with Christmas

lights laced in its antlers, toasting the merry season with champagne and saying, "Bingle Jells."

Bert didn't really like my mug, but he let it go, probably afraid of what else I might bring in. He'd been very pleased with my outfit for the evening. A high-collared blouse so perfectly red I'd had to wear makeup to keep from looking pale. The skirt and matching jacket were a deep forest green. I hadn't dressed for Bert. I had dressed for my date.

The silver outline of an angel gleamed in my lapel. I looked very Christmasy. The Browning Hi-Power 9mm didn't look Christmasy at all, but since it was hidden under the jacket, that didn't seem to matter. It might have bothered Mr. Smitz, but he looked worried enough to not care. As long as I didn't shoot him personally.

"Now, Mr. Smitz, how may I help you today?" I asked.

He was staring at his hands and only his eyes rose to look at me. It was a little-boy gesture, an uncertain gesture. It sat oddly on the big man's face. "I need help, and I don't know who else to go to."

"Exactly what kind of help do you need, Mr. Smitz?"

"It's my wife."

I waited for him to continue, but he stared at his hands. His hat was wadded into a tight ball.

"You want your wife raised from the dead?" I asked.

He looked up at that, eyes wide with alarm. "She's not dead. I know that."

"Then what can I possibly do for you, Mr. Smitz? I raise the dead, and am a legal vampire executioner. What in that job description could help your wife?"

"Mr. Vaughn said you knew all about lycanthropy." He said that as if it explained everything. It didn't.

"My boss makes a lot of claims, Mr. Smitz. But what does lycanthropy have to do with your wife?" This was the second time I'd asked about his wife. I seemed to be speaking English, but perhaps my questions were really Swahili and I just didn't realize it. Or maybe whatever had happened was too awful for words. That happened a lot in my business.

He leaned forward, eyes intense on my face. I leaned forward, too, I couldn't help myself. "Peggy, that's my wife, she's a lycanthrope."

I blinked at him. "And?"

"If it came out, she'd lose her job."

I didn't argue with him. Legally, you couldn't discriminate against lycanthropes, but it happened a lot. "What sort of work is Peggy in?"

"She's a butcher."

A lycanthrope that was a butcher. It was too perfect. But I could see why she'd lose her job. Food preparation with a potentially fatal disease. I don't think so. I knew, and the health department knew, that lycanthropy can only be transferred by an attack in the animal form. Most people don't believe that. Can't say I blame them entirely. I don't want to be fuzzy, either.

"She runs a specialty meat store. It's a good business. She inherited it from her father."

"Was he a lycanthrope, too?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, Peggy was attacked a few years back. She survived . . ." He shrugged. "But, you know."

I did know. "So your wife is a lycanthrope and would lose her business if it came out. I understand that. But how can I help you?" I fought the urge to glance at my watch. I had the tickets. Richard couldn't go in without me.

"Peggy's missing."

Ah. "I am not a private detective, Mr. Smitz. I don't do missing persons."

"But I can't go to the police. They might find out."

"How long has she been missing?"

"Two days."

"My advice is to go to the police."

He shook his head stubbornly. "No."

I sighed. "I don't know anything about finding a missing person. I raise the dead, slay vampires, that's it."

"Mr. Vaughn said you could help me."

"Did you tell him your problem?"

He nodded.

Shit. Bert and I were going to have a long talk. "The police are good at their job, Mr. Smitz. Just tell them your wife is missing. Don't mention the lycanthropy. See what they turn up." I didn't like telling a client to withhold information from the police, but it beat the heck out of not going at all.

"Ms. Blake, please, I'm worried. We've got two kids."

I started to say all the reasons I couldn't help him, then stopped. I had an idea. "Animators, Inc., has a private investigator on retainer. Veronica Sims has been involved in a lot of preternatural cases. She might be able to help you."

"Can I trust her?"

"I do."

He stared at me for a long moment, then nodded. "All right, how do I get in touch with her?"

"Let me give her a call, see if she can see you."

"That would be great, thank you."

"I want to help you, Mr. Smitz. Hunting missing spouses just isn't my specialty." I dialed the phone as I talked. I knew Ronnie's number by heart. We exercised at least twice a week together, not to mention an occasional movie, dinner, whatever. Best friends, a concept that most women never outgrow. Ask a man who his best friend is and he'll have to think about it. He won't know right off the top of his head. A woman would. A man might not even be able to think of a name, not for his best friend. Women keep track of these things. Men don't. Don't ask me why.

Ronnie's answering machine clicked in. "Ronnie, if you're there, it's Anita, pick up."

The phone clicked, and a second later I was talking to the genuine article. "Hi, Anita. I thought you had a date with Richard tonight. Something wrong?"

See, best friends. "Not with the date. I've got a client here who I think is more up your alley than mine."

"Tell me," she said.

I did.

"Did you recommend he go to the police?"

"Yep."

"He won't go?"

"Nope."

She sighed. "Well, I've done missing persons before but usually after the police have done everything they can. They have resources I can't touch."

"I'm aware of that," I said.

"He won't budge?"

"I don't think so."

"So it's me or . . ."

"Bert took the job knowing it was a missing person. He might try giving it to Jamison."

"Jamison doesn't know his butt from a hole in the ground on anything but raising the dead."

"Yeah, but he's always eager to expand his repertoire."

"Ask him if he can be at my office . . ." She paused while she leafed through her appointment book. Business must be good. "At nine tomorrow morning."

"Jesus, you always were an early riser."

"One of my few faults," she said.

I asked George Smitz if nine o'clock tomorrow was all right.

"Couldn't she see me tonight?"

"He wants to see you tonight."

She thought about that for a minute. "Why not? It's not like I have a hot date, unlike some people I could mention. Sure, send him over. I'll wait. Friday with a client is better than Friday night alone, I guess."

"You've just hit a dry spell," I said.

"And you've hit a wet spell."

"Very funny."

She laughed. "I'll look forward to Mr. Smitz's arrival. Enjoy *Guys and Dolls*."

"I will. See you tomorrow morning for our run."

"You sure you want me over there that early in case dream boat wants to stay over?"

"You know me better than that," I said.

"Yeah, I do. Just kidding. See you tomorrow."

We hung up. I gave Mr. Smitz Ronnie's business card, directions to her office, and sent him on his way. Ronnie was the best I could do for him. It still bothered me that he wouldn't go to the police, but hey, it wasn't my wife.

I've got two kids, he'd said. Not my problem. Really. Craig, our nighttime secretary, was at the desk, which meant it was after six. I was running late. There really wasn't time to argue with Bert about Mr. Smitz, but . . .

I glanced at Bert's office. It was dark. "Boss man gone home?"

Craig glanced up from his computer keyboard. He has short, baby-fine brown hair. Round glasses to match a round face. He's slender and taller than I am, but then who isn't? He's in his twenties with a wife and two babies.

"Mr. Vaughn left about thirty minutes ago."

"It figures," I said.

"Something wrong?"

I shook my head. "Schedule me some time to talk to the boss tomorrow."

"I don't know, Anita. He's booked pretty solid."

"Find some time, Craig. Or I'll barge in on one of the other appointments."

"You're mad," he said.

"You bet. Find the time. If he yells about it, tell him I pulled a gun on you."

"Anita," he said with a grin, as if I were teasing.

I left him riffling through the appointment book trying to squeeze me somewhere. I meant it. Bert would talk to me tomorrow. December was our slowest season for raising zombies. People seemed to think you couldn't do it close to Christmas, as if it were black magic or something. So Bert scheduled other things to take up the slack. I was getting tired of clients with problems I could do nothing about. Smitz wasn't the first this month, but he was going to be the last.

With that cheerful thought I bundled into my coat and left. Richard was waiting. If traffic cooperated, I might just make it before the opening number. Traffic on a Friday night, surely not.

Chapter 2

The 1978 Nova that I'd been driving had died a sad and tragic death. I was now driving a Jeep Cherokee Country. It was a deep, deep green that looked black at night. But it had four-wheel drive for winter and enough room to carry goats in the back. Chickens were what I used for zombie raising most of the time, but occasionally you needed something bigger. Carrying goats in the Nova had been a bitch.

I pulled the Cherokee into the last parking space in the lot on Grant. My long, black winter coat billowed around me because I had only buttoned the bottom two buttons. If I buttoned all the buttons I couldn't get to my gun.

My hands were shoved into the coat pockets, arms huddling the cloth around me. I didn't wear gloves. I've never been comfortable shooting with gloves on. The gun is a part of my hand. Cloth shouldn't interfere.

I ran across the street in my high-heeled pumps, careful on the frosty pavement. The sidewalk was cracked, with huge sections broken out of it, as if someone had taken a sledgehammer to it. The boarded-up buildings were as

dilapidated as the sidewalk. I'd missed the crowd, being nearly late, so I had the shattered street to myself. It was a short but lonely walk on a December night. Broken glass littered the ground and in heels I had to be very careful where I stepped. An alley cut the buildings. It looked like the natural habitat of *Muggerus americanus*. I watched the darkness carefully. Nothing moved. With the Browning I wasn't too worried, but still . . . You didn't have to be a genius to shoot someone in the back.

The wind gusted cold enough to take my breath away as I neared the corner and relative safety. I wore a lot of sweaters in the winter, but tonight I'd wanted something dressier, and I was freezing my patooties off, but I was hoping that Richard would like the red blouse.

At the corner there were lights, cars, and a policeman directing traffic in the middle of the street. You never saw this many police in this section of St. Louis unless the Fox was on. A lot of wealthy people came down here in their furs, diamonds, Rolex watches. Wouldn't do for a friend of the city council to get mugged. When Topol came to reprise his role in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the audience was very crème de la crème and the place crawled with cops. Tonight there was just the usual. Mostly in front of the theater, mostly doing traffic, but also taking peeks at the seedy backs of buildings in case someone with money wandered away from the light.

I went through the glass doors into the long, narrow entryway. It was brightly lit, shiny somehow. There's a little room to the right where you can pick up your tickets. People streamed out of it, hurrying to the inner glass doors. I wasn't as late as I thought if there were this many people still getting tickets. Or maybe everyone else was as late as I was.

I caught a glimpse of Richard standing in the far right corner. At six foot one he is easier to spot across a crowded room than I am, at my own five foot three. He stood quietly, eyes following the crowd's movement. He didn't seem bored or impatient. He seemed to be having a good time watching the people. His eyes followed an elderly couple as they walked through the glass doors. The woman used a cane. Their progress was painfully slow. His head turned slowly with them. I scanned the crowd. Everyone else was younger, moving with confident or hurried stride. Was Richard looking for victims? Prey? He was, after all, a werewolf. He'd gotten a bad batch of lycanthropy vaccine. One of the reasons I never get the shots. If my flu shot accidentally backfires, that's one thing, but being furry once a month . . . No, thanks.

Did he realize he was standing there searching the crowd like a lion staring at a bunch of gazelles? Or maybe the elderly couple had reminded him of his grandparents. Hell, maybe I was giving him motives that were only in my suspicious little brain. I hoped so.

His hair was brown. In sunlight it gleamed with strands of gold, hints of copper. I knew the hair was shoulder length, nearly my length, but he'd done something to it, pulled it back somehow so it gave the illusion of being very short and close to his head. Not easy with hair as wavy as his.

His suit was some rich shade of green. Most men would have looked like Peter Pan in a green suit, but on him it looked just right. As I walked closer, I

could see his shirt was a pale almost gold, tie a darker green than the suit, with tiny Christmas trees done in red. I would have made a smart remark about the tie, but dressed in red and green with a Christmas angel on my lapel, who was I to complain?

He saw me and smiled. The smile was very bright against his permanently tanned skin. His last name, Zeeman, is Dutch, but somewhere back in his ancestry was something not European. Not blond, not fair, not cold. His eyes were a perfect, chocolate brown.

He reached out and took my hands, gently, drawing me to him. His lips were soft against my mouth, a brief, nearly chaste kiss.

I stepped back, taking a breath. He kept hold of my hand, and I let him. His skin was very warm against my cold hand. I thought about asking him if he'd been thinking about eating that elderly couple, but didn't. Accusing him of murderous intent might spoil the evening. Besides, most lycanthropes weren't aware of doing nonhuman things. When you pointed it out, it always seemed to hurt their feelings. I didn't want to hurt Richard's feelings.

As we went through the inner doors into the crowded lobby, I asked, "Where's your coat?"

"In the car. Didn't want to carry it, so I made a dash for it."

I nodded. It was typical Richard. Or maybe lycanthropes didn't get cold. From the back I could see he'd braided his hair tight to his scalp. The tip of the braid trailed over his collar. I couldn't even figure out how he'd done it. My idea of fixing my hair is to wash, smear a little hair goop through it, then let it dry. I was not into high-tech hair design. Though it might be fun to figure out the knots in a leisurely fashion after the show. I was always willing to learn a new skill.

The main lobby of the Fox is a cross between a really nice Chinese restaurant and a Hindu temple, with a little Art Deco thrown in for flavor. The colors are so dazzling, it looks like the painter ground up stained glass with bits of light trapped in them. Pit bull-size Chinese lions with glowing red eyes guard a sweep of stairs that lead up to the Fox Club balcony, where for fifteen thousand dollars a year you can eat wonderful meals and have a private box. The rest of us peons mingled nearly shoulder to shoulder in the carpeted lobby, with offerings of popcorn, pretzels, Pepsi, and on some nights, hot dogs. A far cry from chicken cordon bleu or whatever they were serving up above.

The Fox treads that wonderfully thin line between gaudiness and the fantastic. I've loved the building since I first saw it. Every time I come, there is some new wonder. Some color, or carving, or statue that I didn't notice before. When you realize that it was originally built to be a movie theater, you realize how much things have changed. Movie theaters now have the souls of unwashed socks. The Fox is alive as only the best buildings are alive.

I had to let go of Richard's hand to unbutton my coat the rest of the way, but hey, we weren't attached at the hip. I stood close to him in the crowd without touching, but I could feel him, like a line of warmth against my body.

"We're going to look like the Bobsey twins when I take my coat off," I said.

He raised his eyebrows.

I spread the coat like a flasher, and he laughed. It was a good laugh, warm and thick like Christmas pudding.

" 'Tis the season," he said. He gave me a one-armed hug, quick like you'd give a friend, but his arm stayed over my shoulders. It was still early enough in our dating that touching each other was new, unexpected, exhilarating. We kept looking for excuses to touch each other. Trying to be nonchalant about it. Not fooling each other. Not sure we cared. I slipped my arm around his waist and leaned just a bit. It was my right arm. If we were attacked now, I'd never draw my gun in time. I stayed there for a minute thinking it just might be worth it. I moved around him, offering my left hand to him.

I don't know if he caught a glimpse of the gun or just figured it out, but his eyes widened. He leaned close to me, whispering against my hair. "A gun here, at the Fox? You think the ushers will let you in?"

"They did last time."

He got a strange look on his face. "You always go armed?"

I shrugged. "After dark, yes."

His eyes were puzzled, but he let it go. Before this year I'd sometimes gone out after dark unarmed but it had been a rough year. A lot of different people had tried to kill me. I was small even for a woman. I jogged, lifted weights, had a black belt in judo, but I was still outclassed by most professional bad guys. They tended to also lift weights, know martial arts, and outweigh me by a hundred pounds or more. I couldn't arm-wrestle them, but I could shoot them.

Also a lot of this year I'd been up against vampires, and other preternatural creepie-crawlies. They could lift large trucks with a single hand or worse. Silver bullets might not kill a vampire, but it certainly slowed them down. Enough for me to run like hell. To get away. To survive.

Richard knew what I did for a living. He'd even seen some of the messy parts. But I still expected him to blow it. To start playing the male protector and bitch about the gun or something. It was almost a permanent tightness in my gut, waiting for this man to say something awful. Something that would ruin it, destroy it, hurt.

So far, so good.

The crowd started flowing towards the stairs, parting on either side to the corridors leading into the main theater. We shuffle-stepped with the crowd, holding hands to keep from being separated. Sure.

Once free of the lobby, the crowd flowed towards the different aisles like water searching for the quickest route downstream. The quickest route was still pretty slow. I dug the tickets out of the pocket of my suit jacket. I didn't have a purse. There was a small brush, a lipstick, lipliner, eye shadow, ID, and my car keys stuffed in my coat pockets. My beeper was tucked in the front of my skirt, discreetly to one side. When not dressed up, I wore a fanny pack.

The usher, an older woman with glasses, shone a tiny flashlight on our tickets. She took us to our seats, motioned us in, and went back up to assist the

next group of helpless people. The seats were good, near the middle, sort of close to the stage. Close enough.

Richard had scooted in to sit on my left without being asked. He's a quick study. It's one of the reasons we're still going out. That and the fact that I lust after his body something terrible.

I spread my coat over the seat, spreading it out so it wouldn't be bulky. His arm snaked across my chair, fingers touching my shoulder. I fought the urge to lay my head on his shoulder. Too hokey, then thought, what the hell. I snuggled into the bend of his neck, just breathing in the scent of his skin. His aftershave was clean and sweet, but underneath was the smell of his skin, his flesh. It made it so the aftershave would never smell the same on anyone else. Frankly, without a drop of aftershave I loved the smell of Richard's neck.

I straightened up, pulling just a little away from him. He looked at me questioningly. "Something wrong?"

"Nice aftershave," I said. No need to confess that I'd had an almost irresistible urge to nibble his neck. It was too embarrassing.

The lights dimmed and the music began. I'd never actually seen *Guys and Dolls* except in the movies. The one with Marlon Brando and Jean Simmons. Richard's idea of a date was caving, hiking, things that required your oldest clothes and a pair of good walking shoes. Nothing wrong with that. I like the outdoors, but I wanted to try a dress-up date. I wanted to see Richard in a suit and let him see me in something frillier than jeans. I was after all a girl, whether I liked to admit it or not.

But having proposed the date, I didn't want to do the usual dipsy-duo of dinner and a movie. So I'd called up the Fox to see what was playing and asked Richard if he liked musicals. He did. Another point in his favor. Since it was my idea, I bought the tickets. Richard had not argued, not even to pay half. After all, I hadn't offered to pay for our last dinner. It hadn't occurred to me. I was betting paying for the tickets occurred to Richard, but he'd let it go. Good man.

The curtain came up and the opening street scene paraded before us, bright colors, stylized, perfect and cheerful, and just what I needed. "The Fugue for Tinhorns" filled the bright stage and flowed out into the happy dark. Good music, humor, soon to be dancers, Richard's body next to mine, a gun under my arm. What more could a girl ask for?

Chapter 3

A trickle of people had slipped out before the end of the musical, to beat the crowd. I always stayed until the very end. It seemed unfair to slink away

before you could applaud. Besides, I hated missing the end of anything. I was always convinced that the bit I'd miss would be the best part.

We joined in enthusiastically with a standing ovation. I've never lived in any city that gives so many standing Os. Admittedly sometimes, like tonight, the show was wonderful, but I've seen people stand on productions that didn't deserve it. I don't stand unless I mean it.

Richard sat back down after the lights came up. "I'd rather wait until the crowd thins out. If you don't mind." There was a look in his brown eyes that said he didn't think I would.

I didn't. We'd driven separate cars. When we left the Fox, the evening was over. Apparently, neither of us wanted to leave. I knew I didn't.

I leaned on the seats in front of us, gazing down at him. He smiled up at me, eyes gleaming with lust, if not love. I was smiling, too. Couldn't seem to help myself.

"You know this is a very sexist musical," he said.

I thought about that a moment, then nodded. "Yep."

"But you like it?"

I nodded.

His eyes narrowed a bit, "I thought you might be offended."

"I have better things to worry about than whether *Guys and Dolls* reflects a balanced worldview."

He laughed—a short, happy sound. "Good. For a minute there I thought I'd have to get rid of my Rodgers and Hammerstein collection."

I studied his face, trying to decide if he was teasing me. I didn't think so. "You really collect Rodgers and Hammerstein sound tracks?"

He nodded, eyes bright with laughter.

"Just Rodgers and Hammerstein, or all musicals?"

"I don't have them all, but all."

I shook my head.

"What's wrong?"

"You're a romantic."

"You make it sound like a bad thing."

"That happy-ever-after shit is fine on stage, but it doesn't have a lot to do with life."

It was his turn to study my face. Evidently, he didn't like what he saw, because he frowned. "This date was your idea. If you don't approve of all this happy stuff, why'd you bring me?"

I shrugged. "After I asked you on a dress-up date, I didn't know where to take you. I didn't want to do the usual. Besides, I like musicals. I just don't think they reflect reality."

"You're not as tough as you pretend to be."

"Yes," I said, "I am."

"I don't believe that. I think you like that happy-ever-after shit as much as I do. You're just afraid to believe in it anymore."

"Not afraid, just cautious."

"Been disappointed too many times?" He made it a question.

"Maybe." I crossed my arms on my stomach. A psychologist would have said I was closed off, uncommunicative. Fuck them.

"What are you thinking?"

I shrugged.

"Tell me, please."

I stared into his sincere brown eyes and wanted to go home alone. Instead. "Happy ever after is just a lie, Richard, and has been since I was eight."

"Your mother's death," he said.

I just looked at him. I was twenty-four years old and the pain of that first loss was still raw. You could deal with it, endure it, but never escape it. Never truly believe in the great, good place. Never truly believe that the bad thing wasn't going to come swooping down and take it all away. I'd rather fight a dozen vampires than one senseless accident.

He pried my hand from its grip on my arm. "I won't die on you, Anita. I promise."

Someone laughed, a low chuckle that brushed the skin like fingertips. Only one person had that nearly touchable laugh—Jean-Claude. I turned, and there he was, standing in the middle of the aisle. I hadn't heard him come. Hadn't sensed any movement. He was just there like magic.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Richard."

Chapter 4

I pushed away from the seats, taking a step forward to give Richard room to stand. I felt him at my back, a comforting presence if I hadn't been more worried about his safety than my own.

Jean-Claude was dressed in a shiny black tux, complete with tails. A white vest with minute black dots bordered the gleaming whiteness of his shirt. The collar was high and stiff, with a cravat of soft black cloth tied around it and tucked into the vest as if ties had never been invented. The stickpin in his vest was made of silver-and-black onyx. His shoes had spats on them, like the ones Fred Astaire used to wear, though I suspected the entire outfit was of a much older style.

His hair was fashionably long, the nearly black curls edging the white collar. I knew what color his eyes were, but I didn't look at them now. They were midnight blue, the color of a really good sapphire. Never look a vampire in the eyes. It's a rule.

With the master vampire of the city standing there, waiting, I realized how empty the theater was. We'd waited out the crowd, all right. We were alone in the echoing silence. The distant murmur of the departing crowd was like white noise. It meant nothing to us. I stared at the shiny mother-of-pearl buttons on

Jean-Claude's vest. It was hard to be tough when you couldn't meet someone's eyes. But I'd manage.

"God, Jean-Claude, don't you ever wear anything but black and white?"

"Don't you like it, *ma petite*?" He gave a little spin so I could get the whole effect. The outfit suited him beautifully. Of course, everything he wore seemed made to order, perfect, lovely, just like him.

"Somehow I didn't think *Guys and Dolls* would be your cup of tea, Jean-Claude."

"Or yours, *ma petite*." The voice was rich like cream, with a warmth that only two things could give it: anger or lust. I was betting it wasn't lust.

I had the gun, and silver bullets would slow him down, but it wouldn't kill him. Of course, Jean-Claude wouldn't jump us in public. He was much too civilized for that. He was a business vampire, an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs, dead or alive, didn't go around tearing people's throats out. Normally.

"Richard, you're unusually quiet." He stared past me. I didn't glance back to see what Richard was doing. Never take your eyes off the vampire in front of you to glance at the werewolf in back of you. One problem at a time.

"Anita can speak for herself," Richard said.

Jean-Claude's attention flicked back to me. "That is certainly true. But I came to see how the two of you enjoyed the play."

"And pigs fly," I said.

"You don't believe me?"

"Not hardly," I said.

"Come, Richard, how did you enjoy your evening?" There was an edge of laughter to his voice but under that was still the anger. Master vampires are not good to be around when they're angry.

"It was wonderful until you showed up." There was a note of warmth to Richard's voice, the beginnings of anger. I'd never seen him angry.

"How could my mere presence spoil your . . . date?" The last was spit out, scalding hot.

"Why are you so pissed tonight, Jean-Claude?" I asked.

"Why, *ma petite*, I never get . . . pissed."

"Bullshit."

"He's jealous of you and me," Richard said.

"I am not jealous."

"You're always telling Anita how you can smell her desire for you. Well, I can smell yours. You want her so bad you can"—Richard gave an almost bitter sound—"taste it."

"And you, Monsieur Zeeman, you don't lust after her?"

"Stop talking like I'm not here," I said.

"Anita asked me out on a date. I said yes."

"Is this true, *ma petite*?" His voice had gone very quiet. Scarier than anger, that quietness.

I wanted to say no, but he'd smell a lie. "It's true. What of it?"

Silence. He just stood there utterly still. If I hadn't been looking right at him, I wouldn't have known he was there. The dead make no noise.

My beeper went off. Richard and I jumped as if we'd been shot. Jean-Claude was motionless as if he hadn't heard it.

I hit the button, and the number that flashed made me groan.

"What is it?" Richard asked. He laid his hand on my shoulder.

"The police. I've got to find a phone." I leaned back against Richard's chest. His hand squeezed my shoulder. I stared at the vampire in front of me. Would Jean-Claude hurt him after I'd gone? I wasn't sure.

"You got a cross on you?" I didn't bother to whisper. Jean-Claude would have heard me anyway.

"No."

I half turned. "No! You're out after dark without a cross?"

He shrugged. "I'm a shapeshifter. I can take care of myself."

I shook my head. "Getting your throat ripped out once wasn't enough?"

"I'm still alive," he said.

"I know you heal from almost anything, but for God's sake, Richard, you don't heal from everything." I started pulling the silver chain of my crucifix out of my blouse. "You can borrow mine."

"Is that real silver?" Richard asked.

"Yes."

"I can't. I'm allergic to silver, remember."

Ah. Stupid me. Some preternatural expert offering silver to a lycanthrope. I tucked the chain back in my blouse.

"He's no more human than I am, *ma petite*."

"At least I'm not dead."

"That can be remedied."

"Stop it, both of you."

"Have you seen her bedroom, Richard? Her collection of toy penguins?"

I took a deep breath and let it out. I was not going to stand here and explain how Jean-Claude had managed to see my bedroom. Did I really have to say, out loud, that I didn't sleep with the walking dead?

"You're trying to make me jealous, and it won't work," Richard said.

"But there is that worm of doubt in you, Richard. I know it. You are my creature to call, my wolf, and I know you doubt her."

"I don't doubt Anita." But there was a defensiveness in his voice that I didn't like at all.

"I don't belong to you, Jean-Claude," Richard said. "I'm second in line to lead the pack. I come and go where I please. The alpha rescinded his orders about obeying you, after you nearly got me killed."

"Your pack leader was most upset that you survived," Jean-Claude said sweetly.

"Why would the pack leader want Richard dead?" I asked.

Jean-Claude looked past me at Richard. "You haven't told her that you're in a battle of succession?"

"I will not fight Marcus."

"Then you will die." Jean-Claude made it sound very simple.

My beeper sounded again. Same number. "I'm coming, Dolph," I muttered.

I glanced at Richard. Anger glittered in his eyes. His hands were balled into fists. I was standing close enough to feel the tension coming off him like waves.

"What's going on, Richard?"

He gave a quick shake of his head. "My business, not yours."

"If someone's threatening you, it is my business."

He stared down at me. "No, you aren't one of us. I won't involve you."

"I can handle myself, Richard."

He just shook his head.

"Marcus wants to involve you, *ma petite*. Richard refuses. It is a . . . bone of contention between them. One of many."

"How do you know so much about it?" I asked.

"We leaders of the preternatural community must deal with each other. For everyone's safety."

Richard just stood staring at him. It occurred to me for the first time that he seemed to look Jean-Claude in the eyes, with no ill effects. "Richard, can you meet his eyes?"

Richard's eyes flicked down to me, then back to Jean-Claude. "Yes. I'm a monster, too. I can took him in the eyes."

I shook my head. "Irving can't look him in the eyes. It's not just being a werewolf."

"As I am a master vampire, so our handsome friend here is a master werewolf. Though they do not call them that. Alpha males, is it not? Pack leaders."

"I prefer pack leader."

"I'll just bet you do," I said.

Richard looked hurt, his face crumbling like a child's. "You're angry with me, why?"

"You've got all this heavy shit going on with your pack leader, and you don't tell me. Jean-Claude keeps hinting your leader wants you dead. That true?"

"Marcus won't kill me," Richard said.

Jean-Claude laughed. The sound had a bitter undertaste to it, as if it hadn't been laughter at all. "You are a fool, Richard."

My beeper went off again. I checked the number, and turned it off. It wasn't like Dolph to call this many times, this close together. Something bad was happening. I needed to go. But . . .

"I don't have time to get the full story right this second." I poked a finger into the middle of Richard's chest. I gave Jean-Claude my back. He'd already done the damage he'd intended. "You are going to tell me every last bit of what's going on."

"I don't . . ."

"Save it. You either share this problem, or we don't date anymore."

He looked shocked. "Why?"

"Either you kept me out to protect me, which I'm going to hate. Or you have some other reason. It better be a damn good reason and not just some male ego shit."

Jean-Claude laughed again. This time the sound wrapped me around like flannel, warm and comforting, thick and soft next to naked skin. I shook my head. Just Jean-Claude's laughter was an invasion of privacy.

I turned to him, and there must have been something in my face because the laughter died as if it had never been. "As for you, you can get the hell out of here. You've had your fun for the night."

"Whatever do you mean, *ma petite*?" His beautiful face was as pure and blank as a mask.

I shook my head and stepped forward. I was leaving. I had work to do. Richard's hand gripped my shoulder.

"Let me go, Richard. I'm mad at you right now." I didn't look at him. I didn't want to see his face. I was afraid if he looked hurt, I'd forgive him anything.

"You heard her, Richard. She doesn't want you touching her." Jean-Claude had taken a gliding step closer.

"Leave it alone, Jean-Claude."

Richard's hand squeezed gently. "She doesn't want you, Jean-Claude." There was anger in his voice, more anger than should have been there. As if he were trying to convince himself more than Jean-Claude.

I stepped forward, shaking his hand off. I wanted to reach for it, but didn't. He'd been keeping major shit from me. Dangerous shit. It wasn't allowed. Worse yet, he thought in some dark corner of his soul that I might have given in to Jean-Claude. What a mess.

"Fuck you both," I said.

"So you have not had that pleasure?" Jean-Claude said.

"That's Anita's question to answer, not mine," Richard said.

"I would know it if you had."

"Liar," I said.

"No, *ma petite*. I would smell him on your skin."

I wanted to slug him. The desire to smash that beautiful face was physical. It tightened my shoulders, made my arms ache. But I knew better. You don't volunteer for slugfests with vampires. It shortens your life expectancy.

I walked up very close to Jean-Claude, bodies nearly touching. I stared him in the nose, which ruined some of the effect, but his eyes were drowning pools and I knew better.

"I hate you." My voice was flat with the effort not to scream. In that moment I meant it. And I knew Jean-Claude would sense it. I wanted him to know.

"*Ma petite* . . ."

"No, you've done enough talking. It's my turn. If you harm Richard Zeeman, I'll kill you."

"He means that much to you?" There was surprise in his voice. Great.

"No, you mean that little." I stepped away from him, around him. Gave him my back and walked away. Let him sink his fangs into that bit of truth. Tonight, I meant every word.

Chapter 5

The number on my beeper was the car phone of Detective Sergeant Rudolf Storr. A Christmas present from his wife last year. I'd sent her a thank-you note. Police radio made everything sound like a foreign language. Dolph picked up on the fifth ring. I knew he'd get to it eventually.

"Anita."

"What if I'd been your wife?" I asked.

"She'd know I was working."

I let it go. Not every wife would appreciate her husband answering the phone with another woman's name. Maybe Lucille was different.

"What's up, Dolph? This was supposed to be my night off."

"Sorry the murderer didn't know that. If you're too busy, we'll muddle through without you."

"What's got your panties in a twist?"

I was rewarded with a small sound that might have been a laugh. "Not your fault. We're out towards Six Flags on Forty-four."

"Where exactly on Forty-four?"

"Out near the Audubon Nature Center. How soon can you get here?"

"Problem, I don't know where the hell you are. How do I get to the nature center?"

"It's across the road from the St. Ambrose Monastery."

"Don't know it," I said.

He sighed. "Hell, we're out in the middle of fucking nowhere. Those are the only landmarks."

"Just give me directions. I'll find it."

He gave me directions. There were too many of them, and I didn't have pen and paper. "Hold on, I've got to get something to write with." I laid the phone down and snatched a napkin from the concession area. I begged a pen from an older couple. The man was wearing a cashmere overcoat. The woman wore real diamonds. The pen was engraved, and might have been real gold. He did not make me promise to bring it back. Trusting, or above such petty concerns. I was going to have to start stocking my own writing materials. It was getting embarrassing.

"I'm back, Dolph, go ahead."

He didn't ask what took so long. Dolph isn't big on extraneous questions. He gave the directions again. I read them back to him to be sure I had them right. I did.

"Dolph, this is at least a forty-five minute drive." I'm usually the last expert to be called in. After the victim has been photographed, videotaped, poked, prodded, etc . . . After I come, everyone gets to go home, or at least leave the murder scene. People were not going to like cooling their heels for two hours.

"I called you as soon as I figured out nothing human did it. It'll take us at least forty-five minutes to finish up and be ready for you."

I should have known Dolph would have planned ahead. "Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can."

He hung up. I hung up. Dolph never said good-bye.

I gave the man back his pen. He accepted it graciously as if he'd never doubted its return. Good breeding.

I went for the doors. Neither Jean-Claude nor Richard had made it to the lobby. They were in public so I didn't really think they'd have a fistfight, angry words but not violence. So the vampire and the werewolf could take care of themselves. Besides, if Richard wasn't allowed to worry about me when I was off on my own, the least I could do was return the favor. I didn't think Jean-Claude really wanted to push me that far. Not really. One of us would die, and I was beginning to think, just maybe, it wouldn't be me.

Chapter 6

The cold wrapped around me outside the doors. I hunched my shoulders, tucking my chin inside my collar. A laughing foursome walked a few yards ahead of me. They hung on each other, huddling against the cold. The women's high heels made a sharp theatrical clatter. Their laughter was too high, too shrill. A first double date that had gone well, so far. Or maybe they were all deeply in love and I was feeling bitchy. Maybe.

The foursome parted like water around a stone, revealing a woman. The couples came back together on the other side of her, laughing as if they hadn't seen her. Which they probably hadn't.

I felt it now, a faint stirring in the cold air. A sensation that had nothing to do with the wind. She was pretending to be unseen. Until the couples had noticed her, by not noticing her, I hadn't noticed her, either. Which meant she was good. Very, very good.

She stood under the last streetlight. Her hair was butter yellow and thick with waves. Longer than mine, nearly to her waist. The coat she wore, buttoned

all the way up, was black. The color was too harsh for her. It bleached the color from her skin even with makeup.

She stood in the center of the sidewalk, arrogant. She was about my size, not physically imposing. So why did she stand there as if nothing in the world could hurt her? Only three things give you that kind of confidence: a machine gun, stupidity, or being a vampire. I didn't see a machine gun, and she didn't look stupid. She did look like a vampire now that I realized what I was looking at. The makeup was good. It made her look almost alive. Almost.

She caught me staring at her. She stared back, trying to catch my eyes with her own, but I was an old hand at this little dance. Staring at someone's face while not staring at their eyes is a trick that gets easier with practice. She frowned at me. Didn't like the eyes not working.

I stood about two yards from her. Feet apart, as balanced as I was going to get in high heels. My hands were already out in the cold, ready to go for my gun if I had to.

Her power crept over my skin like fingers touching here and there, trying to find a weakness. She was very good, but she was also only a little over a hundred. A hundred years wasn't old enough to cloud my mind. All animators had a partial natural immunity to vampires. Mine seemed to be higher than most.

Her pretty face was blank with concentration like a china doll's. She flung a hand outward as if throwing something at me. I flinched, and her power caught me like an invisible wave, slamming into my body. It staggered me.

I pulled my gun. She didn't try and jump me. She tried to concentrate me out of it. She was at least two hundred years old. I'd underestimated her age by a century. I didn't make mistakes like that often. Her power beat along my skin like tiny clubs, but it never came close to touching my mind. I was almost as surprised as she looked when I pointed the gun at her. It had been too easy.

"Hey," came a voice from behind us. "Put the gun down, now!" A policeman, just when I needed one, I pointed the gun at the sidewalk.

"Put the gun on the sidewalk, right now," his voice growled out, and without turning around I knew his own gun was out. Cops take guns very seriously. I held the Browning out to my right, one-handed, left hand in the air, and squatted to lay the gun gently on the sidewalk.

"I do not need this interruption," the vampire said. I glanced up at her as I stood, slowly, putting my hands atop my head, fingers laced. Maybe I'd get points for knowing the drill. She was staring past me at the approaching cop. It wasn't a friendly look.

"Don't hurt him," I said.

Her eyes flicked back to me. "We are not allowed to attack the police." Her voice was thick with scorn. "I know the rules."

I wanted to say, "What rules?" but didn't. It was a good rule. The policeman could live with a rule like that. Of course, I wasn't a cop, and I was betting the rules didn't apply to me.

The cop came into view out of the corner of my eye. His gun was pointing at me. He kicked my gun out of reach. I saw it hit the building. A hand shoved

into my back, getting my attention. "You don't need to know where the gun went."

He was right, for now. He frisked me one-handed. It wasn't very thorough, and I wondered where his partner was.

"Enough," the vampire said.

I felt the cop step back from me. "What's going on here?"

Her power slithered past me, like a great beast had brushed me in the dark. I heard the policeman gasp.

"Nothing is happening here," the vampire said. There was a flavoring of accent in her voice. German or Austrian, maybe.

I heard his voice say, "Nothing is happening here."

"Now go back to directing traffic," she said.

I turned, slowly, hands still on my head. The cop was standing there, face empty, eyes wide. His gun was pointed at the ground, as if he'd forgotten he was holding it.

"Go away," she said.

He stood there frozen. He was wearing his cross tie tack. He was wearing his blessed cross, just like he was supposed to, and it wasn't doing much good.

I backed away from both of them. If she stopped paying attention to the cop, I wanted to be armed. I lowered my arms slowly, watching the cop. If she took her control off suddenly, and I wasn't where I was supposed to be, he might shoot me. Probably not, but maybe. If he saw me with the gun in my hand a second time, almost certainly.

"I don't suppose you would remove his cross so I could order him about?"

My eyes flicked to the vampire. She was looking at me. The cop stirred, struggling like a dreamer in the grip of a nightmare. She turned her eyes back to him, and the struggles ceased.

"I don't think so," I said. I knelt, trying to keep my attention on both of them. I touched the Browning, and wrapped cold fingers around it. My hands were stiff from being exposed to the cold for so long. I wasn't sure how fast I could draw right at that moment. Maybe I should look into some gloves. Maybe ones with the fingertips cut out.

I shoved the Browning in my coat pocket, hand still gripping it. My hand would warm up, and I could shoot through my coat if I had to.

"Without the cross I could make him go away. Why can't I control you like that?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

Her eyes flicked to me. Again, he stirred. She had to stare at him while she talked to me. It was interesting to see how much concentration it took. She was powerful but it had its limits.

"You are the Executioner," she said.

"What of it?"

"I didn't believe the stories. Now I believe some of the stories."

"Bully for you. Now, what do you want?"

A slight smile curled her lipsticked mouth. "I want you to leave Jean-Claude alone."

I blinked, not sure I'd heard right. "What do you mean, leave him alone?"
"Don't date him. Don't flirt with him. Don't talk to him. Leave him alone."
"Glad to," I said.

She turned to me, startled. You don't get to surprise a two-hundred-year-old vamp often. Her face looked very human with its wide eyes and little *o* of surprise.

The cop gave a snort and looked around wildly. "What the hell?" He looked at both of us. We looked like two petite women out for the evening. He glanced down at his gun and seemed embarrassed. He didn't remember why it was out. He put the gun away, muttering apologies and backing away from us. The vampire let him go.

"You'd leave Jean-Claude alone, just like that?" she asked.

"You bet."

She shook her head. "I do not believe you."

"Look, I don't care what you believe. If you have the hots for Jean-Claude, more power to you. I've been trying to get him off my back for years."

Again that shake of the head, sending her yellow hair flying about her face. It was a very girlish gesture. It would have been cute if she hadn't been a corpse.

"You are lying. You desire him. Anyone would."

I couldn't argue that. "You got a name?"

"I am Gretchen."

"Well, Gretchen, I wish you joy of the Master. If you need any help sinking your fangs into him, let me know. I would love for him to find a nice little vampire to settle down with."

"You mock me."

I shrugged. "A little, but it's habit, nothing personal. I mean what I said. I don't want Jean-Claude."

"You don't think he's beautiful?" Her voice was soft with surprise.

"Well, yeah, but I think tigers are beautiful. I still don't want to sleep with one."

"No mortal could resist him."

"This one can," I said.

"Stay away from him, or I'll kill you," she said.

Gretchen wasn't listening to me, not really. She heard the words, but the meaning didn't sink in. Reminded me of Jean-Claude.

"Look, he chases me. I'll stay away from him if he'll let me. But don't threaten me."

"He's mine, Anita Blake. Come against me at your peril."

It was my turn to shake my head. Maybe she didn't know I had a gun pointed at her. Maybe she didn't know it had silver-plated bullets in it. Maybe she had lived for a couple of centuries and had grown arrogant. Yeah, that was probably it.

"Look, I don't have time for this right now. Jean-Claude is yours, great, fine. I'm thrilled to hear it. Keep him away from me, and I will be the happiest woman alive or dead." I didn't want to turn my back on her, but I had to go. If

she wasn't going to jump me here and now, Dolph was waiting at a murder scene. I had to go.

"Gretchen, what are you and Anita talking about?" Jean-Claude stalked towards us. He was wearing, I kid you not, a black cape. It was a Victorian style with a collar. A top hat with a white silk band completed the look.

Gretchen gazed at him. It was the only word for it. The naked adoration in her face was sickening, and very human. "I wanted to meet my rival."

I wasn't her rival, but I didn't think she'd believe that.

"I told you to wait outside so you would not meet her. You knew that."

The last three words were spat out, thrown at her like rocks.

She flinched. "I meant no harm this night."

That was almost a lie, but I didn't say anything. I could have told him that she'd threatened me, but somehow it seemed like tattling. She'd gone to a lot of trouble to get me alone. To warn me off. Her love for him was so naked. I could not enlist his help against her. Foolish, but true. Besides, I didn't like owing Jean-Claude favors.

"I'll leave you two lovebirds alone."

"What lies did you tell her about us?" His words scalded the air. I could feel myself choking on his rage. Jesus.

She fell to her knees, hands held upward, not to avoid a blow, but beseeching, reaching for him. "Please, I only wanted to meet her. To see the mortal that would steal you from me."

I did not want to see this, but it was like a car crash. I couldn't quite bring myself to leave.

"She steals nothing. I have never loved you."

The pain was raw on her face, and even under the makeup she looked less human. Her face was thinning out, bones growing more apparent, as if her skin were shrinking.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her roughly to her feet. His white-gloved fingers dug into her arm. If she'd been human, there would have been bruises. "Get hold of yourself, woman. You are losing control."

Her thinning lips drew back from fangs. She hissed at him, jerking free of his hand. She covered her face with hands that were almost claws. I'd seen vampires show their true form, but never by accident, never in the open, where anyone might see. "I love you." The words came out muffled and twisted, but the feeling in those three words was very real. Very . . . human.

"Get out of sight before you disgrace us all," Jean-Claude said.

She raised a face to the light that was no longer human. The pale skin glowed with an inner light. The makeup sat on that glowing surface. The blush, eye shadow, lipstick seemed to float above the light, as if her skin would no longer absorb them. When she turned her head, I could see the bones in her jaws like shadows inside her skin. "This is not over between us, Anita Blake." The words fell out from between fangs and teeth.

"Leave us!" Jean-Claude's words were an echoing hiss.

She launched herself skyward, not a leap, not levitation, just upward. She vanished into the darkness with a backwash of wind.

"Sweet Jesus," I whispered it.

"I am sorry, *ma petite*. I sent her out here so this would not happen." He walked towards me in his elegant cape. A gust of icy wind whistled around the corner, and he had to make a grab for the top hat. It was nice to know that at least his clothing didn't obey his every whim.

"I've got to go, Jean-Claude. The police are waiting for me."

"I did not mean for this to happen tonight."

"You never mean for anything to happen, Jean-Claude. But it happens anyway." I put a hand up to stop his words. I didn't want to hear any more of them.

"I've got to go." I turned and walked towards my car. I transferred my gun back to its holster when I was safely across the icy street.

"I am sorry, *ma petite*." I whirled to tell him to get the hell away from me. He wasn't there. The streetlight glowed down on empty sidewalk. I guess he and Gretchen hadn't needed a car.

Chapter 7

There is a glimpse of stately old homes to the right just before you turn onto Highway 44. The houses hide behind a wrought-iron fence and a security gate. When the homes were built, they were the height of elegance and so was the neighborhood. Now the town houses are an island in a rising flood of project housing and dead-eyed children who shoot each other over a scuffed sneaker. But the old money stayed, determined to be elegant, even if it kills them.

In Fenton the Chrysler plant is still the largest employer. A side road runs past fast-food restaurants and local businesses. But the highway bypasses them all. A straight line going onward and not looking back. The Maritz building spans the highway with a covered crosswalk that looks big enough to hold offices. It gets your attention like an overly aggressive date, but I know the name of the business, and I can't say that about many other buildings along 44. Sometimes aggressive works.

The Ozark Mountains rise on either side of the road. They are soft and rounded. Gentle mountains. On a sunny autumn day, with the trees blazing color, the mountains are startling in their beauty. On a cold December night with only my own headlights for company, the mountains sat like sleeping giants pressing close to the road. There was just enough snow to gleam white through the naked trees. The black shapes of evergreens were permanent shadows in the moonlight. A limestone cliff shone white where the mountains had been cracked open for a gravel pit.

Houses huddled at the base of the mountains. Neat farmhouses with front porches just made for sitting on. Not-so-neat houses made of unpainted wood with rusty tin roofs. Corrals sat in empty fields without a farmhouse near. A single horse stood in the icy cold, head down searching the tops of the winter-killed grass. A lot of people kept horses out past Eureka—people who couldn't afford to live in Ladue or Chesterfield, where houses cost over half a mil a piece, but you did get barns, exercising pens, and a corral in your backyard. Here all you got was a shed, a corral, and miles to drive to visit your horse, but at least you had one. A lot of trouble to go to for a horse.

The white head of a road sign flashed in the headlights. I slowed down. A car had run into the pole and crumbled it like a broken flower stem. The sign was hard to read from a sixty-degree angle. Which was probably why Dolph had told me to look for the smashed sign rather than the street name.

I pulled onto the narrow road. In St. Louis we'd gotten about a three-inch snowfall. Here it looked more like six. The road hadn't been plowed. It angled sharply upward, climbing into the hills. Tire tracks like wagon wheels made two lines through the snow. The police cars had gotten up the hill. So could my Jeep. In my old Nova I might have been wading fresh snow in high heels. Though I did have a pair of Nikes in the trunk. Still, jogging shoes weren't a big improvement. Maybe I should buy a pair of boots.

It just didn't snow that much in St. Louis. This was one of the deepest snowfalls I'd seen in four years. Boots seemed sort of unnecessary.

The trees curled over the road, naked branches bouncing in the headlights. Wet, icy trunks bent towards the road. In summertime the road would be a leafy tunnel, now it was just black bones erupting from the white snow.

At the crest of the hill there was a heavy stone wall. It had to be ten feet tall, and effectively hid anything on the left-hand side of the road. It had to be the monastery.

About a hundred yards further there was a plaque set in the wall next to a spiked gate. St. Ambrose Monastery was done in raised letters, metal on metal. A driveway curved up and out of sight around a curve of hill. And just across from the entrance was a smaller gravel road. The car tracks climbed into the darkness ahead of me and vanished over the next hill. If the gate hadn't been there for a landmark, I might have missed it. It was only when I turned the Jeep to an angle that my lights caught the tire tracks leading off to the right.

I wondered what all the heavy traffic was up ahead. Not my problem. I eased onto the smaller road. Branches scraped at the Jeep, scratching down the gleaming paint job like fingernails on a chalkboard. Great, just great.

I'd never had a brand-new car before. That first ding, where I'd run over a snow-covered tombstone, had been the hardest. After the first damage the rest was easy to take. Riiight.

The land opened up to either side of the narrow road. A large meadow with winter-killed weeds waist high, weighted down with snow. Lightning flashes of red and blue strobed over the snow, chasing back the darkness. The meadow stopped abruptly in a perfect straight line where the mower had cut it. A white farmhouse, complete with screened-in porch, sat at the end of the road.

Cars were everywhere, like a child's spilled toys. I hoped the road formed a turn around under the snow. If not, the cars were parked all over the grass. My grandmother Blake had hated it when people parked on the grass.

A lot of the cars had their motors running, including the ambulance. There were people sitting in the cars, waiting. But for what? By the time I got to a crime scene, all the work was usually done. Someone would be waiting to take the body away after I'd finished looking at it, but the crime-scene people should have been done and gone. Something was up.

I pulled in next to a St. Gerard County Sheriff car. One policeman was standing in the driver's side door, leaning on the roof. He'd been staring at the knot of men near the farmhouse, but he turned to stare at me. He didn't look happy with what he saw. His Smokey Bear hat shielded his face but left his ears and the back of his head open to the cold. He was pale and freckled and at least six foot two. His shoulders were very broad in his dark winter jacket. He looked like a large man who had always been large, and thought that made him tough. His hair was some pale shade that absorbed the colors of flashing lights, so his hair looked alternately blue and red. As did his face, and the snow, and everything else.

I got out of the car very carefully. Snow spilled in around my foot, soaking my hose, filling the leather pump. It was cold and wet, and I kept a death grip on the car door. High heels and snow do not mix. The last thing I wanted to do was fall on my ass in front of the St. Gerard County Sheriff Department. I should have just grabbed my Nikes from the back of the Jeep and put them on in the car. It was too late now. The deputy sheriff was walking very purposefully towards me. He had boots on and was having no trouble with the snow.

He stopped within reach of me. I didn't let strange men get that close to me normally but to back up I'd have to let go of the car door. Besides he was the police, I wasn't supposed to be afraid of the police. Right?

"This is police business, ma'am, I'll have to ask you to leave."

"I'm Anita Blake. I work with Sergeant Rudolf Storr."

"You're not a cop." He seemed very certain of that. I sort of resented his tone.

"No, I'm not."

"Then you're going to have to leave."

"Can you tell Sergeant Storr that I'm here . . . please." Never hurts to be polite.

"I've asked you real nice twice now to leave. Don't make me ask a third time."

All he had to do was reach out and grab my arm, shove me into the Jeep, and away we went. I certainly wasn't going to draw my gun on a cop with a lot of other cops within shouting distance. I didn't want to get shot tonight.

What could I do? I shut the car door very carefully and leaned against it. If I was careful and didn't move around too much, I might not fall down. If I did, maybe I could claim police brutality.

"Now, why did you do that?"

"I drove forty-five minutes and left a date to get here." Try to appeal to his better nature. "Let me talk to Sergeant Storr and if he says I need to leave, I'll leave."

"I don't care if you flew in from outta state. I say you leave. Right now."

He didn't have a better nature.

He reached for me. I stepped back, out of reach. My left foot found a patch of ice and I ended up on my ass in the snow.

The deputy looked sort of startled. He offered me a hand up without thinking about it. I climbed to my feet using the Jeep's bumper, moving farther away from Deputy Sullen at the same time. He figured this out. The frown lines on his forehead deepened.

Snow clung in wet clumps to my coat and glided in melting runnels down my legs. I was getting pissed off.

He strode around the Jeep.

I backpedaled using my hands on the car as traction. "We can play ring-around-the-Rosie if you want to, Deputy, but I'm not leaving until I've talked to Dolph."

"Your sergeant isn't in charge here." He stepped a little closer.

I backed away. "Then find someone who is."

"You don't need to talk to anyone but me," he said. He took three rapid steps towards me. I backed up faster. If we kept this up we'd be running around the car like a Marx brothers movie, or would that be the Keystone Kops?

"You're running from me."

"In these shoes, you've got to be kidding."

I was almost around the back of the Jeep, we'd be back where we started soon. Over the crackle of police radios you could hear angry voices. One of them sounded like Dolph. I wasn't the only one having trouble with the local cops. Though I seemed to be the only one being chased around a car.

"Stop, right where you are," he said.

"If I don't?"

He unclicked the flap on his holster. His hand rested on the butt of his gun. No words necessary.

This guy was crazy.

I might be able to get to my gun before he could draw his, but he was a cop. He was supposed to be one of the good guys. I try not to shoot the good guys. Besides, try explaining to other cops why you shot a cop. They get testy as hell about stuff like that.

I couldn't draw my gun. I couldn't outrun him. Arm wrestling seemed to be out. I did the only thing I could think of. I yelled "Dolph, Zerbrowski! Get your butts over here."

The shouting stopped as if someone had clicked a switch. Silence and the crackle of radios were the only sounds. I glanced towards the men. Dolph was glancing my way. At six foot eight inches, Dolph towered over everyone else. I waved a hand at him. Not frantically, but I wanted to be sure he saw me.

The deputy drew his gun. It took everything I had not to go for mine. But this bugnut was looking for an excuse. I wasn't going to give it to him. If he shot me anyway, I was going to be pissed.

His gun was a .357 Magnum, great for whale hunting. It was overkill for anything on two legs. That was human. I felt very human staring down that gun barrel. My eyes flicked up to his face. He wasn't frowning anymore. He looked very determined, and very sure of himself, as if he could pull the trigger and not get caught.

I wanted to yell for Dolph again, but didn't. The fool might pull the trigger. At this distance with that caliber of weapon I was dead meat. All I could do was stand there in the snow, my feet going slowly numb, hands gripping the car. At least he hadn't asked me to put my hands up. Guess he didn't want me to fall down again until he splattered my brains all over the new paint job.

It was Detective Clive Perry who walked towards us. His dark face reflected the lights like ebony. He was tall, though not as tall as the deputy from hell. His slender frame was enclosed in a pale camel's-hair coat. A hat that matched it perfectly sat atop his head. It was a nice hat and couldn't be pulled low enough to cover his ears. Most nice hats couldn't be. You had to get a toboggan hat, something knit that would ruin your hair to keep your ears warm. Not stylish. Of course, I wasn't wearing a hat at all. Didn't want to muss my hair.

Dolph had gone back to yelling at someone. I couldn't tell exactly what color uniform he was yelling at, there were at least two flavors to choose from. I caught a glimpse of a wildly gesturing arm, the rest of the man lost behind the small crowd. I'd never seen anybody wave their fists in Dolph's face. When you're six foot eight and built like a wrestler, most people are a little afraid of you. Probably wise.

"Ms. Blake, we're not quite ready for you," Perry said.

He always called everyone by title and last name. He was one of the most polite people I'd ever met. Soft-spoken, hardworking, courteous, so what had he done to end up on the Spook Squad?

The squad's full title was the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. They handled all preternatural-related crime in the area. A sort of permanent floating special task force. I don't think anyone planned on the squad actually solving cases. Their success rate was high enough that Dolph had been invited to lecture at Quantico. Lecturing to the FBI's preternatural research branch was not shabby.

I kept staring at the deputy and his gun. I wasn't going to glance away a second time. I didn't really believe he'd shoot me, but I wasn't sure. There was something in his face that said he'd do it, that maybe he wanted to do it. You give some people a gun and they turn into bullies. Legally armed bullies.

"Hello, Detective Perry. The deputy here and I seem to have a problem."

"Deputy Aikensen, do you have your gun out?" Perry's voice was soft, calm, a voice to talk jumpers off of ledges, or madmen out of hostages.

Aikensen turned his head, glancing back at Perry. "No civilians allowed at a murder scene, sheriff's orders."

"I don't think Sheriff Titus meant for you to shoot the civilians, Deputy."

He glanced back at Perry. "You making fun of me?"

There was enough time. I could have pulled my gun. I wanted to shove it in his ribs. I wanted him disarmed, but I behaved myself. It took more willpower than was pretty, but I didn't draw my gun. I wasn't ready to kill the son of a bitch. If you draw guns, there is always the chance someone will end up dead. Unless you want someone dead, you don't draw, simple as that. But it hurt something deep down inside when the deputy turned back to me with his gun still out. So far my ego was taking a lot of bruising, but I could live with that, and so could Deputy Aikensen.

"Sheriff said I wasn't to let anybody but police into the perimeter."

"Perimeter" was a pretty fancy word for someone this stupid. Of course, it was a military term. He'd probably been dying to use it in conversation for years.

"Deputy Aikensen, this is our preternatural expert, Anita Blake."

He shook his head. "No civvies, unless the sheriff okays it."

Perry glanced back towards Dolph, and what I now assumed was the sheriff.

"He's not even allowing us near the body, Deputy. What do you think the chances are of Sheriff Titus saying a civilian can see the body?"

Aikensen grinned then, most unpleasant. "Slim and none." He still held the gun very steady on the middle of my body. He was enjoying himself.

"Put the gun away and Ms. Blake will leave," Perry said.

I opened my mouth to say, The hell I will, but Perry gave a small shake of his head. I kept quiet. He had a plan, better than what I had.

"I don't take orders from no nigger detective."

"Jealous," I said.

"What?"

"That he's a big city detective and you're not."

"I don't have to take crap from you, either, bitch."

"Ms. Blake, please, let me handle this."

"You can't handle shit," Aikensen said.

"You've been totally uncooperative and rude, you and your sheriff. You can call me all the names you like, if that makes you feel better, but I can't let you point a gun at one of our people."

A look passed over Aikensen's face. I could see the thought flicker into life. Perry was a cop, too. He probably had a gun, and Aikensen had his back to him. The deputy whirled, bringing the gun up as he moved. His hand flexed.

I went for my gun.

Perry's empty hands were held out from his body, showing he was unarmed.

Aikensen was breathing hard. He raised the gun to head level, two-handed, steady, no hurry.

Someone noticed us and yelled, "What the fuck?" Indeed.

I pointed the Browning at Aikensen's back. "Freeze, Aikensen, or I will blow you away."

"You're not armed."

I clicked the hammer back. On a double-action you don't need to do that before you fire, but it makes a nice dramatic sound. "You didn't frisk me, asshole."

People were running towards us, shouting. But they wouldn't get here in time. It was just the three of us in the psychedelic snow, waiting.

"Put the gun down, Aikensen, now."

"No."

"Put it down or I'll kill you."

"Anita, you don't need to shoot. He's not going to hurt me," Perry said. It was the only time he'd ever used my first name.

"I don't need no nigger protecting me." His shoulders tensed. I couldn't see his hands well enough to be sure, but I thought he was pulling the trigger. I started to squeeze the trigger.

A bellowing voice yelled, "Aikensen, put that damn gun down!"

Aikensen pointed the gun skyward, just like that. He hadn't been pulling the trigger at all. He was just jumpy. I felt a giggle at the back of my throat. I'd almost shot him for being twitchy. I swallowed the laugh and eased off the trigger. Did Deputy Numb-nuts know how close he'd come? The only thing that had saved him was the Browning's trigger. It was stiff. There were a lot of guns out there where a tiny squeeze was all you needed.

He turned towards me, gun still out, but not pointed. Mine was still pointed. He started to lower his weapon to point it back at me. "If that barrel drops another inch, I'm going to shoot you."

"Aikensen, I said put the damn gun up. Before you get somebody killed." The man that went with the voice was about five foot six and must have weighed over two hundred pounds. He looked perfectly round like a sausage with arms and legs. His winter jacket strained over his round little tummy. A clear, grey stubble decorated his double chins. His eyes were small, nearly lost in the doughiness of his face. His badge glittered on his jacket front. He hadn't left it inside on his shirt. He'd pinned it outside, where the big city detectives couldn't miss it. Sort of like unzipping your fly so company could see you were well-endowed.

"This nigger . . ."

"We don't hold with talk like that, Deputy, you know that."

From the look on Aikensen's face you'd have thought the sheriff had told him there was no Santa Claus. I was betting the sheriff was a good ol' boy in the worst sense of the word. But there was intelligence in those beady little eyes, more than you could say for Aikensen.

"Put it away, boy, that's an order." His southern accent was getting thicker, either for show, or because he was getting teed off at Aikensen. A lot of people's accents got stronger under stress. It wasn't a Missouri accent. Something further south.

Aikensen finally, reluctantly, put up the gun. He didn't snap the holster closed, though. He was cruising for a bruising. I was just glad I hadn't been the one to give it to him. Of course if I'd pulled the trigger before Aikensen had raised his gun skyward, I'd never have known he wasn't pulling his trigger, too. If we'd all been cops with Aikensen as a criminal, it would have gone down as a clean shoot. Jesus.

Sheriff Titus put his hands in the pockets of his jacket and looked at me. "Now, miss, you can put your gun away, too. Aikensen here isn't going to shoot nobody."

I just stared at him, gun pointed skyward, held loose. I had been ready to put the gun away until he told me to do it. I'm not big on being told anything. I just stared at him.

His face still looked friendly, but his eyes lost their shine. Angry. He didn't like being defied. Great. Made my night.

Three other deputies gathered at Titus's back. They all looked sullen and ready to do anything their sheriff asked them to do. Aikensen stepped over to them, hand hovering near his freshly bolstered gun. Some people never learn.

"Anita, put the gun away." Dolph's usual pleasant tenor was harsh with anger. Like what he wanted to say was shoot the son of a bitch, but it would be hard to explain to his superiors.

Though not officially my boss, I listened to Dolph. He'd earned it.

I put the gun away.

Dolph was made up of blunt angles. His black hair was cut very short, leaving his ears naked to the cold. His hands were plunged into the pockets of a long black trench coat. The coat looked too thin for the weather, but maybe it was lined. Though he was a little too bulky to leave room for him and a lining in the same coat.

He beckoned Perry and me to one side, and said softly, "Tell me what happened."

We did.

"You really think he was going to shoot you?"

Perry stared down at the trampled snow for a moment, then looked up.

"I'm not sure, Sergeant."

"Anita?"

"I thought he was, Dolph."

"You don't sound sure now."

"The only thing I'm sure of is that I was going to shoot him. I was squeezing down on him, Dolph. What the hell is going on? If I end up killing a cop tonight, I'd like to know why."

"I didn't think anybody was stupid enough to pull a weapon," Dolph said. His shoulders hunched, the cloth of his coat straining to hold the movement.

"Well, don't look now," I said, "but Deputy Aikensen has still got his hand right over his weapon. He's just aching to draw it again."

Dolph drew a large breath in through his nose and let it out in a white whoosh of breath from his mouth. "Let's go talk to Sheriff Titus."

"We've been talking to the sheriff for over an hour," Perry said. "He isn't listening."

"I know, Detective, I know." Dolph kept walking towards the waiting sheriff and his deputies. Perry and I followed. What else could we do? Besides, I wanted to know why an entire crime-scene unit was standing around twiddling their thumbs.

Perry and I took a post to either side of Dolph, like sentries. Without thinking about it we were both a step back from him. He was, after all, our leader. But the automatic staging irked me. Made me want to step forward, be an equal, but I was a civvie. I wasn't equal. No matter how much I hung around or did, I wasn't a cop. It made a difference.

Aikensen's hand was gripping the butt of his gun tight. Would he actually draw down on all of us? Surely, even he wasn't that stupid. He was glaring at me, nothing but anger showed in his eyes. Maybe he was that stupid.

"Titus, tell your man there to get his hand away from his gun," Dolph said.

Titus glanced at Aikensen. He sighed. "Aikensen, get your damned hand away from your damn gun."

"She's a civilian. She drew on a policeman."

"You're lucky she didn't shoot your ass," Titus said. "Now, fasten the holster and tone it down a notch, or I'm going to make you go home."

Aikensen's face looked even more sullen. But he fastened his holster and plunged his hands into the pockets of his coat. Unless he had a derringer in his pocket, we were safe. Of course, he was just the sort of yahoo that would carry a backup weapon. Truthfully, sometimes so did I, but only when the alligator factor was high. Neck deep instead of ass deep.

Footsteps crunched through the snow behind us. I turned halfway so I could keep an eye on Aikensen and see the new arrivals.

Three people in navy blue uniforms came to stand on the other side of us. The tall man in front had a badge on his hat that said police chief. One of his deputies was tall, so thin he looked gaunt, and too young to shave. The second deputy was a woman. Surprise, surprise. I'm usually the only female at a crime scene. She was small, only a little taller than I, thin, with close-cropped hair hidden under her Smokey Bear hat. The only thing I could tell in the flashing lights was that everything on her was pale, from her eyes to her hair. She was pretty in a pixielike way, cute. She stood with her feet apart, hands on her Sam Brown belt. She was carrying a gun that was a little too big for her hands. I was betting she wouldn't like being called cute.

She was either going to be another pain in the ass, like Aikensen, or a kindred spirit.

The police chief was at least twenty years older than either deputy. He was tall, not as tall as Dolph, but then who was? He had a salt-and-pepper mustache, pale eyes, and was ruggedly handsome. One of those men who might not have been very attractive as a young man, but age had given his face character, depth. Like Sean Connery who was better looking at sixty than he had been at twenty.

"Titus, why don't you let these good people get on with their work? We're all cold and tired and want to go home."

Titus's small eyes flared to life. A lot of anger there. "This is county business, Garroway, not city business. You and your people are out of your jurisdiction."

"Holmes and Lind were on their way into work when the call came over the radio that somebody had found a body. Your man Aikensen here said he was tied up and couldn't get to the body for at least an hour. Holmes offered to sit with the body and make sure the crime scene stayed pure. My deputies didn't touch anything or do anything. They were just baby-sitting the crime scene for your people. What is wrong with that?" Garroway said.

"Garroway, the murder was found on our turf. It was our body to take care of. We didn't need any help. And you had no right to call in the Spook Squad without clearing it with me first," Titus said.

Police Chief Garroway spread his hands in a push-away gesture. "Holmes saw the body. She made the call. She thought the man hadn't been killed by anything human. Protocol is we call in the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team anytime we suspect supernatural activity."

"Well, Aikensen and Troy here don't think it was anything supernatural. A hunter gets eaten up by a bear and your little lady there jumps the gun."

Holmes opened her mouth but the chief held up a hand. "It's all right, Holmes." She settled back down, but she didn't like it.

"Why don't we ask Sergeant Storr here what he thinks killed the man?" Garroway said.

I was close enough to hear Dolph sigh.

"She had no right to let people near the body without us there to supervise," Titus said.

Dolph said, "Gentlemen, we have a dead body in the woods. The crime scene is not getting any younger. Valuable evidence is being lost, while we stand here and argue."

"A bear attack is not a crime scene, Sergeant," Titus said.

"Ms. Blake is our preternatural expert. If she says it was a bear attack, we'll all go home. If she says it was preternatural, you let us do our job, and treat it as a crime scene. Agreed?"

"Ms. Blake, Ms. Anita Blake?"

Dolph nodded.

Titus squinted at me, as if trying to bring me into focus. "You're the Executioner?"

"Some people call me that, yeah."

"This little bit of a girl has over a dozen vampire kills under her belt?" There was laughter in his voice, disbelief.

I shrugged. It was actually higher than that now, but a lot of them were unsanctioned kills. Not something I wanted the police to know about. Vampires have rights, and killing them without a warrant is murder. "I'm the legal vampire executioner for the area. You got a problem with that?"

"Anita," Dolph said.

I glanced at him, then back at the sheriff. I wasn't going to say anything more, honest, but he did.

"I just don't believe a little thing like yourself coulda done all the things I've heard."

"Look, it's cold, it's late, let me see the body and we can all go home."

"I don't need a civilian woman to tell me my job."

"That's it," I said.

"Anita?" Dolph said. That one word told me not to say it, not to do it, whatever it was.

"We have licked enough jurisdictional butt for one night, Dolph."

A man appeared, offering us steaming mugs on a tray. The smell of coffee mingled with the scent of snow. The man was tall. There was a lot of that going around tonight. A lock of white-blond hair obscured one eye. He wore round metal-framed glasses that made his face look even younger than it was. A dark toboggan hat was pulled low over his ears. Thick gloves, a multicolored parka, jeans, and hiking boots completed his outfit. He didn't look fashionable but he was dressed for the weather. My feet had gone numb in the snow.

I took a mug of coffee gratefully. If we were going to stand out here and argue, hot anything sounded like a great idea. "Thanks."

The man smiled. "You're welcome." Everybody was taking a mug but not everybody was saying thank you. Where were their manners?

"I've been sheriff of this county since before you were born, Ms. Blake. It's my county. I don't need any help from the likes of you." He sipped his coffee. He had said thank you.

"The likes of me? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Let it go, Anita."

I looked up at Dolph. I didn't want to let it go. I sipped at the coffee. The smell alone made me feel less angry, more relaxed. I stared into Titus's little piggy eyes and smiled.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

I opened my mouth to say, you, but the coffee man interrupted. "I'm Samuel Williams. I'm the caretaker here. I live in the little house behind the nature center. I found the body." He held his now-empty tray down at his side.

"I'm Sergeant Storr, Mr. Williams. These are my associates, Detective Perry, and Ms. Blake."

Williams dunked his head in acknowledgment.

"You know all of us, Samuel," Titus said.

"Yes, I do," Williams said. He didn't seem too excited about knowing them all.

He nodded at Chief Garroway and his deputies. "I told Deputy Holmes that I didn't think it was a natural animal. I still don't, but if it is a bear, it slaughtered that man. Any animal that'll do that once will do it again." He looked down at the snow, then up, like a man rising from deep water. "It ate parts of that man. It stalked him and treated him like a prey animal. If it really is a bear, it needs to be caught before it kills somebody else."

"Samuel here has a degree in biology," Titus said.

"So do I," I said. Of course, my degree was in preternatural biology, but hey, biology is biology, right?

"I'm working on my doctorate," Williams said.

"Yeah, studying owl shit," Aikensen said.

It was hard to tell, but I think Williams blushed. "I'm studying the feeding habits of the barred owl."

I had a degree in biology. I knew what that meant. He was collecting owl shit and regurgitated pellets to dissect. So Aikensen was right. Sort of.

"Will your doctorate be in ornithology or strigiology?" I asked. I was proud of myself for remembering the Latin name for owls.

Williams looked at me with a sense of kinship in his eyes. "Ornithology."

Titus looked like he'd swallowed a worm. "I don't need no college degree to know a bear attack when I see it."

"The last reported bear sighting in St. Gerard County was in 1941," Williams said. "I don't think there's ever been a bear attack reported." The implication just sat there. How did Titus know a bear attack from beans if he'd never seen one?

Titus threw his coffee out on the snow. "Listen here, college boy—"

"Maybe it is a bear," Dolph said.

We all looked at him. Titus nodded. "That's what I've been saying."

"Then you better order up a helicopter and get some dogs out here."

"What are you talking about?"

"An animal that'd slice up a man and eat him might break into houses. No telling how many people the bear might kill." Dolph's face was unreadable, just as serious as if he believed what he was saying.

"Now, I don't want to get dogs down here. Start a panic if people thought there was a mad bear loose. Remember how crazy everyone got when that pet cougar got loose about five years ago. People were shooting at shadows."

Dolph just looked at him. We all looked at him. If it was a bear, he needed to treat it like a bear. If it wasn't . . .

Titus shifted uncomfortably in his heavy boots in the snow. "Maybe Ms. Blake ought to have a look." He rubbed the cold tip of his nose. "Wouldn't want to start a panic for the wrong reasons."

He didn't want people to think there was a rampaging bear on the loose. But he didn't mind people thinking there was a monster on the loose. Or maybe Sheriff Titus didn't believe in monsters. Maybe.

Whatever, we were on our way to the murder scene. Possible murder scene. I made everyone wait while I put on my Nikes and the coveralls that I kept for crime scenes and vampire stakings. Hated getting blood on my clothes. Besides, tonight the coveralls were warmer than hose.

Titus made Aikensen stay with the cars. Hoped he didn't shoot anybody while we were gone.

Chapter 8

I didn't see the body at first. All I saw was the snow. It had pooled into a deep drift in one of those hollows that you find in the woods. In spring the holes fill with rain and mud. In fall they pile deep with leaves. In winter they hold the deepest snow. The moonlight carved each footprint, every scuff mark into high relief. Every print filled like a cup with blue shadows.

I stood at the edge of the clearing staring down at the mishmash of tracks. Somewhere in all this were the murderer's tracks, or a bear's tracks, but unless it was an animal I didn't know how anyone was going to figure out which tracks were significant. Maybe all crime scenes were tracked up this much, the snow just made it obvious. Or maybe this scene had been screwed over. Yeah.

Every track, cop or not, led to one thing—the body. Dolph had said the man had been sliced up, eaten. I didn't want to see it. I'd been having a very good time with Richard. A pleasant evening. It wasn't fair to end the night by looking at partially eaten bodies. Of course, the dead man probably thought being eaten hadn't been much fun either.

I took a deep breath of the cold air. My breath fogged as I exhaled. I couldn't smell the body. If it'd been summer, the dead man would have been ripe. Hurrah for the cold.

"You planning to look at the body from here?" Titus said.

"No," I said.

"Looks like your expert is losing her nerve, Sergeant."

I turned to Titus. His round, double-chinned face was smug, pleased with itself.

I didn't want to see the body, but losing my nerve, never. "You better hope this isn't a murder scene . . . Sheriff, because it has been fucked twenty ways to Sunday."

"You're not helping anything, Anita," Dolph said softly.

He was right, but I wasn't sure I cared. "You got any suggestions for preserving the crime scene, or can I just march straight in like the fifty billion people before me?"

"There were only four sets of footprints when I was ordered to leave the scene," Officer Holmes said.

Titus frowned at her. "When I determined it was an animal attack, there was no reason to keep it secure." His southern accent was getting thicker again.

"Yeah, right," I said. I glanced at Dolph. "Any suggestions?"

"Just walk in, I don't think there's much to preserve now."

"You criticizing my men?" Titus said.

"No," Dolph said, "I'm criticizing you."

I turned away so Titus wouldn't see me smile. Dolph doesn't suffer fools gladly. He'll put up with them a little longer than I will, but once you've reached his limit, run for cover. No bureaucratic ass will be spared.

I stepped into the hollow. Dolph didn't need my help to hand Titus his head on a platter. The snow collapsed at the edge of the hole. My feet slid on

the leaves underfoot. I ended on my butt for the second time tonight. But I was on a slope now. I slid almost all the way to the body. Laughter bubbled up behind me.

I sat on my ass in the snow and stared at the body. They could laugh all they wanted; it was funny. The dead man wasn't.

He lay on his back in the snow. The moonlight shone down on the body, reflecting on the snow, and giving the luster of midday to objects below. I had a penlight in one of the coverall's pockets, but I didn't need it. Or maybe didn't want it. I could see enough, for now.

Ragged furrows ran down the right side of his face. One claw had sliced over the eye, spilling blood and thick globs of eyeball down his cheek. The lower jaw was crushed, as if some great hand had grabbed it and squeezed. It made the face look unfinished, only half there. It must have hurt like hell, but it hadn't killed him. More's the pity.

His throat had been torn out; that had probably killed him. The flesh was just gone. His spine shone a dull white, like he'd swallowed a ghost and it hadn't gotten away. His camouflage coveralls were ripped away from his stomach. Some trick of the moonlight threw a thick shadow inside that ripped cloth. I couldn't see the damage inside. I needed to.

I prefer night kills. Darkness steals the color. Somehow it just isn't as real at night. Shine some light on it and the colors explode: the blood is crimson; the bone sparkles; fluids are not just dark but green, yellow, brown. Light lets you differentiate. A mixed blessing, at best.

I slipped the surgical gloves on. They were a cool second skin. Even riding in my inner pocket, the gloves were cooler than my skin. The penlight snapped on. Its tiny yellowish beam was dimmed by the bright moonlight, but cut through the shadows like a knife. The man's clothing had been peeled away like the layers of an onion; coveralls, pants and shirt, thermal underwear. The flesh was torn. The light glinted on frozen blood and gobbets of icy flesh. Most of the internal organs were gone. I shone the light on the surrounding snow, but there was nothing to see. The flesh, organs, were gone.

The intestine had leaked dark fluid all over the cavity, but it was frozen solid. I smelled no odor as I leaned over. Cold was a wonderful thing. The edges of the wound were ragged. No knife had done this. Or if it had, it was like no blade I'd ever seen. The medical examiner could tell for sure. A rib had been broken. It pointed upward like an exclamation mark. I shone the light on the bone. It was chipped, but not claws, not hands . . . teeth. I would have bet a week's pay that I was looking at tooth marks.

The throat wound was crusted with frozen snow. Reddish ice crystals had frozen to his face. The remaining eye was frozen shut with bloody ice. There were tooth marks at each side of the throat wound, not claws. The crushed jaw bore clear imprint of teeth. It certainly wasn't human teeth. Which meant it wasn't ghouls, vampires, zombies, or any other human undead. I had to hike my coat up to fish the tape measure out of the coverall pocket. It would have looked better if I'd taken the time to unbutton my coat, but, hey, it was cold.

The claw marks on the face were wide ripping things. Wider than a bear's claws, wider than anything natural. Monstrously large. There was a nearly perfect imprint of teeth on either side of the jaw. As if the creature had bitten down hard, but not tried to tear. Biting to crush, biting to . . . stop the screaming. Can't make a lot of noise with the entire bottom half of your mouth crushed. There was something very deliberate about that one bite. The throat was torn away, but again not as bad as it could be. Just enough to kill. It was only when you got to the stomach that the creature had lost control. The man was dead before the stomach was opened. I'd have bet on that. But the creature took the time to eat the stomach. To feed. Why?

There was an imprint in the snow, near the body. The imprint showed where people had knelt in it, me included, but the light picked up blood drained into the snow. He'd been facedown when someone rolled him over.

The footprints had tracked through nearly every inch of snow except for the blood splatters. Given a choice, people won't walk through blood. Crime scene or not. There wasn't nearly as much blood as you'd expect. Slicing a throat is messy business. But, of course, this throat hadn't been sliced. It had been ripped out by teeth. The blood had gone into the mouth, not onto the snow.

The blood had soaked into the clothing. If we could find our creature, it would be covered in blood, too. The snow was surprisingly clean for the amount of carnage. There was a thick pool of blood to one side, at least a yard from the body, but right next to the body-size impression. The dead man had lain by that stain long enough to bleed quite a bit, then been rolled over on its stomach, where it had lain long enough for the skin to freeze to the snow. More blood had pooled underneath the body while it lay facedown. Now here the body lay faceup, but no fresh blood. The body hadn't been turned over the last time until after he was very dead.

I called up, "Who rolled the body over?"

"It was just like that when I came on the scene," Titus said.

"Holmes?" Chief Garroway made her name a question.

"He was faceup when we got here."

"Did Williams move the body?"

"I didn't ask," she said.

Great. "Someone moved him. It'd be good to know if it was Williams."

"I'll go ask him," Holmes said.

"Patterson, you go with her," Titus said.

"I don't need . . ."

"Holmes, just go," Garroway said.

The two deputies left.

I went back to looking at the body. Had to think of it as a body, couldn't call it a "him." If I did that, I'd begin to wonder if he had a wife, kids. I didn't want to know. It was just a body, so much meat. Don't I wish.

I shone the penlight on the mishmashed snow. I stayed on my knees, nearly crawling on the snow. Me and Sherlock Holmes. If the creature had come up behind the man, there should have been some mark in the snow.

Maybe not a whole print but something. Every print I found wore shoes. Whatever had done this hadn't worn shoes. Even with a herd of squabbling cops trampling through there should have been some imprint of claws and animal tracks. I couldn't find any. Maybe the crime techs would have better luck. I hoped so.

If there were no prints, could it have flown in? A gargoyle, maybe? It was the only large winged predator that attacked man. Except for dragons, but they weren't native to this country, and it would have been a hell of a lot messier. Or maybe a lot neater. A dragon would simply have swallowed the man whole.

Gargoyles will attack and kill a man, but it's rare. Besides the nearest pack was in Kelly, Kentucky. The Kelly gargoyles were a small subspecies that had attacked people but never killed. They were mostly carrion eaters. In France there were three species of gargoyles that were man-sized or better. They'd eat you. But there'd never been anything that large in America.

What else could it be? There were a few lesser eastern trolls in the Ozarks, but not this close to St. Louis. Besides I'd seen pictures of troll kills, and this wasn't it. The claws were too curved, too long. The stomach looked like it had been cleaned out by something with a muzzle. Trolls looked frightfully human, but then they were primates.

A lesser troll wouldn't attack a human if it had a choice. A greater mountain troll might have, but they had been extinct for more than twenty years. Also they had a tendency to snap off trees and whap people to death, then eat them.

I didn't think it was anything as exotic as trolls or gargoyles. If there'd been tracks leading up to the body, I'd have been sure it was a lycanthrope kill. Trolls had been known to wear castoff clothing. So a troll could have tramped through the snow, or a gargoyle could have flown up, but a lycanthrope . . . they had to walk on naked feet that wouldn't fit any human shoe. So how?

I would have slapped my forehead, but didn't. If you do that at murder scenes, you got blood in your hair. I looked up. Humans almost never look up. Millions of years of evolution had conditioned us to ignore the sky. Nothing was big enough to take us from above. But that didn't mean something couldn't jump on us.

A tree branch snaked out over the hollow. The penlight picked out fresh white scars against the black limb. A shapeshifter had crouched on the bark, waiting for the man to walk underneath. Ambush, premeditation, murder.

"Dolph, could you come down here a minute?"

Dolph walked carefully down the snow-covered slope. Didn't want to repeat my performance, I guess. "You know what it is?"

"Shapeshifter," I said.

"Explain." He had his trusty notebook out, pen poised. I explained what I'd found. What I thought.

"We haven't had a rogue lycanthrope since the squad was formed. Are you sure about this?"

"I'm sure it's a shapeshifter, but I didn't say it was a lycanthrope."

"Explain."

"All lycanthropes are shapeshifters by definition, but not all shapeshifters are lycanthropes. Lycanthropy is a disease that you catch from surviving an attack or getting a bad batch of lycanthropy vaccine."

He looked at me. "You can get it from the vaccine?"

"It happens."

"Good to know," he said. "How can you be a shapeshifter and not a lycanthrope?"

"Most often an inherited condition. The family guardian dog, beast, giant cat. Mostly European. One person a generation has the genes and changes."

"Is that tied to the moon like normal lycanthropy?"

"No. A family guardian comes out when the family needs it. War, or some kind of physical danger. There are swanmanes. They are tied to the moon, but it's still an inherited condition."

"That it?"

"You can be cursed, but that's really rare."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "You've got to find a witch or something with magic powerful enough to curse somebody with shapeshifting. I've read spells for personal shapeshifting. The potions are so full of narcotics that you might believe you were an animal. You might also believe you were the Chrysler building, or you might just die. Real spells for it are a lot more complex and usually require a human sacrifice. A curse is a step up from a spell. It's not really a spell at all."

I tried to think how to explain it. In this area Dolph was the civvie. He didn't know the lingo. "A curse is like the ultimate act of will. You just gather all your power, magic, whatever, and focus it on one person. You will them to be cursed. You always do it in person, so they know it's been done. Some theories think it takes the victim's belief to make a curse work. I'm not sure I buy that."

"Are witches the only people that can curse people?"

"Occasionally somebody will run afoul of a fairy. One of the old Daoine sidhe, but you'd have to be in Europe for that. England, Ireland, parts of Scotland. In this country it'd be a witch."

"So a shapeshifter, but we don't know what kind or even how they got to be a shapeshifter."

"Not from a few marks and tracks, no."

"If you saw the shifter face-to-face could you tell what kind they were?"

"What animal?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Nope."

"Could you tell if they'd been cursed or if it was a disease?"

"Nope."

He just looked at me. "You're usually better than this."

"I'm better with the dead, Dolph. Give me a vamp or a zombie and I'll tell you their Social Security number. Some of that is natural talent, but a lot of it is practice. I haven't had as much experience with shapeshifters."

"What questions can you answer?"

"Ask and find out," I said.

"You think this is a brand-new shapeshifter?" Dolph asked.

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"The first time you change on the night of the full moon. It's too early for a brand-new shifter. But it could be a second, or third month, but . . ."

"But what?"

"If this is still a lycanthrope that can't control itself, that kills indiscriminately, it should still be here. Hunting us."

Dolph glanced out into the darkness. He held his notebook and pen in one hand, right hand free for his gun. The movement was automatic.

"Don't sweat it, Dolph. If it was going to eat more people, it would have taken Williams or the deputies."

His gaze searched the darkness, then came back to me. "So the shapeshifter could control itself?"

"I think so."

"Then why kill the man?"

I shrugged. "Why does anyone kill? Lust, greed, rage."

"The animal form used as a murder weapon then," Dolph said.

"Yeah."

"Is it still in animal form?"

"This was done by a half-and-half form, sort of a wolfman."

"A werewolf."

I shook my head. "I can't tell what sort of animal it is. The wolfman was just an example. It could be any sort of mammal."

"Just a mammal?"

"These wounds, yeah. I know there are avian weres, but they don't do this sort of damage."

"So werebirds?"

"Yeah, but that's not what did this."

"Any guesses?"

I squatted beside the body, stared at it. Willed it to tell me its secrets. Three nights from hence, when the soul had finally flown far away, I might have tried to raise the man and ask what did this. But his throat was gone. Even the dead can't talk without the proper equipment.

"Why did Titus think it was a bear kill?" I asked.

Dolph thought about that for a minute. "I don't know."

"Let's ask him."

Dolph nodded. "Be my guest." He sounded just a wee bit sarcastic. If I'd been arguing with the sheriff for hours, I'd have been a large chunk o' sarcastic.

"Come on, Dolph. We can't know less than we do right now."

"If Titus has any say in it, we might."

"Do you want me to ask him or not?"

"Ask."

I called up to the waiting men. "Sheriff Titus."

He looked down at me. He'd gotten out a cigarette but hadn't lit it yet. He paused with a lighter halfway to his mouth. "You want something, Ms. Blake?" The cigarette bobbed in his lips as he spoke.

"Why do you think this is a bear attack?"

He snapped the lid on his lighter, and took the unlit cig out of his mouth with the same hand. "Why do you want to know?"

I wanted to say, just answer the damn question, but I didn't. Brownie point for me. "Just curious."

"It wasn't a mountain lion. A cat would have used its claws more. Scratched him up some."

"Why not a wolf?"

"Pack animal. Looks like only one animal to me."

I had to agree with all the above. "I think you've been holding out on us, Sheriff. You seem to know a lot about animals that aren't native to this area."

"I go hunting now and then, Ms. Blake. Need to know the habits of your prey if you want to bag one."

"So a bear by process of elimination?" I asked.

"You might say that." He put the cig back in his mouth. Flame flared, pulsing against his face. When he flipped the lighter closed, the darkness seemed thicker.

"What do you think it was, Ms. Expert?" The smell of his cigarette carried on the cold air.

"Shapeshifter."

Even in the darkness I could feel the weight of his eyes. He blew a ghostly cloud of smoke moonward. "You think so."

"I know so," I said.

He gave a sharp *hmph* sound. "Awful sure of yourself, ain't ya?"

"You want to come down here, Sheriff. I'll show you what I've found."

He hesitated, then shrugged. "Why not?" He came down the slope like a bulldozer, heavy boots forming snowy wakes. "Okay, Ms. Expert, dazzle me."

"You are a pain in the ass, Titus."

Dolph sighed a white cloud of breath.

Titus thought that was real funny, laughed, doubled over, slapping his leg. "You are just a laugh a minute, Ms. Blake. Now, tell me what you got."

I did.

He took a long drag on his cig. The end flared bright in the darkness. "Guess it wasn't a bear, after all."

He wasn't going to argue. Bliss. "No, it wasn't."

"Cougar?" he said, sort of hopefully.

I stood carefully. "You know it wasn't."

"Shapeshifter," he said.

"Yeah."

"There hasn't been a rogue shapeshifter in this county for ten years."

"How many did it kill?" I asked.

He took in a lungful of smoke and blew it out slowly. "Five."

I nodded. "I missed that case. It was before my time."

"You'da been in junior high when it happened?"

"Yeah."

He threw his cigarette in the snow and ground it out with his boot. "I wanted it to be a bear. "

"Me, too," I said.

Chapter 9

The night was a hard, cold darkness. Two o'clock is a forsaken time of night, no matter what the season. In mid-December two o'clock is the frozen heart of eternal night. Or maybe I was just discouraged. The light over the stairs leading up to my apartment shone like a captured moon. All the lights had a frosted, swimming quality. Slightly unreal. There was a haze in the air, like an infant fog.

Titus had asked me to stick around in case they found someone in the area. I was their best bet for figuring out if the person was a lycanthrope or some innocent schmuck. Beat the heck out of cutting off a hand to see if there was fur on the inside of the body. If you were wrong, what did you do, apologize?

There had been some lycanthrope tracks leading up to the murder scene. Plaster casts had been made, and at my suggestion, copies were being sent to the biology department at Washington University. I had almost addressed it to Dr. Louis Fane. He taught biology at Wash U. He was one of Richard's best friends. A nice guy. A wererat. A deep, dark secret that might be jeopardized if I started addressing lycanthrope paw prints to him. Addressing it to the entire department pretty much guaranteed Louie would see it.

That had been my greatest contribution of the night. They were still searching when I drove off. I had my beeper on. If they found a naked human in the snow, they could call. Though if my beeper went off before I got some sleep, I was going to be pissed.

When I shut my car door, there was an echo. A second car door slammed shut. I was tired, but it was automatic to search the small parking lot for that second car. Irving Griswold stood four cars down, bundled in a Day-Glo orange parka with a striped muffler trailing around his neck. His brown hair formed a frizzy halo to his bald spot. Tiny round glasses perched on a button nose. He looked jolly and harmless, and was a werewolf, too. Seemed to be my night for it.

Irving was a reporter on the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Any story about me and Animators, Inc., usually had his byline on it. He smiled as he walked towards me. Just your friendly neighborhood reporter. Yeah, right.

"What do you want, Irving?"

"Is that any way to greet someone who has spent the last three hours in his car waiting for you?"

"What do you want, Irving?" Maybe if I just kept repeating the question over and over, I'd wear him down.

The smile faded from his round little face. He looked solemn and worried. "We've got to talk, Anita."

"Will this be a long story?"

He seemed to think about that for a moment, then nodded. "Could be."

"Then come upstairs. I'll fix us both some real coffee."

"Real coffee as opposed to fake coffee?" he asked.

I started for the stairs. "I'll fix you a cup of java that'll put hair on your chest."

He laughed.

I realized I'd made a pun and hadn't meant to. I know Irving is a shapeshifter. I've even seen his wolf form. But I forget. He's a friend and doesn't seem the least preternatural in human form.

We sat at the small kitchenette table, sipping vanilla nut creme coffee. My suit jacket was draped over the back of the kitchen chair. It left my gun and shoulder holster exposed. "I thought you were on a date tonight, Blake."

"I was."

"Some date."

"A girl can never be too careful."

Irving blew on his cup, sipping it delicately. His eyes had flicked from side to side, taking in everything. Days from now he'd be able to describe the room completely, down to the Nike Airs and jogging socks in front of the couch.

"What's up, Irving?"

"Great coffee." He wouldn't meet my eyes. It was a bad sign.

"What's wrong?"

"Has Richard told you anything about Marcus?"

"Your pack leader, right?"

Irving looked surprised. "He told you?"

"I found out tonight that your alpha is named Marcus. There's a battle of succession going on. Marcus wants Richard dead. Richard says he won't fight him."

"Oh, he fought him, all right," Irving said.

It was my turn to be surprised. "Then why isn't Richard pack leader?"

"Richard got squeamish. He had him, Blake, claws at Marcus's throat."

Irving shook his head. "He thought when Marcus recovered they could talk, compromise." He made a rude sound. "Your boyfriend is an idealist."

Idealist. It was almost the same thing as fool. Jean-Claude and Irving agreed. They didn't agree on much.

"Explain."

"You can move up in the pack hierarchy by fighting. You win, you go up a notch. You lose, you stay where you are." He took a long sip of coffee, eyes closed as if drinking in the warmth. "Until you fight for pack leader."

"Let me guess. It's a fight to the death."

"No killie, no new leader," he said.

I shook my head, coffee sitting untouched in front of me. "Why are you telling me all this, Irving? Why now?"

"Marcus wants to meet you."

"Why didn't Richard tell me that himself?"

"Richard doesn't want you involved."

"Why not?" Irving kept answering my questions, but the answers weren't helping much.

Irving shrugged. "Richard won't give Marcus a freaking inch. If Marcus said black, Richard would say white."

"Why does Marcus want to see me?"

"I don't know," Irving said.

"Yeah, right."

"Honest, Blake, I don't know what's going on. Something big is up, and no one's talking to me."

"Why not? You're a shapeshifter."

"I'm also a reporter. I made the mistake years back of printing an article. The lycanthrope I talked to lied, said he never gave me permission to quote him. He lost his job. Some of the others wanted to out me, too, let me lose my job." He huddled around his coffee mug. Eyes distant with remembering. "Marcus said no, said I was more valuable to them as a reporter. No one's really trusted me since."

"Not a forgiving bunch," I said. I sipped my coffee and found it cooling. If I drank it fast enough, it would be drinkable, barely.

"They never forgive and they never forget," Irving said.

Sounds like a bad character trait, but it's one of my founding principles, so I couldn't complain much. "So Marcus sent you out here to talk to me. About what?"

"He wants to meet you. To talk some kind of business."

I got up and refilled my mug. A little less sugar this time. I was beginning to wake up just from frustration. "Let him make an appointment to come to my office."

Irving shook his head. "Marcus is some hotshot surgeon. You know what would happen if even a hint of what he is got out?"

I could understand that. You might get away with being a shapeshifter on some jobs. Doctor was not one of them. There was still the dentist in Texas that was being sued by a patient. Said she contracted lycanthropy from him. Nonsense. You didn't get it from having human hands in your mouth. But the case hadn't been thrown out. People didn't have a lot of sympathy for fur balls treating their kid's sparkling teeth.

"Okay, send someone else to the office. Surely, Marcus must trust someone."

"Richard has forbidden anyone to contact you."

I just looked at him. "Forbidden?"

Irving nodded. "Anyone lower in the pack order contacts you at their peril."

I started to smile and stopped. He was serious. "You're not kidding."

He raised a three-fingered salute. "Scout's honor."

"So how come you're here? You looking to move up in the pack?"

He paled. Honest to God, he paled. "Me? Fight Richard? Hell no."

"Then Richard won't mind you talking to me?"

"Oh, he'll mind."

I frowned. "Is Marcus going to protect you?"

"Richard gave a specific order. Marcus can't interfere."

"But he ordered you to come see me," I said.

"Yep."

"What's to stop Richard from busting your chops about this?"

Irving grinned. "I thought you'd protect me."

I laughed. "You son of a bitch."

"Maybe, but I know you, Blake. You won't like that Richard's been keeping things from you. You certainly won't like him protecting you. Besides, I've been your friend for years. I don't think you'll stand by while your boyfriend beats the hell out of me."

Irving knew me better than Richard did. It was not a comforting thought. Had I been fooled by a handsome face, a nice sense of humor? Had I not seen the real Richard? I shook my head. Could I be fooled that completely? I hoped not.

"Do I have your protection?" He was still smiling, but there was something in his eyes. Fear, maybe.

"You need me to say it out loud for it to be official?"

"Yeah."

"That a rule in the lycanthrope underground?"

"One of them," he said.

"You have my protection, but I want information in return."

"I told you I don't know anything, Blake."

"Tell me what it's like to be a lycanthrope, Irving. Richard seems determined to keep me in the dark. I don't like being in the dark."

Irving smiled. "I heard that."

"You be my guide to the world of the furry, and I'll keep Richard off your back."

"Agreed."

"When does Marcus want to meet?"

"Tonight." Irving had the grace to look embarrassed.

I shook my head. "No way. I'm going to bed. I'll meet with Marcus tomorrow, but not tonight."

He looked down into his coffee, fingertips touching the mug. "He wants it to be tonight." He looked up at me. "Why do you think I've been camped out in my car?"

"I am not at the beck and call of every monster in town. I don't even know what Fur Face wants to meet about." I leaned back in the chair and crossed my arms. "No way am I going out tonight to play with shapeshifters."

Irving squirmed in his chair, rotating the coffee cup slowly on the table. He wouldn't meet my eyes again.

"What's wrong now?"

"Marcus told me to set up a meeting with you. If I refused, he'd have me . . . punished. If I come here, Richard gets pissed. I'm trapped between two alpha males, and I ain't up to it."

"Are you asking me to protect you from Marcus, as well as Richard?"

"No," he said, shaking his head, "no. You're good, Blake, but you aren't in Marcus's league."

"Glad to hear it," I said.

"Will you meet with Marcus tonight?"

"If I say no, do you get in trouble?"

He stared into his coffee. "Would you believe no?"

"Nope."

He looked at me, brown eyes very serious. "He'll get mad, but I'll live."

"But he'll make you hurt." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah." That one word so soft, so tentative. It wasn't like Irving.

"I'll see him on one condition. That you're present at the meeting."

His face bloomed into a grin that spread from pole to pole. "You are a true friend, Blake." All the sadness was gone, washed away in the rosy glow of finding out what the hell was going on. Even ass deep in alligators, Irving was a reporter. It was who and what he was, more than the lycanthropy.

The smile alone was worth a meeting. Besides, I wanted to know if Richard was really in danger. Meeting the man who was threatening him was the only real way to find out. Also, I didn't really care for someone threatening one of my friends. Silver-plated bullets only slowed down a vampire, unless you can take out the head and heart. Silver bullets will kill a werewolf, no second chances, no healing, just dead.

Marcus might remember that. If he pushed it, I might even remind him.

Chapter 10

Irving had called Marcus from my apartment. Again Irving didn't know why, all he did know was Marcus said to call before we came. I went into the bedroom. Hung up my dryclean-only suit, and changed clothes. Black jeans, red polo shirt, black Nikes with a blue swoosh, and real socks. I abandoned jogging socks for everyday wear once winter set in.

I reached for the bulky green sweater I had laid out on the bed. I hesitated. It wasn't the fact that the sweater had stylized Christmas trees on it, and it might not be the coolest thing to wear. I didn't give a damn about that. I was debating on whether to carry a second gun. A fashion accessory nearer and dearer to my heart than any piece of clothing.

No lycanthrope had threatened me yet, but ol' Gretchen the vamp had. She might not be a master vampire but she was close. Besides, the memory of the cop taking the Browning away was still fresh. I had too many preternatural enemies to go unarmed. I got out my Uncle Mike's sidekick inner-pants holster. A comfy fit that didn't ruin the line of your jeans unless someone was really looking.

My main backup gun is a Firestar 9mm. Small, light, pretty to look at, and I could wear it at my waist and still be able to sit down. The sweater hung to mid thigh. The gun was invisible unless you frisked me. The gun was set in front, ready for a cross-draw. Probably wouldn't need it. Probably.

The sweater bulked up around the straps of the shoulder holster. I've seen people wear shoulder rigs underneath bulky sweaters or sweatshirts, but you lose a few seconds groping under the cloth. I'd rather look less than fashion perfect and live.

The sweater was too long for my leather jacket, so I was back in my black trench coat. Me and Phillip Marlowe. I didn't take any extra ammo. I figured twenty-one rounds was enough for one night. I even left my knives at home. I almost talked myself out of the Firestar. I usually didn't start carrying two guns until after people had tried to kill me. I shrugged. Why wait? If I didn't need it, I'd feel silly tomorrow. If I did need it, I wouldn't feel silly at all.

Irving was waiting for me. Sitting on the couch like a good little boy. He looked like a schoolboy whom the teacher had made stand in the corner.

"What's wrong?"

"Marcus wanted me to just give you directions. He doesn't want me at the meeting. I said, you wouldn't come without me. That you didn't trust him." He looked up at me. "He's pretty pissed."

"But you stood your ground," I said.

"Yeah."

"Why don't you sound happier about that?"

He shrugged. "Marcus in a bad mood is not a pleasant experience, Blake."

"I'll drive, you give directions."

"Marcus said we both should drive. He said that I'd need to stay after the meeting, for a little talk."

"Come on, Irving, I'm driving, you're giving directions, and when I leave, you leave."

"I appreciate the offer, Blake, but you don't want Marcus mad at you."

"If I'm protecting you from Richard, I might as well throw in Marcus."

He shook his head. "No, you follow my car." He held up a hand. "No more arguing, Blake. I am a werewolf. I have to live in the community. I can't afford to make a stand against Marcus, not over one little talk."

I wanted to argue some more, but I didn't. Irving knew his problems better than I did. If fighting Marcus over this would make things worse, then I'd let it go. But I didn't like it.

The Lunatic Cafe was located in University City. Its sign was a glowing crescent moon with the restaurant name done in soft blue neon. Except for the name, and the nifty sign, the place didn't look much different from all the other shops and restaurants in the college district.

It was Friday night and there was no parking. I was beginning to think Marcus would have to come out to my car, when a wine dark Impala pulled out of the two spaces it had been hogging. My Jeep slipped in with room for a second car on one side.

Irving waited in front of the restaurant. His hands were shoved deep into his pockets. The ridiculous muffler trailed nearly to the ground. He looked distracted and not a bit happy.

I walked towards him with the trench coat flapping around me like a cape. Even like this, most people wouldn't see the gun. They'd see a small woman with a bright Christmas sweater. People see what they expect to see most of the time. The people that I was wearing the gun for would notice, and know I was armed.

Irving pushed the door in without a word. Irving, quiet? I didn't like seeing him subdued, almost beaten, like a kicked dog. It made me not like Marcus, and I hadn't even met him.

Noise poured around us just inside the door. A murmur of voices so thick it was like ocean noise. Silverware clinked, someone laughed high and bright like a hand rising from the noise, to be swallowed back again and lost. There was a bar along one wall, polished dark wood, old and lovingly cared for. The rest of the room held small, round tables that could comfortably seat about four. Every seat was full, and then some. Three doorways opened up; one beside the bar, one to the right, one in the middle. More tables were shoved into the smaller rooms.

The cafe had started life as someone's home. We were standing in the living room. Through the doorways leading to the other rooms were open archways, as if someone had knocked down a few walls. Even with that, the place was claustrophobic. People were three deep at the bar waiting for a table. The place was jammed to bursting with happy, smiling people.

One of the women behind the bar came around, wiping her hands on a towel tucked into the tie of her apron. She gave a wide, welcoming smile. She had a pair of menus in her one hand.

I started to say, but we don't need . . . when Irving gripped my arm. Tension vibrated through his hand. He'd grabbed my right arm. I turned to tell him not to do that, but the look on his face stopped me. He was staring at the smiling woman as if she had sprouted a second head. I turned back to the woman, and looked at her. Really looked at her.

She was tall, slender, with long, straight hair. It was a rich, reddish auburn that gleamed under the lights. Her face was a soft triangle, chin maybe a little

too pointed, but overall she was lovely. Her eyes were a strange amber-brown that matched her hair perfectly.

Her smile widened, just a lift of lips. I knew what I was looking at. Lycanthrope. One that could pass for human. Like Richard.

I looked out over the room, and realized why it felt so tight. It wasn't just the crowd. A majority of the happy, smiling people were shapeshifters. Their energy burned in the air like the weight of a thunderstorm. I had thought the crowd was boisterous, too loud, but it was the shapeshifters. Their energy boiled and filled the room, masquerading as the energy of any crowd. As I stood there at the door, a face lifted here and there. Human eyes looked at me, but the glance wasn't human.

The glance was considering, testing. How tough was I? How good would I taste? It reminded me of the way Richard had been watching the crowd at the Fox. I felt like a chicken at a coyote convention. I was suddenly glad of the second gun.

"Welcome to the Lunatic Cafe, Ms. Blake," the woman said. "I'm Raina Wallis, proprietor. If you'll follow me. Your party is waiting for you." She said it all with a smile and a warm glow in her eyes. Irving's grip on my arm was nearly painful.

I leaned into him, and whispered, "That's my right arm."

He blinked at me. His eyes flicked to the Browning, and he let go, muttering, "Sorry."

Raina leaned closer. Irving flinched. "I won't bite, Irving, not yet." She gave a low laugh that was rich and bubbling. The kind of laugh that was meant for bedrooms and private jokes. The laugh gave her eyes and body a different look. She suddenly seemed more voluptuous, more sensual than just a second ago. Nicely weird.

"Mustn't keep Marcus waiting." She turned and began threading her way through the tables.

I glanced at Irving. "Something you want to tell me?"

"Raina's our alpha female. If the punishment's going to be really bad, she does it. She's a lot more creative than Marcus."

Raina was motioning to us by the archway near the bar. Her lovely face was frowning, looking a little less lovely, and a lot more bitchy.

I patted his shoulder. "I won't let her hurt you."

"You can't stop it."

"We'll see," I said.

He nodded, but not as if he believed me. He started between the tables. I followed. A woman touched his hand as he walked past. Gave him a smile. She was about my size, and dainty, with straight black hair cut short that framed her face like black lace. Irving squeezed her fingers and kept walking. Her large, dark eyes met mine. The eyes told me nothing. They had smiled at Irving; for me they were neutral. Like the eyes of a wolf I'd seen once in California. I'd walked around a tree and there it had stood. I had never really understood what neutral meant until that moment. Those pale eyes stared at me, waiting. If I

threatened it, it would attack. If I left it alone, it would run. My choice. The wolf hadn't given a damn which way it turned out.

I kept walking, but the space between my shoulder blades was itching. I knew if I turned around that nearly every eye would be on me, on us. The weight of their gaze was physical.

I had an urge to whirl and say boo, but fought it off. I had a feeling they were all staring at me with neutral inhuman eyes, and I didn't want to see it.

Raina led us to a closed door at the back of the dining room. She pushed it open and motioned us through with a theatrical wave of her arm. Irving just walked through. I walked through but kept my eyes on her. I was nearly close enough for her to have hugged me. Close enough that with her reflexes she could probably take me.

Lycanthropes are just faster than a normal human. It isn't mind tricks like with vampires. They are just flat out better. I wasn't sure how much better in human form, though. Staring up into Raina's smiling face, I wasn't sure I wanted to find out.

We stood in a narrow hallway. There was a door at either end, one showing the cold night through its glass window, the other closed, a question mark.

Raina closed the door behind us, leaning on it. She seemed to collapse against it, head hanging down, hair spilling forward.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She took a deep, shuddering breath and looked up at me.

I gasped. I couldn't help myself.

She was gorgeous. Her cheekbones were high and sculpted. Her eyes wider and more centered in her face. She looked like what might have been her sister, a family resemblance but not the same person.

"What did you just do?"

She gave that rich, bedroom laugh again. "I am alpha, Ms. Blake. I can do a great many things that most shifters cannot."

I was willing to bet that. "You moved your bones around, on purpose, like do-it-yourself cosmetic surgery."

"Very good, Ms. Blake, very good." Her amber-brown eyes flashed to Irving. The smile left her face. "Do you still insist on this one being at the meeting?"

"Yes, I do."

Her lips pursed, as though she'd tasted something sour. "Marcus said to ask, then to bring you." She shrugged, and stood away from the door. She was taller by about three inches. I wished I'd paid more attention to her hands. Had they changed, too?

"Why the body sculpting?" I asked.

"The other form is my day form. This is real."

"Why the disguise?"

"In case I have to do something nefarious," she said.

Nefarious?

She stalked down the hall towards the other closed door. Her walk was a gliding, athletic movement like a big cat's. Or would that be big wolf's?

She knocked on the door. I heard nothing, but she opened the door. She stood there, arms crossed over her stomach, cradling her breasts, smiling at us. I was beginning not to like Raina's smiles.

The room was a banquet hall with cloth-covered tables grouped in a horseshoe. A raised platform with four chairs and a lectern closed the mouth of the horseshoe. Two men stood on the platform. One was at least six feet tall, slender but muscled like a basketball player. His hair was black, cut short with a matching finger-thin mustache and goatee beard. He stood with one hand gripping his opposite wrist. A jock pose. A bodyguard pose.

He wore a skintight pair of black jeans, and a sweater with a black-on-black design clung to wide shoulders. There was a fringe of dark chest hair just above the scooped neckline. Black tooled cowboy boots and a large blocky watch completed the badass look.

The other man was no more than five foot seven. His hair was that funny shade of blond that has brown highlights in it, but still manages to be blond. The hair was short but styled and blow-dried, and would have been lovely to look at if it had been a little longer. His face was clean-shaven, square jawed, with a dimple in his chin. The dimple should have made the face look fun, but it didn't. It was a face for rules. Those thin lips were built for saying, my way or else.

He wore a pale blue linen suit jacket over black pants. A pale blue turtleneck that matched the jacket to perfection completed the outfit. His shoes were black and polished to a shine.

It had to be Marcus. "Alfred." One word, but it was an order. The bigger man stepped-leaped off the platform. It was a graceful, bounding movement. He moved in a cloud of his own vitality. It rolled and boiled around him almost like heat rising off pavement. You couldn't see it with the naked eye, but you could sure as hell feel it.

Alfred came at me as though he had a purpose. I put my back to the wall, keeping Raina in sight, along with everybody else. Irving moved back with me. He stood a little away from all of us, but closer to me than anyone.

I put the trench coat back so the gun showed plainly. "Your intentions better be friendly, Alfred."

"Alfred," the other man said. One word, even the tone sounded the same, but this time Alfie stopped in his tracks. He stood, staring at me. His eyes weren't neutral, they were hostile. People don't usually dislike me on sight. But hey, I wasn't too thrilled with him, either.

"We have not offered you violence, Ms. Blake," Marcus said.

"Yeah, right. Alfie there is contained violence in motion. I want to know what his intentions are before he comes closer."

Marcus looked at me as if I'd done something interesting. "A very apt description, Ms. Blake. You can see our auras, then?"

"If that's what you want to call it," I said.

"Alfred's intentions are not hostile. He will merely search you for weapons. It is standard procedure for nonshifters. It is nothing personal, I assure you."

The very fact that they didn't want me armed made me want to keep my weapons. Stubbornness, or a strong survival instinct.

"Maybe I'd agree to being searched if you explained why I'm here first." Stall, until I could decide what to do.

"We don't discuss business in front of the press, Ms. Blake."

"Well, I'm not talking to you without him."

"I will not jeopardize all of us to satisfy idle curiosity." He was still standing on the platform like a general surveying his troops.

"The only reason I'm here at all is because Irving is a friend. Insulting him isn't going to endear you to me."

"I do not wish to endear myself to you, Ms. Blake. I wish your aid."

"You want my help?" I didn't try to keep the surprise out of my voice.

He gave a brief nod.

"What kind of help?"

"He must leave."

"No," I said.

Raina pushed away from the wall and stalked around us, just out of reach, but circling like a shark. "Irving's punishment could begin now." Her voice was low and puffing around the edges.

"I didn't know wolves purred," I said.

She laughed. "Wolves do a lot of things, as I'm sure you're aware."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, come now, woman to woman." She leaned one shoulder against the wall, arms crossed, face friendly. I was betting she could bite my finger off and smile just like that the entire time.

She bent close as if we were sharing secrets. "Richard is as good as he looks, isn't he?"

I stared into her amused eyes. "I don't kiss and tell."

"I'll tell you my juicy tidbit, if you'll tell me yours."

"Raina, enough." Marcus had moved forward to the edge of the stage. He didn't look happy.

She gave him a lazy smile. She was baiting him more than me, and enjoying it very much.

"Irving must leave, and Alfred must search you for weapons. There is no negotiating those two points."

"I'll make you a deal," I said. "Irving leaves now, but he goes home. No punishment."

Marcus shook his head. "I have decreed he will be punished. My word is law."

"Who died and made you king?"

"Simon," Raina said.

I blinked at her.

"He fought and killed Simon. That's who died and made him pack leader."

Ask a silly question . . . "You want my help, Irving goes free and untouched. No punishment."

"Don't do this, Anita," Irving said. "You'll just make things worse."

Raina stayed leaning beside me. Just a little girl talk. "He's right, you know. Right now he's mine to play with, but if you make Marcus really angry he'll give him to Alfred. I'll torture his mind and body. Alfred will break him."

"Irving goes free, no punishment. I stay and let Alfred search me for weapons. Otherwise we walk."

"Not we, Ms. Blake. You are free to go, but Irving is mine. He will stay, and with or without you he will be taught his lesson."

"What did he do wrong?" I asked.

"That is our business, not yours."

"I'm not going to help you do shit."

"Then go," he leaped gracefully off the stage, walking towards us as he spoke, "but Irving stays. You are only among us for this one night. He must live with us, Ms. Blake. He cannot afford your bravado."

The last sentence brought him just a little behind Alfred. Close up there were fine lines around his eyes and mouth, a slackness to the skin of his neck and jaws. I added ten years to his age. Fifties.

"I can't leave Irving here, knowing what you'll do to him."

"Oh, you have no idea what we'll do to him," Raina said. "We heal so well." She pushed away from the wall and walked to Irving. She paced round him in a tight circle, shoulder, hip, brushing against him, here and there as she moved. "Even the weakest of us can take so very much damage."

"What do you want to guarantee Irving's safety?" I asked.

Marcus looked at me, face careful, neutral. "You promise to aid us, and let Alfred frisk you. He is my bodyguard. You must let him do his job."

"I can't promise to help you without knowing what it is."

"Then we have no bargain."

"Anita, I can take it, whatever they dish out. I can take it. I've done it before."

"You asked for my protection from Richard, just call it a package deal," I said.

"You asked her for her protection?" Raina stepped away from him, surprise plain on her pretty face.

"Just against Richard," Irving said.

"It's clever," Raina said, "but it does have certain implications."

"She's not a pack member. It only works on Richard because they're dating," Irving said. He looked a little worried.

"What implications?" I asked.

Marcus answered, "To ask pack members for their protection is to acknowledge they are of higher rank without having to fight them. If they give their protection, then you have agreed to help them fight their battles. If they are challenged you are honor bound to aid them."

I glanced at Irving. He looked ill. "She's not one of us. You can't hold her to the law."

"What law?" I asked.

"Pack law," Marcus said.

"I forfeit her protection," Irving said.

"Too late," Raina said.

"You place us in a quandary, Ms. Blake. A pack member has acknowledged you as higher rank than he is. Acknowledged you as dominant. By our laws we must accept that as binding."

"I can't be a pack member," I said.

"No, but you can be dominant."

I knew what the word meant in the real world. Marcus was using it as if it meant more. "What does it mean to be dominant?"

"It means you can stand as Irving's protector against all comers."

"No," Irving said. He brushed past Raina and stood in front of Marcus. He stood tall and stared him in the eye. It was not a submissive display.

"I won't let you use me like this. It's what you intended all along. You knew I'd ask her protection from Richard. You counted on it, didn't you, you smug bastard."

A low growl trickled out from between Marcus's perfect white teeth. "I would watch my tongue if I were you, youngling."

"If it offends you, I will cut it out." Alfred's first words were not comforting.

This was getting out of hand. "Irving is under my protection, Alfred. If I understand the law. You have to go through me to hurt Irving, is that right?"

Alfred turned cold, dark eyes to me. He nodded.

"If you kill me, then I can't help Marcus."

This seemed to puzzle the big fella. Great, confusion to my enemies.

Marcus smiled. "You have found a flaw in my logic, Ms. Blake. If you truly intend to protect Irving, to the letter of the law, then you would indeed die. No mere human could withstand one of us. Even the lowliest would kill you."

I let that comment go. Why argue when I was winning anyway?

"Since you cannot accept challenges, and you won't let us harm Irving, he is safe."

"Great, now what?"

"Irving can go, and he will not be harmed. You stay and hear our plea. You may decide to aid us or not, Irving will not suffer for your choice."

"That's mighty generous of you."

"Yes, Ms. Blake, it is." There was a look in his eyes that was very serious.

Raina might play sadistic games. Alfred might hurt you in an eager rush. But Marcus, it was just business. He was a mob boss with fur.

"Leave us, Irving."

"I won't leave her."

Marcus turned on him with a snarl. "My patience is not endless!"

Irving dropped to his knees, head bowed, spine bent low. It was a submissive display. I grabbed Irving's arm, and lifted him to his feet. "Get up, Irving. The nice werewolf isn't going to hurt you."

"And why is that, Ms. Blake?"

"Because Irving's under my protection. If Alfred can't fight me, then you sure as hell can't."

Marcus threw back his head, and gave a sharp, barking laugh. "You are clever, and brave. Traits we admire." The laughter died from his face, lingering in his eyes like a pleasant dream. "Do not challenge me too openly, Ms. Blake. It wouldn't be healthy."

The last of the laughter died out of his eyes. I was left staring into human eyes, but there was no one home to talk to. It looked like a human being, talked like a human being, but it wasn't one.

I dug my fingers into Irving's parka-clad shoulder. "Go on, Irving. Get out of here."

He touched my arm. "I would never leave you in a tough spot."

"I'm safe tonight, you're not. Now go, please, Irving."

I watched the struggle on his face. But finally after another dirty look from Marcus, he left. The door closed and I was alone with three werewolves. Down from four. The night was looking up.

"Alfred must search you now."

So much for the night looking up. "Then do it," I said. I just stood there. I didn't put my arms out. I didn't lean against the wall. I wasn't going to help him, not unless he asked.

He took the Browning, then patted down my arms, legs, even the small of my back. He didn't pat down the front center of my body. Maybe he was being a gentleman, or maybe he was just careless. Whatever, he missed the Firestar. I had eight silver bullets and they didn't know it. The night was looking up.

Chapter 11

Marcus took a seat on the platform. Alfred stood just behind him like a good bodyguard. "Join us, Ms. Blake. It may be a long meeting to stand through."

I didn't want to sit with Alfred at my back, so I moved to the last chair. The empty chair between us looked unsociable, but I was out of Alfred's reach. Safety before good manners.

Raina sat on Marcus's right, hand on his knee. Marcus sat in the same manner he did everything—rigid. Posture that would have made my Aunt Mattie proud. But he didn't move Raina's hand. In fact, he laid his hand over hers. Love? Solidarity? They didn't strike me as a really compatible couple.

A woman came through the door. Short blond hair styled and held in place with gel. Her business skirt suit was red with pinkish undertones, like a rose

petal. Her white blouse had one of those blousy ties that made the suit seem feminine, and a little silly.

"Christine, it's good of you to come," Marcus said.

The woman nodded, and took the seat at the end of the horseshoe of tables, nearest the stage. "What choice did I have? What choice did you give any of us?" she asked.

"We must have a united front on this, Christine."

"As long as you're in charge, right?"

Marcus started to say more but the crowd was growing. People drifted through the door in ones, twos, threes. He let the argument go. They could argue later, and I was betting they would. The woman's complaint sounded like an old one.

I recognized one person. Rafael the Rat King. He was tall, dark, and handsome with short-cut black hair, strong Mexican features, and an arrogant expression. He would have looked as stern as Marcus except for his lips. They were soft and sensuous, and ruined some of the effect.

Rafael nodded at me. I nodded back. He had two wererats with him, in human form. I didn't recognize either of them.

There were about a dozen people sitting along the tables when Marcus stood and walked to the podium. "My friends, I have asked you here tonight to meet Anita Blake. The vampires call her the Executioner. I believe she can help us."

"What can a vampire hunter do for us?" This from a tall man who sat alone, chairs on either side acting as walls. He had short white hair, cut in a strange Mia Farrow sixties cut, but gentler. He wore a white dress shirt, pale pink tie, white sport jacket, and cream-colored pants. He looked like the Good Humor man with money. But he had a point.

"We don't need a human to help us." This from a man who sat with one other. He had hair cut just above his collar, so curly it looked like fur, or maybe . . . Naw. He had thick eyebrows over dark eyes, with heavy, sensual features. The Rat King's lips may have seemed kissable, but this man seemed made for nefarious deeds done in dark places.

His clothing matched his face. The boots that he had propped on the table were of soft, velvety leather. His pants were of shiny black leather. The shirt he was almost wearing was a muscle tank top that left most of his upper body bare. His right arm was covered from elbow to fingers in leather straps. The knuckles had spikes coming out of them. The hair on his chest was as curly and dark as the hair on his head. A black duster coat was thrown across the table beside him.

The woman on his right rubbed her cheek along his shoulder as if it were a cat scent marking. Long, dark hair formed waves around her shoulders. What I could see of her outfit looked tight, black, and mostly of leather.

"We are human here, Gabriel," Marcus said.

Gabriel made a rude noise. "You believe what you want to, Marcus. But we know what we are, and what she isn't." He pointed at me with his gauntleted fist. It didn't seem a particularly friendly gesture.

Rafael stood. The gesture stopped the argument. There was something about the way he stood there in his ordinary street clothes that made you stare at him as if he were wearing a crown. His presence was more commanding than that of a ton of black leather. Marcus made the lowest of growls. Too many kings in this room.

"Does Marcus speak for Anita Blake as he speaks for the wolves?"

"Yes," Marcus said. "I speak for Ms. Blake."

I stood up. "I don't know what's going on, but I can speak for myself."

Marcus turned like a small blond storm. "I am pack leader. I am law."

Alfred moved to face me, big hands flexing.

"Chill out, fur face. You're not my leader, and I'm not a pack member."

Alfred stalked forward. I hopped off the stage. I had the gun, but I might need it more later. If I drew it now, I might not have it later. He leaped off the stage, a high bounding as if he'd had a trampoline to jump from. I dropped to the ground and rolled. I felt the air of his passage. I ended up against the stage. I went for the Firestar, and he was on me. Faster than a speeding bullet, faster than anything I'd ever seen.

His hand gripped my throat and squeezed. His lips drew back from his teeth, and made a low, rolling growl, like the sound a Rottweiler would make.

My hand was on the Firestar, but I still had to lift up, point it, and pull the trigger. I'd never make it. He'd rip my throat out long before I could manage it.

He drew me to my feet using my throat as a handle. His fingers dug in just enough to let me feel the strength in his hands. All he had to do was clench his fist, and the front of my throat would come with it. I kept my hand on the Firestar. I'd be clinging to it when I died.

"Does Alfred fight your battles for you now?" It was Christine of the blousy tie. "Pack leaders must fight all challenges to their dominance personally or forfeit leadership. It's one of your own laws, Marcus."

"Do not quote my laws back to me, woman."

"She challenged your authority over her, not Alfred's. If he kills her, is he the new pack leader?" There was soft derision in her voice.

"Release her, Alfred."

Alfred's eyes flicked to Marcus, then back to me. His fingers tensed, digging in and raising me to my tiptoes.

"I said, let her go!"

He dropped me. I staggered back against the stage and aimed Firestar in one movement. It wasn't pretty, but the gun was out and pointed at Alfred. If he tried me again, I was going to kill him, and I'd enjoy it.

"I thought you checked her for weapons," Marcus said.

"I did." Alfred was backing away, hands held in front of him as if to ward off a blow.

I scooted along the stage so I could keep an eye on Marcus. I caught sight of Raina, still sitting, looking amused.

I backed away from everyone, working to put a wall at my back. If Marcus was faster than Alfred, I needed distance, like a hundred miles, but I'd have to settle for the far wall.

"Have him disarm her," Raina said. She sat there, legs crossed, hands resting on her knee, smiling. "It was Alfred's oversight. Let him correct it."

Marcus nodded. Alfred turned his eyes back to me.

I pressed my back more solidly into the wall, as if I could make a door if I pressed hard enough. Alfred stalked towards me, slow, like a movie maniac. I pointed the gun at his chest. "I will kill him," I said.

"Your little bullets cannot hurt me," Alfred said.

"Silver-plated Glaser safety rounds," I said. "It'll blow a hole in your chest big enough to put a fist through."

He hesitated. "I can heal any wound, even silver."

"Not if it's a killing blow," I said. "I take out your heart and you're dead."

He glanced back at Marcus. Marcus's face was all squeezed down with anger. "You let her bring a gun among us."

"If you're afraid of the gun, Marcus, take it away from her yourself."

Christine again. This time I wasn't sure she was helping me.

"We intend you no harm, Ms. Blake. But I promised the others you would bring no weapons among us. I gave my word. If you will give Alfred your gun, this can end."

"No way."

"You are defying me, Ms. Blake. I cannot let anyone contest my authority."

He had come to stand at the end of the stage, closest to me. He was closer to me than Alfred. I wasn't sure it was an improvement.

"You step off that stage and I'll shoot."

"Alfred." Just the name again, but it was enough. Alfred moved up beside him, eyes on Marcus's face. "Master?"

"Take it from her, Alfred. She cannot defy us."

"You're going to get him killed, Marcus."

"I don't think so."

Alfred took a step forward, in front of Marcus. His face was neutral, eyes unreadable. "This is a stupid thing to die over, Alfie."

"He gives orders. I obey. It is the way of things."

"Don't do this," I said.

Alfred took a step forward.

I took a slow, steady breath. I had a peripheral sense of everyone else, but I was looking only at Alfred. At a spot in the center of his chest. "I am not bluffing."

I felt him tense, knew he was going to do it. He was confident that he could move faster than I could pull the trigger. Nothing was that fast. I hoped.

He leaped in that wide, arching roll that he'd used earlier. I dropped to one knee, aiming as I moved. The bullet hit him in midair. He jerked and crumbled to the floor.

The gunshot echoed into silence. I got to my feet, the gun still pointed at him. I eased forward. He never moved. If he was breathing, I couldn't see it. I knelt until the gun was shoved into the back of his spine. No movement. I felt for a pulse in his neck. Nothing. I pulled the Browning out of his waistband left

handed. I kept the Firestar pointed at everybody. I wasn't as good left handed, and I didn't want to take the time to switch hands.

Marcus stepped off the stage. "Don't," I said. He froze, staring at me. He looked shocked, as if he hadn't thought I'd do it.

Rafael came up through the tables. "May I look at him?"

"Sure." But I backed away. Theoretically out of reach.

Rafael turned him over. Blood had pooled on the floor from the hole in his chest. Bright crimson rivulets trailed down his lips to mingle with his beard. Not faster than a speeding bullet, after all.

Marcus looked at me over the body. I had expected to see anger, but all I saw was pain. He mourned Alfred's passing. I may have pulled the trigger, but he had pushed Alfred into it. He knew it, I knew it. We all knew it.

"You didn't have to kill him," he said, softly.

"You gave me no choice," I said.

He glanced down at Alfred's body, then back to me. "No, I suppose I didn't. We killed him together, you and I."

"For future reference, so there will never be another misunderstanding between us, Marcus. I never bluff."

"So you said."

"But you didn't believe me."

He watched the blood spread across the floor. "I believe you now."

Chapter 12

We had a body on the ground. The age-old question remained. What do you do with a dead body? There was the traditional approach. "I'll call the cops," I said.

"No," Marcus said. That one word had more force in it than anything he'd said since Alfred hit the ground.

"He's dead, folks. If I'd hit him with a regular bullet he'd heal, but it was silver. We've got to call the cops."

"Are you so eager to go to jail?" This from Rafael.

"I don't want to go to jail, but I killed him."

"I think you had a little help on that." Christine had moved up beside us. She stood there in her rose-petal suit with her sensible black pumps, staring down at the body. A line of blood trickled towards her shoes. She had to see it, snaking its way towards her. She didn't move out of the way. The blood seeped around the toe of her shoe and kept going.

Raina came up behind Marcus. She put her arms around his shoulders, leaning her face against his neck, close enough to whisper in his ear. Those lips

did not move, but it had been her one needling comment that had pushed things over the edge. One little remark.

Marcus rubbed his hand along her arm, lowering his face to kiss her wrist.

I looked around at them. Rafael was still kneeling by the body. A line of blood was making for the knee of his slacks. He stood up quickly, fingertips brushing the bloody floor. He raised the fingers to his mouth. I wanted to say, don't, but didn't. He stuck the fingers in his mouth and sucked them clean.

His dark eyes flicked to me. He lowered his hand as if he were embarrassed, as if I'd caught him in an intimate bodily function. Maybe I had.

The two leather-clad shapeshifters drifted up behind the tables, as if they'd circle me. I backed away. I still had the guns naked in my hands. The one with the spiked glove looked at me, a smile playing at the edge of his mouth. His eyes were a strange liquid grey. His curly black hair had fallen in a tangle over his eyes. They bore a startling luminosity peering from behind that black hair. He made no move to push his hair from his eyes. It would have driven me nuts. But then maybe I wasn't accustomed to staring out through fur.

He stepped closer to the body, which was closer to me. I raised the guns. At this range you didn't really have to aim. I did not feel more confident with a gun in each hand. Fact was, I felt silly, but I didn't want to lose the time to holster one of them. To holster the Firestar, I had to scoot my sweater up and shove the gun in the inner-pants holster. I could probably do it without glancing down, but I wasn't sure. Habit might take over. Like driving a car. You don't realize how long you glanced down until that semi truck looms into view. If Gabriel was as fast as Alfred, a fraction of a second would be enough.

His smile widened, the tip of his tongue traced his full lips. His gaze had heat in it. Nothing magical, just the heat that any man could put into his eyes. That look that said they were wondering what you looked like naked, and if you'd give a good blow job. Crude, but accurate. That look was not wanting to make love to anyone. The look was pure fucking. Even sex was too mild a term.

I fought the urge to turn away. I didn't dare take my eyes off of him. But I wanted to. My skin crawled under his gaze. I felt heat creeping up my face. I couldn't meet his eyes and not blush. My Daddy'd raised me better than that.

He took a step forward, a small movement, but it put him almost in arm's reach. With Alfred's body still warm, he was playing with me. I raised the guns a little more firmly, pointed at him. "Let's not do this again," I said.

"Gabriel, leave her alone," Christine said.

He glanced back at her. "Tyger! Tyger! burning bright/ In the forests of the night/ What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

"Stop it, Gabriel," she said. She was blushing. One stanza of Blake and she was embarrassed. Why that poem? A weretiger maybe? But who was the kitty cat? Maybe both.

He turned back to me. I watched something slide behind his eyes. Some streak of perversity that made him want to take that next step.

"Try me tonight, and you're going to join your friend on the floor."

He laughed, mouth wide, exposing pointed canines, top and bottom like a cat. Not fangs, but not human, either.

"Ms. Blake is under my protection," Marcus said. "You will not harm her."

"You let Alfred nearly throttle me, then you goad him into attacking me. I don't think much of your protection, Marcus. I think I do just fine on my own."

"Without those little guns you wouldn't be so tough." This from the brunette biker chick. Brave words, but she was standing on the other side of the little crowd.

"I'm not going to offer to arm wrestle you. I know I'm outclassed without a gun. That's why I've got them."

"You refuse my protection?" Marcus asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"You are a fool," Raina said.

"Maybe, but I'm still the one with the guns."

Gabriel laughed again. "She doesn't believe you can protect her, Marcus, and she's right."

"You question my dominance?"

Gabriel turned, giving me his back, staring at Marcus. "Always."

Marcus moved forward, but Raina tightened her grip on him. "We've aired enough dirty laundry in front of Ms. Blake for one night. Don't you think?"

He hesitated. Gabriel just stared at him. Finally Marcus nodded.

Gabriel gave a purring laugh and knelt down by the body. He smeared his fingers through the blood. "It cools so fast." He wiped his hand on Alfred's sweater and touched the open chest wound. He ran his hand around the edge as though he were scooping icing from a bowl. His hand came out crimson. He raised it to his mouth, blood dripping down his arm. His tongue licked along his bloody fingers.

"Stop it," Marcus said.

The woman knelt on the other side of the body. She knelt, lowering her torso, butt in the air, like lions drinking at watering holes. She lapped up the blood from the floor with quick, sure movements of her tongue.

"Jesus," I whispered.

There was movement in the room like a wind over a field of wheat. They were all out of their seats. They were all moving towards the body.

I stepped back, put the wall at my back, and began working my way towards the door. If there was going to be a feeding frenzy, I didn't want to be the only non-shapeshifter in the room. Didn't seem healthy.

"No!" Marcus's voice roared through the room. He stalked to the body, pushing everyone back without a gesture. Even Gabriel rolled back onto his left side, propped up, sitting in the blood. The woman crawled back, out of reach. Gabriel stayed within touching distance of the master werewolf. He gazed up at Marcus, but there was no fear on his face.

"We are not animals to feed on our dead."

"We are animals," Gabriel said. He raised his bloody hand towards Marcus. "Smell the blood, and tell me you don't want it."

Marcus jerked his head away, swallowing hard enough for me to hear it. Gabriel rose to his knees, pressing the blood close to Marcus's face.

He slapped the hand away, but stepped away from the body, too. "I smell the blood." His voice was very harsh when he said it, every word squeezed out through a low growl. "But I am a human being. That means I do not have to give in to my urges." He turned his back on the body, pushed his way through the crowd, having to step up on the stage to find a clear place to stand. His breathing was hard and fast, as if he'd been running as fast as he could.

I was about halfway behind the podium. I could see his face. Beads of sweat touched his skin. I had to get out of here.

The white-haired man who had spoken first, wondering what good a vampire executioner would be to them, was standing apart from the others. He was leaning against a table, arms crossed. He was watching me. From across the room, he could watch all he wanted to. I had the guns out and pointed at everybody. There wasn't anyone in this room that I wanted to be around unarmed.

I was almost at the door. I needed a free hand for the door. I was nearly the length of the room away from them. It was as far away as I could get without opening the door. I holstered the Firestar. Transferred the Browning to my right hand. I slid my left hand behind me along the wall, until I touched the doorknob. I turned the knob and opened the door a crack. I was far enough away from all of them, that I gave the room my back and opened the door wide. And stopped.

The hallway was four deep with lycanthropes. They were all staring at me with wide, haunted eyes. I pressed the Browning into the chest of the nearest one. "Back up."

He just stared at me as if he didn't understand what I'd said. His eyes were brown and perfectly human, but it reminded me of the look a dog gets when it's trying to understand English. It wants to understand, but just doesn't quite get it.

There was movement behind me. I slammed my back against the door, pressing it flat to the wall, gun scanning the room. If the shapeshifters in the hallway surged forward, I was gone. I could shoot some of them, but not all of them.

It was the man who'd been leaning against the table. He put his hands up to show himself unarmed, but that didn't really help. What helped was there was no sweat on his face. He didn't look glassy eyed, like the ones in the hall. He looked very . . . human.

"My name is Kaspar Gunderson. Do you need a little help?"

I glanced at the waiting horde and back to him. "Sure."

Kaspar smiled. "You'll take my help, but not Marcus's?" He seemed amused.

"Marcus doesn't offer help. He gives orders."

"Too true."

Rafael moved up beside him. "None of us takes orders from Marcus. Though he would like us to."

A sound somewhere between a moan and a howl broke from the crowd in the hall. I scooted a little farther down the wall, pointing the gun at the crowd. There were too many possible dangers, I had to pick someone to trust. Rafael and the other man seemed a better choice than the crowd.

A high ragged scream broke from inside the room. I shoved my back into the wall, and turned back to the room. What now?

I caught a glimpse of thrashing limbs through the huddled lycanthropes. The dark-haired woman threw back her head and shrieked.

"She's fighting it," the pale man said.

"Yes, but she will not win unless a dominant steps in to help her," Rafael said.

"Gabriel won't help."

"No," Rafael said, "he enjoys the show."

"It's not full moon yet, what the hell's happening?" I said.

"The scent of blood started it. Gabriel fed it. He and Elizabeth. Now, unless Marcus can control them, they may all turn and feed," Rafael said.

"And this is a bad thing?" I asked.

Rafael just looked at me. His hands gripped his forearms so tightly the skin paled. His short-clipped fingernails bit into the skin, and tiny little half circles of blood formed under his hands. He took a deep, cleansing breath and nodded. He removed his fingers from his arms. The cuts filled with blood but only a few trickled. Minor cuts, minor pain. Pain sometimes helped keep a vamp from controlling your mind.

His voice came out strained, but clear, each word pronounced with great care, as if it took great effort just to speak. "One of the old wives' tales that is true is that a lycanthrope has to feed after shapeshifting." His eyes stared at me, drowning deep. The black had eaten all the white. His eyes sparkled like jet buttons.

"Are you about to go all furry on me?"

He shook his head. "The beast does not control me. I control myself."

The other man stood there, calmly.

"Why aren't you having problems?"

"I'm not a predator. Blood doesn't bother me."

A whimper came in from the hallway. A young man who couldn't have been more than twenty was crawling on hands and knees into the room. A low whimper was rising from his throat like a mantra.

He raised his head, sniffing the air. His head turned with a jerk, eyes staring at me. He crawled towards me. His eyes were the color of spring skies, innocent as an April morning. The look in them was not. He looked at me as if he were wondering what I tasted like. In a human I'd have thought he was thinking of sex, now . . . maybe he was just thinking of food.

I pointed the gun at his forehead. His eyes looked past the gun, at me. I wasn't even sure he saw the gun. He touched my leg. I didn't shoot him. He hadn't offered to hurt me. I wasn't sure what the hell was going on, but I couldn't shoot him for touching me. Not just for that. He had to do something to deserve a bullet in the brain. Even from me.

I moved the gun slightly from side to side in front of his eyes. They didn't track.

His hands gripped my jeans, pulling him to his knees. His head was a little above my waist, blue eyes staring up at my face. His arms wrapped around my waist. He buried his face in my stomach, sort of nuzzling.

I tapped his head with the barrel of the gun. "I don't know you well enough for you to nuzzle me, fella. Get up."

His head buried under my sweater. His mouth bit gently into my side. He stiffened, arms rigid. His breathing was suddenly ragged.

And I was suddenly afraid. One man's foreplay was another man's appetizer. "Get him off of me before I hurt him."

Rafael yelled, voice roaring over the mounting chaos, "Marcus!" That one word rang out and silence fell. Faces turned to him. Faces smeared with blood. Elizabeth, the dark-haired woman, was nowhere in sight. Only Marcus remained clean. He stood on the stage rigid, but there was a vibration to him like a struck tuning fork. His face was gaunt with some great effort. He looked at us with the eyes of a drowning man, who was determined not to scream on the last trip down.

"Jason is having some difficulty controlling himself," Rafael said. "He is your wolf. Call him off."

Gabriel stood up, his face coated in blood. He bared his flashing teeth with a laugh. "I'm surprised Ms. Blake hasn't killed him yet."

Raina stood from the kill, a patch of blood on her chin. "Ms. Blake refused Marcus's protection. She is dominant. Let her discover what it means to refuse our help."

Jason was still rigid against me. His arms locked tight, face pressed against my stomach. I could feel his breath through my shirt, hot and too heavy for what was happening.

"You asked me here for my help, Marcus. Your hospitality sucks."

He glared at me. But even from across the room I could see a nervous tic jumping in his face. A twitching, as though something alive were trying to come out.

"It is too late for business tonight, Ms. Blake. Things are out of hand."

"No joke. Get him off of me, Marcus. One dead tonight is enough."

Raina went to him, holding up a bloody hand to him. "Let her acknowledge your dominance over her. Acknowledge that she needs your help."

Marcus stared at me. "Acknowledge my dominance, and I will call Jason off."

"If he starts to shapeshift, I'll kill him. You know I'll do it, Marcus. Call him off."

"If I am to give you my protection, you must acknowledge me."

"Fuck you, Marcus. I'm not asking you to save me. I'm asking you to save him. Or don't you care about your pack members?"

"Rafael is a king," Raina said, "let him save you."

A shudder ran through the man. His grip tightened painfully. He stood, arms still locked behind my back. If he'd held me any closer, I'd have come out the other side. He was about my height, which put our faces very close. His eyes were full of a great hunger, a need. He bent his head as if to kiss me, but another shudder ran through him. He buried his face in my hair, lips touching my neck.

I pressed the barrel of the Browning into his chest. If he tried to take a bite out of me, he was dead. But where Alfred had been a bully, this one, Jason, seemed unable to help himself, like a compulsion. If I waited too long I'd be just as dead. But until he hurt me it made me not want to hurt him. Besides, I was feeling a wee bit gun happy for killing Alfred. Not a lot, but a little. It cut Jason some slack.

His teeth brushed along my neck, drawing an edge of skin into his mouth. He had just about reached the end of my patience even if he didn't turn furry.

A low, rumbling growl vibrated along my skin. My pulse thudded into my throat. I squeezed down on the trigger. I couldn't wait for him to bite my throat out.

I heard Kaspar say, "Rafael, no!"

Jason's head jerked up, eyes wild. Rafael stood beside us, holding his arm in front of Jason's face. Blood ran down it from deep scratches.

"Fresh blood, my wolf," Rafael said.

Jason jerked away from me so fast, he threw me into the wall. My head smacked the wall after my shoulders made impact, which was the only thing that saved me from passing out. I ended up with my butt on the floor, gun in my hand only by instinct. The strength in that one movement left my gut hollow with fear. I had let him nuzzle my neck, as if he were human. He could have torn me apart with his human hands. I might have killed him first, but I'd have been just as dead.

Jason crouched in front of Rafael. A ripple ran through his back like a wave of water driven by wind. Jason fell into a little ball, his back pulsing under his shirt.

Rafael stood over him, blood dripping onto the floor. "I hope you understand what I have done for you," he said.

I had enough air back to speak. "You want me to shoot him?"

A strange look came over his face, leaving his black button eyes dead. "You offer your protection."

"Protection, smetection. You helped me. I'll help you."

"Thank you, but I have started it, and I must finish it, but I think you must go before you run out of silver bullets."

Kaspar offered me a hand up; I took it. His skin was unusually warm, but that was all. He didn't seem to have the urge to touch me or eat me. A nice change.

The crowd was coming in the door, in twos and threes and tens. Some moved like sleepwalkers towards the body at the far side of the room. That was dandy. Some went for Rafael and the writhing Jason. He'd said he could handle himself. But about six of them turned to me and Kaspar.

They stared at us with hungry eyes. One, a girl, dropped to her knees and began to crawl towards me. "Can you do anything about this?" I asked.

"I'm a swan, they consider me food."

It took every ounce of self-control not to glance at him. I stared at the crawling lycanthrope, and said, "A swan, great. You got any suggestions?"

"Wound one of them. They respect pain."

The girl was reaching out for me. I stared at her slender arm and didn't fire. Glazer safety rounds could take off an arm. I wasn't sure lycanthropes could heal amputations. I pointed over her head at the large male behind her. I gut-shot him. He fell screaming to the floor, blood pouring between his fingers. The girl turned on him, burying her face in his stomach.

He slapped her away. The others surged forward.

"Let's get out while we can," Kaspar said. He motioned for the door.

Didn't have to ask me twice. Marcus was suddenly there. I hadn't seen him come, too busy concentrating on the immediate threat. He pulled two men off the wounded one, tossing them like toys. He drew a manila file folder from under his blue linen jacket and handed it to me. In a voice that was more growl than anything, he said, "Kaspar can answer your questions."

He turned with a snarl, tearing into the lycanthropes, protecting the one I'd wounded. Kaspar pushed me out the door, and I let him.

I had one last glimpse of Jason. He was a mass of flowing fur and naked dripping bones. Rafael was once again the slick, black ratman I'd met months ago. The crown-shaped burn in his forearm, the mark of kingship for the rats, showed clean. He was no longer bleeding. The change had healed him.

The door slammed shut. I wasn't sure who had done it. Kaspar and I stood in the hallway, alone. There were no sounds from behind the door. The silence was so heavy, it thrummed in my head.

"I can't hear them?"

"Soundproof room," he said.

Logical. I stared down at the file folder. There was a bloody handprint on it. I held it gingerly at the edge, waiting for the blood to dry.

"Are we supposed to sit down and have a business meeting?"

"Knowing Marcus, the information will be complete. He's a very good bureaucrat."

"But not a very good pack leader."

He glanced at the door. "I'd say that somewhere else if I were you."

He had a point. I stared up at him. His baby-fine hair was nearly white, almost feathery. I shook my head. It couldn't be.

He grinned at me. "Go ahead. Touch it."

I did. I brushed fingers through his hair, and it was soft and downy like the under feathers on a bird. Heat rose from his scalp like fever. "Jesus."

Something heavy smacked into the door. I felt the vibrations through the floor. I backed away, hesitating about putting the Browning away. I compromised and put my hand in the pocket of my trench coat. It was the only coat I owned with pockets deep enough to swallow the Browning.

Kaspar opened the door to the dining rooms. There were still people eating. Humans out for a night on the town. Carving their steaks, eating their veggies, oblivious to the potential destruction just two doors away.

I had a horrible urge to yell, Flee, flee for your lives. But they wouldn't have understood. Besides the Lunatic Cafe had been here for years. I'd never heard of an incident here. Of course, I'd killed one man, werewolf, whatever. I didn't think there was going to be enough evidence to turn over to the cops. Maybe a few well-gnawed bones.

Who knew what disasters had been covered up here?

Kaspar handed me a business card. It was white and shiny with Gothic script that said, KASPAR GUNDERSON, ANTIQUES AND COLLECTIBLES.

"If you have any questions, I will try to answer them."

"Even if the questions are about what the hell you are?"

"Even that," he said.

We were walking as we talked. He offered me his hand beside the bar in the outer dining room. The outside door was in sight, fun almost over for the night. Thank God.

My smile froze on my face. I knew one of the men at the bar. Edward was sitting there sipping a tall, cold drink. He never glanced at me, but I knew he saw me. Kaspar cocked his head to one side. "Is anything wrong?"

"No," I said, "no." My words were too fast, even I didn't believe myself. I tried my best professional smile. "It's just been a long night."

He didn't believe me, and I didn't care. I wasn't good at spur-of-the-moment lying. Kaspar let it go, but his eyes scanned the crowd as he walked out, looking for whatever or whoever had bothered me.

Edward looked like a nice, ordinary man. He was five foot eight, of slender build, with short blond hair. He had on a nondescript black winter jacket, jeans, and soft-soled shoes. He looked a little like Marcus, and in his own way, was just as dangerous.

He was ignoring me, effortlessly, which meant he might not want to be noticed. I walked past him, wanting to ask what the hell he was doing here, but not wanting to blow his cover. Edward was an assassin who specialized in vampires, lycanthropes, and other preternatural humanoids. He'd started out killing humans, but it had been too easy. Edward did love a challenge.

I stood in the cold dark wondering what to do. I had the bloody file folder in one hand. The other was still gripping the Browning. Now that the adrenaline was seeping away, my hand was cramping around the gun. I'd held it too long without firing it. I tucked the folder under my arm and put the gun away. All the shapeshifters were busy eating each other. I could probably walk to my car without having a gun naked in my hands.

Edward didn't come out. I had half expected him to. He was hunting someone, but who? After what I'd seen tonight, I wasn't sure hunting them was such a bad idea.

Of course, Richard was one of them. I didn't want anyone hunting him. I would have to ask Edward what he was doing, but not tonight. Richard wasn't

inside. The rest of them could take their chances. I had a momentary thought about Rafael, but let it go. He knew what Edward looked like, if not exactly what he did for a living.

I stopped halfway down the sidewalk. Should I warn Edward that Rafael might recognize him and tell the others? My head hurt. For this one night let Death take care of himself. The vampires called me the Executioner, but they called Edward Death. After all, I'd never used a flamethrower on them.

I kept walking. Edward was a big, scary boy. He could take care of himself. And everyone else in the back room certainly didn't need my help.

Even if they did, I wasn't sure I wanted to give it to them. Which brought me back to the file folder. What could they need my help for? What could I do that they couldn't? I almost didn't want to know. But I didn't throw the folder in the nearest trash can. Truth was, if I didn't read it, it would bug me. Curiosity killed the cat. Here was hoping it didn't do the same for animators.

Chapter 13

At 5:35 that morning I was tucked in bed with the file folder. My favorite stuffed toy penguin, Sigmund, was sitting next to me. It used to be that I used Sigmund only when people were trying to kill me. Lately, I'd been sleeping with him most of the time. It'd been a rough year.

The Browning Hi-Power was in its second home, a holster on the headboard of the bed. I sometimes slept without the penguin, but never without the gun.

The folder consisted of a half dozen sheets of paper. All neatly typed, double spaced. The first was a list of eight names with an animal designation beside them. The last two pages were an explanation of the names. Eight lycanthropes had gone missing. Vanished. No bodies, no signs of violence. Nothing. Their families knew nothing. None of the lycanthropes knew anything.

I went back over the names. Margaret Smitz was number seven. Designation wolf. Could it be George Smitz's wife? Peggy was a nickname for Margaret. Don't ask me how you get Peggy from Margaret, but you do.

The last few pages were suggestions about who Marcus thought I should talk to. Controlling little bastard. He did offer an explanation for why he asked me for help. He thought that the other shapeshifters would talk more freely to me than to him or any of his wolves. No joke. I was sort of a compromise. They didn't trust the police. And who else do the lunarly disadvantaged go to for help? Why, your friendly neighborhood animator.

I wasn't sure what I could do for them. I had sent George Smitz to Ronnie for a reason. I was not a detective. I'd never handled a missing-person case in

my life. When I met Ronnie the next day, cancel that, that morning, I'd fill her in. George's wife missing was one thing, but eight lycanthropes missing was a pattern. They needed to go to the police. But they didn't trust human law. As late as the 1960s, lycanthropes were still being mobbed and burned at the stake. Couldn't blame them for being leery.

I put the folder in the drawer of the nightstand. I got a plain white business card out of the drawer. The only thing on it was a phone number. Edward had given me the card only two months ago. It was the first time I'd ever been able to contact him. Before he'd just shown up. Usually when I didn't want him to.

The number was a twenty-four-hour phone message service. A mechanized voice said, "At the tone leave your message." A long, low beep sounded. "This is Anita. What the hell are you doing in town? Call me soon." I wasn't usually that blunt on a phone message, but hey, it was Edward. He knew me. Besides, he didn't appreciate social niceties.

I set the alarm, turned off the light, and cuddled into the blankets, my faithful penguin at my side. The phone rang before I'd gotten warm. I waited for the machine to pick up; after the eighth ring I gave up. I'd forgotten to turn on the machine. Great.

"This better be important," I said.

"You said to call soon." It was Edward.

I pulled the receiver under the blankets with me. "Hi, Edward."

"Hi."

"Why are you in town? And why were you at the Lunatic Cafe?"

"Why were you?"

"It is nearly six in the freaking morning, I haven't been to sleep yet. I don't have time for games."

"What was in the folder you had? There was fresh blood on it. Whose blood was it?"

I sighed. I wasn't sure what to tell him. He might be a great deal of help, or he could kill people that I was supposed to be helping. Choices, choices.

"I can't tell you shit until I know if I'm endangering people."

"I never hunt people, you know that."

"So you are on a hunt."

"Yes."

"What this time?"

"Shapeshifters."

Figures. "Who?"

"I don't have any names yet."

"Then how do you know who to kill?"

"I've got film."

"Film?"

"Come to my hotel room tomorrow and I'll show you the film. I'll tell you everything I know."

"You're not usually this obliging. What's the catch?"

"No catch. You might be able to identify them, that's all."

"I don't know a lot of shapeshifters," I said.

"Fine, just come, see what I have."

He sounded so sure of himself, but then he always did. "Okay, where are you staying?"

"Adams Mark. Do you need directions?"

"No, I can get there. When?"

"Do you work tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"Then at your convenience, of course."

He was being too damn polite. "How long will your little presentation take?"

"Two hours, maybe less."

I shook my head, realized he couldn't see it, and said, "It'll have to be after my last zombie appointment. I'm booked until then."

"Name the time."

"I can be there between twelve-thirty and one." Even saying it made me tired. I wasn't going to get any sleep again.

"I'll be waiting."

"Wait. What name are you registered under?"

"Room 212, just knock."

"You do have a last name, don't you?"

"Of course. Good night, Anita." The phone line went dead, buzzing in my hand like an unquiet spirit. I fumbled the receiver into its cradle and switched on the answering machine. I turned the sound down as low as it would go and snuggled back under the covers.

Edward never shared information unless forced to. He was being too helpful. Something was up. Knowing Edward, it was something unpleasant. Lycanthropes disappearing without a trace. It sounded like a game that Edward would enjoy. But somehow I didn't think it was him. He liked taking credit for his kills as long as the police couldn't tie him to them directly.

But somebody was doing it. There were bounty hunters who specialized in rogue lycanthropes. Edward might know who they were and if they'd condone murder. Because if all eight were dead, then it was murder. None of them was wanted, as far as I knew. The police would know, but I wasn't going to involve the police. Dolph should know if lycanthropes were disappearing in his territory.

I felt sleep sucking at the edges of the world. I flashed on the murder victim. I saw his face frozen in the snow, one eye ripped open like a grape. The crushed jaw tried to move, to speak. One word hissed out of his ruined mouth: "Anita." My name, over and over. I woke up enough to roll over, and sleep washed over me in a heavy, black wave. If I dreamed again, I never remembered.

Chapter 14

Every year I wondered what to buy Judith, my stepmother, for Christmas. You'd think after fourteen years I'd get better. Of course, you'd think she'd get better at buying for me. Judith and I always end up staring at each other across this chasm of misunderstanding. She wants me to be this perfect feminine daughter, and I want her to be my dead mother. Since I can't have what I want, I've made sure Judith doesn't get her wish, either. Besides, she's got Andria, who is perfect. One perfect kid in the family is enough.

Ronnie and I were Christmas shopping. We had jogged on the slick wintery streets at nine that morning. I'd managed about three hours of sleep. The running helped. The freezing wind slapping my face helped even more. I was wide awake and temporarily energized when we hit the mall, hair still damp from the shower.

Ronnie is five foot nine. Her short blond hair is cut in a sort of pageboy. It's the same haircut she's had since I met her, but then my hairstyle hasn't changed, either. She was wearing jeans, cowboy boots with purple tooling, a short winter coat over a lilac crewneck sweater. She was not wearing a gun. Didn't think the mall elves would get that out of hand.

I was dressed for the office, because I'd need to go straight there from shopping. The skirt was a standard navy blue, with a black belt for my shoulder holster to slip through. The skirt was about two inches higher than I was comfortable with, but Ronnie had insisted. She's a tad more fashion conscious than I am. Then, who isn't? The jacket was a rich midnight blue, the color of Jean-Claude's eyes. Darker blue designs, nearly black, traced it in a vaguely Oriental pattern. The open-necked blouse was a blue that matched the jacket. With black high-heel pumps, I looked pretty snazzy. Ronnie had picked out the jacket, too. Its only fault was that it didn't hide the Browning as well. You got little flashes of it as I moved. So far no one had run screaming to the mall cops. If they'd had known I was wearing a knife on each forearm under the pretty jacket, maybe they would have.

Ronnie was staring into a jewelry case at Krigle's, and I was staring at her eyes. They were grey. The same color that Gabriel's eyes had been last night, but there was something different. Her eyes were human. Even in human form Gabriel's eyes weren't human.

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "Thinking about last night."

"How do you feel about loverboy after last night?" The jewelry store was three deep in people. We'd forced our way to the case, but I knew I wasn't buying anything here, so I sort of stood beside Ronnie, scanning the crowd. All the faces looked hostile, but it was nothing personal. They were Christmas shopping with two weeks to the big day. Ho, ho, ho.

The store was a mass of shoving, jostling people. I was getting claustrophobic. "Are you going to buy something?"

Ronnie looked up at me. "You never answered my question."

"Get me out of this mess and maybe I will."

She stood up and motioned me forward. I cleared us a path to the open mall. I'm small and was dressed too pretty to be intimidating, but people cleared a path. Maybe they saw the gun. When we were in the main open space, I took a deep breath. It was crowded but nothing like the stores. At least here, people weren't actually brushing against me. If they did it out here, I could yell at them.

"You want to sit down?" There were miraculously two seats open on a bench. Ronnie had made the offer because I was dressed for work, which meant heels. In her comfy jogging shoes she didn't need to sit. My feet didn't hurt yet. Maybe I was getting used to wearing heels. Eeek.

I shook my head. "Let's hit the Nature Company. Maybe I'll find Josh something there."

"How old is he now, thirteen?" Ronnie asked.

"Fifteen," I said. "My baby brother was my height last year. He'll be gigantic this year. Judith says he's outgrowing his jeans faster than she can buy them."

"A hint to buy him jeans?" Ronnie said.

"If it is, I'm ignoring it. I'm buying Josh something fun, not clothes."

"A lot of teenagers would rather have clothes," Ronnie said.

"Not Josh, not yet anyway. He seems to have taken after me."

"What are you going to do about Richard?" she asked me.

"You're not going to let it go, are you?"

"Not a chance."

"I don't know what I'm going to do. After what I saw last night. After what Jean-Claude told me. I just don't know."

"You know that Jean-Claude did it deliberately," she said. "To try and drive a wedge between you."

"I know, and it worked. I feel like I don't know Richard. Like I've been kissing a stranger."

"Don't let fang-face break you up."

I smiled at that. Jean-Claude would love being referred to as fang-face. "I won't."

She punched my shoulder softly. "I don't believe you."

"It won't be Jean-Claude that breaks us up, Ronnie. If Richard's been lying to me for months . . ." I didn't finish the sentence. I didn't have to.

We were outside the Nature Company. It was crawling with people like a jar of lightning bugs abuzz with activity, but not half as bright.

"What exactly has Richard lied about?"

"He didn't tell me about this battle he's got going with Marcus."

"And you tell him everything," she said.

"Well, no."

"He hasn't lied to you, Anita. He just didn't tell you. Let him explain. Maybe he's got a good reason."

I turned and looked full at her. Her face was all soft with concern. It made me look away. "He's been in danger for months, and didn't tell me. I needed to know."

"Maybe he couldn't tell you. You won't know until you ask him."

"I saw lycanthropes last night, Ronnie." I shook my head. "What I saw last night wasn't human. It wasn't even close."

"So he's not human. No one's perfect."

I looked at her then. She was smiling at me. I had to smile back. "I'll talk to him."

"Call him before we leave the mall and set up a dinner for today."

"You are so pushy," I said.

She shrugged. "I've learned from the best."

"Thanks," I said. "What have you learned from George Smitz?"

"Nothing new to add to the folder you showed me. Except he doesn't seem to know that his wife is one of eight missing shapeshifters. He thinks she's the only one. I got a picture of her. You need pictures of the others. First thing you need in a missing-person case is a picture. Without a picture you could pass them on the street and not know it."

"I'll ask Kaspar about pictures."

"Not Richard?"

"I'm sort of mad at him. I don't want to ask him for help."

"You're being petty."

"It's one of my best traits."

"I'll check out the usual channels for a missing person, but if they're all lycanthropes, I bet it isn't a missing person."

"You think they're dead?"

"Don't you?"

"Yeah."

"But what could take out eight shapeshifters without a trace?" she asked.

"That's got me worried, too." I touched her arm. "You wear your gun from now on."

She smiled. "I promise, Mommy."

I shook my head. "Shall we brave one more store? If I can get Josh's gift, I'll be halfway done."

"You'll have to buy Richard a present, you know."

"What?"

"You have to buy your steady a gift. It's traditional."

"Shit." I was halfway mad at him, but she was right. Fighting or not, I had to buy him something. What if he bought me something, and I didn't? I'd feel guilty. If I bought something and he didn't, then I could feel superior. Or angry. I was almost hoping he wouldn't buy me anything.

Was I looking for an excuse to dump Richard? Maybe. Of course, maybe after we talked he'd give me a good excuse on a silver, excuse me, golden platter. I was ready for a knock-down, drag-out fight. It did not bode well.

Chapter 15

My one o'clock appointment was with Elvira Drew. She sipped her coffee, elegant fingernails curled around the mug. Her nail polish was clear, making her fingertips glint like abalone shell; colorless until the light hit it. The rest of her was just as tasteful. Her dress was that interesting color that looked blue one minute and green the next. Blue-green they called it, but it wasn't accurate. The dress was almost green. For cloth to have that shimmer, almost a life of its own like fur, it had to be expensive. The dress was probably worth more than my entire wardrobe.

Her long yellow hair spilled down her back in an elegant line. It was the only thing that didn't match. That dress, the manicure, the dyed-to-match shoes, the nearly invisible makeup should have gone with a tasteful but complicated hairdo. I liked her better for the hair being free and nearly untouched.

When she raised her eyes to meet mine, I knew why she'd spent so much on the dress. Her eyes were the same startling blue-green. The combination was breathtaking.

I sat across from her, sipping my coffee, happy I'd dressed up. Most days she'd have made me feel like a country cousin. Today I could hold my own.

"What can I do for you today, Ms. Drew?"

She smiled, and the smile was all it should have been. She smiled like she knew the effect it had on most people. I was almost afraid to see her near a man. If she lit up this much for me, the thought of what she'd do around Jamison or Manny was kind of frightening.

"I'm a writer. I'm working on a book about shapeshifters."

My smile wilted around the edges. "Really. And what brings you to the offices of Animators, Inc.?"

"The book is set up with each chapter being a different animal form. I give history, any well-known shapeshifters of that form from history, then a personal profile of a present-day shapeshifter."

My face was beginning to hurt, and I knew my smile was more a baring of teeth than anything else. "Sounds like an interesting book. Now, how can I help you?"

She blinked gorgeous eyes at me and looked puzzled. She was good at looking puzzled. I'd seen the intelligence in her eyes a moment ago. The dumb-blonde routine was an act. Would it have worked if I were a man? I hoped not.

"I'm missing one interview. I need to find a wererat. The interview can be strictly confidential." The dumb blonde was gone as quickly as it had come. She'd seen I wasn't buying it.

The interview can be—not would—be confidential. I sighed and gave up on the smile. "What made you think I could find you a wererat?"

"Mr. Vaughn assured me that if anyone in this area could help me, it would be you."

"Did he really?"

She smiled, eyes glittering. "He seemed very sure you could help me."

"My boss promises a lot of things, Ms. Drew. Most of which he doesn't have to deliver." I stood. "If you could wait here for just a moment, I want to confer with Mr. Vaughn."

"I'll wait right here for you." Her smile was just as sweet, but something in her eyes let me know she knew exactly what kind of conferring I had in mind.

The outer office was done in pale greens, from the wallpaper, with its thin Oriental designs, to the foamy carpet. Plants flourished in every unoccupied niche. Bert thought the plants gave the office a homey touch. I thought it looked like a cheap jungle set.

Mary, our daytime secretary, glanced up from her computer keyboard with a smile. Mary was over fifty, with blond hair that was a little too yellow to be natural. "You need something, Anita?" Her smile was pleasant. I'd almost never seen her in a bad mood. It was a good personality trait for a receptionist.

"Yeah, to see the boss."

She cocked her head to one side, eyes suddenly wary. "Why?"

"I should have an appointment to see Bert today, anyway. I told Craig to schedule it."

She glanced through the appointment book. "Craig did, and Bert canceled it." The smile was gone. "He really is very busy today."

That was it. I went for Bert's door.

"He's with a client right now," Mary said.

"Peachy," I said. I knocked on the door and opened it without waiting for permission.

Bert's desk took up most of the pale blue office. It was the smallest of the three offices, but it was permanently his. The rest of us had to rotate. He'd played football in college and it still showed. Broad shoulders, strong hands, six feet four inches tall and aware of every inch. His boater's tan had washed away with the winter weather. His white crew cut seemed a little less dramatic against the paler skin.

His eyes are the color of dirty window glass, sort of grey. Those eyes glared at me now. "I'm with a client, Anita."

I spared a glance for the man sitting across from him. It was Kaspar Gunderson. He was dressed all in white today, and it emphasized everything. How I could have ever looked at him and thought him human was beyond me. He smiled. "Ms. Blake, I presume." He put out a hand.

I shook it. "If you could wait outside for just a few moments, Mr . . ."

"Gunderson," he said.

"Mr. Gunderson, I need to speak with Mr. Vaughn."

"I think it can wait, Anita," Bert said.

"No," I said, "it can't."

"Yes," he said, "it can."

"Do you want to have this particular talk in front of a client, Bert?"

He stared at me, his small grey eyes looking even smaller as he squinted at me. It was his mean look. It had never worked on me. He gave a tight smile.

"Are you insisting?"

"You got it."

He took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly, as if he were counting to ten. He flashed his best professional smile on Kaspar. "If you will excuse us for a few minutes, Mr. Gunderson. This won't take long."

Kaspar stood, nodded at me, and left. I closed the door behind him.

"What the hell are you doing coming in here while I'm talking to a client?" He stood up, and his broad shoulders nearly touched from wall to wall.

He should have known better than to try and intimidate me with size. I've been the smallest kid on the block for as long as I can remember. Size hadn't been impressive for a very long time.

"I told you no more clients that are outside my job description."

"Your job description is anything I say it is. I'm your boss, remember?" He leaned over his desk, palms flat.

I leaned into the desk on the other side. "You sent me a missing person's case last night. What the fuck do I know about missing persons?"

"His wife's a lycanthrope."

"And that means we should take his money?"

"If you can help him, yes."

"Well, I gave it to Ronnie."

Bert leaned back. "See, you did help him. He would never have found Ms. Sims without your help."

He was looking all reasonable again. I didn't want him reasonable. "I've got Elvira Drew in my office right now. What the hell am I supposed to do with her?"

"Do you know any wererats?" He had sat down, hands crossed over his slightly bulging middle.

"That's beside the point."

"You do, don't you?"

"And if I say yes?"

"Set up an interview. Surely one of them wants to be famous."

"Most lycanthropes go to a lot of trouble to hide what they are. Being outed endangers their jobs, marriages. There was that case in Indiana last year where a father lost his kids to his ex-wife after five years, because she found out he was a shapeshifter. No one wants to risk that kind of exposure."

"I've seen shifters interviewed on live television," he said.

"They're the exceptions, Bert, not the rule."

"So you won't help Ms. Drew?"

"No, I won't."

"I won't try and appeal to your sense of greed, though she has offered us a lot of money. But think what a positive book on lycanthropy would do to help your shapeshifting friends. Good press is always welcome. Before you turn her down, talk to your friends. See what they say."

"You don't give a damn about good exposure for the lycanthrope community. You're just excited about the money."

"True."

Bert was an unscrupulous bastard and didn't care who knew it. It was hard to win a fight when you couldn't insult someone. I sat down across from him. He looked pleased with himself, like he knew he'd won. He should have known better.

"I don't like sitting down across from clients and not knowing what the hell they want. No more surprises. You clear clients with me first."

"Anything you say."

"You're being reasonable. What's wrong?"

His smile widened, setting his little eyes sparkling. "Mr. Gunderson has offered us a lot of money for your services. Twice the normal fee."

"That's a lot of money. What does he want me to do?"

"Raise an ancestor from the dead. He's under a family curse. A witch told him if he could talk to the ancestor that the curse originated with, she might be able to lift it."

"Why double the fee?"

"The curse started with one of two brothers. He doesn't know which one."

"So I have to raise them both."

"If we're lucky, only one."

"But you keep the second fee anyway," I said.

Bert nodded vigorously, happy as a greedy clam. "It's even your job description, and besides, even you wouldn't let a fellow go through his life with feathers on his head if you could help him, now would you?"

"You smug bastard," I said, but my voice sounded tired even to me.

Bert just smiled. He knew he'd won.

"You'll clear clients with me that aren't zombie raisings or vampire slayings?" I said.

"If you have the time to read up on every client I see, then I certainly have time to write up a report."

"I don't need to read about every client, just the ones you're sending my way."

"But, Anita, you know it's just luck of the draw which of you is on duty on any given day."

"Damn you, Bert."

"You've kept Ms. Drew waiting long enough, don't you think?"

I stood up. It was no use. I was outmaneuvered. He knew it. I knew it. The only thing left was a graceful retreat.

"Your two o'clock canceled. I'll have Mary send Gunderson in."

"Is there anything you wouldn't schedule in as a client, Bert?"

He seemed to think about that for a minute, then shook his head. "If they could pay the fee, no."

"You are a greedy son of a bitch."

"I know."

It was no use. I wasn't winning this one. I went for the door.

"You're wearing a gun." He sounded outraged.

"Yeah, what of it?"

"I think you can meet clients in broad daylight at our offices without being armed."

"I don't think so."

"Just put the gun in the desk drawer like you used to."

"Nope." I opened the door.

"I don't want you meeting clients armed, Anita."

"Your problem, not mine."

"I could make it yours," he said. His face was flushed, voice tight with anger. Maybe we were going to get to fight after all.

I closed the door. "You mean fire me?"

"I am your boss."

"We can argue about clients, but the gun is not negotiable."

"The gun frightens clients."

"Send the squeamish ones to Jamison," I said.

"Anita"—he stood up like an angry storm—"I don't want you wearing the gun in the office."

I smiled sweetly. "Fuck you, Bert." So much for a graceful exit.

Chapter 16

I closed the door and realized I had accomplished nothing but pissing Bert off. Not a bad hour's work, but not a great accomplishment. I was going to tell Ms. Drew that I might be able to help her. Bert was right about good press. I nodded at Gunderson as I passed him. He smiled back. Somehow I didn't think he really wanted me to raise the dead. I'd find out soon enough.

Ms. Drew was sitting legs crossed, hands folded in her lap. The picture of elegant patience.

"I may be able to help you, Ms. Drew. I'm not sure, but I may know someone who can help you."

She stood up, offering me a manicured hand. "That would be wonderful, Ms. Blake. I certainly appreciate your help."

"Does Mary have a number where I can reach you?"

"Yes." She smiled.

I smiled. I opened the door, and she walked past me in a cloud of expensive perfume. "Mr. Gunderson, I can see you now."

He stood, laying the magazine he'd been leafing through on the small table beside the *Ficus benjium*. He didn't move with that dancelike grace that the other shapeshifters had. But then swans weren't particularly graceful on land.

"Have a seat, Mr. Gunderson."

"Please, Kaspar."

I leaned on the edge of the desk, staring down at him. "What are you doing here, Kaspar?"

He smiled. "Marcus wants to apologize for last night."

"Then he should have come in person."

His smile widened. "He thought that offering a sizable monetary reward might make up for our lack of hospitality last night."

"He was wrong."

"You aren't going to give an inch, are you?"

"Nope."

"Are you not going to help us?"

I sighed. "I'm working on it. But I'm not sure what I can do. What or who could take out eight shapeshifters without a struggle?"

"I have no idea. None of us do. That is why we have come to you."

Great. They knew less than I did. Not comforting. "Marcus gave me a list of people to question." I handed it to him. "Any thoughts, or additions?"

He frowned, eyebrows arching together. The white eyebrows were not hair. I blinked, trying to concentrate. The fact that he was feathery seemed to bother me a lot more than it should have.

"These are all rivals for Marcus's power. You met most of them at the cafe."

"Do you really think he suspects them, or is he just making trouble for his rivals?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Marcus said you could answer my questions. Do you actually know anything that I don't?"

"I would say that I know a great deal more about the shapeshifting community than you do," he said. He sounded a trifle offended.

"Sorry, I think it's just wishful thinking on Marcus's part that his rivals are the bad guys. Not your fault he's playing games."

"Marcus often tries to manage things. You saw that last night."

"His management skills haven't impressed me so far."

"He believes that if there were one ruler for all shapeshifters, we would be a force to rival the vampires."

He might be right on that. "He wants to be that ruler," I said.

"Of course."

The intercom buzzed. "Excuse me a minute." I hit the button. "What is it, Mary?"

"Richard Zeeman on line two. He says he's returning your message."

I hesitated, then said, "I'll take it." I picked up the phone, very aware that Kaspar was sitting there listening. I could have asked him to step outside, but I was getting tired of playing musical clients.

"Hi, Richard."

"I got your message on my answering machine," he said. His voice was very careful, as if he were balancing a glass of water filled to the very brim.

"I think we need to talk," I said.

"I agree."

My, weren't we being cautious this afternoon. "I'm supposed to be the one that's mad. Why does your voice sound so funny?"

"I heard about last night."

I waited for him to say more, but the silence just stretched to infinity. I filled it. "Look, I have a client with me right now. You want to meet and talk?"

"Very much." He said it as though he weren't really looking forward to it.

"I have a dinner break around six. You want to meet at the Chinese place on Olive?"

"Doesn't sound very private."

"What did you have in mind?"

"My place."

"I only get an hour, Richard, I don't have time to drive that far."

"Your place, then."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Just no."

"What we need to say to each other isn't going to go over well in public. You know that."

I did. Dammit. "All right, we'll meet at my place a little after six. Do you want me to pick up something?"

"You're at work. It'll be easier for me to pick up something. You want mooshu pork and crab ragoon?"

"Yeah." We'd dated enough that he could order food for me without asking. But he asked anyway. Brownie point for him.

"I'll see you at about six-fifteen then," he said.

"See you."

"Bye, Anita."

"Bye." We hung up. My stomach was one hard knot of dread. If we were going to have "the" fight, the breakup fight, I didn't want to have it at my apartment, but Richard was right. We didn't want to be screaming about lycanthropes and killing people in a public restaurant. Still, it was not going to be a good time.

"Is Richard angry about last night?" Kaspar asked.

"Yeah."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I need the complete stories about the disappearances: struggles, who last saw them, that sort of thing."

"Marcus said all questions directly about the disappearances should be answered only by him."

"You always do what he says?"

"Not always, but he's quite adamant about this, Anita. I am not a predator. I cannot defend myself against Marcus at his worst."

"Would he really kill you for going against his wishes?"

"Perhaps not kill me, but I would be hurting for a very, very long time."

I shook my head. "He doesn't sound any better than most master vampires I know."

"I don't personally know any master vampires. I am forced to take your word for that."

I had to smile. I knew more monsters than the monsters did. "Would Richard know?"

"Perhaps, and if not, he could help you find out."

I wanted to ask him if Richard was as bad as Marcus. I wanted to know if my sweetie was really a beast at heart. I didn't ask. If I wanted to know about Richard, I should ask Richard.

"Unless you have more information, Kaspar, I have work to do." It sounded grumpy even to me. I smiled to try to soften it but didn't take it back. I wanted this whole mess to go away, and he was a reminder of it.

He stood. "If you need any assistance, please call."

"You'll only be able to give me the assistance Marcus okays, right?"

A slight flush colored his pale skin, a pink glow like colored sugar. "I am afraid so."

"I don't think I'll be calling," I said.

"You don't trust Marcus?"

I laughed, but it was harsh, not amused. "Do you?"

He smiled, and gave a slight nod of his head. "I suppose not." He moved for the door.

I had my hand on the doorknob when I turned and asked, "Is it really a family curse?"

"My affliction?"

"Yeah."

"Not a family one, but a curse, yes."

"Like in the fairy tale?" I said.

"Fairy tale sounds like such a gentle thing. The original stories are often quite gruesome."

"I've read some of them."

"Have you read *The Swan Princess* in its original Norse?"

"Can't say I have."

"It's even worse in the original language."

"Sorry to hear that," I said.

"So am I." He stepped closer to the door, and I had to open it to let him go. I dearly wanted to hear the story from his own lips, but there was a pain in his eyes that was raw enough to cut skin. I couldn't press against that much pain.

He stepped past me. I let him go. I was really going to have to find my textbook on fairy tales as truth from that comparative literature class. It had been a long time since I'd read *The Swan Princess*.

Chapter 17

It was more like six-thirty by the time I walked down the hallway to my apartment. I had half expected to see Richard sitting in the hall, but it was empty. The tightness in my stomach eased just a bit. A reprieve, even of a few minutes, was still a reprieve.

I had my keys in the door when the door behind me opened. I dropped the keys, leaving them dangling. My right hand went for the Browning. It was instinct, not something I thought about. My hand was on the butt, but I hadn't drawn it when Mrs. Pringle appeared in the door. I eased my hand away from the gun and smiled. I don't think she realized what I was doing because her smile never faltered.

She was tall and thin with age. Her white hair was wrapped in a bun at the nape of her neck. Mrs. Pringle never wore makeup and never apologized for being over sixty. She seemed to enjoy being old.

"Anita, you're running a little late tonight," she said. Custard, her Pomeranian, yapped in the background like a stuck record.

I frowned at her. Six-thirty was early for me to get home. Before I could say anything, Richard appeared behind her in the doorway. His hair fell around his face in a mass of rich brown waves. He was wearing one of my favorite sweaters. It was solid forest green and squishy soft to the touch. Custard was barking at him, inches away from his leg, as if working up courage for a quick nip.

"Custard, stop that," Mrs. Pringle said. She looked up at Richard. "I've never seen him behave like this around anyone. Anita can tell you that he likes almost everyone." She looked to me for support, embarrassed about her dog being rude to a guest.

I nodded. "You're right. I've never seen him act like this before." I was looking at Richard. His face was as closed and careful as I'd ever seen it.

"He acts like this around other dogs sometimes, tries to boss them," she said. "Do you have a dog, Mr. Zeeman? Maybe Custard smells him on you."

"No," Richard said, "I don't have a dog."

"I found your beau sitting in the hall with his sack of food. I thought he might like to wait inside. I'm sorry that Custard has made the visit so unpleasant."

"I always enjoy talking shop with another teacher," he said.

"So polite," she said. Her face had broken into a wonderful smile. She'd only met Richard once or twice in the hall, but she liked him. Even before she found out he was a teacher. Snap judgment.

Richard stepped around her into the hall. Custard followed him, yipping furiously. The dog looked like an overly ambitious dandelion. But it was a pissed dandelion. The dog bounced forward on tiny feet, giving a little hop with each bark.

"Custard, get back in here."

I held the door open for Richard. He had a white take-out sack and a coat in his arms. The dog gave a running bound, darting in to nip his ankle. Richard looked down at the dog. Custard stopped a nose away from his pants leg. He rolled eyes upward, a look in his doggy eyes that I'd never seen before. A considering look as if he wondered if Richard really would eat him.

Richard slipped through the door. Custard just stood there in the hallway, as subdued as I'd ever seen him. "Thanks for looking after Richard, Mrs. Pringle."

"My pleasure. He's a nice young man," she said. Her tone of voice said more than the words. "Nice young man" meant marry him. My stepmother, Judith, would agree with her. Except that Judith would have said it out loud, no hinting.

I smiled and closed the door. Custard started yapping at the door. I locked the door out of habit and turned to face the music.

Richard had draped his leather coat across the back of the couch. The take-out sack was sitting on the small kitchenette table. He lifted out cartons of food. I put my coat on the back of the couch by his and slipped off the high heels. I lost about two inches of height and felt much better.

"Nice jacket," he said. His voice was still neutral.

"Thanks." I had been going to take the jacket off, but he liked it, so I kept it on. Silly, but true. We were both being so careful. The tension in the room was choking.

I got plates out of the cabinet. I got a cold Coke from the fridge for me and poured a glass of water for Richard. He didn't like carbonated beverages. I'd taken to keeping a jug of cold water in the fridge just for him. My throat felt tight as I set the drinks on the table.

He set out silverware. We moved around my minuscule kitchen like dancers, knowing where each would be, never bumping unless it was on purpose. Tonight there was no touching. We left the lights off. The only light was from the living room, leaving the kitchen in semidarkness like a cave. It was almost as if neither one of us wanted to see clearly.

We sat down at last. We stared at each other over the food on the plates: mooshu pork for me, cashew chicken for Richard. The smell of hot Chinese food filled the apartment. Warm and comforting on most occasions. Tonight it nauseated me. A double order of crab ragoon sat on a plate between us. He had filled a saucer with sweet-and-sour sauce. It was the way we always ate Chinese, sharing a bowl of sauce.

Damn.

His chocolate brown eyes stared at me. I was the one who looked away first. I didn't want to do this. "So, do all dogs react like that to you?"

"No, just the dominant ones."

I looked up at that. "Custard is dominant to you?"

"He thinks so."

"Unhealthy," I said.

He smiled. "I don't eat dogs."

"I didn't mean . . . oh, shit." If we were going to do this, might as well do it right. "Why didn't you tell me about Marcus?"

"I didn't want to involve you."

"Why not?"

"Jean-Claude involved you with Nikolaos. You told me how much you hated that. Resented it. If I brought you in to help me with Marcus, what would be the difference?"

"It's not the same," I said.

"How? I won't use you like Jean-Claude did. I won't do it."

"If I volunteer, you're not using me."

"What are you going to do? Kill him?" There was a bitterness in his voice, anger.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You might as well take your jacket off. I saw the gun."

I opened my mouth to protest and closed it. Explaining in the middle of a fight that I wanted to look good for him sounded silly. I stood up and took the jacket off. I draped it carefully over the back of the chair, taking a lot of time with it. "There. Happy?"

"Is that gun your answer to everything?"

"Why do you suddenly have a problem with me carrying a gun?"

"Alfred was my friend."

That stopped me. It hadn't even occurred to me that Richard might like Alfred. "I didn't know he was your friend."

"Would it have made a difference?"

I thought about that. "Maybe."

"You didn't have to kill him."

"I had this conversation with Marcus last night. They left me no choice, Richard. I warned him, more than once."

"I heard all about it. The pack's buzzing with it. How you wouldn't back down. You rejected Marcus's protection. You shot another one of us." He shook his head. "Oh, everyone's real impressed."

"I didn't do it to impress them."

He took a deep breath. "I know, that's what scares me."

"You're scared of me?"

"For you," he said. The anger was seeping out of his eyes, what was replacing it was fear.

"I can handle myself, Richard."

"You don't understand what you did last night."

"I am sorry if Alfred was your friend. Frankly, he didn't strike me as someone you'd hang out with."

"I know he was a bully, and Marcus's dog to call, but he was mine to protect."

"Marcus wasn't doing a lot of protecting last night, Richard. He was more interested in his little power struggle than in keeping Alfred safe."

"I stopped by Irving's place this morning." He let the statement hang there in the air between us.

It was my turn to get angry. "Did you hurt him?"

"If I did, it was my right as beta male."

I stood up, hands pressed on the tabletop. "If you hurt him, we are going to have more than just words."

"Are you going to shoot me, too?"

I looked at him, with his wonderful hair, looking scrumptious in his sweater, and nodded. "If I had to."

"You could kill me, just like that."

"No, not kill, but wound, yeah."

"To keep Irving safe, you'd pull a gun on me." He was leaning back in the chair, arms crossed on his chest. His expression was amazed and angry.

"Irving asked for my protection. I gave it."

"So he told me this morning."

"Did you hurt him?"

He stared at me for a long time, then finally said, "No, I didn't hurt him."

I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding and eased back into my chair.

"You'd really pit yourself against me to protect him. You really would."

"Don't sound so amazed. Irving was caught in the middle of the two of you. Marcus would have hurt him if he didn't contact me, and you said you'd hurt him if he did. Didn't seem very fair."

"A lot of things in the pack aren't fair, Anita."

"So is life, Richard. What of it?"

"When Irving told me that he was under your protection, I didn't hurt him, but I didn't really believe you'd hurt me."

"I've known Irving a lot longer than I've known you."

He leaned forward, hands on the tabletop. "But he's not dating you."

I shrugged. I didn't know what else to say. Nothing seemed like a safe bet.

"Am I still your sweetie or did your baptism by fire last night make you not want to date me anymore?"

"You're in a life-or-death struggle and you didn't tell me. If you hide things like that from me, how can we have a relationship?"

"Marcus won't kill me," he said.

I just stared at him. He seemed sincere. Shit. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"Yes."

I wanted to call him a fool, but I closed my mouth and tried to think of something else to say. Nothing came to mind. "I've met Marcus. I've met Raina." I shook my head. "If you really believe that Marcus doesn't want you dead, you're wrong."

"One night and you're an expert," he said.

"Yeah, on this I am."

"That's why I didn't tell you. You'd kill him, wouldn't you? You'd just kill him."

"If he was trying to kill me, yeah."

"I have to handle this myself, Anita."

"Then handle it, Richard. Kill his ass."

"Or you'll do it for me."

I sat back in my chair. "Shit, Richard, what do you want from me?"

"I want to know if you think I'm a monster."

The conversation was moving too fast for me. "You're accusing me of being a murderer. Shouldn't that be my question?"

"I knew what you were when we first met. You thought I was human. Do you still think I'm human?"

I stared at him. He looked so uncertain. In my head I knew he wasn't human. But I'd still never seen him do any of the otherworldly stuff. Looking at him here in my kitchen, brown eyes brimming with sincerity, he just didn't seem very dangerous. He believed that Marcus wouldn't kill him. It was too naive for words. I wanted to protect him. To keep him safe somehow.

"You're not a monster, Richard."

"Then why haven't you touched me tonight, not even a hello kiss."

"I thought we were mad at each other," I said. "I don't kiss people that I'm mad at."

"Are we mad at each other?" His voice was soft, hesitant.

"I don't know. Promise me something."

"What?"

"No more hiding. No more lying, not even by omission. You tell me the truth, and I'll tell you the truth."

"Agreed, if you promise not to kill Marcus."

I stared across at him. How could anybody be a master werewolf and be so goody-two-shoes? It was both charming and liable to get him killed. "I can't promise that."

"Anita . . ."

I held up a hand. "I can promise not to kill him unless he attacks me, or you, or a civilian."

It was Richard's turn to stare at me. "You could kill him, just like that?"

"Just like that."

He shook his head. "I don't understand that."

"How can you be a lycanthrope and never have killed anybody?"

"I'm careful."

"And I'm not?"

"You're almost casual about it. You killed Alfred last night, and you don't seem sorry."

"Should I be?"

"I would be."

I shrugged. Truth was, it did bother me a little. There might have been a way out without Alfred ending up in a body bag. Or in the stomachs of his friends. But I'd killed him. There it was. No going back. No changing it. No apologizing.

"It's the way I am, Richard. Live with it or get out. I'm not going to change."

"One of the reasons I wanted to date you to begin with was I thought you could take care of yourself. You've seen them now. I think I can get out of it alive, but a regular person—an ordinary human being—what chance would they have?"

I just looked at him. I flashed on him with his throat torn out. Dead. But he hadn't been dead. He'd healed. He'd lived. There'd been another man. Another human being that hadn't healed. I never wanted to love anyone and lose them like that. Ever.

"So you got what was advertised. What's the problem?"

"I still want you. I still want to hold you. Touch you. Can you stand to touch me after what you saw last night?" He wouldn't meet my eyes. His hair fell forward, hiding his face.

I stood up and took the step that left me looking down at him. He raised his face to me, his eyes glittered with unshed tears. The fear in his face was raw. I had thought that what I saw last night would make a difference between us. I flashed on Jason's unnatural strength, the sweat on Marcus's face, Gabriel with his blood-coated mouth. But staring into Richard's face, with him close enough to touch, none of that was real. I trusted Richard. Besides, I was armed.

I leaned over him, bending down to kiss his lips. The first kiss was gentle, chaste. He made no move to touch me, hands in his lap. I kissed his forehead, hands combing through his long hair, so I could feel the warmth of him against my fingers. I kissed his eyebrows, the tip of his nose, each cheek, finally his lips again. He sighed, the breath pouring into my mouth, and I pressed my lips against his like I'd eat him from the mouth down.

His arms wrapped around my back, hands hesitating at my waist, fingers slightly lower. His hands jumped to my thighs, skipping all those questionable areas. I put one leg on either side of his knees, and found the short skirt did have its uses. I straddled his lap, didn't have to raise the skirt an inch. Richard made a small sound of surprise. He stared at me, and his eyes were drowning deep.

I raised his sweater off his stomach, running hands against his bare flesh. "Off," I said.

He raised the sweater over his head in one movement, dropping it to the floor. I sat in his lap, staring at his bare chest. I should have stopped right there, but I didn't want to.

I pressed my face in the bend of his neck, breathing in the smell of his skin, his hair covering my face like a veil. I ran just the tip of my tongue in a thin line of wetness down his neck, across his collarbone.

His hands kneaded the small of my back, sliding downward. His fingers danced over my buttocks, then up to my back. Point for him. He hadn't groped me.

"The gun, can you take it off?" He asked with his face buried in my hair.

I nodded, slipping out of the shoulder straps. I couldn't get the rest off without removing the skirt's belt. My hands didn't seem to want to work.

Richard took my hands and placed them gently to either side. He undid the buckle and began to slide the belt out a loop at a time. Each pull made me move

just a little. I held the holstered gun while he drew the belt free. He let the belt drop to the floor. I folded the shoulder holster carefully and laid it on the table behind us.

I turned back to him. His face was startlingly close. His lips were soft, full. I licked the edges of his mouth. The kiss was quick and messy. I wanted to run my mouth over other things. Down his chest. We'd never let it go this far. Not even close.

He pulled my blouse out of the skirt, running hands over my bare back. The feel of his naked skin on places he'd never touched before made me shudder.

"We have to stop now." I whispered it into his neck, so it wasn't completely convincing.

"What?"

"Stop." I pushed a little back from him, enough to see his face. Enough to breathe just a little. My hands were still playing with his hair, touching his shoulders. I dropped my hands. Made myself stop. He was so warm. I raised my hands to my face, and could smell him on my skin. I did not want to stop. From the look on his face, the feel of his body, neither did he. "We should stop now."

"Why?" His voice was almost a whisper.

"Because if we don't stop now, we might not stop at all."

"Would that be such a bad thing?"

Staring into his lovely eyes from inches away, I almost said, no. "Maybe, yes."

"Why?"

"Because one night is never enough. You either have a regular diet of it or you go cold turkey."

"You can have this every night," he said.

"Is that a proposal?" I asked.

He blinked at me, trying to draw himself back up. To think. I watched the effort and struggled with it myself. It was hard to think sitting in his lap. I stood up. His hands were still under my shirt, on my bare back.

"Anita, what's wrong?"

I stood looking down at him, hands on his shoulders for balance, still too close for clear thinking. I backed away, and he let me go. I leaned my hands against the kitchen counter, trying to think enough to make sense.

I tried to think how to say a couple of years' worth of pain in one mouthful. "I was always a good girl. I didn't sleep around. In college I met someone, we got engaged, we set a date, we made love. He dumped me."

"He'd done all that just to get you in bed?"

I shook my head and turned to look at him. He was still sitting there with his shirt off, looking scrumptious. "His family disapproved of me."

"Why?"

"His mother didn't like my mother being Mexican." I leaned my back against the cabinets, arms crossed, hugging myself. "He didn't love me enough

to go against his family. I missed him in a lot of ways, but my body missed him, too. I promised myself I'd never let that happen again."

"So you're waiting for marriage," he said.

I nodded. "I want you, Richard, badly, but I can't. I promised I'd never let myself get hurt like that again."

He stood up and came to stand in front of me. He stood close but didn't try to touch me. "Then marry me."

I looked up at him. "Yeah, right."

"No, I mean it." He put his hands on my shoulders, gently. "I've thought about asking before, but I was afraid. You hadn't seen what a lycanthrope could do, what we could be. I knew you needed to see that before I could ask, but I was afraid for you to see it."

"I still haven't seen you change," I said.

"Do you need to?"

"Standing here like this, I say no, but realistically, if we're serious, probably."

"Now?"

I stared up at him in the near dark and hugged him. I folded against him and shook my head, cheek sliding along his naked chest. "No, not now."

He kissed the top of my head. "Is that a yes?"

I raised my head to look at him. "I should say no."

"Why?"

"Because life is too complicated for this."

"Life is always complicated, Anita. Say yes."

"Yes." The minute I said it, I wanted it back. I lusted after him a lot. I even loved him maybe more than a little. Did I suspect him of eating Little Red Riding Hood? Hell, he couldn't even bring himself to kill the Big Bad Wolf. Of the two of us, I was the more likely to slaughter people.

He kissed me, his hands pressing against my back. I drew back enough to breathe, and said, "No sex tonight. The rule still stands."

He lowered his mouth and spoke with our lips almost touching. "I know."

Chapter 18

I was late to my first zombie appointment. Surprise, surprise. Being late to the first meeting made me late to the other two. It was 2:03 by the time I got to Edward's room.

I knocked. He opened the door and stepped to one side. "You're late."

"Yeah," I said. The room was nice but standard. A single king-sized bed, nightstand, two lamps, a desk against the far wall. The drapes were closed over the nearly wall-to-wall windows. The bathroom light was on, door open. The

closet door was half-open, showing that he'd hung up his clothes. He planned to stay for a while.

The television was on, sound turned off. I was surprised. Edward didn't watch television. A VCR sat on top of the TV. That was not standard hotel issue.

"You want something from room service before we get started?"

"A Coke would be great."

He smiled. "You always did have champagne tastes, Anita." He went to the phone and ordered. He asked for a steak, rare, with a bottle of burgundy.

I took off my coat and laid it on the desk chair. "I don't drink," I said.

"I know," he said. "You want to freshen up while we wait for the food?"

I glanced up and caught a distant look at myself in the bathroom mirror. Chicken blood had dried to a sticky, brick color on my face. "I see your point."

I shut the bathroom door and looked at myself in the mirror. The lighting was that harsh, glaring white that so many hotel bathrooms seem to have. It's so unflattering that even Ms. America wouldn't look good in it.

The blood stood out like reddish chalk against my pale skin. I was wearing a white Christmas sweatshirt that had Maxine from the Shoebox Hallmark commercials on it. She was drinking coffee with a candy cane in hand, saying, "This is as jolly as I get." Bert had asked us to wear Christmasy-type things for the month. Maybe the sweatshirt wasn't exactly what he had in mind, but hey, it was better than some of the ones I had at home. There was blood on the white cloth. Figures.

I took the sweatshirt off, draping it on the bathtub. There was blood smeared over my heart. I'd even gotten a little on my silver cross. I'd put the blood there along with the stuff on my face and hands. I'd killed three chickens tonight. Raising zombies was a messy job.

I got one of the white washrags from the little towel rack. I wondered how Edward would explain the bloodstains to the maid. Not my problem, but sort of amusing anyway.

I ran water into the sink and started scrubbing. I caught a glimpse of myself with blood running down my face in watery rivulets. I stood up and stared. My face looked fresh scrubbed and sort of surprised.

Had Richard really proposed? Had I really said yes? Surely not. I had said yes. Shit. I wiped at the blood on my chest. I played with monsters all the time. So I was engaged to one. That stopped me. I sat down on the closed lid of the stool, bloody washrag gripped in my hands. I was engaged. Again.

The first time he'd been so white bread that even Judith had liked him. He'd been Mr. All-American, and I hadn't been good enough for him, according to his family. What had hurt most was that he hadn't loved me enough. Not nearly as much as I'd loved him. I'd have given up everything for him. Not a mistake to make twice.

Richard wasn't like that. I knew that. Yet there was that worm of doubt. Fear that he'd blow it. Fear he wouldn't blow it. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

I looked down and realized I was dripping bloody water on the linoleum. I knelt and wiped it up. I was scrubbed as clean as I was going to get until I showered at home. If I'd brought clean clothes, I might have done it here, but I hadn't thought of it.

Edward knocked on the door. "Food's here."

I got dressed, put the rag in the sink, and ran cold water over it. I made sure the cloth wasn't blocking the drain and opened the door. The smell of steak hit me. It smelled wonderful. I hadn't eaten for more than eight hours, and truthfully I hadn't eaten all that much then. Richard had distracted me.

"Do you think room service would shoot us if we asked for another order?"

He made a small hand motion at the room-service cart. There were two orders on the cart.

"How did you know I'd be hungry?"

"You always forget to eat," he said.

"My, aren't we being mother of the year."

"The least I can do is feed you."

I looked at him. "What's up, Edward? You're being awfully considerate."

"I know you well enough to know you won't like this. Call the meal a peace offering."

"Won't like what?"

"Let's eat, watch the movie, and all will be revealed."

He was being cagey. It wasn't like him. He'd shoot you, but he wouldn't be cute about it. "What are you up to, Edward?"

"No questions until after the movie."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll have better questions." With that inscrutable answer he sat down on the edge of the bed and poured a glass of red wine. He cut his meat, which was raw enough to bleed in the center.

"Please tell me my steak isn't bloody."

"It isn't bloody. You like your meat well dead."

"Ha, ha." But I sat down. It seemed odd sharing a meal in Edward's hotel room, like we were two business people traveling together, just a working dinner. The steak was well done. Thick house fries suitably spiced took up almost as much room as the steak. There was a side order of broccoli, which could be slid to one side and ignored.

The Coke came in a chilled wineglass, which seemed a little excessive, but it looked nice.

"The movie's going to start near the end. I don't think you'll have any trouble picking up the plot." He hit the remote control, and the TV screen flickered, jumping from a game show to a bedroom.

A woman with long brown hair lay on her back in a round bed. She was nude, or at least what I could see of her was nude. Below the waist she was hidden behind the furiously pumping buttocks of a dark-haired man.

"This is pornography." I didn't even try to keep the disbelief from my voice.

"It certainly is."

I glanced at Edward. He was cutting his steak with neat, precise hand movements. He chewed a bite of steak, sipped his wine, and watched the screen.

I glanced back at the "movie." A second man had joined the couple on the bed. He was taller than the first man, with shorter hair, but beyond that it was a little hard to tell, mainly because I was trying not to look.

I sat on the edge of Edward's bed with our nice steak dinners, and for the first time felt awkward around Edward. There had never been any sexual tension between us. We might kill each other someday, but we'd never kiss. But I was still in a man's hotel room watching a porno movie, and good girls just didn't do that.

"Edward, what the hell is going on?"

He hit the remote control. "Here, a face shot."

I turned back to the screen. The frozen image stared out at me. It was the second man. It was Alfred.

"Oh, my, God," I said.

"You know him?" Edward asked.

"Yeah." No sense denying it. Alfred was dead. Edward couldn't hurt him anymore.

"Name?"

"Alfred. I don't know the last name."

He hit fast forward. The images on the screen moved at a furious pace, doing intimate things that would have been obscene at any speed. At fast forward it seemed sadder. Ridiculous as well as degrading.

He hit the pause again. The woman was full face to the camera, mouth open, eyes heavy lidded with sexual languor. Her hair was spread artfully over the silken pillow. It should have been provocative. It managed not to be.

"Do you know her?"

I shook my head. "No."

He hit the button again. "We're near the end."

"What about the other man?"

"He wears a face mask throughout."

The masked man had mounted the woman from behind. His hips cupped her butt, the line of his thigh matching hers. He leaned his upper body over her nude torso, hands massaging the flesh of her upper arms. He seemed to be draping himself on top of her more than anything else. There seemed to be very little sex going on.

She was supporting his full weight on her hands and knees. Her breath came in pants. A low growl trickled through the room. The camera did a close-up of the man's back. The skin was rippled, as if a hand had rubbed the under surface of his skin, then vanished. More ripples, as if something small were trying to punch its way out.

A wider-angle shot showed him still draped over the woman. The ripples on his back were growing. You could see things pushing against his skin,

movements large enough you could have seen them even if he'd been dressed. Like those I had seen on Jason last night.

I had to admit this part was fascinating. I'd seen people shapeshift, but never like this. Not in minute detail, not with the loving eye of a camera on it.

The skin split along his back, and he reared upward, hands hugging her waist, screaming. Clear liquid flowed down his back in a wash that soaked the bed and the woman underneath him.

The woman gave a little encouragement, moving her buttocks against him, thrusting against him, head bowed to the bed.

Black fur flowed outward from his back. His hands shot to his sides, spasming. He leaned over her again, hands digging into the bed. The hands were just hands, then those human fingers sliced into the bed, ripping white stuffing from great clawed furrows.

The man seemed to shrink. The fur flowed faster and faster, almost liquid in its speed. The mask dropped away. The face was the wrong shape for it now. The camera did a close shot of the fallen mask. A bit of art in all this . . . oh, hell. I didn't have a word for it.

The man was gone. A black leopard mounted the woman and seemed very happy with the arrangement. The leopard bent over the woman, lips spread to reveal glistening teeth. The leopard nipped her back, drawing a small amount of blood. She gave a low moan, a shudder sweeping her body.

Alfred came back into view. He was still in human form. He crawled up to the bed and kissed the woman. It was a long, complete kiss, full of probing tongues. He rose on his knees, still kissing her, rocking his body with the movements. He seemed very excited to see her.

His back rippled, and he tore away from her, hands clutching the sheets. The change seemed to go a lot faster for him. The camera did a close-up of one of his hands. Bones slid out of the skin with wet, sucking noises. Muscles and ligaments crawled and rearranged. The skin tore and that same clear liquid poured out. The hand changed into a naked claw before the dark fur flowed over it.

He stood on bent legs, half wolf, half man, but all male. He threw back his head and howled. The sound had a deep, resonating quality that filled the room.

The woman looked up at him, eyes wide. The leopard jumped off her, rolling on the bed, for all the world like a big kitten. It rolled itself in the silken sheet, until only its black-furred face peeked out.

The woman lay on her back, legs spread-eagled. She held out her hands to the wolfman, tongue flicking out along her lips as if she were really enjoying herself. Maybe she was.

The werewolf thrust into her, and it wasn't gentle. She gave a gasping moan, as if it were the best thing she'd ever felt.

The woman was making noises. Either she was a very good actor or she was coming close to climax. I wasn't sure which I preferred. Good acting, I think.

She came with a sound between a scream and a shout of joy. She lay back gasping on the bed, body liquid. The werewolf gave one last shuddering thrust and drew claws down the length of her naked body.

She screamed then, no acting required. Blood poured down her body in scarlet rivulets. The leopard gave a startled scream and jumped off the bed. The woman put her hands up in front of her face, and the claws smashed her arms to one side. Blood poured, and there was a glimpse of bone in one arm where the claws had torn all the flesh away.

Her screams were high and continuous, one loud ragged shriek after another, as fast as she could draw air. The werewolf's pointed muzzle lowered towards her face. I had an image of the murder victim's crushed jaw. But he went for her throat. He bit her throat out, spraying a great gout of blood.

Her eyes stared sightless at the camera, wide and shiny, dull with death. The blood had somehow left her face untouched. The werewolf reared back, blood dripping from its jaws. A gob of blood fell on her staring face, running between her eyes.

The leopard leaped back onto the bed. It licked her face clean with long, sure strokes of its tongue. The werewolf licked its way down her body, stopping over her stomach. It hesitated, one yellow eye staring at the camera. It began to feed. The leopard joined the feast.

I closed my eyes, but the sounds were enough. Heavy, wet, tearing sounds filled the room. I heard myself say, "Turn it off." The sounds stopped, and I assumed that Edward had turned the tape off, but I didn't look up to see. I didn't look up until I heard the whir of the tape rewinding.

Edward cut a bite of steak.

"If you eat that right now, I will throw up on you."

He smiled, but he put down his silverware. He looked at me. His expression was neutral, as it was most of the time. I couldn't tell if he'd enjoyed the film or been disgusted by it. "Now you can ask me questions," he said. His voice was like it always was, pleasant, unaffected by external stimuli.

"Jesus, where did you get that thing?"

"A client."

"Why give it to you?"

"The woman was his daughter."

"Oh, God, please, tell me he didn't watch this."

"You know he saw it. You know he watched it to the end or why hire me? Most men don't hire people to kill their daughter's lovers."

"He hired you to kill the two men?"

Edward nodded.

"Why did you show this to me?"

"Because I knew you'd help me."

"I'm not an assassin, Edward."

"Just help me identify them. I'll do the rest. Is it all right if I drink some wine?"

I nodded.

He sipped his wine. The dark liquid rolled around the glass, looking a lot redder than it had before the movie. I swallowed hard and looked away. I would not throw up. I would not throw up.

"Where can I find Alfred?"

"Nowhere," I said.

He set his wineglass carefully on the tray. "Anita, you disappoint me. I thought you'd help me after seeing what they did to the girl."

"I'm not being uncooperative. That film is one of the worst things I've ever seen, and I've seen a hell of a lot. You're too late to find Alfred."

"How too late?"

"I killed him last night."

A smile spread across his face, beautiful to behold. "You always make my job easier."

"Not on purpose."

He shrugged. "Do you want half the fee? You did do half the work."

I shook my head. "I didn't do it for money."

"Tell me what happened."

"No."

"Why not?"

I looked at him. "Because you hunt lycanthropes and I don't want to give someone to you by accident."

"The wereleopard deserves to die, Anita."

"I'm not arguing that. Though, technically, he didn't kill the girl."

"The father wants them both. Do you blame him?"

"No, I guess I don't."

"Then you'll help me identify the other man?"

"Maybe." I stood up. "I need to call someone. I need for someone else to see this film. He might be able to help you more than I could."

"Who?"

I shook my head. "Let me see if he'll come first."

Edward gave a long nod, almost a bow with just his neck. "As you like."

I dialed Richard's number by heart. I got his machine. "This is Anita, pick up if you're there. Richard, pick up. This is important." No one picked up the phone.

"Damn," I said.

"Not home?" Edward asked.

"Do you have the number for the Lunatic Cafe?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me."

He repeated the number slowly, and I dialed it. A woman picked up the phone. It wasn't Raina. I was thankful for that. "Lunatic Cafe, Polly here, how may I help you."

"I need to speak with Richard."

"I'm sorry we don't have any waiters by that name."

"Look, I was a guest of Marcus's last night. I need to speak with Richard. It's an emergency."

"I don't know. I mean, like, they're all busy in the back room."

"Look, get Richard on the phone now."

"Marcus doesn't like to be disturbed."

"Polly, is it? I have been on my feet for over thirteen hours. If you do not put Richard on the phone right now, I am going to come down there personally and bust your ass. Am I making myself clear?"

"Who is this?" She sounded a little miffed, and not in the least afraid.

"Anita Blake."

"Oh," she said. "I'll get Richard for you, right away, Anita, right away."

There was an edge of panic to her voice that hadn't been there before. She put me on hold. Someone with a sick sense of humor had compiled the Muzak. "Moonlight and Roses," "Blue Moon," "Moonlight Sonata." Every song was a moon theme. We were halfway through "Moon over Miami" when the phone clicked back to life.

"Anita, it's me. What's wrong?"

"I'm all right, but I've got something you need to see."

"Can you tell me what it is?"

"I know this sounds corny, but not over the phone."

"You sure you're not just looking for an excuse to see me again?" There was a note of teasing in his voice.

It had been too long a night. "Can you meet me?"

"Of course. What's wrong? Your voice sounds awful."

"I need a hug and to erase the last hour of my life. The first you can take care of when you get here, the second I'll just have to live with."

"Are you home?"

"No." I glanced at Edward, putting my hand over the mouthpiece. "Can I give him the hotel room?"

He nodded.

I gave Richard the hotel room, and directions. "I'll be there as soon as I can." He hesitated, then said, "What did you say to Polly? She's nearly hysterical."

"She wouldn't put you on the phone."

"You threatened her," he said.

"Yeah."

"Was it an idle threat?"

"Pretty much."

"Dominant pack members don't make idle threats to subordinates."

"I'm not a pack member."

"After last night you're a dominant. They're treating you like a rogue dominant lycanthrope."

"What does that mean?"

"It means when you say you're going to bust someone's ass, they believe you."

"Oh, sorry."

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to Polly. I'll be there before you get her calmed down."

"Don't put her on, Richard."

"That's what you get for being trigger happy. People get scared of you."

"Richard . . ." A sobbing female voice came on the line. I spent the next fifteen minutes convincing a crying werewolf that I wasn't going to hurt her. My life was getting too strange, even for me.

Chapter 19

Richard was wrong. He didn't knock on the door while I was on the phone calming Polly down. She was so grateful that I had forgiven her for her rudeness, that it was embarrassing. Waves of submissiveness poured out of the phone. I hung up.

Edward was grinning at me. He had moved to one of the soft chairs. "Did you just spend nearly twenty minutes convincing a werewolf that you weren't going to hurt her?"

"Yes."

He laughed, a wide, abrupt sound. The smile vanished, leaving a sort of shimmering glow to his face. His eyes glittered with something darker than humor. I wasn't sure what he was thinking, but it wasn't pleasant.

He slid down in the chair, base of his skull resting on the back, hands clasped over his stomach, ankles crossed. He looked utterly comfortable. "How did you come to be the terror of good little werewolves everywhere?"

"I don't think they're used to people shooting and killing them. At least not on first acquaintance."

His eyes simmered with some dark joke. "You went in there and killed someone your first night? Hell, Anita, I've been down three times and haven't killed anyone yet."

"How long have you been in town?"

He looked at me for a long moment. "Is that an idle question or do you need to know?"

It had occurred to me that Edward could take out eight lycanthropes and leave no trace. If any human could do it, it was him.

"I need to know," I said.

"A week, tomorrow." His eyes had gone empty. They were as cool and distant as any of the shapeshifters' last night. There's more than one way to become a predator. "Of course, you'll have to take my word for it. You can check with registration, but I could have changed hotels."

"Why would you lie to me?"

"Because I enjoy it," he said.

"It's not the lie you enjoy."

"What do I enjoy?"

"Knowing something I don't."

He gave a small shrug, not easy for him, slid down in the chair as he was. He made it look graceful. "Egotistical of you."

"It's not just from me. You like keeping secrets for the pure hell of it."

He smiled then, a slow, lazy smile. "You do know me well."

I started to say, we're friends, but the look in his eyes stopped me. His stare was a little too intense. He seemed to be studying me as if he'd never really seen me before.

"What are you thinking, Edward?"

"That you might be able to give me a run for my money."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know how I like a challenge."

I stared at him. "You're talking about coming against me, seeing who's better?" I made it a question. He didn't give me the answer I wanted.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I won't do it. You know me—no money, no killing—but it would be . . . interesting."

"Don't go all spooky on me, Edward."

"It's just for the very first time I'm wondering if you would win?"

He was scaring me. I was armed, and he didn't seem to be, but Edward was always armed. "Don't do this, Edward."

He sat up in one liquid movement. My hand jumped to my gun. The gun was halfway out of its holster when I realized he hadn't done anything but sit up. I let out a shaky breath and eased the gun back into the holster. "Don't play with me, Edward. One of us will get hurt if you do."

He spread his hands wide. "No more games. I would like to know which of us was best, Anita, but not enough to kill you."

I let my hand relax. If Edward said he would kill me tonight, he meant it. If we ever did do this for real, he'd tell me first. Edward liked to be sporting about these things. Surprising your victim made things too easy.

There was a knock on the door. I jumped. Nervous—who, me? Edward sat there as though he hadn't heard, still staring at me with his spooky eyes. I went to the door. It was Richard. He put his arms around me, and I let him. I folded against his chest and was very aware that I couldn't pull a gun very fast clasped to Richard's body.

I drew back first and pulled him into the room. He looked questioningly at me. I shook my head. "You remember Edward?"

"Anita, you didn't tell me you were still dating Richard." Edward's voice was pleasant, normal, as if he hadn't been wondering what it would be like to kill me. His face was open, friendly. He walked across the room with his hand outstretched. He was a superb actor.

Richard shook his hand, looking a little puzzled. He glanced at me.

"What's happening, Anita?"

"Can you set up the movie?"

"If you'll let me eat during it. My steak is getting ice cold," Edward said.

I swallowed hard. "You've seen the movie before, and you still ordered steaks. Why?"

"Maybe to see if you could eat after watching it."

"You competitive bastard."

He just smiled.

"What movie?" Richard asked.

"Eat your steak, Edward. We'll watch after you're done."

"It bothered you that much?"

"Shut up and eat."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and started cutting meat. The meat was red. Blood oozed out of it. I walked towards the bathroom. I wasn't going to be sick, but if I watched him eat that piece of meat I would be.

"I'm going to hide in the bathroom. You want an explanation, come join me," I said.

Richard glanced at Edward, then back to me. "What is going on?"

I pulled him into the bathroom and shut the door behind us. I ran cold water in the sink and splashed it on my face.

He gripped my shoulders, massaging. "Are you all right?"

I shook my head, water dripping down my face. I fumbled a towel and pressed it to my face, holding it there a minute. Edward hadn't warned me because he liked to shock people. And a warning would have lessened the impact. How much impact did I want Richard to endure?

I turned to him, towel still clutched in my hands. He looked worried, all tender concern. I didn't want him to look like that. Had I really said yes, just eight hours ago? It seemed less and less real.

"The movie is a porno flick," I said.

He looked startled. Good. "Porno? Are you serious?"

"Deadly," I said.

"Why do I need to see it?" A thought seemed to occur to him. "Why did you watch it with him?" There was the tiniest bit of anger in his voice.

I laughed then. I laughed until tears ran down my face, and I was too breathless to speak.

"What's so funny?" He sounded a little indignant.

When I could speak without gasping, I said, "Be afraid of Edward, but never be jealous of him."

The laughter had helped. I felt better, less dirty, less embarrassed, even a little less horrified. I stared up at him. He was still wearing the green sweater that had ended up on my kitchen floor earlier. He looked wonderful. I realized I didn't. In my oversize sweatshirt, complete with bloodstain, jeans, and sneakers, I had lost several notches in the cuteness game. I shook my head. Did it matter? No, I was delaying. I didn't want to go back out there. I didn't want to watch the movie again. I certainly didn't want to sit in the same room with the man I might marry and watch him watch a porno film. Should I spoil the ending?

Would it excite him before it went wrong? I looked at his very human face, and wondered.

"It's lycanthropes and a human in the film."

"They're already for sale?" he said.

It was my turn to look surprised. "You know about the film? You said 'they.' There are more of them?"

"Unfortunately," he said. He leaned against the door, sliding down to sit Indian fashion on the floor. If he'd stretched his legs out, there wouldn't have been room for both of us.

"Explain this, Richard."

"It was Raina's idea," he said. "She convinced Marcus to order some of us to participate."

"Did you . . ." I couldn't even say it.

He shook his head. Something tight in my chest eased. "Raina tried to get me in front of the cameras. For those that need to hide their identity they use masks. I wouldn't do it."

"Did Marcus order you to?"

"Yes. These damn films are one of the main reasons I started rising in the pack. Everyone higher in the structure could order me around. If Marcus okays it, they can order you to do almost anything, as long as it's not illegal."

"Wait. The films aren't illegal?"

"Bestiality is against the law in some states, but we sort of slip through the cracks on the law."

"Nothing else illegal goes on in these films?" I asked.

He stared up at me. "What's on that film that makes you look so scared?"

"It's a snuff film."

He just stared at me, no change of expression, as if waiting for me to say more. When I didn't, he said, "You cannot be serious."

"I wish I wasn't."

He shook his head. "Even Raina wouldn't do that."

"Raina wasn't in the film as far as I saw."

"But Marcus wouldn't approve of that, not that." He stood up, using only his legs and the wall. He paced to the edge of the bathtub and back. He brushed past me, slamming his hand into the wall. It gave a resounding thunk.

He turned, and I'd never seen him so angry. "There are other packs around the country. It doesn't have to be us."

"Alfred was in it."

He leaned his back against the far wall, and slammed his palms into the wall again. "I can't believe it."

Edward knocked on the door. "The film's ready."

Richard yanked the door open and poured into the other room like a crackling storm. For the first time I felt some of that otherworldly energy radiating from him.

Edward's eyes widened. "You gave him a preview?"

I nodded.

The room was in darkness except for the television. "I'll give you two love birds the bed. I'll sit over here." He sat down in the chair again, upright, watching us. "Don't mind me if the mood strikes you."

"Shut up and start the movie," I said.

Richard had sat down on the edge of the bed. The room-service cart was gone, along with its offending meat. Great, one less reason to upchuck. Richard seemed to have calmed down. He seemed normal enough sitting there. That wash of energy was gone so cleanly that I wondered if I'd imagined it. I glanced at Edward's face. He was watching Richard as if he had done something interesting. I hadn't imagined it.

I thought about turning on the lights but didn't. Darkness seemed better for this.

"Edward."

"Showtime," he said. He hit the button, and it began again.

Richard stiffened at the first image. Did he recognize the other man? I didn't ask, not yet. Let him see it, then questions.

I didn't want to sit on the bed with my sweetie while this filth played. Maybe I hadn't really thought about what sex might mean to Richard. Did it mean shapeshifting? Bestiality? I hoped not, and wasn't sure how to find out without asking, and I didn't want to ask. If the answer was yes to the bestiality, the wedding was off.

I finally walked across the screen and sat down in the other chair, beside Edward. I didn't want to see the film again. Apparently neither did Edward. We both watched Richard watch the film. I wasn't sure what I expected to see, or even what I wanted to see. Edward's face gave nothing away. His eyes closed about halfway through. He'd slid down in the chair again. He looked asleep, but I knew better. He was aware of everything in the room. I wasn't sure Edward ever really slept.

Richard watched alone. He sat on the very edge of the bed, hands clasped together, shoulders hunched. His eyes were bright, reflecting the light of the television set. I could almost watch the action playing over his face. Sweat glistened on his upper lip. He wiped it away, catching me looking at him. He looked embarrassed, then angry.

"Don't watch me, Anita." His voice was choked tight with something more than emotion, or less.

I couldn't pretend sleep like Edward. What the hell was I supposed to do? I got up and walked towards the bathroom. I studiously did not look at the screen, but I had to cross in front of it. I felt Richard track me as I moved. His eyes on my back made my skin itch. I wiped suddenly sweating palms on my jeans. I turned, slowly, to look at him.

He was looking at me, not the movie. There was rage on his face—anger was too mild a word—and hatred. I didn't think it was me he was angry with. That left who? Raina, Marcus . . . himself?

The woman's scream jerked his head around to the film. I watched his face while his friend killed her. The rage blossomed on his face, spilling out his mouth in an inarticulate cry. He slid off the bed to his knees, covering his face with his hands.

Edward was standing. I caught the movement on the edge of my vision and found him holding a gun that had magically appeared. I was holding the Browning. We stared at each other over Richard's kneeling body.

Richard had rolled into an almost fetal position, rocking slowly back and forth on his knees. The sounds of tearing flesh came from the screen. He raised a shocked face, caught one glimpse of the screen, and scrambled towards me. I stepped out of the way and he let me. He was going for the bathroom.

The door slammed shut, and a few seconds later the sound of his retching came through the door.

Edward and I stood out in the room, looking at each other. We still had our guns out. "You go for your gun as quickly as I do. That wasn't true two years ago."

"It's been a rough two years," I said.

He smiled. "Most people wouldn't have seen me move in the dark."

"My night vision is excellent," I said.

"I'll remember that."

"Let's call a truce tonight, Edward. I'm too tired to screw with it tonight."

He gave one nod, and tucked the gun at the small of his back. "That wasn't where the gun started out," I said.

"No," he said, "it wasn't."

I holstered the Browning and knocked on the bathroom door. Admittedly, I didn't turn completely around. I just wasn't easy with Edward at my back right that moment.

"Richard, are you all right?"

"No." His voice sounded deeper, hoarse.

"Can I come in?"

There was a long pause, then, "Maybe you better."

I pushed the door open carefully, didn't want to smack him with it. He was still kneeling over the toilet, head down, long hair hiding his face. He had a bunch of toilet paper crumbled in one hand. The sharp, sweet smell of vomit hung in the air.

I closed the door and leaned against it. "Can I help?"

He shook his head.

I smoothed his hair back on one side. He jerked away from me as if I'd burned him. He ended up huddled in the corner, trapped between the wall and the bathtub. The look on his face was wild, panicked.

I knelt in front of him.

"Don't touch me, please!"

"Okay, I won't touch you. Now what's wrong?"

He wouldn't look at me. His eyes wandered the room, not settling on anything, but definitely avoiding me.

"Talk to me, Richard."

"I can't believe Marcus knows. He can't know. He wouldn't allow it."

"Could Raina do it without his knowing?"

He nodded. "She's a real bitch."

"I noticed."

"I have to tell Marcus. He won't believe it. He might need to see the film." His words were almost normal, but his voice was still breathy, thin, panicked. If he kept this up, he was going to hyperventilate.

"Take a slow, deep breath, Richard. It's all right."

He shook his head. "But it isn't. I thought you'd seen us at our worst." He gave a loud, spitting laugh. "Oh, God, now you really have."

I reached for him, to comfort, to do something. "Don't touch me!" He screamed it at me. I backed up and ended sitting with my back pressed against the far wall. It was as far away as I could get without leaving the room.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I want you, right now, here, after seeing that."

"It excited you?" I made it a question.

"God help me," he said.

"Is that what sex means to you, not the killing but before?"

"It can, but it isn't safe. In animal form we're contagious. You know that."

"But it's a temptation," I said.

"Yes." He crawled towards me, and I felt myself recoil. He sat back on his knees and just looked at me. "I am not just a man, Anita. I am what I am. I don't ask you to literally embrace the other half, but you have to look at it. You have to know what it is or it's not going to work between us." He studied my face. "Or have you changed your mind?"

I didn't know what to say. His eyes didn't look wild anymore. They had gone dark and deep. There was a heat to his gaze, to his face, that had nothing to do with horror. He rose on all fours, the movement was enough to bring him close to me. I stared at his face from inches away. He gave a long, shuddering sigh, and energy prickled along my skin. I was left gasping. His otherness beat against my skin like a crashing wave. The wash of it pressed me against the wall like an invisible hand.

He leaned into me, lips almost touching, then moved past. His breath was hot against the side of my face. "Think how it could be. Making love like this, feeling the power crawl over your skin while I was inside you."

I wanted to touch him, and I was afraid to touch him. He drew back enough to look me in the face, close enough to kiss. "It would be so good." His lips brushed mine. He whispered the next words into my mouth like a secret. "And all this lust comes from me seeing blood and death and imagining her fear."

He was standing, as if someone had pulled him upright with strings. It was magically quick. It made Alfred last night look slow. "This is what I am, Anita. I can pretend to be human. I'm better at it than Marcus, but it's just a game."

"No." But my voice was just a whisper.

He swallowed hard enough for me to hear it. "I've got to go." He offered me his hand. I realized he couldn't open the door with me sitting there, not without banging me with it.

I knew if I refused his hand that that would be it. He would never ask again, and I would never say yes. I took his hand. He let out a long breath. His skin was hot to the touch, almost burning hot. His skin sent little shock waves

through my arm. Touching him with all his power loose in the room was too amazing for words.

He raised my hand to his mouth. He didn't so much kiss my hand as nuzzle it, rub it along his cheek, trace his tongue over my wrist. He dropped it so abruptly, I stumbled back. "I have to get out of here, now." There was sweat on his face again.

He stepped out into the room. The lights were on this time. Edward was sitting in the chair, hands loose in his lap. No weapon in sight. I stood in the bathroom door, feeling Richard's power swirl out and fill the outer room like water too long imprisoned. Edward showed great restraint, not going for a gun.

Richard stalked to the door and you could almost feel the waves of his passing in the air. He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "I'll tell Marcus if I can get him alone. If Raina interferes, we'll have to think of something else." He gave one last glance at me, then he was gone. I almost expected him to run down the hallway, but he didn't. Self-restraint at its best.

Edward and I stood in the doorway and watched him vanish around the corner. He turned to me. "You're dating that."

Minutes ago I would have been insulted, but my skin was vibrating with the backwash of Richard's power. I couldn't pretend anymore. He'd asked me to marry him, and I'd said yes. But I hadn't understood, not really. He wasn't human. He really, truly wasn't.

The question was, how big a difference did that make? Answer: I hadn't the foggiest.

Chapter 20

I slept Sunday morning and missed church. I hadn't gotten home until nearly seven o'clock in the morning. There was no way to make a ten o'clock service. Surely God understood the need for sleep, even if he didn't have to do it himself.

Late afternoon found me at Washington University. I was in the office of Dr. Louis Fane, Louie to his friends. The early-winter evening was filling the sky with soft purple clouds. Strips of sky like a lighted backdrop for the clouds showed through his single office window. He rated a window. Most doctorates didn't. Doctorates are cheap on a college campus.

Louie sat with his back to the window. He had turned on the desk lamp. It made a pool of golden warmth against the coming night. We sat in that last pool of light, and it seemed more private than it should have. A last stand against the dark. God, I was melancholy today.

Louie's office was suitably cluttered. One wall was ceiling-to-floor bookshelves, filled with biology textbooks, nature essays, and a complete set of

James Herriot books. The skeleton of a Little Brown Bat was laid behind glass and hung on his wall by his diploma. There was a bat identification poster on his door like the ones you buy for bird feeders. You know, "Common Birds of Eastern Missouri." Louie's doctoral thesis had been on the adaptation of the Little Brown Bat to human habitation.

His shelves were lined with souvenirs; seashells, a piece of petrified wood, pinecones, bark with dried lichen on it. All the bits and pieces that biology majors are always picking up.

Louie was about five foot six, with eyes as black as my own. His hair was straight and fine, growing a little below his shoulders. It wasn't a fashion statement as it was with Richard. It sort of looked as though Louie had just not gotten around to cutting his hair in a while. He had a square face, a slender build, and looked sort of inoffensive. But muscles worked in his forearms as he tented his fingers and looked at me. Even if he hadn't been a wererat, I might not have offered to arm-wrestle him.

He had come in specially to talk to me on a Sunday. It was my day off, too.

It was the first Sunday that Richard and I hadn't at least talked to each other in months. Richard had called and canceled, saying it was pack business. I hadn't been able to ask questions because you can't argue with your answering machine. I didn't call him back. I wasn't ready to talk to him, not after last night.

I felt like a fool this morning. I'd said yes to a proposal from someone I didn't know. I knew what Richard had shown me, his outward face, but inside was a whole new world that I had just begun to visit.

"What did you and the rest of the professors think of the footprints the police sent over?"

"We think it's a wolf."

"A wolf? Why?"

"It's certainly a big canine. It isn't a dog, and other than wolves that's about it."

"Even allowing for the fact that the canine foot is mixed with human?"

"Even allowing."

"Could it be Peggy Smitz?"

"Peggy could control herself really well. Why would she kill someone?"

"I don't know. Why wouldn't she kill someone?"

He leaned back in his chair. It squeaked under his weight. "Fair question. Peggy was as much a pacifist as the pack would let her be."

"She didn't fight?"

"Not unless forced into it."

"Was she high in the pack structure?"

"Shouldn't you be asking Richard these questions? He is next in line to the throne, so to speak."

I just looked at him. I wouldn't look away as if I were guilty of something.

"I smell trouble in paradise," he said.

I ignored the hint. Business, we had business to discuss. "Peggy's husband came to see me. He wanted me to look for her. He didn't know about the other missing lycanthropes. Why wouldn't Peggy have told him?"

"A lot of us survive in relationships by pretending as hard as we can that we aren't what we are. I bet Peggy didn't talk pack business with her husband."

"How hard is it to pretend?"

"The better you control, the easier it is to pretend."

"So it can be done."

"Would you want to go through your life pretending you didn't raise zombies? Never talking about it? Never sharing it? Having your husband embarrassed by it, or sickened by it?"

I felt my face burn. I wanted to deny it. I wasn't embarrassed by Richard, or sickened, but I wasn't comfortable, either. Not comfortable enough to protest. "It doesn't sound like a very good way to live," I said.

"It isn't."

There was a very heavy silence in the room. If he thought I was going to spill the beans, he was wrong. When all else goes to hell, concentrate on business. "The police were all over the area where the body was found today. Sergeant Storr said they didn't find anything but a few more footprints, a little blood." Truth was, they had found some fresh rifle slugs in the trees near the kill area, but I wasn't sure I was free to share that with the lycanthrope community. It was police business. I was lying to both sides. It didn't seem like a good way to run a murder investigation, or a missing-person case.

"If the police and the pack would share information, we might be able to solve this case."

He shrugged. "It's not my call, Anita. I'm just an Indian, not a chief."

"Richard's a chief," I said.

"Not as long as Marcus and Raina are alive."

"I didn't think Richard had to fight her for pack dominance. I thought it was Marcus's fight."

Louie laughed. "If you think Raina would let Marcus lose without helping him, you haven't met the woman."

"I have met her. I just thought her helping Marcus was against pack law."

He shrugged again. "I don't know about pack law, but I know Raina. If Richard would play footsie with her, she might even help him defeat Marcus, but he's made it very clear that he doesn't like her."

"Richard said she had this idea about lycanthrope porno movies?"

Louie's eyes widened. "Richard told you about that?"

I nodded.

"I'm surprised. He was embarrassed about the whole idea. Raina was hot and heavy to have him be her costar. I think she was trying to seduce him, but she misjudged her boy. Richard is too private to ever have sex for a camera."

"Raina's starred in some of the movies?"

"So I'm told."

"Have any of the wererats appeared in the flicks?"

He shook his head. "Rafael forbid it. We're one of the few groups that refused it flat."

"Rafael's a good man."

"And a good rat," Louie said.

I smiled. "Yeah."

"What's up with you and Richard?"

"What do you mean?"

"He left a message on my answering machine. Said he had big news concerning you. When I saw him in person, he said it was nothing. What happened?"

I didn't know what to say. Not a new event lately. "I think it has to be Richard's news."

"He said something about it being your choice and he couldn't talk about it. You say it's his business and you can't talk about it. I wish one of you would talk to me."

I opened my mouth, closed it, and sighed. I had questions that I needed answers to, but Louie was Richard's friend before he was mine. Loyalty and all that. But who the hell else could I ask? Irving? He was in enough trouble with Richard.

"I've heard Richard and Rafael talk about controlling their beasts. Does that mean the change?"

He nodded. "Yes." He looked at me, eyes narrowing. "If you've heard Richard talk about his beast, you must have seen him close to changing. What happened last night?"

"If Richard didn't tell you, Louie, I don't think I can."

"The grapevine says you killed Alfred. Is that true?"

"Yes."

He looked at me as if waiting for more, then shrugged. "Raina won't like that."

"Marcus didn't seem too pleased, either."

"But he won't jump you in a dark alley. She will."

"Why didn't Richard tell me that?"

"Richard is one of the best friends I have. He's loyal, honest, caring, sort of the world's furriest boy scout. If he has a flaw, it's that he expects other people to be loyal, honest, and caring."

"Surely after what he's seen from Marcus and Raina, he doesn't still think they're nice people?"

"He knows they aren't nice, but he has trouble seeing them as evil. When all is said and done, Anita, Marcus is his alpha male. Richard respects authority. He's been trying to work out some sort of compromise with Marcus for months. He doesn't want to kill him. Marcus doesn't have the same qualms about Richard."

"Irving told me Richard defeated Marcus, could have killed him, and didn't. Is that true?"

"'Fraid so."

"Shit."

"Yeah, I told Richard he should have done it, but he's never killed anyone. He believes all life is precious."

"All life is precious," I said.

"Some life is just more precious than others," Louie said.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Did Richard change for you last night?"

"God, you are relentless."

"You said it was one of my better qualities."

"It is normally." It was like being picked at by Ronnie. She never gave up, either.

"Did he change for you?"

"Sort of," I said.

"And you couldn't handle it." It was a flat statement.

"I'm not sure, Louie. I'm just not sure."

"Better to find out now," he said.

"I guess so."

"Do you love him?"

"None of your damn business."

"I love Richard like a brother. If you're going to slice his heart up and serve it on a platter, I'd like to know now. If you leave, I'll be the one helping him pick up the pieces."

"I don't want to hurt Richard," I said.

"I believe you." He just looked at me. There was a great peacefulness to his expression, as if he could wait all night for me to answer the question. Louie had more patience than I would ever have.

"Yes, I love him. Happy?"

"Do you love him enough to embrace his furry side?" His eyes were staring at me as if they'd burn a hole through my heart.

"I don't know. If he were human . . . Shit."

"If he were human, you'd marry him maybe?" He was kind enough to make it a question.

"Maybe," I said. But it wasn't a maybe. If Richard had been human, I'd be a very happily engaged woman right now. Of course, there was another male that wasn't human that had been trying to get me to date him for a while. Jean-Claude had said that Richard wasn't any more human than he was. I hadn't believed him. I was beginning to. It looked like I owed Jean-Claude an apology. Not that I would ever admit it to him.

"A writer came to my office yesterday, Elvira Drew. She's doing a book on shapeshifters. It sounds legit and could be good press." I explained the format of the book.

"Sounds good, actually," he said. "Where do I come in?"

"Guess."

"She's missing a wererat interview."

"Bingo."

"I can't afford to be exposed, Anita. You know that."

"It doesn't have to be you. Is there anyone among you that would be willing to meet with her?"

"I'll ask around," he said.

"Thanks, Louie." I stood.

He stood and offered me his hand. His grip was firm but not too strong, just right. I wondered how fast he really was, and how easy it would be for him to crush my hand into pulp. It must have shown on my face, because he said, "You might want to stop dating Richard. Until you get this sorted out."

I nodded. "Yeah, maybe."

We stood there in silence for a moment. There didn't seem to be anything left to say, so I left. I was all out of clever repartee, or even a good joke. It was barely dark, and I was tired. Tired enough to go home and crawl into bed and hide. Instead, I was on my way to the Lunatic Cafe. I was going to try and convince Marcus to let me talk to the police. Eight missing, one dead human. It didn't have to be connected. But if it was a werewolf, then Marcus would know who did the killing, or Raina would know. Would they tell me? Maybe, maybe not, but I had to ask. They'd come closer to telling me the truth than they would to the police. Funny how all the monsters talked to me and not to the police. You had to begin to wonder why the monsters were so damn comfortable around me.

I raised zombies and slew vampires. Who was I to throw stones?

Chapter 21

I walked along the campus sidewalk towards my car. I walked from one pool of light to the next. My breath fogged in the glow of the streetlights. It was my night off so I was dressed all in black. Bert wouldn't let me wear black to work. Said it gave the wrong impression—too harsh—associated with evil magic. If he'd done any research, he'd have found that red, white, and a host of other colors are used in evil rituals. It depends on the religion. It was very Anglo-Saxon of him to outlaw only black.

Black jeans, black Nike Airs with a blue swoosh, a black sweater, and a black trench coat. Even my guns and holsters were black. I was just monochrome as hell tonight. I was wearing silver, but it was hidden under the sweater; a cross, and a knife on each forearm. I was headed for the Lunatic Cafe. I was going to try to persuade Marcus to let me share information with the police. The missing lycanthropes, even the ones like Peggy Smitz who didn't want their secret known, were safe from bad publicity now. They were dead. They had to be. There is no way to hold eight shapeshifters against their will for this long. Not alive.

It couldn't hurt them to tell the cops, and it might save any other shapeshifters from going missing. I had to talk to the people who had last seen the missing ones. Why had none of them put up a fight? That had to be a clue. Ronnie was better at this sort of thing than I was. Maybe we could go out detecting tomorrow.

Would Richard be there? If so, what was I supposed to say to him? It made me stop walking. I stood in the cold dark, trapped between streetlights. I wasn't ready to see Richard again. But we had a dead body, maybe more. I couldn't chicken out just because I didn't want to see Richard. It would be pure cowardice.

Truth was, I would rather have faced down a herd of vampires than one would-be fiancé.

The wind whistled at my back as if a blizzard were moving up behind me. My hair streamed around my face. The trees were icy still, no wind. I whirled, Browning in my hand. Something slammed into my back, sending me smashing into the sidewalk. I tried to save myself, arms slamming into the concrete first. My arms went numb and tingling. I couldn't feel my hands. My head snapped downward.

There is that moment after a really good head blow that you can't react. A frozen moment when you wonder if you'll ever be able to move again.

Someone was sitting on my back. Hands jerked my coat on the left side. I heard the cloth rip. The feeling was coming back in my arms. I'd lost the Browning. I tried to roll over on my side to go for the Firestar. A hand slammed my head into the sidewalk again. Light exploded inside my head. My vision went dark, and when I could see again, I caught Gretchen's face rearing above me.

She had a handful of my hair, pulled painfully to one side. My sweater was ripped away from my shoulder. Gretchen's mouth was stretched wide, fangs shimmering in the dark. I screamed. The Firestar was trapped under my body. I went for one of the knives, but it was under the sleeve of my coat, the sleeve of my sweater. I wasn't going to get there in time.

There was a high scream, and it wasn't me. A woman was standing at the end of the sidewalk screaming. Gretchen raised her head and hissed at them. The man with her grabbed her shoulders and pushed her off the path. They ran. Wise.

I plunged the knife into her throat. It wasn't a killing blow and I knew it, but I thought she'd rear. Give me a chance at the Firestar. She didn't. I shoved the knife in to its hilt; blood poured down my hand, splattered my face. She darted downward, going for my throat. The knife had done as much damage as it could. There was no time to go for the second blade. I was still pinned over the gun. I had forever to watch her mouth coming for me, to know I was going to die.

Something dark smashed into her, rolling her off me with the impact. I was left gasping on the sidewalk, blinking. I had the Firestar in my hand. I didn't remember getting it out. Practice, practice, practice.

There was a wererat on top of Gretchen. The dark muzzle darted downward, teeth glimmering. Gretchen grabbed his muzzle, holding those snapping teeth from her throat. A furred claw slashed her pale face. Blood flowed. She screamed, punching one hand into his stomach. It raised him in the air, just enough for her to get her legs under him. She lifted with her legs and shoved him into the air. The wererat went tumbling like a thrown ball.

Gretchen was on her feet like magic. I sighted down the barrel of the gun, still on the ground. But she was gone into the bushes, after the wererat. I'd missed my chance.

Snarls and snapping branches came from the darkness. It had to be Louie. I didn't know that many wererats that would come to my rescue.

I stood up and the world swam. I stumbled, and it took everything I had to stay standing. For the first time I wondered how badly I was hurt. I knew I was scraped up some because I could feel that sharp, stinging pain that taking off the first layer of skin will get you. I raised a hand to my head and it came away with blood. Some of it was mine.

I tried another step, and I could do it. Maybe I'd just tried to stand too fast. I hoped so. I didn't know if a wererat could take a vampire or not. But I wasn't standing out here in the clear and waiting to find out.

I was at the edge of the trees when they rolled out of the darkness and over me. I lay on the pavement for the second time, but there was no time to get my wind back. I rolled onto my right side, sighting down my arm towards the noise.

The movement was too sudden, my vision swam. When I could focus again, Gretchen had sunk fangs into Louie's neck. He gave a high, wild squeal. I couldn't shoot her lying down, all I could see from here was the rat's body, her arms and legs riding him, but the only shot I had that might kill her was a line of her blond head. I didn't dare try it. I might kill Louie, too. Even clear-headed, it would have been an iffy shot.

I got to my knees. The world shifted, and nausea rolled at the back of my throat. When the world was still again, there was still nothing to shoot at. Some trick of a distant streetlight flashed on the blood pouring from his throat. If she'd had the teeth Louie had, he'd be dead.

I fired into the ground near them, hoping it would scare her off. It didn't. I aimed at a tree just above her head. It was as close to Louie as I dared get. The bullet exploded in the tree. One blue eye looked at me while she fed off of him. She was going to kill him while I watched.

"Shoot her," it was Louie's voice twisted around furry jaws, but his voice. His eyes glazed and closed, while I watched. Last words.

I took a deep, steadying breath and aimed two-handed, one hand cupping the other in a teacup grip. I sighted on that one pale eye. Darkness swam over my vision. I waited on my knees, blind, for my vision to clear and me to pull that trigger. If my vision went while I was firing, I'd hit Louie. I was out of options.

Or maybe not. "Richard asked me to marry him and I said yes. You can smell a lie. I said yes to marrying someone else. We don't have to do this."

She hesitated. I stared into her eye. My vision was clear. Arm steady, I pressed on the trigger. She released his throat, sliding her head into his neck fur, hiding. Her voice came muffled but clear enough: "Put down your little gun, and I will let him go."

I took a breath and raised the gun skyward. "Let him go."

"The gun first," she said.

I didn't want to give up my only gun. That seemed like a really bad idea. But what choice did I have? If I were Gretchen, I wouldn't want me armed. I did still have the second knife, but from this distance it was useless. Even if I could throw well enough to put it through her heart, it would have to be a very solid blow. She was too old for a glancing blow to do much good. I'd shoved a knife hilt-deep into her throat and it hadn't slowed her down. It had impressed me.

I laid the Firestar on the sidewalk and raised my hands to show myself unarmed. Gretchen rose slowly from behind Louie's limp body. Without her propping him up, his body rolled onto its back. There was a looseness to the movement that unnerved me. Was it too late? Could a vampire's bite kill like silver?

The vampire and I stared at each other. My knife was sticking out of her throat like an exclamation mark. She hadn't even bothered to take it out. Jesus. I must have missed the voice box or she wouldn't have been able to talk. Even vampirism has its limits. I was meeting her eyes. Nothing was happening. It was like looking into anyone's eyes. That shouldn't have been. Maybe she was holding her power in check? Naw.

"Is he still alive?"

"Come closer and see for yourself."

"No, thanks." If Louie was dead, my being dead wouldn't help that.

She smiled. "Tell me again, this news of yours."

"Richard asked me to marry him, and I said yes."

"You love this Richard?"

"Yes." This was no time for hesitation. She accepted it with a nod. I guess it was true, surprise, surprise.

"Tell Jean-Claude and I will be content."

"I plan on telling him."

"Tonight."

"Fine, tonight."

"Lie. When I leave you will tend your wounds, and his, and not tell Jean-Claude."

I couldn't even get away with a little white lie, shit. "What do you want?"

"He is at Guilty Pleasures tonight. Go there and tell him. I will be waiting for you."

"I have to tend to his wounds before I do anything," I said.

"Tend his wounds, but come to Guilty Pleasures before dawn, or our truce is over."

"Why not tell Jean-Claude yourself?"

"He would not believe me."

"He could tell you were telling the truth," I said.

"Just because I believed it was truth would not make it so. But he will smell the truth on you. If I am not there, wait for me. I want to be there when you tell him you love another. I want to see his face fall."

"Fine, I'll be there before dawn."

She stepped over Louie's body. She had the Browning in her right hand, held palm over the barrel and grip, not to fire but to keep me from it. She stalked to me and picked up the Firestar, eyes never leaving me.

Blood dripped down the knife hilt in her throat. The blood fell in a heavy, wet splat. She smiled as my eyes widened. I knew it didn't kill them, but I'd thought it hurt. Maybe they only took the blades out from habit. It certainly didn't seem to bother Gretchen.

"You can have these back after you tell him," she said.

"You're hoping he kills me," I said.

"I would shed no tears."

Great. Gretchen took a step backwards, then another. She stopped at the edge of the trees, a pale form in the dark. "I await you, Anita Blake. Do not disappoint me this night."

"I'll be there," I said.

She smiled, flashing bloody teeth, stepped back again, and was gone. I thought it was a mind trick, but there was a backwash of air. The trees shook as if a storm were passing. I looked up and caught a glimpse of something. Not wings, not a bat, but . . . something. Something my eyes couldn't or wouldn't make sense of.

The wind died, and the winter dark was as still and quiet as a tomb. Sirens wailed in the distance. I guess the coeds had called the cops. Couldn't say I blamed them.

Chapter 22

I stood, carefully. The world didn't spin. Great. I walked to Louie. His rat-man form lay very still and dark on the grass. I knelt, and another wave of dizziness took me. I waited on all fours for it to pass. When the world was steady once more, I put my hand on his fur-covered chest. I let out a sigh when his chest rose and fell under my palm. Alive, breathing. Fantastic.

If he'd been in human form, I'd have checked his neck wound. I was pretty sure that just touching his blood in animal form wouldn't give me lycanthropy, but I wasn't one hundred percent. I had enough problems without turning furry once a month. Besides, if I had to pick an animal, a rat wouldn't be it.

The sirens were getting closer. I wasn't sure what to do. He was badly hurt, but I'd seen Richard worse off and he had healed. But had he needed some

medical attention to get healed? I didn't know. I could hide Louie in the bushes, but would I be leaving him to die? If the cops saw him like this, his secret was out. His life would be in a shambles around him, just because he'd helped me. It didn't seem fair.

A long sigh rose from his pointed muzzle. A shudder ran through his body. The fur began to recede like the tide pulling back. The awkward, ratlike limbs began to straighten. His bent legs straightened. I watched his human form rise from the fur like a shape caught in ice.

Louie lay there on the dark grass, pale and naked and very human. I'd never seen the process in reverse before. It was just as spectacular as the change to animal form, but it wasn't as frightening, maybe because of the end product.

The wound on his neck was more like an animal bite than a vampire, skin torn, but two of the marks were deeper, fangs. There was no blood on the wound now. As I watched, blood started to flow. I couldn't tell for sure in the dark, but it looked like the wound was already beginning to heal. I checked his pulse. It was steady, strong, but what did I know? I wasn't a doctor.

The siren was silent, but lights strobed the darkness just over the trees like colored lightning. The cops were coming, and I had to decide what to do. My head was feeling better. My vision was clear. The dizziness seemed to be gone. Of course, I hadn't tried to stand again. I could carry him in a fireman's carry; not too fast and not too far, but I could do it. The bite marks were shrinking. Hell, he'd be healed by morning. I couldn't let the cops see him, and I couldn't leave him here. I didn't know if lycanthropes could freeze to death, but I didn't feel lucky tonight.

I covered him with my coat, wrapping it around him as I lifted. Wouldn't do for him to get frostbite on certain delicate places. You lose a toe and there you are.

I took a deep breath and stood with him across my shoulders. My knees didn't like lifting him. But I got to my feet, and my vision wavered. I stood there, bracing against a suddenly moving world. I fell to my knees. The extra weight made it hurt.

The police were coming. If I didn't get out of here right now, I might as well give it up. Giving up wasn't one of my better things. I got to one knee and gave that last push. My knees screamed at me, but I was standing. Black waves passed over my eyes. I just stood there letting it sway over me. The dizziness wasn't as bad this time. The nausea was worse. I'd throw up later.

I stayed on the sidewalk. I didn't trust myself in the snow. Besides, even city cops could follow prints in the snow. A planting of trees hid me from the direction of the flashing lights. The sidewalk led around a building. Once around that I could backtrack to my car. The thought of driving while my vision kept sweeping in and out was a bad idea, but if I didn't get some distance between me and the cops, all this effort would be wasted. I had to get to the car. I had to get Louie out of sight.

I didn't look back to see if there were flashlights sweeping the area. Looking back wouldn't help, and with Louie on my shoulders it was a lot of

effort to turn. I put one foot in front of the other, and the edge of the building curved around us. We were out of sight, even if they cleared the trees. Progress. Great.

The side of the building stretched like some dark monolith to my left. The distance around the building seemed to be growing. I put one foot in front of the other. If I just concentrated on walking, I could do this. Louie seemed to be getting lighter. That wasn't right. Was I about to pass out and just didn't know it yet?

I looked up and found the edge of the building right beside me. I'd lost some time there. It was a bad sign. I was betting I had a concussion. It couldn't be too bad or I'd pass out, right? Why didn't I believe that?

I peered around the corner, concentrating on not whacking Louie's legs into the building. It took a lot more concentration than it should have.

The police lights strobed the darkness. The car was parked on the edge of the lot with one door open. The radio filled the night with garbled squawking. The car looked empty. Squinting at something that far away brought a wave of blackness across my eyes. How the hell was I going to drive? One problem at a time. Right now, just get Louie to the Jeep, out of sight.

I stepped away from the sheltering building. It was my last refuge. If the cops came now with me walking across the parking lot, it was over.

On a Sunday night there weren't a lot of cars in the visitors' parking lot. My Jeep sat under one of the streetlights. I always parked under a light if I could. Safety rule number one for women traveling alone after dark. The Jeep looked like it was in a spotlight. The light was probably not that bright. It just looked that way because I was trying to be sneaky.

Somewhere about halfway to the Jeep, I realized that the head injury wasn't the only problem. Sure I could lift this much weight, even walk with it, but not forever. My knees were trembling. Every step was getting slower and took more effort. If I fell down again, I wasn't going to be able to pick Louie back up. I wasn't even sure I'd be able to get me back up.

One foot in front of the other, just one foot in front of the other. I concentrated on my feet until the Jeep's tires came into view. There, that wasn't so hard.

The car keys were, of course, in the coat pocket. I hit the button on the key chain that unlocked the doors. The high-pitched beeping noise that signaled them open only sounded loud enough to wake the dead. I opened the middle doors, balancing Louie one handed. I let him fall into the backseat. The coat fell open, revealing a naked line of body. I must have been feeling better than I thought because I took the time to fling the coat over his groin and lower chest. It left one arm flung outward, limp and awkward, but that was all right. My sense of propriety could live with a naked arm.

I closed the door and caught a glimpse of myself in the sideview mirror. One side of my face was a bloody mask, the clean parts had bloody scrapes. I slid into the Jeep, and got a box of aloe and lanolin baby wipes from the floorboard. I'd started carrying the wipes to help with the blood from zombie raisings. It worked better than the plain soap and water that I had been carrying.

I wiped enough blood off that I wouldn't get stopped by the first cop that drove by, then slid behind the wheel.

I glanced in the rearview mirror. The police car still stood there alone, like a dog waiting for its master. The motor kicked. I put the car in gear and hit the gas. The Jeep weaved towards a streetlight as if it were a magnet. I slammed the brakes on and was glad I'd worn my seat belt.

Okay, so I was just a bit disoriented. I hit the light on my sunshade that's supposed to let you check your makeup, and checked my eyes instead. The pupils were even. If one pupil had been blown, that might have meant I was bleeding inside my head. People died from things like that. I'd have turned us in to the cops and gotten a ride to the hospital. But it wasn't that bad. I hoped.

I clicked the light off and eased the Jeep forward. If I drove very slowly, the car wouldn't want to kiss the streetlight. Great. I inched out of the parking lot, expecting to hear shouts behind me. Nothing. The street was dark and lined with cars on either side. I crawled down the street at about ten miles per hour, afraid to go faster. It looked like I was driving through cars on one side. Illusion but unnerving as hell.

A bigger street and headlights stabbed at my eyes. I put my hand up to shield my eyes and nearly ran into a parked car. Shit. I had to pull over before I hit something. Four more blocks before I found a gas station with pay phones outside. I wasn't sure how rough I looked. I didn't want some overzealous clerk to call the police after I'd gone to all the trouble of getting away undetected.

I eased the Jeep into the parking lot. If I overcorrected and took out the gas pumps, they might call the cops anyway. I pulled the Jeep in front of the phone bank. I put it in park and was very relieved to be standing still.

I fumbled a quarter out of the ashtray. It had never held anything but change. When I left the car, for the first time I was aware of how cold it was without my coat. There was a line of cold going down my back where the sweater had been ripped away. I dialed Richard's number without thinking about it. Who else could I call?

The answering machine kicked in. "Dammit, be home, Richard, be home."

The beep sounded. "Richard, this is Anita. Louie's hurt. Pick up if you're there. Richard, Richard, dammit, Richard, pick up." I leaned my forehead against the cool metal of the phone booth. "Pick up, pick up, pick up. Richard. Dammit."

He picked up, sounding out of breath. "Anita, it's me. What's wrong?"

"Louie got hurt. His wound's healing. How do you explain that to a hospital emergency room?"

"You don't," he said. "We have doctors that can tend him. I'll give you an address to go to."

"I can't drive."

"Are you hurt?"

"Yeah."

"How bad?"

"Bad enough that I don't want to drive."

"What happened to the two of you?"

I gave him a very abbreviated version of the night's events. Just a vampire attack, no specific motive. I wasn't ready to tell him I had to tell Jean-Claude about our engagement, because I wasn't sure we still had one. He'd asked, I said yes, but now I wasn't sure. I wasn't even sure Richard was sure anymore.

"Give me the address." I did. "I know the gas station you're talking about. I stop there when I visit Louie sometimes."

"Great. When can you be here?"

"Are you going to be all right until I can get there?"

"Sure."

"Because if you're not, call the police. Don't risk your life just to keep Louie's secret. He wouldn't want that."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Don't get macho on me, Anita. I don't want anything to happen to you."

I smiled with my forehead pressed against the phone. "Macho's the only way I got this far. Just get here, Richard. I'll be waiting." I hung up before he could get mushy on me. I was feeling too pitiful to withstand much sympathy.

I got back into the Jeep. It was cold inside the car. I'd forgotten to turn on the heater. I turned the heater on full blast. I knelt on the seat and checked on Louie. He hadn't moved. I touched the skin of his wrist, checking for the pulse. It was strong and steady. For the heck of it, I lifted his hand and let it flop back. No reaction. I hadn't really expected one.

Usually, a lycanthrope stayed in animal form for eight or ten hours. Changing back early took a lot of energy. Even if he hadn't been hurt, Louie would be asleep for the rest of the night. Though sleep was too mild a word for it. You couldn't wake them from it. It wasn't a great survival method. Just like sleeping during the day didn't help vampires much. Evolution's way of helping us puny humans out.

I slid down in my seat. I wasn't sure how long it would take for Richard to get here. I glanced at the station building. The man behind the counter was reading a magazine. He wasn't taking any notice of us at the moment. If he'd been watching, I would have moved out of the lights. Didn't want him wondering why I was sitting here, but if he wasn't paying attention, we'd just sit here.

I leaned back, putting my head against the headrest. I wanted to close my eyes, but didn't. I was pretty sure I had a concussion. Going to sleep wasn't a good idea. I'd had one head injury worse than this, but Jean-Claude had cured it. But a vampire mark was a little harsh for a mild concussion.

This was the first time I'd been badly hurt since I lost Jean-Claude's marks. They had made me harder to hurt, faster to heal. Not a bad side effect. One of the other effects had been an ability to meet a vampire's eyes without them being able to bespell me. Like I had met Gretchen's eyes.

How had I met her eyes with impunity? Had Jean-Claude lied to me? Was there some lingering mark? Another question to ask him when I saw him. Of course, after I told him the news bulletin, all hell would break loose and there would be no more questions. Well, maybe one question. Would Jean-Claude try to kill Richard? Probably.

I sighed, closing my eyes. I was suddenly tired, so tired I didn't want to open my eyes. Sleep sucked at me. I opened my eyes and slid up in the seat. Maybe it was just tension, adrenaline draining away, or maybe it was a concussion. I clicked on the overhead light and checked on Louie again. Breathing and pulse were steady. His head was to one side, neck stretched in a long line that showed the wound. The bite marks were healing. I couldn't see it happening, but every time I looked it was better. Like trying to watch a flower bloom. You see the effect, but you never actually see it happening.

Louie was going to be all right. Would Richard be all right? I'd said yes because in the heat of the moment I meant it. I could see spending my life with him. Before Bert found me and showed me how to use my talent for money, I'd had a life. I'd gone hiking, camping. I'd been a biology major and thought I'd go on for my master's and doctorate and study preternatural creatures for the rest of my life. Sort of the preternatural Jane Goodall. Richard had reminded me of all that, of what I'd originally thought my life would be like. I hadn't planned on spending my life ass deep in blood and death. Really.

If I gave in to Jean-Claude, it would be admitting that there was nothing but death, nothing but violence. Sexy, attractive, but death all the same. I'd thought with Richard I had a chance at life. Something better. After last night I wasn't even sure of that.

Was it too much to ask for someone who was human? Hell, I knew a lot of women in my age bracket that couldn't get a date at all. I'd been one of them until Richard. All right, Jean-Claude would have taken me out, but I was avoiding him. I couldn't imagine dating Jean-Claude as if he were an ordinary guy. I could imagine having sex with him, but not dating. The thought of him picking me up at eight, dropping me off, and being satisfied with a good-night kiss seemed ridiculous.

I stayed kneeling in the seat, staring down at Louie. I was afraid to turn around and get comfortable, afraid I'd fall asleep and not wake up. I wasn't really afraid, but I was worried. A trip to the hospital might not be a bad idea, but first I had to tell Jean-Claude about Richard. And keep him from killing him.

I laid my face on my arms, and a deep, throbbing pain started behind my forehead. Good. My head should hurt after the beating it had taken. The fact that it hadn't been hurting had worried me. A good headache I could live with.

How was I going to keep Richard alive? I smiled. Richard was an alpha wolf. What made me think he couldn't take care of himself? I'd seen what Jean-Claude could do. I'd seen him when he wasn't human at all. Maybe after I saw Richard change I'd feel differently about him. Maybe I wouldn't feel so protective. Maybe hell would freeze over.

I did love Richard. I really did. I'd meant that yes. I'd meant it before last night. Before I felt his power creep over my skin. Jean-Claude had been right about one thing. Richard wasn't human. The snuff film had excited him. Was Jean-Claude's idea of sex any stranger than that? I'd never let myself find out.

Someone knocked on the window. I jumped and whirled. My vision swam in black streamers. When I could see again, Richard's face was outside the window.

I unlocked the doors, and Richard opened one. He started to reach for me and stopped. The hesitation on his face was painful. He wasn't sure I'd let him touch me. I turned away from the hurt on his face. I loved him, but love isn't enough. All the fairy tales, the romance novels, the soap operas; they're all lies. Love does not conquer all.

He was very careful not to touch me. His voice was neutral. "Anita, are you all right? You look awful."

"Nice to know I look like I feel," I said.

He touched my cheek, fingers sliding just over the skin, a ghost of a touch that made me shiver. He traced the edge of the scrape. It hurt and I jerked away. A spot of blood decorated his fingertips, gleaming in the dome light. I watched his eyes stare at the blood. I saw the thought trail behind his true brown eyes. He almost licked his fingers clean, as Rafael had done. He wiped his fingers on his coat, but I'd seen the hesitation. He knew I'd seen it.

"Anita . . ."

The back door opened, and I whirled, going for the last knife I had on me. The world swam in waves of blackness and nausea. The movement had been too abrupt. Stephen the Werewolf stood in the half-open door staring at me. He was sort of frozen there, blue eyes wide. He was looking at the silver knife in my hand. The fact that I'd been blind and too sick to use it seemed to have escaped him. It might have been that I was kneeling, moving towards him. I'd been willing to strike blind as a bat, not considering that whoever it was had a right to be there.

"You didn't tell me you brought someone with you," I said.

"I should have mentioned that," Richard said.

I relaxed, easing back to kneel in the seat. "Yeah, you should have mentioned that." The knife gleamed in the dome light. It looked razor sharp and well tended. It was.

"I was just going to check on Louie," Stephen said. He sounded a little shaky. He had a black leather jacket with silver studding snapped tight around his throat. His long, curling blond hair fell forward over the jacket. He looked like an effeminate biker.

"Fine," I said.

Stephen looked past me to Richard. I felt more than saw Richard nod. "It's okay, Stephen." There was something in his voice that made me turn slowly to look at him.

He had a strange look on his face. "Maybe you are as dangerous as you pretend to be."

"I don't pretend, Richard."

He nodded. "Maybe you don't."

"Is that a problem?"

"As long as you don't shoot me, or my pack members, I guess not."

"I can't promise about your pack."

"They're mine to protect," he said.

"Then make sure they leave me the hell alone."

"Would you fight me over that?" he asked.

"Would you fight me?"

He smiled, but it wasn't happy. "I couldn't fight you, Anita. I could never hurt you."

"That's where we're different, Richard."

He leaned in as if to kiss me. Something on my face stopped him. "I believe you."

"Good," I said. I slipped the knife back in its sheath. I stared at his face while I did it. I didn't need to look to put the knife away. "Never underestimate me, Richard, and what I'm willing to do to stay alive. To keep others alive. I never want us to fight, not like that, but if you don't control your pack, then I will."

He moved away from me. His face looked almost angry. "Is that a threat?"

"It's out of control, and you know it. I can't promise not to hurt them unless you can guarantee that they'll behave. And you can't do that."

"No, I can't guarantee that." He didn't like saying it.

"Then don't ask me to promise not to hurt them."

"Can you at least try not to kill them, as a first option?"

I thought about that. "I don't know. Maybe."

"You can't just say, 'Yes, Richard, I won't kill your friends?'"

"It would be a lie."

He nodded. "I suppose so."

I heard the rustle of leather from the backseat as Stephen moved around. "Louie's out of it, but he'll be okay."

"How did you get him into the Jeep?" Richard asked.

I just stared at him.

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "You carried him. I knew that." He touched the cut on my forehead, gently. It still hurt. "Even with this, you carried him."

"It was either that or let the cops have him. What would have happened if they'd piled him into an ambulance and he'd started healing like that?"

"They'd have known what he was," Richard said.

Stephen was leaning on the back of the seat, chin resting on his forearms. He seemed to have forgotten that I'd nearly stabbed him, or maybe he was used to being threatened. Maybe. Up close his eyes were the startled blue of cornflowers. With his blond hair spitting around his face he looked like one of those china dolls that you buy in exclusive shops, that you never let children play with.

"I can take Louie to my place," he said.

"No," I said.

They both looked at me, surprised. I wasn't sure what to say, but I knew that Richard could not come with me to Guilty Pleasures. If I had any hope of keeping us all alive, Richard could not be on the spot when I broke the news.

"I thought I'd drive you home," Richard said, "or to the nearest hospital, whichever you need."

It would have been my preference to, but not tonight. "Louie's your best friend. I thought you might want to take care of him."

He was staring at me, lovely brown eyes narrowed into suspicious squints. "You're trying to get rid of me. Why?"

My head hurt. I couldn't think of a good lie. I didn't think he'd buy a bad one. "How much do you trust Stephen?"

The question seemed to throw him off balance. "I trust him."

His first reaction was to say yes, I trust him, but he hadn't thought about it first. "No, Richard, I mean do you trust him not to talk to Jean-Claude or Marcus?"

"I wouldn't tell Marcus anything you didn't want me to," Stephen said.

"And Jean-Claude?" I asked.

Stephen looked uncomfortable, but said, "If he asked a direct question, I'd have to give a direct answer."

"How can you owe more allegiance to the Master of the City than to your own pack leader?"

"I follow Richard, not Marcus."

I glanced at Richard. "A little palace revolt?"

"Raina wanted him in the movies. I stepped in and stopped it."

"Marcus must really hate you," I said.

"He fears me," Richard said.

"Even worse," I said.

Richard didn't say anything. He knew the situation better than I did, even if he wasn't willing to do the ultimate deeds.

"Fine, I'd planned to tell Jean-Claude that you proposed."

"You proposed," Stephen said. His voice held a lilt of surprise. "Did she say yes?"

Richard nodded.

A look of delight swept over Stephen's face. "Way to go," His face fell into sadness. It was like watching wind over a grassy field, everything visible on the surface. "Jean-Claude is going to go ape-shit."

"I couldn't have said it better myself."

"Then why tell him tonight?" Richard asked. "Why not wait? You're not sure about marrying me anymore. Are you?"

"No," I said. I hated saying it, but it was the truth. I loved him already, but if it went much further it would be too late. If I had any doubts I needed to work them out now. Staring into his face, smelling the warm scent of his aftershave, I wished I could have thrown caution to the wind. Falling into his arms. But I couldn't. I just couldn't, not unless I was sure.

"Then why tell him at all? Unless you're planning to elope and didn't tell me, we have some time."

I sighed. I told him why it had to be tonight. "You can't go with me."

"I won't let you go alone," he said.

"Richard, if you are Johnny-on-the-spot when he finds out, he'll try to kill you, and I'll try to kill him to protect you." I shook my head. "If the shit hits the fan, this could end up like *Hamlet*."

"How like *Hamlet*?" Stephen asked.

"Everybody dead," I said.

"Oh," he said.

"You'd kill Jean-Claude to protect me, even after what you saw last night?"

I stared at him. I tried to read behind his eyeballs to know if there was anybody home I could really talk to. He was still Richard. With his love of the outdoors, any activity that would get you messy, and a smile that warmed me to my toes. I wasn't sure I could marry him, but I was positive I couldn't let anybody kill him.

"Yes."

"You won't marry me, but you'll kill for me. I don't understand that."

"Ask me if I still love you, Richard. That answer's still yes."

"How can I let you face him alone?"

"I've been doing just fine without you."

He touched my forehead, and I winced. "You don't took fine."

"Jean-Claude won't hurt me."

"You don't know that for sure," he said.

He had a point there. "You can't protect me, Richard. Your being there will get us both killed."

"I can't let you go alone."

"Don't go all manly on me, Richard. It's a luxury that we can't afford. If saying yes to marriage is going to make you behave like an idiot, it can be changed."

"You took back your yes."

"It's not a definite no, either," I said.

"Just trying to protect you would make you say no?"

"I don't need your protection, Richard. I don't even want it."

He leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes. "If I play the white knight, you'll leave me."

"If you think you need to play the white knight, then you don't know me at all."

He opened his eyes and turned his head to look at me. "Maybe I want to be your white knight."

"That's your problem."

He smiled. "I guess so."

"If you can drive the Jeep back to my apartment, I'll take a cab."

"Stephen can drive you," he said. He volunteered him without even wondering what Stephen would say about it. It was arrogant.

"No, I'll take a cab."

"I don't mind," Stephen said. "I'm due back at Guilty Pleasures tonight anyway."

I glanced at him. "What do you do for a living, Stephen?"

He laid his cheek on his forearm and smiled at me. He managed to look winsome and sexy at the same time. "I'm a stripper," he said.

Of course he was. I wanted to point out that he'd refused to be in a pornographic movie, but he still stripped. But taking your clothes off down to tasteful undies was not the same thing as having sex on screen. Not even close.

Chapter 23

Lillian was a small woman in her mid-fifties. Her salt-and-pepper hair was cut short and neat in a no-nonsense style. Her fingers were as quick and sure as the rest of her. The last time she'd treated my wounds, she'd had claws and greying fur.

I was sitting on an examining table in the basement of an apartment building. A building that housed lycanthropes and was owned by a shapeshifter. The basement was the makeshift clinic for the lycanthropes in the area. I was the first human they'd ever allowed to see the place. I should have been flattered, but managed not to be.

"Well, according to X rays you don't have a skull fracture."

"Glad to hear it," I said.

"You may have a mild concussion, but a mild one won't show up on tests, at least nothing we have the equipment for here."

"So I can go?" I started to hop down.

She stopped me with a hand on my arm. "I didn't say that."

I eased back on the table. "I'm listening."

"Grudgingly," she said, smiling.

"If you want grace under pressure, Lillian, I'm not your girl."

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said. "I've cleaned the scrapes and taped up your forehead. You were very lucky not to need stitches."

I didn't like stitches, so I agreed with her.

"I want you to wake up every hour for twenty-four hours." I must not have looked happy, because she said, "I know it's awkward, and probably unnecessary, but humor me. If you go to sleep and are injured more severely than I think you are, you might not wake up. So humor an old rat lady. Set the alarm or have someone wake you every hour for twenty-four hours."

"Twenty-four hours from the injury?" I asked hopefully.

She laughed. "Normally I'd say from now, but you can do it from the time of the injury. We're just being cautious."

"I like being cautious." Richard pushed away from the wall. He came to stand with us under the lights. "I volunteer to wake you every hour."

"You can't go with me," I said.

"I'll wait for you at your apartment."

"Oh, no driving for the night," Lillian said. "Just as a precaution."

Richard's fingertips touched the back of my hand. He didn't try to hold my hand, just that touch. Comforting. I didn't know what to do. If I was going to say no, eventually, it didn't seem fair to flirt. Just the weight of his fingers was a line of warmth all the way up my arm. Lust, just lust. Don't I wish.

"I'll drive your Jeep to your apartment, if you agree. Stephen can drive you to Guilty Pleasures."

"I can take a cab."

"I'd feel better if Stephen took you. Please," he said.

The "please" made me smile. "All right, Stephen can drive me."

"Thank you," Richard said.

"You're welcome."

"I would recommend you go straight home and rest," Lillian said.

"I can't," I said.

She frowned at me. "Very well, but rest as soon as you can. If this is a mild concussion and you abuse yourself, it could worsen. And even if it isn't a concussion, rest will do you more good than gallivanting around."

I smiled. "Yes, Doctor."

She made a small umph sound. "I know how much attention you're going to pay to my orders. But go along with you, both of you. If you won't listen to good sense, then be gone."

I slid off the table, and Richard did not offer to help me. There were reasons why we had been dating this long. A moment of dizziness and I was fine.

Lillian didn't look happy. "You promise me that this dizziness is less than it was."

"Scout's honor."

She nodded. "I'll take your word for it." She didn't look really pleased about it, but she patted my shoulder and walked out. She had made no notes. There was no chart to check. Nothing to prove I'd ever been here, except for some bloody cotton swabs. It was a nice setup.

I had gotten to lie back and relax in the car on the way here. Just not having to tote around naked men or drive helped a lot. I really was feeling better, which was great since I had to see Jean-Claude tonight regardless of how I felt. I wondered whether Gretchen would have given me a night of grace if she had put me in the hospital. Probably not.

I couldn't put it off any longer. It was time to go. "I've got to go, Richard."

He put his hands on my shoulders. I didn't pull away. He turned me to look at him, and I let him. His face was very solemn. "I wish I could go with you."

"We've been over this," I said.

He looked away from my eyes. "I know."

I touched his chin and raised his eyes to mine. "No heroics, Richard, promise me."

His eyes were too innocent. "I don't know what you mean."

"Bullshit. You can't be waiting outside. You have to stay here. Promise me that."

He dropped his arms and stalked away from me. He leaned against the other examining table, palms flat, all his weight on his arms. "I hate you doing this alone."

"Promise me you will wait here, or wait at my apartment. Those are the only choices, Richard."

He wouldn't look at me. I walked over to him, and touched his arm. Tension sang through it. There was none of that otherworldly energy, yet, but it was there below the surface, waiting.

"Richard, look at me."

He stayed with his head bent, hair falling like a curtain between us. I ran my hand through that wavy hair, grabbing a handful close to the warmth of his skull. I used the hair like a handle and turned his face to me. His eyes were dark with more than just their color. Something was home in his eyes that I'd seen only last night. The beast was rising through his eyes like a sea monster swimming upward through dark water.

I tightened my grip on his hair, not to hurt, but to get his attention. A small sound escaped his throat. "If you fuck this up through some misguided male ego thing, you're going to get me killed." I drew his face towards me, hand tangled in his hair. When his face was only inches from mine, almost close enough to kiss, I said, "If you interfere, you will get me killed. Do you understand?"

The darkness in his eyes wanted to say no. I watched the struggle on his face. Finally he said, "I understand."

"You'll be waiting for me at home?"

He nodded, pulling his hair against my grip. I wanted to pull his face to me. To kiss him. We stood there frozen, hesitating. He moved to me. Our lips touched. It was a soft, gentle brush of lips. We stared at each other from an inch away. His eyes were drowning deep, and I could suddenly feel his body like an electric shock through my gut.

I jerked away from him. "No, not yet. I don't know how I feel about you anymore."

"Your body knows," he said.

"If lust was everything, I'd be with Jean-Claude."

His face crumbled as if I'd slapped him. "If you really aren't going to date me anymore, then don't tell Jean-Claude. It's not worth it."

He looked so hurt. That was one thing I'd never meant to do. I laid my hand on his arm. The skin was smooth, warm, real. "If I can get out of telling him, I will, but I don't think Gretchen will make that one of my choices. Besides, Jean-Claude can smell a lie. You did propose, and I said yes."

"Tell him you changed your mind, Anita. Tell him why. He'll love it. That I'm not human enough for you." He pulled away from my hand. "Jean-Claude will just eat that up." His voice was bitter, angry. The bitterness was strong enough to walk on. I'd never heard him like that.

I couldn't stand it. I came up behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist. I buried my face in the line of his spine. Cheek cradled between the swell of his shoulders. He started to turn, but I held tighter. He stood very still in my arms. His hands touched my arms tentatively at first, then he hugged them to him. A shudder ran through his back. His breath came in a long gasp.

I turned him around to face me. Tears glistened on his cheeks. Jesus. I'd never been good around tears. My first instinct was to promise them anything if they would only stop crying.

"Don't," I said. I touched a fingertip to one tear. It clung to my skin, trembling. "Don't let this tear you up, Richard. Please."

"I can't be human again, Anita." His voice sounded very normal. If I hadn't seen the tears, I wouldn't have known he was crying. "I'd be human for you if I could."

"Maybe human isn't what I want, Richard. I don't know. Give me a little time. If I can't handle you being furry, better to find out now." I felt awful, mean and petty. He was gorgeous. I loved him. He wanted to marry me. He taught junior high science. He loved hiking, camping, caving. He collected sound tracks of musicals, for God's sake. And he was next in line to rule the pack. An alpha werewolf. Shit.

"I need time, Richard. I am so sorry, but I do." I sounded like a chump. I'd never sounded so indecisive in my life.

He nodded, but didn't look convinced. "You may end up turning me down but you're going to risk your life confronting Jean-Claude. It doesn't make sense."

I had to agree. "I have to talk to him tonight, Richard. I don't want another run-in with Gretchen. Not if I can avoid it."

Richard wiped the palms of his hands over his face. He ran his hands through his hair. "Don't get yourself killed."

"I won't," I said.

"Promise," he said.

I wanted to say, "Promise," but I didn't. "I don't make promises I can't keep."

"Couldn't you be comforting and lie to me?"

I shook my head. "No."

He sighed. "Talk about painful honesty."

"I've got to go." I walked away before he could distract me again. I was beginning to think he was doing it on purpose to delay me. Of course, I was letting him do it.

"Anita." I was almost to the door. I turned back. He stood there under the harsh lights, hands at his sides, looking . . . helpless.

"We've kissed good-bye. You've told me to be careful. I've warned you not to play hero. That's it, Richard. There is no more."

He said, "I love you."

Okay, so there was more. "I love you, too." It was the truth, damn it. If I could just get over his being furry, I would marry him. How would Jean-Claude take the news? As the old saying goes, only one way to find out.

Chapter 24

Guilty Pleasures is in the heart of the vampire district. Its glowing neon sign bled into the night sky, giving the blackness a crimson tint like a distant house fire. I hadn't come to the district unarmed after dark for a very long time. Okay, I had the knife, and it was better than arm wrestling, but against a vampire, not much better.

Stephen was beside me. A werewolf wasn't a bad bodyguard, but somehow Stephen didn't look scary enough. He was only an inch or two taller than me, slender as a willow with just enough shoulder definition to make him look masculine. To say his pants were tight wasn't enough. They were leather and looked painted on like a second skin. It was hard not to notice that his derriere was tight and firm. The leather jacket cut him off at the waist, so the view was unobstructed.

I was wearing my black trench coat again. It had a little bit of blood on it, but if I cleaned it, it would be wet. Wet would not keep me warm. My sweater, one of my favorite sweaters, was torn off one shoulder down to the line of my bra. Too cold without a coat. Gretchen owed me a sweater. Maybe after I got my guns back, we'd talk about that.

Three broad steps led up to closed doors. Buzz the Vampire was guarding them. It was the worst vampire name I'd ever heard. It wasn't great if you were human, but Buzz seemed all wrong for a vampire. It was a great name for a bouncer. He was tall and muscle-bound with a black crew cut. He seemed to be wearing the same black T-shirt he'd worn in July.

I knew vampires couldn't freeze to death, but I hadn't known they didn't get cold. Most vampires tried to play human. They wore coats in the winter. Maybe they didn't need them the same way Gretchen hadn't needed to take the knife from her throat. Maybe it was all pretend.

He smiled, flashing fangs. My reaction seemed to disappoint him. "You missed a set, Stephen. The boss is pissed."

Stephen sort of shrank in on himself. Buzz seemed to get larger, pleased with himself. "Stephen was helping me. I don't think Jean-Claude will mind."

Buzz squinted at me, really seeing my face for the first time. "Shit, what happened to you?"

"If Jean-Claude wants you to know, he'll tell you," I said. I walked past him. There was a large sign on the door: No Crosses, Crucifixes, or Other Holy Items Allowed Inside. I pushed the doors open and kept walking, my cross securely around my neck. They could pry it from my cold dead hands if they wanted it tonight.

Stephen stayed at my heels, almost as if he were afraid of Buzz. Buzz wasn't that old a vampire, less than twenty years. He still had a sense of "aliveness" to him. That utter stillness that the old ones have hadn't touched the bouncer yet. So why was a werewolf afraid of a new vampire? Good question.

It was Sunday night and the place was packed. Didn't anyone have work tomorrow? The noise washed over us like a wave of nearly solid sound. That rich murmurous sound of many people in a small space determined to have a good time. The lights were as bright as they ever got. The small stage empty. We were between shows.

A blond woman greeted us at the door. "Do you have any holy items to declare?" She smiled when she said it. The holy-item check girl.

I smiled when I said, "Nope."

She didn't question me, just smiled and walked away. A male voice said, "Just a moment, Shelia." The tall vampire that strode towards us was lovely to look at. He had high, sculpted cheekbones, and short blond hair styled to perfection. He was too masculine to be beautiful, and too perfect to be real. Robert had been a stripper last time I was here. It looked as though he'd moved up into management.

Shelia waited, looking from Robert to me. "She lied to me?"

Robert nodded. "Hello, Anita."

"Hello. Are you the manager here now?"

He nodded.

I didn't like it, him being manager. He'd failed me once, or rather failed Jean-Claude's orders. Failed to keep someone safe. That someone had died. Robert hadn't even gotten bloody trying to stop the monsters. He should at least have gotten hurt trying. I didn't insist he die to keep people safe, but he should have tried harder. I'd never completely trust him or forgive him.

"You are wearing a holy item, Anita. Unless on police business, you must give it to Shelia."

I glanced up at him. His eyes were blue. I glanced down, then up, and realized I could meet his eyes. He was over a hundred years old, not nearly as powerful as Gretchen, but I shouldn't have been able to meet his eyes.

His eyes widened. "You have to give it up. Those are the rules."

Maybe being able to look him in the eyes had given me courage, or maybe I had had enough for one night. "Is Gretchen here?"

He looked surprised. "Yes, she's in the back room with Jean-Claude."

"Then you can't have the cross."

"I can't let you in then. Jean-Claude is very clear on that." There was a hint of unease in his voice, almost fear. Good.

"Take a good look at my face, Bobby-boy. Gretchen did it. If she's here, I keep the cross."

Frown lines formed between his perfect brows. "Jean-Claude said no exceptions." He stepped closer, and I let him. He lowered his voice as much as he could and be heard above the noise. "He said if I ever fail him again in anything large or small, he'll punish me."

Normally, I thought statements like that were pitiful or cruel. I agreed with this one.

"Go ask Jean-Claude," I said.

He shook his head. "I cannot trust you to stay here. If you get past me with the cross, I will have failed."

This was getting tiresome. "Can Stephen go ask?"

Robert nodded.

Stephen sort of hung by me. He hadn't recovered from Buzz's remarks. "Is Jean-Claude mad at me for missing my set?"

"You should have called if you couldn't make your set," Robert said. "I had to go on in your place."

"Good to be useful," I said.

Robert frowned at me. "Stephen should have called."

"He was taking me to a doctor. You got a problem with that?"

"Jean-Claude may."

"Then bring the great man out and let's ask him. I'm tired of standing in the door."

"Anita, how good of you to grace us with your presence." Gretchen was practically purring with anticipation.

"Robert won't let me pass."

She turned her eyes to the vampire. He took a step back. She hadn't even unleashed any of that impressive magic yet. Robert scared easy for a century-old corpse.

"We have been awaiting her, Robert. Jean-Claude is most anxious to see her."

He swallowed hard. "I was told that no one came inside with a holy item other than the police. No exceptions were to be made."

"Not even for the master's sweetheart." She put a lot of irony in that last part.

Robert either didn't get it or ignored it. "Until Jean-Claude tells me differently, she doesn't go through with a cross."

Gretchen stalked around us all. I wasn't sure who looked more worried. "Take off the little cross and let us get this over with."

I shook my head. "Nope."

"It didn't do you a lot of good earlier tonight," she said.

She had a point. For the first time I realized I hadn't even thought of bringing out my cross earlier. I'd gone for my weapons, but not my faith. Pretty damn sad.

I fingered the cool silver of the chain. "The cross stays."

"You are both spoiling my fun," she said. The way she said it made that sound like a very bad thing. "I'll give you one of your weapons back."

A moment before I'd have agreed, but not now. I was embarrassed that I had not gone for my cross earlier. It wouldn't have kept her from jumping me at the beginning. She was too powerful for that. But it might have chased her off Louie. I was going to have to stop skipping church even if I didn't get to sleep at all.

"No."

"Is this your way of getting out of our bargain?" Her voice was low and warm with the first stirrings of anger.

"I keep my word," I said.

"I will escort her through, Robert." She raised a hand to stop his complaining. "If Jean-Claude blames you, tell him I was going to tear your throat out." She stepped into him until only a breath separated their bodies. It was only standing that close that you realized that Robert was taller by a head and a half. Gretchen seemed bigger than that. "It isn't a lie, Robert. I think you're weak, a liability. I would kill you now if our master did not need us both. If you still fear Jean-Claude, remember that he wants you alive. I do not."

Robert swallowed hard enough that it had to hurt. He didn't back up. Brownie point for him. She moved that fraction closer, and he jumped back as if he'd been shot. "Fine, fine, take her through."

Gretchen's lip curled in disgust. One thing we agreed on: we didn't like Robert. If we had one thing in common, maybe there'd be more. Maybe we could be girlfriends. Yeah, right.

The noise level had dropped to a background murmur. We had everybody's attention. Nothing like a floor show. "Is there supposed to be an act on stage right now?" I asked.

Robert nodded. "Yes, I need to introduce him."

"Go do your job, Robert." The words were thick with scorn. Gretchen gave good scorn.

Robert left us, obviously relieved. "Wimp," I said softly.

"Come, Anita, Jean-Claude is waiting for us." She stalked away, long pale coat swinging out behind her. Stephen and I exchanged glances. He shrugged. I followed her and he trailed behind as if he were afraid of losing me.

Jean-Claude's office was like being inside a domino. Stark white walls, white carpet, black lacquer desk, black office chair, black leather couch against one wall, and two straight-backed chairs sat in front of the desk. The desk and chairs were Oriental, set with enamel pictures of cranes and Oriental women in flowing robes. I'd always liked the desk, not that I would admit it out loud.

There was a black lacquer screen in one corner. I'd never seen it before. It was large, hiding one entire corner. A dragon curled across the screen in oranges and reds, with huge bulbous eyes. It was a nice addition to the room. It was not a comfortable room, but it was stylish. Like Jean-Claude.

He sat on the leather couch dressed all in black. The shirt had a high, stiff collar that framed his face. It was hard to tell where his hair left off and the shirt began. The collar was pinned at his throat, with a thumb-size ruby pendant. The shirt was open down to his belt, leaving a triangle of pale, pale skin showing. Only the pendant kept the shirt from opening completely.

The cuffs were as wide and stiff as the collar, nearly hiding his hands. He raised one hand and I could see the cuffs were open on one side so he could still use his hands. Black jeans and velvet black boots completed the outfit.

I'd seen the pendant before, but the shirt was certainly new. "Spiffy," I said.

He smiled. "Do you like it?" He straightened the cuffs, as if they needed it. "It's a nice change from white," I said.

"Stephen, we were expecting you earlier." His voice was mild enough, but there was an undertaste of something dark and unpleasant.

"Stephen took me to the doctor."

His midnight blue eyes turned back to me. "Is your latest police investigation getting rough?"

"No," I said. I glanced at Gretchen. She was looking at Jean-Claude.

"Tell him," she said.

I didn't think she was referring to my accusing her of trying to kill me. It was time for a little honesty, or at least a little drama. I was sure Jean-Claude wouldn't disappoint us.

"Stephen needs to leave now," I said. I didn't want him getting killed trying to protect me. He wasn't up to being anything but cannon fodder. Not against Jean-Claude.

"Why?" he asked. He sounded suspicious.

"Get on with it," Gretchen said.

I shook my head. "Stephen doesn't need to be here."

"Get out, Stephen," Jean-Claude said. "I am not angry with you for missing your set. Anita is more important to me than your being on time to your job."

That was nice to know.

Stephen gave a sort of bob, almost a bow to Jean-Claude, flashed a look at me, and hesitated. "Go on, Stephen. I'll be all right."

I didn't have to reassure him twice. He fled.

"What have you been up to, *ma petite*?"

I glanced at Gretchen. She had eyes only for him. Her face looked hungry, as if she'd waited for this a long time. I stared into his dark blue eyes and realized that I could without vampire marks; I could meet his eyes.

Jean-Claude noticed it, too. His eyes widened just a bit. "*Ma petite*, you are full of surprises tonight."

"You ain't seen nothing yet," I said.

"By all means, continue. I do love a surprise."

I doubted he'd like this one. I took a deep breath and said it fast, as if that would make it go down better, like a spoonful of sugar. "Richard asked me to marry him, and I said yes." I could have added, "But I'm not sure anymore," but I didn't. I was too confused to offer up anything but the bare facts. If he tried to kill me, maybe I'd add details. Until then . . . we'd wait it out.

Jean-Claude just sat there. He didn't move at all. The heater clicked on, and I jumped. The vent was above the couch. The air played along his hair, the cloth of his shirt, but it was like watching a mannequin. The hair and clothes worked but the rest was stone.

The silence stretched and filled the room. The heater died, and the quiet was so profound I could hear the blood rushing in my ears. It was like the stillness before creation. You knew something big was coming. You just didn't know quite what. I let the silence flow around me. I wouldn't be the one to

break it, because I was afraid of what came next. This utter calmness was more unnerving than anger would have been. I didn't know what to do with it, so I did nothing. A course of action I seldom regret.

It was Gretchen who broke first. "Did you hear her, Jean-Claude? She is to wed another. She loves another."

He blinked once, a long, graceful sweep of lashes. "Ask her now if she loves me, Gretchen."

Gretchen stepped in front of me, blocking Jean-Claude from view. "What does it matter? She's going to marry someone else."

"Ask her." It was a command.

Gretchen whirled to face me. The bones in her face stood out under the skin, lips thin with rage. "You don't love him."

It wasn't exactly a question, so I didn't answer it. Jean-Claude's voice came lazy and full of some dark meaning that I didn't understand. "Do you love me, *ma petite*?"

I stared into Gretchen's rage-filled face and said, "I don't suppose you'd believe me if I said no?"

"Can you not simply say yes?"

"Yes, in some dark, twisted part of my soul, I love you. Happy?"

He smiled. "How can you marry him if you love me?"

"I love him, too, Jean-Claude."

"In the same way?"

"No," I said.

"How do you love us differently?"

The questions were getting trickier. "How am I supposed to explain something to you that I don't even understand myself?"

"Try."

"You're like great Shakespearean tragedy. If Romeo and Juliet hadn't committed suicide, they'd have hated each other in a year. Passion is a form of love, but it isn't real. It doesn't last."

"And how do you feel about Richard?" His voice was full of some strong emotion. It should have been anger, but it felt different from that. Almost as if it were an emotion I didn't have a word for.

"I don't just love Richard, I like him. I enjoy his company. I . . ." I hated explaining myself. "Oh, hell, Jean-Claude, I can't put it into words. I can see spending my life with Richard, and I can't see it with you."

"Have you set a date?"

"No," I said.

He cocked his head to one side, studying me. "It is the truth but there is some bit of lie to it. What are you holding back, *ma petite*?"

I frowned at him. "I've told you the truth."

"But not all of it."

I didn't want to tell him. He'd enjoy it too much. I felt vaguely disloyal to Richard. "I'm not completely sure about marrying Richard."

"Why not?" There was something in his face that was almost hopeful. I couldn't let him get the wrong idea.

"I saw him go all spooky. I felt his . . . power."

"And?"

"And now I'm not sure," I said.

"He's not human enough for you, either." He threw back his head and laughed. A joyous outpouring of sound that coated me like chocolate. Heavy and sweet and annoying.

"She loves another," Gretchen said. "Does it matter if she doubts him? She doubts you. She rejects you, Jean-Claude. Isn't that enough?"

"Did you do all that to her face?"

She stalked a tight circle like a tiger in a cage. "She does not love you as I do." She knelt in front of him, hands touching his legs, face staring up into his. "Please, I love you. I've always loved you. Kill her or let her marry this man. She doesn't deserve your adoration."

He ignored her. "Are you all right, *ma petite*?"

"I'm fine."

Gretchen dug fingers into his jeans, grabbing at him. "Please, please!"

I didn't like her, but the pain, the hopeless pain in her voice was horrible to hear. She'd tried to kill me and I still felt sorry for her.

"Leave us, Gretchen."

"No!" She clutched at him.

"I forbade you to harm her. You disobeyed me. I should kill you."

She just stayed kneeling, gazing up at him. I couldn't see her expression and was glad of it. I wasn't big on adoration. "Jean-Claude, please, please, I only did it for you. She doesn't love you."

His hand was suddenly around her neck. I hadn't seen him move. It was magic. Whatever was letting me look him in the eyes, it didn't stop him playing with my mind. Or maybe he was just that fast. Naw.

She tried to talk. His fingers closed, and the words came out as small, choked sounds. He stood, drawing her to her feet. Her hands wrapped around his wrist, trying to keep him from hanging her. He kept lifting until her feet dangled in the air. I knew she could fight him. I'd felt the strength in those delicate-seeming hands. Except for her hand on his wrist she didn't even struggle. Would she let him kill her? Would he do it? Could I stand here and just watch?

He stood there in his wonderful black shirt, looking elegant and scrumptious, and holding Gretchen with one arm, straight up. He walked towards his desk still holding her. He kept his balance effortlessly. Even a lycanthrope couldn't have done it, not like that. I watched his slender body walk across the carpet and knew he could pretend all he wanted to, but it wasn't human. He wasn't human.

He set her feet on the carpet on the far side of the desk. He relaxed his grip on her throat but didn't let her go.

"Jean-Claude, please. Who is she that the Master of the City should beg for her attention?"

He kept his hand resting on her throat, not squeezing now. He pushed the screen back with his free hand. It folded back to reveal a coffin. It sat up off the

ground on a cloth-draped pedestal. The wood was nearly black and polished to a mirrorlike shine.

Gretchen's eyes widened. "Jean-Claude, Jean-Claude, I'm sorry. I didn't kill her. I could have. Ask her. I could have killed her, but I didn't. Ask her. Ask her!" Her voice was pure panic.

"Anita." That one word slithered across my skin, thick and full of forboding. I was very glad that that voice was not angry with me.

"She could have killed me with the first rush," I said.

"Why do you think she did not do it?"

"I think she got distracted trying to draw it out. To enjoy it more."

"No, no, I was just threatening her. Trying to frighten her away. I knew you wouldn't want me to kill her. I knew that, or she'd be dead."

"You were always a bad liar, Gretel."

Gretel?

He raised the lid on the coffin with one hand, drawing her nearer to it.

She jerked away from him. His fingernails drew bloody furrows on her throat. She stood behind the office chair, putting it between her and him, as if it would help. Blood trickled down her throat.

"Do not make me force you, Gretel."

"My name is Gretchen and has been for over a hundred years." It was the first real spirit I'd seen in her against Jean-Claude anyway. I fought the urge to applaud. It wasn't hard.

"You were Gretel when I found you, and you are Gretel still. Do not force me to remind you of what you are, Gretel."

"I will not go into that cursed box willingly. I won't do it."

"Do you really want Anita to see you at your worst?"

I thought I already had.

"I will not go." Her voice was firm, not confident, but stubborn. She meant it.

Jean-Claude stood very still. He raised one hand in a languid gesture. There was no other word for it. The movement was almost dancelike.

Gretchen staggered, grabbing at the chair for support. Her face seemed to have shrunk. It wasn't the drawing down of power that I had seen on her earlier. Not the ethereal corpse that would tear your throat out and dance in the blood. The flesh squeezed down, wrapping tight on the bones. She was withering. Not aging, dying.

She opened her mouth and screamed.

"My God, what's happening to her?"

Gretchen stood clutching bird-thin hands on the chair back. She looked like a mummified corpse. Her bright lipstick was a gruesome slash across her face. Even her yellow hair had thinned, dry and brittle as straw.

Jean-Claude walked towards her, still graceful, still lovely, still monstrous. "I gave you eternal life and I can take it back, never forget that."

She made a low mewling sound in her throat. She held out one feeble hand to him, beseeching.

"Into the box," he said. His voice made that last word dark and terrible, as if he'd said "hell" and meant it.

He had beaten the fight out of her, or maybe stolen was the word. I'd never seen anything like this. A new vampire power that I'd never even heard whispered in folklore. Shit.

Gretchen took a trembling step towards the coffin. Two painful, dragging steps and she lost her grip on the chair. She fell, bone-thin arms catching her full weight, the way you're not supposed to. A good way to get your arm broken. Gretchen didn't seem to be worried about broken bones. Couldn't blame her.

She knelt on the floor, head hanging as if she didn't have the strength to rise. Jean-Claude just stood there, staring at her. He made no move to help her. If it had been anyone but Gretchen, I might have helped her myself.

I must have made some movement towards her because Jean-Claude made a back-away gesture to me. "If she fed on a human at this moment, all her strength would return. She is very frightened. I would not tempt her right now, *ma petite*."

I stayed where I was. I hadn't planned on helping her, but I didn't like watching it.

"Crawl," he said.

She started to crawl.

I'd had enough. "You've made your point, Jean-Claude. If you want her in the coffin, just pick her up and put her there."

He looked at me. There was something almost amused in his face. "You feel pity for her, *ma petite*. She meant to kill you. You know that."

"I'd have no problem shooting her, but this . . ." I didn't have a word for it. He wasn't just humiliating her. He was stripping her of herself. I shook my head. "You're tormenting her. If it's for my benefit, I've seen enough. If it's for your benefit, then stop it."

"It is for her benefit, *ma petite*. She has forgotten who her master is. A month or two in a coffin will remind her of that."

Gretchen had reached the foot of the pedestal. She had grabbed handfuls of the cloth but couldn't drag herself to her feet.

"I think she's been reminded enough."

"You are so harsh, *ma petite*, so pragmatic, yet suddenly something will move you to pity. And your pity is as strong as your hate."

"But not nearly as fun," I said.

He smiled and lifted the lid of the coffin. The inside was white silk, of course. He knelt and lifted Gretchen. Her limbs lay awkwardly in his arms as if they didn't quite work. As he lifted her over the lip of the coffin, her long coat dragged against the wood. Something in her pocket clunked, solid and heavy.

I almost hated to ask—almost. "If that's my gun in her pocket, I need it back."

He laid her almost gently in the silk lining, then rifled her pockets. He held the Browning in one hand and began to lower the lid. Her skeletal hands raised, trying to stop its descent.

Watching those thin hands beat at the air, I almost let it go. "There should be another gun and a knife."

He widened his eyes at me, but nodded. He held the Browning out to me. I walked forward and took it. I was standing close enough to see her eyes. They were pale and cloudy, like the eyes of the very old, but there was enough expression left for terror.

Her eyes rolled wildly, staring at me. There was a mute appeal in that look. Desperation was too mild a word for it. She looked at me, not Jean-Claude, as if she knew that I was the only person in the room that gave a damn. If it bothered Jean-Claude, you couldn't tell it by his face.

I tucked the Browning under my arm. It felt good to have it back. He held the Firestar out to me. "I cannot find the knife. If you want to search her yourself, feel free."

I stared down at the dry, wrinkled skin, the lipless face. Her neck was as skinny as a chicken's. I shook my head. "I don't want it that bad."

He laughed, and even now the sound curled along my skin like velvet. A joyous sociopath.

He closed the lid, and she made horrible sounds, as though she were trying to scream and had no voice to do it with. Her thin hands beat against the lid.

Jean-Claude snapped the locks in place and leaned over the closed coffin. He whispered, "Sleep." Almost immediately the sounds slowed. He repeated the word once more, and the sounds ceased.

"How did you do that?"

"Quiet her?"

I shook my head. "All of it."

"I am her master."

"No, Nikolaos was your master, but she couldn't do that. She'd have done it to you if she could have."

"Perceptive of you, and very true. I made Gretchen. Nikolaos did not make me. Being the master vampire that brings someone over gives you certain powers over them. As you saw."

"Nikolaos had made most of the vampires in her little entourage, right?"

He nodded.

"If she could have done what you just did, I'd have seen it. She'd have shown it off."

He gave a small smile. "Again perceptive. There are a variety of powers that a master vampire can possess. Calling an animal, levitation, resistance to silver."

"Is that why my knife didn't seem to hurt Gretchen?"

"Yes."

"But each master has a different arsenal of gifts."

"Arsenal, it is an appropriate word. Now, where were we, *ma petite*? Ah, yes, I could kill Richard."

Here we go again.

Chapter 25

"Did you hear me, *ma petite*? I could kill your Richard." He pulled the screen back into place. The coffin and its terrible contents gone just like that.

"You don't want to do that."

"Oh, but I do, *ma petite*. I would love to tear out his heart and watch him die." He walked past me. The black shirt fanned around him, exposing his stomach as he moved.

"I told you, I'm not sure I'm going to marry him. I'm not even sure I'm going to be dating him anymore. Isn't that enough?"

"No, *ma petite*. You love him. I can smell his scent on your skin. You have kissed him tonight. With all your doubts, you have held him close."

"Hurt him and I'll kill you, simple as that." My voice was very matter-of-fact.

"You would try to kill me, but I am not so easily killed." He sat down on the couch again, shirt spreading out around him, leaving most of his upper body exposed. The cross-shaped burn scar was a shiny imperfection on his flawless skin.

I stayed standing. He hadn't offered me a seat anyway. "Maybe we'd kill each other. It's your choice of music, Jean-Claude, but once we start this dance, it doesn't stop until one of us is dead."

"I am not allowed to harm Richard. Is he allowed to harm me?"

Good question. "I don't think it'll come up."

"You have dated him for months, and I have said little. Before you marry him, I want equal time."

I looked at him. "What do you mean, 'equal time'?"

"Date me, Anita, give me a chance to woo you."

"Woo me?"

"Yes," he said.

I just stared at him. I didn't know what to say. "I've been trying to avoid you for months. I'm not just going to give in now."

"Then I will start the music, and we will dance. Even if I die, and you die. Richard will die first, that I can promise you. Surely dating me is not a fate worse than that."

He had a point, and yet . . . "I don't give in to threats."

"Then I appeal to your sense of fair play, *ma petite*. You have allowed Richard to win your heart. If you had dated me first, would it be my heart you hold so dear? If you had not fought our mutual attraction, would you even have given Richard a second glance?"

I couldn't say yes, and be honest. I wasn't sure. I had refused Jean-Claude because he wasn't human. He was a monster and I didn't date monsters. But last night I'd had a glimpse of what Richard might be. I'd felt a power that rivaled

Jean-Claude's creep along my skin. It was getting harder to tell the humans from the monsters. I was even beginning to wonder about myself. There are more roads to monsterdom than most people realize.

"I don't believe in casual sex. I haven't slept with Richard, either."

"I am not blackmailing you into sex, *ma petite*. I am trying to get equal time."

"If I agree, then what?"

"Why, I pick you up on Friday night."

"Like a date-date?"

He nodded. "We might even discover how you are meeting my eyes with impunity."

"Let's just stick to as normal a date as we can."

"As you like."

I stared at him. He looked at me. He would pick me up on Friday. We had a date. I wondered how Richard would feel about that.

"I can't date both of you indefinitely."

"Allow me a few months, as you have given Richard. If I cannot win you from him, then I will retire from the field."

"You'll leave me alone and you won't harm Richard?"

He nodded.

"You give me your word?"

"My word of honor."

I took it. It was the best offer I was going to get. I wasn't sure how much his word of honor was worth, but it gave us time. Time to work something else out. I didn't know what else, but there had to be something. Something besides dating the freaking Master of the City.

Chapter 26

There was a knock on the door. It opened without Jean-Claude's giving permission. Somebody was pushy. Raina stalked in through the door. Pushy was one word for it.

She was wearing a rust-collared trench coat with the belt tied very tight at her waist. The buckle flopped loosely as she glided into the room. She undid a multicolored scarf and shook her auburn hair. It shimmered in the light.

Gabriel followed at her back in a black trench coat. His-and-her outfits. His hair and strange grey eyes looked as good with his coat as Raina's did with hers. Earrings glittered from the earlobe to the curl at the top of his ear. Every piece of metal was silver.

Kaspar Gunderson followed at their heels. He was wearing a pale tweed coat and one of those hats with a little feather in the band. He looked like an

elegant version of everybody's 1950s dream dad. He didn't look happy to be here.

Robert stood sort of hovering in the doorway. "I told them you were busy, Jean-Claude. I told them you didn't want to be disturbed." He was practically wringing his hands with anxiety. After what I'd seen done to Gretchen I didn't blame him for being afraid.

"Come in, Robert, and close the door behind you," Jean-Claude said.

"I really need to oversee the next act. I . . ."

"Come in and close the door, Robert."

The century-old vampire did as he was told. He closed the door and leaned against it, one hand on the doorknob as if that would keep him safe. The right sleeve of his white shirt was sliced up, and blood trickled out of fresh claw marks. His throat showed more blood, as if a clawed hand had lifted him by the throat. Like Jean-Claude had done to Gretchen, but with talons.

"I told you what would happen if you failed me again, Robert. In anything, large or small." Jean-Claude's voice was a whisper that filled the room like wind.

Robert dropped to his knees on the white carpet. "Please, master, please." He extended his hands towards Jean-Claude. A thick drop of blood plopped from his arm to the carpet. The blood seemed very red against the white, white carpet.

Raina smiled. I was betting I knew whose claw marks Robert was sporting. Kaspar went to sit on the couch, distancing himself from the show. Gabriel was looking at me. "Nice coat," he said.

We were both wearing black trench coats. Great. "Thanks," I said.

He grinned flashing, pointy teeth.

I wanted to ask him if the silver earrings hurt but Robert made a low whimpering noise, and I turned back to the main show.

"Come to me, Robert." Jean-Claude's voice had heat to it, enough to scald.

Robert went nearly prone on the carpet, abasing himself. "Please, master. Please don't."

Jean-Claude stalked towards him, fast enough to have his black shirt sweeping behind him like a miniature cape. His pale skin flashed against the black cloth. He stopped beside the cowering vampire. Jean-Claude's shirt swirled around the suddenly quiet body. Jean-Claude stood utterly still. The cloth had more life to it than he did.

Jesus. "He tried, Jean-Claude," I said. "Leave him alone."

Jean-Claude stared at me, his eyes a bottomless blue. I looked away from those eyes. Maybe I could meet his gaze with impunity, but then again . . . He was always full of surprises.

"I was under the impression, *ma petite*, that you did not like Robert."

"I don't, but I've seen enough punishment for one night. They bloodied him just because he wouldn't let them in your office a few minutes early. Why aren't you mad about that?"

Raina walked over to Jean-Claude. The spiked heels of her metallic copper pumps made indents in the carpet. A trail of stab wounds.

Jean-Claude watched her come. His face was neutral but there was something about the way he held himself. Was he afraid of her? Maybe. But there was a wariness to his body as she moved closer. He wasn't happy. More and more curious.

"We had an appointment with Jean-Claude. It would have hurt my feelings to be turned away at the door." She stepped over Robert, flashing a lot of leg. I wasn't sure she was wearing anything under the trench coat. Robert did not try to sneak a peek. He froze, flinching as her coat brushed his back.

Raina stood with her shapely calves, nearly touching Robert. He didn't move away from her. He seemed to just freeze as if he could pretend he wasn't there and everyone would forget about him. He wished.

She was standing so close to Jean-Claude that the length of their bodies touched. She was sort of wedged between the two vampires. I expected Jean-Claude to step back, give her a little room. He didn't.

She ran her fingers under his shirt, laying her hands on either side of his naked waist. Her lipsticked mouth parted and she leaned into him. She kissed him, and he stood like a statue under her hands. But he didn't tell her to go to hell.

What the hell was going on?

Raina raised her face enough to speak. "Jean-Claude doesn't wish to offend Marcus. He needs the pack's backing to hold the city. Don't you, love?"

He put his hands on her slender waist and stepped back. Her hands trailed along his skin until he was completely out of reach. She watched him the way snakes watch small birds. Hungry. You didn't have to be a vampire to feel her lust. Obvious was putting it kindly.

"Marcus and I have an arrangement," Jean-Claude said.

"What sort of arrangement?" I asked.

"Why do you care, *ma petite*? You are going to be seeing Monsieur Zeeman. Am I not allowed to see other people? I have offered you monogamy and you have turned me down."

I hadn't thought about it. It did bother me. Damn. "It's not the sharing that bothers me, Jean-Claude."

Raina walked up behind him, long painted nails tracing his skin. Hands curling up his chest until her chin rested on his shoulder. Jean-Claude relaxed in her arms this time. He leaned his back against her, pale hands caressing her arms. He stared at me while he did it.

"What does bother you, *ma petite*?"

"Your choice of playmates."

"Jealous?" Raina asked.

"No."

"Liar," she said.

What was I supposed to say? That it bothered me to see her hanging all over him? It did. Which bothered me more than her groping him.

I shook my head. "Just wondering how far you'll go to secure the pack's favor."

"Oh, all the way," Raina said. She moved around to stand in front of him. She was taller than he was in her heels. "You are going to come play with me." She kissed him, one quick movement. She dropped to her knees in front of him, gazing upward.

Jean-Claude stroked her hair. His pale graceful hands raising her face upward. He bent towards her as if to kiss her, but he stared at me while he did it.

Was he waiting for me to say, no, don't? He'd seemed almost afraid of her at first. Now he was utterly comfortable. I knew he was taunting me. Trying to make me jealous. It was sort of working.

He kissed her long and lingering. He looked up from it with her lipstick smeared on his lips. "What are you thinking, *ma petite*?"

He couldn't read my mind anymore, one point for not having vampire marks. "That I think less of you for having sex with Raina."

Gabriel gave a warm, rolling laugh. "Oh, he hasn't had sex with her, not yet." He walked towards me in a long, gliding stride.

I flashed the trench coat showing the Browning. "Let's not get crazed."

He undid the trench coat's belt, and raised his hands in surrender. He wasn't wearing a shirt. He had a silver ring through his left nipple, and the edge of his belly button.

It made me wince just to see it. "I thought silver hurt a lycanthrope, like an allergy."

"It burns," he said. His voice had a soft huskiness to it.

"And this is a good thing?" I asked.

Gabriel put his hands down slowly and shrugged the coat off his shoulders. He turned slowly as the cloth fell like a striptease. I didn't see any other silver rings. He whirled as it came off his arms, and at the apex of the turn he flung it on me. I batted at the coat, knocking it away from me. That was the mistake.

He was on me, body flattening me to the floor. My arms ended up pinned to my chest, trapped under his coat. His waist had the Firestar trapped. I went for the Browning and his hand tore through the coat like paper, ripped the gun out from under my arm. He damn near took the holster and my arm with it. For a second my left arm was just one raw pain. When I could feel my arm again the Browning was gone and I was staring up into Gabriel's face from three inches away.

He wriggled his hips, grinding the Firestar into both of us. It had to hurt him more than it hurt me.

"Doesn't that hurt?" I asked. My voice was surprisingly calm.

"I like pain," he said. He put the tip of his tongue on my chin and licked across my mouth. He laughed. "Struggle harder. Push those little hands."

"You like pain?" I said.

"Yeah."

"You're gonna love this." I shoved the knife into his upper stomach. He gave a small sound between a grunt and a sigh. A shudder ran the length of his

body. He reared up over me, still pinning me from the waist down, like he was doing girl's push-ups.

I raised myself up with him, shoving the knife in deeper, drawing the blade upward through the meat of his body.

Gabriel ripped the coat into pieces but didn't try to grab the knife. He braced an arm on either side of me, staring downward at the knife and my bloody hands.

He rested his face in my hair, slumping just a little. I thought he'd pass out. He whispered, "Deeper."

"Oh, Jesus." The blade was almost at the bottom of his sternum. When I got to it one upward thrust would give me his heart.

I lay back on the floor to get a better angle for the killing blow.

"Don't kill him," Raina said. "We need him."

We? The knife was on its way to his heart when he rolled off me in a blinding blur of speed. He ended up lying on his back not too far away. He was breathing very fast, his chest rising and falling. Blood poured down his naked skin. His eyes were closed, lips curled in a half smile.

If he'd been human he might have died later tonight. Instead he lay on the carpet smiling. He rolled his head to one side and opened his eyes. His strange grey eyes looked at me. "That was wonderful."

"Jesus H. Christ," I said. I got to my feet using the couch for support. I was covered in Gabriel's blood. The knife was thick with it.

Kaspar was sitting on the corner of the couch staring at me. He huddled in his coat, eyes wide. I didn't blame him.

I wiped my hands and blade on the black couch. "Thanks for the help, Jean-Claude."

"I was told that you are a dominant now, *ma petite*. Struggles of internal dominance are not to be interfered with." He smiled. "Besides, you did not need my help."

Raina knelt beside Gabriel. She lowered her face to his bleeding stomach and began to lick it. Long, slow movements of her tongue. Her throat convulsed as she swallowed.

I would not be sick. I would not be sick. I looked at Kaspar. "What are you doing with these two?"

Raina raised a blood coated face. "Kaspar is our sample."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He can shapeshift back and forth as often as he wants to. He doesn't pass out. We use him to test potential stars of our movie productions. To see how they react to somebody changing shape in the middle of things."

I was going to be sick. "Please tell me you don't mean he changes in the middle of sex as a sort of screen test."

Raina cocked her head to one side. Her tongue rolled around her mouth, licking the blood clean. "You know about our little films?"

"Yeah."

"I'm surprised Richard told you. He doesn't approve of our fun."

"Are you in the movies?"

"Kaspar won't play on film," Raina said. She stood up and walked towards the couch. "Marcus won't force anybody to be on film. But Kaspar helps us audition people. Don't you, Kaspar?"

He nodded. He was staring at the carpet, working very hard at not looking at her.

"Why are you all here tonight?" I asked.

"Jean-Claude promised us some vampires for our next movie."

"That true?" I asked.

Jean-Claude's face was blank, lovely but unreadable. "Robert needs to be punished."

I frowned at the change of subject. "The coffin's full."

"There are always more coffins, Anita."

Robert crawled forward. "I'm sorry, master. I'm sorry." He didn't touch Jean-Claude, but he crept close to him. "I can't bear the box again, master. Please."

"You're afraid of Raina, Jean-Claude. What do you expect Robert to do with her?"

"I am not afraid of Raina."

"Fine, but Robert was overmatched. You know he was."

"Perhaps you are right, *ma petite*."

Robert looked up. A moment of hope flashed across his handsome face. "Thank you, master." He looked at me. "Thank you, Anita."

I shrugged.

"You can have Robert for your next film," Jean-Claude said.

Robert grabbed his leg. "Master, I . . ."

"Oh, come on, Jean-Claude, don't give him to her."

Raina plopped down on the couch between Kaspar and me. I stood up. She put an arm over Kaspar's shoulders. He flinched.

"He's handsome enough. Any vampire can take a great deal of punishment. Most acceptable," she said.

"You saw them here tonight," I said. "Do you really want to do that to one of your own people?"

"Let Robert decide," Jean-Claude said. "The box, or Raina?"

Robert looked up at the lycanthrope. She smiled at him with her bloody mouth.

Robert lowered his head so he could see her, then nodded. "Not the box. Anything is better than that."

"I'm out of here," I said. I'd had all the interpreternatural politics that I could stand for one night.

"Don't you want to see the show?" Raina said.

"I thought I'd seen the show," I said.

She tossed Kaspar's hat across the room. "Strip," she said.

I'd sheathed the knife and retrieved the Browning from the carpet where Gabriel had thrown it. I was armed. For what good it did me.

Kaspar sat there on the couch. There was a pink flush to his white skin. His eyes glittered. Angry, embarrassed. "I was a prince before your ancestors discovered this country."

Raina propped her chin on his shoulder, still hugging his shoulders. "We know how blue your pedigree is. You were a prince and you were such a big, bad hunter, such a wicked boy that a witch cursed you. She turned you into something beautiful and harmless. She hoped you'd learn how to be gentle and kind." She licked his ear, running her hands through his feathery hair. "But you aren't gentle or kind. Your heart is just as cold and your pride just as impervious as it was centuries ago. Now, take off your clothes and turn into a swan for us."

"You don't need me to do it for the vampire," he said.

"No, do it for me. Do it so Anita can see. Do it so Gabriel and I don't hurt you." Her voice was going lower. Each word more measured.

"You can't kill me, not even with silver," he said.

"But we can make you wish you could die, Kaspar."

He screamed, a low, ragged cry of frustration. He stood up abruptly and pulled on his coat. The buttons snapped and fell to the carpet. He flung the coat into Raina's face.

She laughed.

I started for the door.

"Oh, don't leave yet, Anita. Kaspar may be a pain in the ass, but he's really quite beautiful."

I glanced back.

Kaspar's sport jacket and tie lay on the carpet. He unbuttoned his white dress shirt with quick, angry movements. There was a line of white feathers down the middle of his chest. Soft and downy as an Easter duck.

I shook my head and kept going for the door. I did not run. I did not walk faster than normal. It was the bravest thing I'd done all night.

Chapter 27

I took a taxi home. Stephen stayed behind to strip or just to lick Jean-Claude's boots, I wasn't sure which and I wasn't sure I cared. I'd made sure Stephen wasn't in trouble. It was the best I could do. He was Jean-Claude's creature, and I'd had about enough of the Master of the City for one night.

Killing Gretchen was one thing, tormenting her was another. I kept flashing on the sound of her frantically beating hands. I'd like to believe that Jean-Claude would keep her asleep, but I knew better. He was a master vampire. They ruled, in part, through fear. Gretchen seemed like a real good threat. Displease me and I'll do that to you. Worked for me.

I was standing outside my apartment when I realized I didn't have a key to it. I'd given Richard my car keys, which had my house keys on the ring.

It felt silly standing out in the hallway about to knock on my own front door. The door opened without me touching it. Richard stood in the doorway. He smiled. "Hi," he said.

I found myself smiling back. "Hi, yourself."

He stepped back to one side, giving me room. He hadn't tried to kiss me in the door like Ozzie meeting Harriet after work. I was glad. It was too intimate a ritual. If we ever did this for real, he could molest me at the door, but not tonight.

He closed the door behind me, and I half expected him to take my coat. Wisely, he did not.

I took off my own coat and laid it across the couch, where all good coats go. The warm smell of cooking food filled the apartment. "You've been cooking," I said, not entirely pleased.

"I thought you might be hungry. Besides, all I had to do was wait. I cooked. It filled the time."

I could understand that. Though cooking would never have occurred to me unless forced.

The only lights were in the kitchen. It looked like a lighted cave from the darkened living room. If I wasn't mistaken, there were candles on the table.

"Are those candles?"

He laughed. It had an embarrassed edge to it. "Too hokey?"

"It's a two-seater breakfast table. You can't possibly serve a fancy dinner on it."

"I thought we'd use the divider as a buffet and just have plates on the table. There's room if we're careful where we put our elbows." He walked past me into the light. He started puttering with a saucepan, sloshing something around in it.

I stood there staring at my kitchen, watching my possible fiancé cooking my dinner. My skin felt tight and itchy. I couldn't draw a complete breath. I wanted to go right back out the door. This was more intimate than a kiss at the door. He'd moved in, made himself at home.

I didn't leave. It was the bravest thing I'd done all night. I checked the lock on the door automatically. He'd left it unlocked. Careless.

I didn't know what to do next. My apartment was my refuge. I could come here and just kick back. I could be alone. I liked being alone. I needed some time to unwind, regroup, think how to tell him Jean-Claude and I had a date.

"Will dinner be spoiled if I clean up first?"

"I can reheat everything when you're ready. I planned the meal so it wouldn't ruin no matter how late you were."

Great. "I'm going to go clean up then."

He turned to me, framed by the light. He'd tied his hair back, but it was coming loose in long, curling strands. His sweater was a burnt orange that made his skin look golden highlighted. He was wearing an apron that said, Mrs. Lovett's Meatpies on it. I didn't own an apron, and I certainly wouldn't have

chosen one with a logo from *Sweeney Todd*. A musical about cannibalism seemed inappropriate for an apron. Delightfully so, but still . . .

"I'm going to go clean up."

"You said that."

I turned on my heel and walked to the bedroom. I did not run, though the temptation was great. I closed the door to my bedroom and leaned against it. My bedroom was untouched. No signs of invasion.

There was a love seat under the room's only window. Stuffed toy penguins sit on the love seat and spill down onto the floor. The collection was threatening to take over half the floor like a creeping tide. I grabbed the nearest one and sat on the corner of the bed. I hugged it tight, burying the upper half of my face in its fuzzy head.

I'd said I would marry Richard, so why was I so bugged about his sudden domestic turn? We downgraded the yes to a maybe, but even if it had still been a yes it would have bugged me. Marriage. The implications of that hadn't really sunk in. It wasn't fair to ask questions like that when he was half-naked and looking yummy. If he'd dropped to one knee over a fancy restaurant dinner, would my answer have been different? Maybe. But we'd never know, would we?

If I'd been alone, I wouldn't have eaten at all. I'd have taken a shower, thrown on an oversize T-shirt, and gone to bed surrounded by a few select penguins.

Now I had a fancy dinner to eat, by candlelight nonetheless. If I said I wasn't hungry, would he be insulted? Would he pout? Would he yell about all the work going to waste and tell me about starving kids in Southeast Asia?

"Shit," I said softly and with feeling. Well, hell, if we ever were going to cohabit, he'd have to know the truth. I was unsociable, and food was something you ate so you wouldn't die.

I decided to do what I'd have done if he hadn't been here, sort of. I really disliked feeling uncomfortable in my own home. If I'd known it was going to feel like this, I'd have called Ronnie to wake me every hour. I was fine. I didn't need the help, but Ronnie would have been more comfy, less threatening. Of course, if Gretchen got out of her box, I trusted Richard would survive an attack, but wasn't so sure about Ronnie. One good point in Richard's favor. He was damn hard to kill.

I put the Browning in the holster built into the bed. I stripped off the sweater and let it fall to the floor. It was ruined and sweaters didn't wrinkle anyway. I laid the Firestar on the back of the toilet. Then I stripped off and got in the shower. I didn't lock the bedroom door. It would seem insulting, as if, if I didn't lock the door, he'd be naked in the bed with a rose in his teeth when I came out.

I locked the bathroom door. I'd done it when I was home with my father. Now I did it so if someone busted down the door, I'd have time to grab the Firestar off the toilet.

I turned the shower on as hot as it would go and stayed under it until my fingers started to prune. I was scrubbed clean and had delayed as long as I could.

I wiped the steam from the mirror with a towel. The top layer of skin was gone from my right cheek. It would heal just fine, but a scrape looks like hell until it heals. There was a small scrape on my chin and the side of my nose. A knot was blossoming into brilliant color on my forehead. I looked as though I'd been hit by a train. It was amazing that anyone wanted to kiss me.

I peeked out the door into the bedroom. No one was waiting for me. The room was empty and full of the whir of the heater. It was quiet, peaceful, and I couldn't hear any noises from the kitchen. I let out a long sigh. Alone, for a little while.

I was vain enough that I didn't want Richard to see me in my usual nighttime attire. I had had a nice black robe that matched a tiny black teddy. An overly optimistic date had given it to me. He never got to see me wear it. Fancy that. The robe had died a sad death covered in blood and other bodily fluids.

Wearing the teddy seemed cruel since I didn't plan on having sex with him. I stood in front of my closet and didn't have a thing to wear. Since I consider clothes something you wear so you won't be naked, that was pretty sad.

I put on an oversize T-shirt with a caricature of Mary Shelley on it, a pair of grey sweatpants—not the fancy ones, either, the kind with a drawstring in them. The way God intended sweatpants to be. A pair of white jogging socks, the closest thing I owned to slippers, and I was ready to go.

I looked at myself in the mirror and wasn't happy. I was comfortable, but it wasn't very flattering. But it was honest. I've never understood those women who wear makeup, do their hair, and dress wonderfully until after they're married. Suddenly, they forget what makeup is and lose all their thin clothes. If we did marry, he should see what he'd be sleeping beside every night. I shrugged and walked out.

He'd combed his hair out. It foamed around his face, soft and inviting. The candles were gone. So was the apron. He stood in the entryway between kitchen and living room. His arms were crossed over his chest, shoulder leaning against the doorjamb. He smiled. He looked so scrumptious, I wanted to go back in and change, but I didn't.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What about?"

"I'm not completely sure, but I think for presuming I could take over your kitchen."

"I think it's the first meal that's ever been cooked in it."

His smile widened, and he pushed away from the door. He walked towards me. He moved in the circle of his own energy. Not that otherworldly power, but just Richard. Or was it? Maybe a lot of his drive was from his beast.

He stood staring down at me, close enough to touch but not doing it. "I was going crazy waiting for you. I got this idea to cook a fancy meal. It was

stupid. You don't have to eat it, but it kept me from running down to Guilty Pleasures and defending your honor."

It made me smile. "Damn you, I can't even pout around you. You always jolly me out of it."

"And this is a bad thing?"

I laughed. "Yes. I enjoy my bad moods, thank you very much."

He traced fingers down my shoulders, kneading the muscles in my upper arms. I pulled away from him. "Please, don't." Just like that, the cozy domestic scene was ruined. All my fault.

His hands dropped to his sides. "I'm sorry." I didn't think he meant the meal. He took a deep breath and nodded. "You don't have to eat a bite." I guess we were going to pretend he had meant the meal. Fine with me.

"If I said I wasn't hungry at all, you wouldn't be mad at me?"

"I fixed the meal to make me feel better. If it bothers you, don't eat it."

"I'll drink a cup of coffee and watch you eat."

He smiled. "It's a deal."

He stayed standing, looking down at me. He looked sad. Lost. If you love someone, you shouldn't make them miserable. It's a rule somewhere, or should be.

"You combed your hair out."

"You like it loose."

"Just like this is one of my favorite sweaters," I said.

"Is it?" His voice held a teasing edge to it. I could have the lightness back. We could have a nice relaxing evening. It was up to me.

I looked up into his big brown eyes and wanted it. But I couldn't lie to him. That would be worse than cruel. "This is awkward."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing. It's not your fault. It's mine."

He shook his head. "You can't help how you feel."

"My first instinct is to cut and run, Richard. Stop seeing you. No more long conversations. No touching. Nothing."

"If that's what you want." His voice sounded sort of strangled, as if it cost him dearly to say those words.

"What I want is you. I just don't know if I can handle all of you."

"I shouldn't have proposed until you'd seen what I really was."

"I saw Marcus and the gang."

"It's not the same as seeing me go beastly on you, is it?"

I took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "No," I said, "it isn't."

"If you have someone else you can call to wait with you tonight, I'll go. You said you needed time and I practically move in. I'm pushing."

"Yeah, you are."

"I'm scared that I'm losing you," he said.

"Pushing won't help," I said.

"I guess not."

I stood there staring at him. The apartment was dark. The only light from the kitchen. It could have been, should have been, very intimate. I told

everybody that lycanthropy was just a disease. It was illegal and immoral to discriminate. I didn't have a prejudiced bone in my body, or so I told myself. Staring up into Richard's handsome face, I knew it wasn't true. I was prejudiced. I was prejudiced against monsters. Oh, they were good enough to be my friends, but even my closest friends, Ronnie and Catherine, were human. Good enough to be friends, but not good enough to love. Not good enough to share my bed. Is that really what I thought? Was that who I was?

It wasn't who I wanted to be. I raised zombies and slew vampires. I wasn't clean enough to throw stones.

I moved closer to him. "Hold me, Richard. Just hold me."

His arms enfolded me. I wrapped my arms around his waist, pressing my face against his chest. I could hear his heartbeat, fast and strong. I held him, listening to the beat of his heart, breathing his warmth. For just an instant I felt safe. It was the way I'd felt before my mother died. That childish belief that nothing can hurt you while Mommy and Daddy hold you tight. That utter faith that they can make everything all right. In Richard's arms, for brief moments, I had that again. Even though I knew it was a lie. Hell, it had been a lie the first time. My mother's death had proven that.

I pulled away first. He didn't try and hold on. He didn't say anything. If he'd said anything remotely sympathetic I might have cried. Couldn't have that. Down to business. "You haven't asked how it went with Jean-Claude."

"You were almost mad at me when you came through the door. I thought if I started questioning you right off the bat, you might yell at me."

He'd made coffee all on his own. That earned him at least two brownie points. "I wasn't mad at you." I poured coffee into my baby penguin mug. Regardless of what I take to work, it is my favorite mug.

"Yes, you were," he said.

"You want some coffee?"

"You know I don't like it."

How do you trust a man that doesn't like coffee? "I keep hoping you'll come to your senses."

He started dishing out his meal. "Sure you don't want some?"

"No, thanks." It was some small brown meat in a brown sauce. Looking at it made me nauseous. I'd eaten later than this with Edward, but tonight, food just didn't sound good. Maybe getting my head bashed into concrete had something to do with that.

I sat down in one of the chairs, one knee drawn up to my chest. The coffee was Viennese cinnamon, one of my favorites. Sugar, real cream, and it was perfect.

Richard sat down opposite me. He bowed his head and said grace over his meal. He's Episcopalian, did I mention that? Except for the furry part, he really is perfect for me.

"Tell me what happened with Jean-Claude, please," he asked.

I sipped my coffee and tried to think of a short version. Okay, a short version Richard wouldn't mind hearing. Okay, maybe just the truth.

"He took the news better than I thought he would, actually."

Richard looked up from his meal, silverware poised. "He took it well?"

"I didn't say that. He didn't burst through a wall and try to kill you immediately. He took it better than I expected."

Richard nodded. He took a sip of water and said, "Did he threaten to kill me?"

"Oh, yeah. But it was almost like he saw this coming. He didn't like it, but it didn't catch him by complete surprise."

"Is he going to try and kill me?" He asked it very calmly, eating his meat and brown sauce.

"No, he isn't."

"Why not?"

It was a good question. I wondered what he'd think of the answer. "He wants to date me."

Richard stopped eating. He just looked at me. When he could speak, he said, "He *what*?"

"He wants a chance to woo me. He says that if he can't win me from you in a few months, he'll give up. He'll let us go our merry way, and he won't interfere."

Richard sat back in his chair. "And you believe him?"

"Yeah. Jean-Claude thinks he's irresistible. I think he believes that if I let him use all his charms on me, I'll reconsider."

"Will you?" His voice was very quiet when he asked.

"No, I don't think so." It wasn't a rousing endorsement.

"I know you lust after him, Anita. Do you love him?"

The conversation was becoming *déjà-vu*ish. "In some dark, twisted part of my heart, yeah. But not the way I love you."

"How is it different?"

"Look, I just had this conversation with Jean-Claude. I love you. Can you see me setting up house with the Master of the City?"

"Can you see setting up house with an alpha werewolf?"

Shit. I stared across the table at him, and sighed. He was pushing, but I didn't blame him. If I'd been him, I'd have dumped me. If I didn't love him enough to accept all of him, then who the hell needed me? I didn't want him to dump me. I wanted to be indecisive but I didn't want to lose him. Talk about having your cake and eating it, too.

I leaned across the table and held my hand out to him. After a moment he took it. "I don't want to lose you."

"You won't lose me."

"You are a hell of a lot more tolerant than I would be."

He didn't smile. "I know I am."

I would have liked to argue, but truth is truth. "I'd be bigger about this if I could."

"I understand your having reservations about marrying a werewolf. Who wouldn't? But Jean-Claude . . ." He shook his head.

I squeezed his hand. "Come on, Richard. This is the best we can do right now. Jean-Claude won't try and kill either of us. We still get to date and see each other."

"I don't like you being forced into dating him." He rubbed his fingers across my knuckles, caressing. "I like it even less that I think you'll enjoy it. In that small dark part of yourself, you'll be having a very good time."

I wanted to deny it, but it would be a total lie. "You can smell it if I lie?"

"Yep," he said.

"Then it's intriguing and terrifying."

"I want you safe so the terrifying part bothers me, but the intriguing part bothers me more."

"Jealous?"

"Worried."

What could I say? So was I.

Chapter 28

The phone rang. I groped for it and found nothing. I raised my head and found the nightstand empty. The phone was gone. It had even stopped ringing. The radio clock was still there, glowing red. It read 1:03. I stayed propped on my elbow blinking at the empty space. Was I dreaming? Why would I dream that someone had stolen my phone?

The bedroom door opened. Richard stood framed in the light beyond. Ah. Now I remembered. He'd taken the phone into the living room so it wouldn't wake me. Since he was having to wake me every hour, I'd let him do it. When you're only sleeping an hour, even a short phone call can screw things up.

"Who is it?"

"It's Sergeant Rudolf Storr. I asked him to wait until I had to wake you, but he was pretty insistent."

I could imagine. "It's all right."

"Would fifteen minutes have killed him?" Richard asked.

I swung my legs out from under the covers. "Dolph's in the middle of a murder investigation, Richard. Patience isn't his strong suit."

Richard crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the doorjamb. The light from the living room made strong shadows on his face. The shadows cut huge square shapes on his orange sweater. He radiated displeasure. It made me smile. I patted his arm as I went past. I seemed to have inherited a watchwolf.

The phone was sitting just inside the front door, where the other phone jack was. I sat down on the floor, putting my back to the wall, and picked up the phone. "Dolph, it's me. What's up?"

"Who's this Richard Zeeman that's answering your phone in the middle of the night?"

I closed my eyes. My head hurt. My face hurt. I hadn't had a hell of a lot of sleep. "You're not my father, Dolph. What's up?"

A moment of silence. "Defensive, aren't we?"

"Yeah, want to make something of it?"

"No," he said.

"You call just to catch up on my personal life or is there a reason you woke me up?" I knew it wasn't another murder. He was being too cheerful for that, which made me wonder if it couldn't have waited a few hours.

"We found something."

"What exactly?"

"I'd rather you just come and see it for yourself."

"Don't do this to me, Dolph. Just tell me what the fuck it is."

Another silence. If he was waiting for me to apologize, he was in for a long wait. Finally. "We found a skin."

"What kind of skin?"

"If we knew what the hell it was, would I be calling you at one o'clock in the freaking morning?" He sounded angry. I guess I couldn't blame him.

"I'm sorry, Dolph. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"Fine."

He hadn't exactly accepted my apology. Fine. "Is it connected to the murder?"

"I don't think so, but I'm not some hotshot preternatural expert." He still sounded pissed. Maybe he wasn't getting much sleep, either. Of course, I bet no one had smashed his head into a sidewalk.

"Where are you?"

He gave me the address. It was down in Jefferson County, far away from the murder scene.

"When can you be here?"

"I can't drive," I said.

"What?"

"Doctor's orders, I'm not to get behind the wheel of a car tonight."

"How bad are you hurt?"

"Not too bad, but the doctor wanted me woken up every hour, and no driving."

"That's why Mr. Zeeman is there."

"Yeah."

"If you're too hurt to come tonight, it can wait."

"Is the skin where it was found? Nothing disturbed?"

"Yeah."

"I'll come. Who knows? There might be a clue."

He let that go. "How are you going to get here?"

I glanced at Richard. He could drive me, but somehow I didn't think it was a good idea. He was a civvie, for one thing. He was a lycanthrope, for another. He answered to Marcus, and to a degree to Jean-Claude. Not a good person to

bring into a preternatural murder investigation. Besides, if he'd been human, the answer would have been the same. No deal.

"Unless you can send a squad car, I guess I'll take a taxi."

"Zerbrowski didn't answer his first page. He lives in St. Peters. He'll have to come right by you. He can pick you up."

"Is that okay with him?"

"It will be," Dolph said.

Great. Trapped in a car with Zerbrowski. "Fine, I'll be dressed and waiting."

"Dressed?"

"Don't even start, Dolph."

"Touchy, very touchy."

"Stop it."

He laughed. It was good to hear him laugh. It meant not many people had died this time. Dolph didn't laugh much during serial-killer cases.

He hung up. So did I.

"You have to go out?" Richard asked.

"Yeah."

"Do you feel well enough to go?"

"Yes."

"Anita . . ."

I leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes. "Don't, Richard. I'm going."

"No debate allowed?"

"No debate," I said. I opened my eyes and looked at him.

He was staring down at me, arms crossed.

"What?" I said.

He shook his head. "If I told you that I was going to do something, no debate, you'd be mad."

"No, I wouldn't."

"Anita." He said my name the way my father use to say it.

"I wouldn't, not if your reasons were valid."

"Anita, you'd be pissed, and you know it."

I wanted to deny it but couldn't. "All right, you're right. I wouldn't like it." I stared up at him. I was going to have to give him reasons why I was going to go out and do my job. It wasn't a pretty sight.

I stood. I wanted to say I didn't have to explain myself to anyone, but if I meant this marriage thing, it wasn't true anymore. I didn't like that much. His being a werewolf was not the only hurdle to domestic bliss.

"This is police business, Richard. People die when I don't do my job."

"I thought your job was raising zombies and executing vampires."

"You sound like Bert."

"You've told me enough about Bert that I know that is an insult."

"If you don't want to be compared, then stop saying one of his favorite things." I walked past him towards the bedroom. "I've got to get dressed."

He followed me. "I know that helping the police is very important to you."

I turned on him. "I don't just help the police, Richard. The spook squad is just over two years old. The cops on it didn't know shit about preternatural creatures. It was a garbage detail. Do something to piss off your superiors and you get transferred."

"The newspapers and TV said it was an independent task force like the major task force. That's an honor."

"Oh, yeah, right. The squad gets almost no extra funding. No special training in preternatural creatures or events. Dolph, Sergeant Storr, saw me in the paper and contacted Bert. There was no training in preternatural crime for law officers in this country. Dolph thought I could be an adviser."

"You're a heck of a lot more than an adviser."

"Yes, I am." I could have told him that earlier in the summer Dolph had tried not calling me in right away. It had seemed like a clear-cut case of ghouls in a cemetery getting a little ambitious and attacking a necking couple. Ghouls were cowards and didn't attack able-bodied people, but exceptions to the rule and all that. By the time Dolph called me in, six people were dead. It hadn't been ghouls. So lately Dolph had started calling me at the beginning before things got too messy. Sometimes I could diagnose a problem before it got out of hand.

But I couldn't tell Richard that. There might have been a lower kill count if I'd been called in this summer, but that was no one's business but Dolph's and mine. We'd spoken of it only once, and that was enough. Richard was a civvie, werewolf or not. It wasn't any of his business.

"Look, I don't know if I can explain this so you'll understand, but I have to go. It may head off a larger problem. It may keep me from having to go to a murder scene later on. Can you understand that?"

He looked perplexed, but what came out of his mouth wasn't. "Not really, but maybe I don't have to. Maybe seeing it's important to you is enough."

I let out a deep breath. "Great. Now I've got to get ready. Zerbrowski will be here any time. He's the detective giving me a ride."

Richard just nodded. Wise of him.

I went into the bedroom and closed the door. Gratefully. Would this be a regular occurrence if we married? Would I be forever explaining myself? God, I hoped not.

Another pair of black jeans, a red sweater with a cowl neck, so soft and fuzzy that it made me feel better just to wear it. The Browning's shoulder holster looked very dark and dramatic against the crimson of the sweater. The red sweater also brought out the raw-meat color of the scrapes on my face. I might have changed it, but the doorbell rang.

Zerbrowski. Richard was answering the door while I stared at myself in the mirror. That thought alone was enough. I went for the door.

Zerbrowski was standing just inside the door, hands in the pockets of his overcoat. His curly black hair with its touches of grey was freshly cut. There was even hair-goop in it. Zerbrowski was usually lucky if he remembered to comb his hair. The suit that showed from his open coat was black and formal. His tie was tasteful and neatly knotted. I glanced down, and yes indeed, his

shoes were shined. I'd never seen him when he didn't have food stains on him somewhere.

"Where were you all dressed up?" I asked.

"Where were you all undressed?" he asked. He smiled when he said it.

I felt heat rush up my face and hated it a lot. I hadn't done anything worth blushing for. "Fine, let's go." I grabbed my trench coat from the back of the couch and touched dried blood. Shit.

"I've got to get a clean coat. I'll be right back."

"I'll just talk to Mr. Zeeman here," Zerbrowski said.

I was afraid of that, but I went for my leather jacket anyway. If we ended up engaged, Richard would have to meet Zerbrowski sooner or later. Later would have been my preference.

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Zeeman?"

"I'm a schoolteacher."

"Oh, really."

I lost the conversation then. I grabbed the jacket from the closet and walked back out. They were chatting along like old buddies.

"Yes, Anita is our preternatural expert. Wouldn't know what to do without her."

"I'm ready. Let's go." I walked past them and opened the door. I held the door for Zerbrowski.

He smiled at me. "How long have you two been dating?"

Richard looked at me. He was pretty good at picking up when I wasn't comfortable. He was going to let me answer the question. Good of him. Too good. If he would only be completely unreasonable and give me an excuse to say no. This isn't worth it. But damn if he didn't work really hard at keeping me happy. Not an easy task.

"Since November," I said.

"Two months, not bad. Katie and I were engaged two months after our first date." His eyes sparkled, his grin was mocking. He was pulling my leg, he didn't know it was coming off in his hands.

Richard looked at me. The look was long and serious. "Two months isn't very long, really."

He'd given me an out. I didn't deserve him.

"Long enough if it's the right one," Zerbrowski said.

I tried to get Zerbrowski through the door. He was grinning. He had no intention of being hurried. My only hope was for Dolph to page him again. That'd light a fire under his butt.

Dolph didn't call. Zerbrowski grinned at me. Richard looked at me. His big brown eyes were deep and wounded. I wanted to take his face in my hands and wipe that hurt from his eyes. Oh, hell.

He was the right one—probably. "I've got to go."

"I know," he said.

I glanced at Zerbrowski. He was grinning at us, enjoying the show.

Was I supposed to kiss him good-bye? We weren't engaged anymore. Quickest engagement in history. But we were still dating. I still loved him. That deserved a kiss if nothing else.

I grabbed the front of his sweater and pulled him down to me. He looked surprised. "You don't have to do this for show," he whispered.

"Shut up and kiss me."

That earned me a smile. Every kiss was still a pleasant shock. No one's lips were this soft. No one else tasted this good.

His hair fell forward and I grabbed a handful of it, pressing his face to mine. His hands slid around my back, underneath the leather jacket, hands kneading the sweater.

I pushed away from him, breathless. I didn't want to go now. With him staying overnight maybe it was a good thing I had to leave for a while. I meant it about no premarital sex, even if he hadn't been a lycanthrope, but the flesh was more than willing. I wasn't sure the spirit was up to the fight.

The look in Richard's eyes was drowning deep and worth anything in the world. I tried to hide a rather sappy smile but knew it was too late. I knew I would pay for this in the car with Zerbrowski. I would never hear the end of it. Staring up into Richard's face, I didn't care. We'd work out everything, eventually. Surely to God we could work it out.

"Wait 'til I tell Dolph we were late because you were smooching with some guy."

I didn't rise to bait. "I may not be home for hours. You might want to go home instead of waiting here."

"I drove your Jeep here, remember? I don't have a ride home."

Oh. "Fine, I'll be back when I can."

He nodded. "I'll be here."

I walked out into the hallway, not smiling anymore. I wasn't sure how I felt about coming home to Richard. How was I ever going to come to a real decision if he kept hanging around, making my hormones run amok?

Zerbrowski chuckled. "Blake, I have seen everything now. The heap-big vampire slayer in luuv."

I shook my head. "I don't suppose it would help to ask you to keep this to yourself?"

He grinned. "Makes the teasing more fun."

"Damn you, Zerbrowski."

"Loverboy seemed sort of tense, so I didn't say anything before, but now that we're alone, what the hell happened to you? You look like someone took a meat cleaver to your face."

Actually, I didn't. I'd seen that done once and it was a lot messier. "Long story. You know my secret. Where were you tonight all dressed up?"

"Married ten years tonight," he said.

"You're kidding?"

He shook his head.

"Big congrats," I said. We clattered down the stairs.

"Thanks. We hired a baby-sitter and everything. She made me leave my beeper home."

The cold bit into the sores on my face and made my head ache worse.

"Door's not locked," Zerbrowski said.

"You're a cop. How can you leave your car unlocked?" I opened the door and stopped. The passenger seat and floorboard were full. McDonald's take-out sacks and newspapers filled the seat and flowed onto the floorboards. A piece of petrified pizza and a herd of pop cans filled the rest of the floorboard.

"Jesus, Zerbrowski, does the EPA know you're driving a toxic waste dump through populated areas?"

"See why I leave it unlocked. Who would steal it?" He knelt in the seat and began shoveling armfuls of garbage into the backseat. It looked like this wasn't the first time he'd cleaned out the front seat by shoveling things in back.

I brushed crumbs from the empty seat onto the empty floorboard. When it was as clean as I could get it, I sat down.

Zerbrowski slid into his seat belt and started the car. It coughed to life. I put on my seat belt, and he pulled out of the parking lot.

"How does Katie feel about your job?" I asked.

Zerbrowski glanced at me. "She's okay with it."

"Were you a cop when she met you?"

"Yeah, she knew what to expect. Loverboy didn't want you to come out tonight?"

"He thought I was too hurt to go out."

"You do look like shit."

"Thanks."

"They love us, they want us to be careful. He's a junior high school teacher, for God's sake. What does he know about violence?"

"More than he'd like to."

"I know, I know. The schools are a dangerous place nowadays. But it isn't the same, Anita. We carry guns. Hell, you kill vampires and raise the dead, Blake. Can't get much messier than that."

"I know that." But I didn't know that. Being a lycanthrope was messier. Wasn't it?

"No, I don't think you do, Blake. Loving someone who lives by violence is a hard way to go. That anybody'll have us is a miracle. Don't get cold feet."

"Did I say I was getting cold feet?"

"Not out loud."

Shit. "Let's drop it, Zerbrowski."

"Anything you say. Dolph is going to be so excited that you've decided to tie the noose . . . ah, knot."

I sank down into the seat as far as the belt would let me. "I am not getting married."

"Maybe not yet, but I know that look, Blake. You are a drowning woman, and the only way out is down the aisle."

I would have liked to argue, but I was too confused. Part of me believed Zerbrowski. Part of me wanted to stop dating Richard and be safe again. Okay,

okay, I wasn't exactly safe before, what with Jean-Claude hanging around, but I wasn't engaged. Of course, I still wasn't engaged.

"You okay, Blake?"

I sighed. "I've lived alone a long time. A person gets set in her ways." Besides he's a werewolf. I didn't say that part out loud, but I wanted to. I needed a second opinion, but a police officer, especially Zerbrowski, wasn't the person to ask.

"He crowding you?"

"Yeah."

"He want marriage, kids, the whole nine yards?"

Kids. No one had mentioned children. Did Richard have this domestic vision of a little house, him in the kitchen, me working, and kids? Oh, damn, we were going to have to sit down and have a serious talk. If we did manage to get engaged like normal people, what did that mean? Did Richard want children? I certainly didn't.

Where would we live? My apartment was too small. His house? I wasn't sure I liked that idea. It was his house. Shouldn't we have our house? Shit. Kids, me? Pregnant, me? Not in this lifetime. I thought furriness was our biggest problem. Maybe it wasn't.

Chapter 29

The river swirled black and cold. Rocks stuck up like the teeth of giants. The bank behind me was steep, thick with trees. The snow between the trees was trampled and slicked away to show the leaves underneath. The opposite bank was a bluff that jutted out over the river. No way down from there unless you were willing to jump. The water was less than five feet deep in the center of the river. Jumping from thirty feet wasn't a good idea.

I stood carefully on the crumbling bank. The black water rushed just inches from my feet. Tree roots stuck out of the bank, tearing at the earth. The combination of snow, leaves, and nearly vertical bank seemed destined to send me into the water, but I'd fight it as long as I could.

The rocks formed a low, broken wall into the river. Some of the stones were barely above the swirling water, but one near the center of the river stuck up about waist high. Draped over that rock was the skin. Dolph was still the master of understatement. Shouldn't a skin be smaller than a breadbox, not bigger than a Toyota? The head hung on the large rock, draped perfectly as if placed. That was one of the reasons the thing was still in the middle of the river. Dolph had wanted me to see it in case there was some ritual significance to the placement.

There was a dive team waiting on the shore in dry suits, which are bulkier than wet suits and better at keeping you warm in cold water. A tall diver with a hood already pulled up over his hair stood by Dolph. He'd been introduced as MacAdam. "Can we go in after the skin now?"

"Anita?" Dolph asked.

"Better than in the water than me," I said.

"Is it safe?" Dolph asked.

That was a different question. Truth. "I'm not sure."

MacAdam looked at me. "What could be out there? It's just a skin, right?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure what kind of skin it is."

"So?" he asked.

"So, remember the Mad Magician back in the seventies?"

"I'd think you wouldn't remember it," MacAdam said.

"I studied it in college. Magical Terrorism, senior year. The Magician specialized in leaving magical booby traps in out-of-the-way places. One of his favorite traps was an animal skin that would attach itself to whomever touched it first. Took a witch to remove it."

"Was it dangerous?" MacAdam asked.

"One man suffocated when it attached itself to his face."

"How the hell did his face touch it first?"

"Hard to ask a dead man. Animating wasn't a profession in the seventies."

MacAdam stared off across the water. "Okay, how do you find out if it's dangerous?"

"Has anyone been in the water yet?"

He jerked a thumb at Dolph. "He wouldn't let us, and Sheriff Titus said to leave everything for some hotshot monster expert." He looked me up and down. "That you?"

"That's me."

"Well, make like an expert so my people and I can get in there."

"You want the spotlight now?" Dolph asked. They'd had the place lit up like an opening night at Mann's Chinese Theatre. I'd made them turn off the lights after I'd gotten the first glance. There were some things that you needed light to see, other things only showed themselves in the dark.

"No light yet. Let me see it in the dark first."

"Why no light?" Dolph asked.

"Some things hide from light, Dolph, and they might still take a chunk out of one of the divers."

"You're really serious about this, aren't you?" MacAdam asked.

"Yeah, aren't you glad?"

He looked at me for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. How are you going to get a closer look? I know the weather just got cold the last few days, so the water should be about forty degrees, but that's still cold without a suit."

"I'll stay on the rocks. I might dip a hand in to see if anything rises to bait, but I'll stay as dry as I can."

"You take the monsters serious," he said, "I take the water serious. You'll get hypothermia in about five minutes in water this cold. Try not to fall in."

"Thanks for the advice."

"You're going to get wet," Aikensen said. He stood just above me, leaning against a tree. His Smokey Bear hat was pulled low over his head, thick woolly collar pulled up near his chin. His ears and most of his face were still bare to the cold. I hoped he got frostbite.

He put his flashlight under his chin like a Halloween gag. He was smiling. "Didn't move a thing, Miss Blake. Left it just where we found it."

I didn't correct him on the "miss." He'd done it just to irritate me. Ignoring it irritated him. Great.

The Halloween smile faded, leaving him frowning in the light.

"What's the matter, Aikensen? Didn't want to get your delicate toes wet?"

He pushed away from the tree. The movement was too abrupt. He slid down the bank, arms windmilling, trying to slow his fall. He fell to his butt and kept scooting. He was coming straight for me.

I took a step to one side and the bank crumbled underfoot. I gave a hop and ended up on the nearest stone in the river. I huddled on it, nearly on all fours to keep from falling into the water. The stone was wet, slick, and bone-deep cold.

Aikensen landed in the river with a yell. He sat on his butt, freezing water swirling to nearly the middle of his chest. He beat at the water with his gloved hands, as if punishing it. All he was doing was getting wetter.

The skin didn't slide off the rock and cover him. Nothing grabbed him. I couldn't feel any magic on the air. Nothing but the cold and the sound of water.

"Guess nothing's going to eat him," MacAdam said.

"Guess not," I said. I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

"God's sake, Aikensen, get out of the water," Titus's voice boomed from the top of the hill. The sheriff, along with most of the other policemen, were at the top of the bank, along the gravel road that led back to the place. Two ambulances were sitting up there, too. Since Gaia's law went into effect three years ago, an ambulance had to be on the scene if there was any chance the remains were humanoid. There were ambulances being called to take away coyote carcasses, as if they were dead werewolves. The law had gone into effect, but no extra money had been put into the emergency systems across the country. Washington did like to complicate things.

We were in the backyard of someone's summer house. Some of the houses had landings or even small boathouses, if they had deep enough water at the base of their land. The only boat you were taking off through this rocky channel was a canoe, so no landing, no boathouse, just the cold black water and a very wet deputy.

"Aikensen, get your butt up on one of those rocks. Help Ms. Blake out, since you're already wet."

"I don't need his help," I called back to Titus.

"Well, now, Ms. Blake, this is our county. Wouldn't want you getting eaten by some beastie while we stayed nice and safe on shore."

Aikensen stood, nearly falling again when his boots slid on the sandy bottom. He turned to glare at me as if it were all my fault, but he scrambled up

on the rock on the side opposite the skin. He'd lost his flashlight. He was dripping wet in the dark, except for his Smokey Bear hat which he'd managed to keep above water. He looked as sullen as a wet hen.

"Notice you're not offering to climb out on this particular limb," I said.

Titus started down the bank. He seemed to be a lot better at it than I had been. I'd staggered like a drunk from tree to tree. Titus kept his hands out ready to catch himself, but he pretty much walked down. He stopped beside Dolph.

"Delegation, Ms. Blake. What made the country great."

"What do you think of that, Aikensen?" I said more softly.

He glared at me. "He's the boss." He didn't sound like he was happy with it, but he believed it.

"Get on with it, Anita," Dolph said.

Translation, stop yanking everybody's chain. Everybody wanted out of the cold. Couldn't blame them. Me, too.

I stood ever so carefully on the slick rock. My flashlight reflected off the choppy water like a black mirror, opaque and solid.

I shone the flashlight on the first stone. It was pale and shining with water, and probably ice. I stepped onto it carefully. The next stone, still okay. Who knew Nike Airs were good for icy rocks?

MacAdam's warning about hypothermia ran through my head. Just what I'd need, to be hospitalized from exposure. Didn't I have enough problems without having to fight the elements?

There was a gap between the next two stones. It was a tempting distance. Almost stepping distance but just an inch out of comfort range. The stone I was on was flat, low to the water, but solid underfoot. The next one was sort of curved on one side with a point.

"Afraid you're going to get your feet wet?" Aikensen flashed a smile that was more a baring of white teeth in the dark.

"Jealous that you're wet and I'm not?"

"I could get you wet," he said.

"Only in my nightmares," I said. I had to leap for it and hope some miracle of balance kept me safe. I glanced back at the bank. I thought about asking the divers if they had an extra dry suit for me, but it seemed cowardly with Aikensen shivering on the rocks. Besides, I could probably make the jump. Probably.

I backed to the edge of the rock I was standing on, and jumped. There was a second of being airborne, then my foot hit the rock. My foot slid off to one side. I collapsed onto the rock hugging it with both hands and one leg. The other leg ended up thigh deep in ice cold water. The shock of it left me cursing.

I struggled back up on the rock, water streaming from the jean's pants leg. My foot hadn't touched bottom. The water on either side of the rocks would come up to my waist, if Aikensen's little wading show was a good indication. I'd found a sinkhole deep enough to have doused every inch of me. Lucky it was just my leg.

Aikensen was laughing at me. If it had been anyone else, we might have laughed together at how ridiculous all this was, but it was him, and he laughed at me.

"At least I didn't drop my flashlight," I said. It sounded childish even to me, but he stopped laughing. Sometimes childish will get you what you want.

I was beside the skin now. Up close, it was even more impressive. I'd known it was reptilian from the bank. Standing next to it, I could see it was definitely a snake. The largest scales were the size of my palm. The empty eye sockets were the size of golf balls. I reached out to touch it. Something swirled against my arm as I reached for it. I screamed before I realized it was the undulating snakeskin spreading out in the water. When I could breathe again, I touched the skin. I expected it to be light, a sloughed skin. It was heavy, meaty.

I turned the edge of it to the light. It wasn't a sloughed skin. The snake had been skinned. Whether it had been alive when the skinning started was a moot point. It was dead now. Very few creatures can survive being skinned alive.

There was something about the scales and shape of the head that reminded me of a cobra, but the scales, even in the light of a flashlight, gleamed with opalescence. The snake wasn't any one color. It was like a rainbow or an oil slick. The color changed depending on the angle of the light.

"You going to play with it, or can the divers come and get it?" Aikensen asked.

I ignored him for the moment. There was something on the snake's forehead, almost between the eyes. Something smooth and round and white. I ran my fingers over it. It was a pearl. A pearl the size of a golf ball. What the hell was a giant pearl doing embedded in the head of a snake? And why hadn't whoever skinned the creature taken the pearl with him?

Aikensen leaned forward running a hand over the skin. "Yuck. What the hell is it?"

"Giant snake," I said.

He jerked back with a yell. He started scraping at his arms as if he could wipe off the feel of it.

"Afraid of snakes, Aikensen?"

He glared at me. "No."

It was a lie, and we both knew it.

"The two of you enjoy being out on those rocks?" Titus asked. "Get a move on."

"You see anything significant about the placement of the skin, Anita?" Dolph asked.

"Not really. The thing might have just gotten hooked on the rocks. I don't think it was purposefully placed here."

"We can move it then?"

I nodded. "Yeah, the divers can come in. Aikensen's already tested the water for predators."

Aikensen looked at me. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means there might have been creepy-crawlies in the water, but nothing tried to eat you, so it's safe."

"You used me for bait."

"You fell in."

"Ms. Blake say we can move the thing?" Titus asked.

"Yes," Dolph said.

"Go to it, boys."

The divers all looked at each other. "Can we have the spotlight now?" MacAdam asked.

"Sure," I said.

The light smashed into me. I put a hand up to shield my eyes and nearly slipped off the rock. Jesus it was bright. The water was still opaque, black, and choppy, but the rocks glistened and Aikensen and I were suddenly center stage. The bright light washed all the color from the snakeskin.

MacAdam slipped his face mask on, regulator secure in his mouth. Only one other diver followed his lead. Guess they didn't need four to go in after the skin.

"Why're they putting on tanks just to wade out here?" Aikensen asked.

"Insurance in case the current gets them, or they find a sinkhole."

"Current's not that bad."

"Bad enough that if it catches the skin, the skin's gone. With tanks you can follow something in the water all the way down, wherever it goes."

"You sound like you've done it."

"I'm certified."

"Well, aren't you multitalented," he said.

The divers were almost out to us. Their tanks looked like the backs of whales sticking out of the water. MacAdam raised his face mask out of the water, and put a gloved hand on the rocks. He took the regulator out of his mouth, hugging the rock and paddling with his legs to keep free of the current. The other diver moved over by Aikensen.

"There a problem if we tear the skin?" MacAdam asked.

"I'll unhook it from this side of the rock."

"You'll get your arm wet."

"I'll live, right?"

I couldn't see his face well enough under all the equipment, but I'd bet he was frowning at me.

"Yeah, you'll live."

I moved my hand down the front of the skin until I hit water. The cold made me hesitate, but only for a heartbeat. I reached down, soaking myself to the shoulder to untangle it. My hand touched something slick and solid that wasn't skin. I gave a small yip and jerked back, nearly falling. I got my balance and went for my gun.

I had time to say, "Something's down there." It surfaced.

A round face, with a screaming lipless mouth, shot upward, hands reaching for MacAdam. I had a glimpse of dark eyes before it fell back into the water.

The divers got the hell out of there, swimming with strong sure strokes for shore.

Aikensen had stumbled back, falling into the water. He came up sputtering, gun in hand.

"Don't shoot it," I said. The thing surfaced again. I slid in beside it. It shrieked, its human-shaped hand groping for me. It grabbed a handful of jacket and pulled itself to me. My gun was in my hand, but I didn't shoot.

Aikensen was aiming at it. Shouts from the shore. The other cops coming, but there was no time. There was just Aikensen and me in the river.

The creature clung to me, not screaming now, just clinging as if I were the last thing in the world. It buried its earless face into my chest. I pointed my gun at Aikensen's chest.

That seemed to get his attention. He blinked, focusing on me. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Point it somewhere else, Aikensen."

"I'm tired of looking down the barrel of your gun, bitch."

"Ditto," I said.

Voices shouting, movement on the bank, people coming, almost there. Only seconds left until someone came. Someone saved us. Seconds too late.

A shot exploded next to Aikensen. Close enough to spray him with water. He jumped, and his gun fired. The creature went wild, but I was already moving, diving for the rocks. It clung to me as if attached. We floated by the big rock, swirling in snakeskin, but I managed to point the Browning at Aikensen. The sound of his Magnum vibrated in the air, echoing down my bones. If Aikensen had turned towards us, I'd have fired.

"Goddamn it, Aikensen, put that damn gun away!" The splashing was heavy, and it was probably Titus wading into the water, but I couldn't look away from Aikensen.

Aikensen was looking away from me towards the splashing. Dolph got there first. He loomed over Aikensen like the vengeance of God.

Aikensen's gun started to swing towards him, as if he sensed his danger.

"You point that gun at me and I will feed it to you," Dolph said. His voice was low and reverberated even through the ringing in my ears.

"If he points it at you," I said, "I'll shoot him."

"Nobody's shooting him but me." Titus waded up. He was shorter than everyone but me, so he was struggling in the water. He grabbed Aikensen by the belt and pulled him off his feet, tearing the gun from his hand as he fell into the water.

Aikensen surfaced choking and mad. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"Ask Ms. Blake why I did it. Ask her, ask her!" He was short and wet, and still managed to browbeat Aikensen.

"Why?" Aikensen said.

I'd lowered the Browning, but hadn't put it away. "Trouble with carrying a big gun, Aikensen, is that it goes through a hell of a lot of flesh."

"What?"

Titus pushed him, making him stumble. Aikensen struggled to stay on his feet. "If you'd pulled that trigger, boy, with the creature pressed right up against her, you'd have killed her, too."

"I thought she was just protecting it. She said not to shoot it. Look at it!"

Everyone turned to me then. I used the rocks to leverage to my feet. The creature was dead weight, as if he'd passed out with his hands locked in my jacket. I had more trouble putting the gun away than I had getting it out. Cold, adrenaline, and the man's hand stuck on my jacket, covering the holster.

Because that's what I was holding. A man, a man who had been skinned alive, but somehow wasn't dead. Of course, it wasn't exactly a man.

"It's a man, Aikensen," Titus said. "It's a hurt man. If you weren't so damn busy pulling your gun and shooting at things, you might see what's in front of ya."

"It's a naga," I said.

Titus didn't seem to hear me. Dolph asked, "What did you say?"

"He's a naga."

"Who is?" Titus asked.

"The man," I said.

"What the hell is a naga?"

"Everybody out of the water now," a voice from shore yelled. It was a paramedic with an armload of blankets. "Come on folks, let's not have to run everybody into the hospital tonight." I wasn't sure, but I thought I heard the paramedic mutter under his breath, "Damn fools."

"What the hell is a naga?" Titus asked again.

"I'll explain if you can help me get him to shore. I'm freezing my ass off out here."

"You're freezing more than your ass off," the paramedic said. "Everybody to shore, now. Move it people."

"Help her," Titus said. Two uniformed deputies were in the water. They splashed up. They lifted the man, but his fists had locked into my jacket. It was a death grip. I checked the pulse in his throat. It was there, faint but steady.

The medic was folding blankets around everybody as they hit shore. His partner, a slender woman with pale hair was staring at the naga, glistening like an open wound in the spotlight.

"What the hell happened to him?" one of the deputies asked.

"He's been skinned," I said.

"Jesus Christ," the deputy said.

"Right thought, wrong religion," I said.

"What?"

"Nothing. Can you pry his hands loose?" They couldn't, not easily. They ended up carrying him cradled between them. I sort of stumbled to the shore with his fingers still locked in my clothes. None of us fell. A second miracle. The first was that Aikensen was still alive. Staring at the raw bluish skin of the man, maybe the miracle count was higher than just two.

The medic with the pale hair knelt by the naga. She let out her breath in a great whoosh of air. The other medic threw blankets around me and the two deputies.

"When you get him pried off of you, you get your butt up to the ambulances. Get out of those wet clothes, ASAP."

I opened my mouth and he pointed a finger at me. "Clothes off and sit in a warm ambulance, or a trip to the hospital. Your choice."

"Aye, aye, Captain," I said.

"And don't you forget it," he said. He moved off to spread blankets and orders to the rest of the cops.

"What about the skin?" Titus asked. He had a blanket wrapped around him.

"Bring it to shore," I said.

MacAdam said, "You sure this is the only surprise out there in that sinkhole?"

"I think this is our only naga for the night."

He nodded and slipped back into the water with his partner. It was nice not to be argued with. Maybe it was the naked ripped body of the naga.

The paramedics had to pry the naga's hands from my jacket a finger at a time. His fingers didn't want to uncurl. They stayed bent like the fingers of the dead after rigor had set in.

"Do you know what he is?" the paramedic with pale hair asked.

"A naga."

She exchanged glances with her partner. He shook his head. "What the hell is a naga?"

"A creature out of Hindu legend. They're mostly pictured in serpent form."

"Great," he said. "Will he react like a reptile or a mammal?"

"I don't know."

The medics from the other ambulance were setting up a pulley system and directing everybody up to the warmth of the ambulances. We needed more medics.

The paramedics spread a warm saline solution on a soft cotton sheet and wrapped the naga in it. His whole body was an open wound with all that that implied. Infection was the big threat. Could immortal beings get infections? Who knew? I knew about preternatural creatures, but first aid for the immortal? That wasn't my area.

They bundled him in layers of blankets. I looked at the drill sergeant paramedic. "Even if he's reptilian blankets can't hurt."

He had a point.

"His pulse is weak but steady," the woman said. "Should we risk trying an IV or . . ."

"I don't know," her partner answered. "He shouldn't be alive at all. Let's just move him. We'll keep him alive and get him to the hospital."

The distant whoop of more ambulances sounded. Reinforcements were on the way. The medics put the naga on a long spine-board and fit it in a Stokes basket, attached to the ropes the other paramedics had set up at top of the hill.

"You got any other information that'll help us treat him?" the paramedic asked. His eyes were very direct.

"I don't think so."

"Then get your butt up to an ambulance, now."

I didn't argue. I was cold, and my clothes were beginning to freeze to my body even under the blanket.

I ended up in a warm ambulance wearing nothing but a blanket while more paramedics and EMTs forced heated oxygen on me. Dolph and Zerbrowski ended up in the ambulance with me. Better them than Aikensen and Titus.

While we waited for the medics to tell us we would all live, Dolph got back to business.

"Tell me about nagas," Dolph said.

"Like I said, they're creatures from Hindu legend. They're mostly pictured as snakes, particularly cobras. They can take human form. Or appear as snakes with human heads. They're the guardians of raindrops and pearls."

"Say the last again?" Zerbrowski asked. His neatly combed hair had dried in messy curls. He'd jumped in the river to save little ol' me, even though he couldn't swim.

I repeated it. "There's a pearl embedded in the head of the skin. I think the skin was the naga's. Someone skinned him, but he didn't die. I don't know how the skin ended up in the river, or how he did."

Dolph said, "You mean he was a snake and they skinned him, but it didn't kill him."

"Apparently not."

"How is he in man form now?"

"I don't know."

"Why isn't he dead?" Dolph asked.

"Nagas are immortal."

"Shouldn't you tell the paramedics that?" Zerbrowski said.

"He's been completely skinned and is still alive. I think they're going to figure it out on their own," I said.

"Good point."

"Which of you fired the shot at Aikensen?"

"Titus did it," Dolph said.

"He cussed him out, and took his gun away," Zerbrowski said.

"Hope he doesn't give it back. If anyone shouldn't be armed, it's Aikensen."

"You got an extra change of clothes with you, Blake?" Zerbrowski asked.

"Nope."

"I've got two pairs of sweats in the trunk of my car. I want to get back to what's left of my anniversary."

The thought of wearing a used pair of sweats that had been sitting in Zerbrowski's car was too much for me. "I don't think so, Zerbrowski."

He grinned at me. "They're clean. Katie and I were going to exercise today but never got around to it."

"Never made it to the gym, huh," I said.

"No." Color crept up his neck. It must have been something really good, or really embarrassing to get to Zerbrowski that quickly.

"What kind of exercise were you two doing?" I asked.

"A man needs exercise," Dolph said solemnly.

Zerbrowski looked at me, eyebrows going up. "And how much of a workout is your sweetie giving you?" He turned to Dolph. "Did I tell you that Blake's got herself a boyfriend? He's sleeping over."

"Mr. Zeeman answered the phone," Dolph said.

"Isn't your phone right beside your bed, Blake?" Zerbrowski asked. He was giving me his best wide innocent brown eyes.

"Get the sweats and get me out of here," I said.

Zerbrowski laughed, and Dolph joined him.

"These are Katie's sweats so don't get anything on them. If you really want to work out, do it nude."

I flashed him a one-fingered salute.

"Oh, do that again," Zerbrowski said, "your blanket gaped."

I was just amusing the hell out of everyone.

Chapter 30

I was standing in my hallway at four o'clock. I was dressed in a very pink sweatsuit. My wet clothes were held sort of gingerly in a bundle under my left arm. Even with the new pink sweats, I was cold. The paramedics had only let me go because I promised to drink hot fluids and take a hot bath. I'd run up the stairs in a pair of gym socks. I could wear Katie's sweats, but not her shoes.

I was cold, tired, and my face hurt. The headache was gone, though. Maybe it was being dunked in ice-cold water. Maybe it was the touch of a naga. I couldn't recall any stories associating them with spontaneous healing, but it had been a long time since I read up on nagas. They'd been on the final in preternatural bio class. The big clue had been the pearl and the cobra skin. I was going to have to dig up my textbook and reread the section. Though the doc on call at whatever hospital they went to was going to have to read up faster than I was. Would nagas be in their computers? By law, they'd better be. Would the naga have anyone to sue for him if they didn't? Would he rise from his deathbed and sue himself?

I stood in front of my apartment for the second time in six hours and had no key. I leaned my head against the door for just a second and felt sorry for myself. I didn't want to see Richard again tonight. We had a lot to talk about that had nothing to do with his shapeshifting. I wished I hadn't thought of children. I didn't want to discuss the little tykes tonight. I didn't want to discuss anything. I wanted to drag off to bed and be alone.

I took a deep breath and stood straight. No need to look as woebegone as I felt. I rang my own doorbell and vowed to get an extra set of keys made. No, one of them wasn't for Richard. They were both for me.

Richard opened the door. His hair was sleep tousled, falling in a heavy, wavy mass around his face. He was shirtless and barefoot. The top button of his jeans was undone. I was suddenly glad to see him. Lust is a wonderful thing.

I grabbed the top edge of his jeans and drew him to me. He jumped when my wet clothes touched his bare chest, but he didn't pull away. His body was almost fever warm from sleep. I warmed my hands along his spine and he twitched, writhing against the cold but never pulling away. I dropped the wet clothes on the floor.

We kissed. His lips were gentle. My hands traced the edge of his waistband, fingers dangerously low. He spoke low and soft next to my ear. I expected sweet nothings or dirty promises. What I got was, "We have company."

I sort of froze. I had this image of Ronnie, or worse Irving, sitting on the couch while we groped each other. "Shit," I said softly and with feeling.

"Home at last, *ma petite*." It was much worse than Irving.

I stared up at Richard with my mouth hanging open. "What's going on?"

"He came in while I was asleep. I woke up when the door opened."

I was suddenly cold again, down to my sodden toes. "Are you all right?"

"Do you really want to discuss this in the hall, *ma petite*?" Jean-Claude's voice was oh so reasonable.

I wanted to stand in the hall just because he'd said not to, but that was childish. Besides, it was my apartment.

I stepped through the door, Richard a warm presence at my side. I kicked my wet clothes through the door, keeping my hands free. The gun was in plain sight over the sweats. The holster flapped loose without a belt, but I could draw the gun if I needed it. I probably didn't need it, but it was good to keep reminding the master that I meant business.

Richard closed the door and leaned against it, hands behind his back. His face was nearly hidden by a spill of hair. The muscles in his stomach bunched and just seemed to invite caressing, which was what we'd probably have been doing if there hadn't been a vampire in my living room.

Jean-Claude sat on my couch. The black shirt was spread around his naked torso. His arms were straight out along the back of the couch, raising the shirt, revealing nipples that were only two shades darker than his white skin. A slight smile curled his lips. He was dramatic and perfect on the white couch. He matched the decor. Shit. I was going to have to buy new furniture, something not white, not black.

"What are you doing here, Jean-Claude?"

"Is that any way to greet your new suitor?"

"Don't be a pain in the ass tonight, please. I'm too tired and too sore to mess with it. Tell me why you're here and what you want, then get out."

He rose to his feet as if pulled by strings, all boneless ease. At least the shirt closed on most of the pale perfection of his body. That was something.

"I am here to see you and Richard."

"Why?"

He laughed, and the sound rolled over me like a wave of fur, soft and slick, tickling, and dead. I took a deep breath and stripped the holster off. He wasn't here to hurt. He was here to flirt. I walked past both of them and draped the holster on the back of a kitchen chair. I felt their eyes follow me as I moved. It was both flattering and uncomfortable as hell.

I glanced back at them. Richard was still by the door, looking unclothed and inviting. Jean-Claude stood by the couch utterly still, like a three-dimensional picture of a wet dream. The sexual potential in the room was astronomical. The fact that nothing was going to happen was almost sad.

There was still coffee in the pot. If I drank enough hot coffee and took a really hot bath, maybe I'd thaw out. My preference would have been a hot shower, quicker at four o'clock in the morning. But I'd promised the paramedics. Something about my core temperature.

"Why did you want to see Richard and me?" I poured coffee into my freshly washed penguin mug. Richard was good at being domestic.

"I was told that Monsieur Zeeman planned to spend the night."

"If he did, what of it?"

"Who told you?" Richard asked. He'd pushed away from the door. He'd even buttoned the top button of his pants. Pity.

"Stephen told me."

"He wouldn't have volunteered the information," Richard said. He was standing very close to Jean-Claude. Physically, he was looming above him, just a bit. Half-dressed. He should have looked uncertain, hesitant. He looked completely at home. The first time I'd met Richard, he'd been naked in a bed. He hadn't been embarrassed then, either.

"Stephen did not volunteer it," Jean-Claude said.

"He is under my protection," Richard said.

"You are not pack leader yet, Richard. You can protect Stephen within the pack, but Marcus still rules. He has given Stephen to me, as he gave you to me."

Richard was just standing there. He hadn't moved, yet suddenly, the air around him swam. If you blinked, you'd have missed it. A creeping edge of power fanned out, prickling along my skin. Shit.

"I belong to no one."

Jean-Claude turned to him. Face pleasant, open, voice conversational. "You do not acknowledge Marcus's leadership?" It was a trick question, and we all knew it.

"What happens if he says no?" I asked.

Jean-Claude turned back to me. His face was carefully blank. "He says no."

"And you tell Marcus, and then what?"

He smiled then, a slow curve of lips that left his perfect blue eyes glittering. "Marcus would see it as a direct challenge to his authority."

I set down the cup of coffee and came around the island. Standing nearly between them, Richard's energy crawled over my skin like insects on the

march. From Jean-Claude there was nothing. The undead make no noise. "If you get Richard killed, even indirectly, the deal is off."

"I don't need you to protect me," Richard said.

"If you get yourself killed fighting Marcus, that's one thing, but if you get killed because Jean-Claude is jealous of you, that's my fault."

Richard touched my shoulder. His power was like a rush of electricity down my body. I shivered, and he dropped his hand. "I could just give in to Marcus, just acknowledge his leadership, then I'd be safe."

I shook my head. "I've seen what Marcus considers acceptable. It's not even close to being safe."

"Marcus didn't know they filmed two endings," Richard said.

"So you have talked to him about it?"

"Are you referring to the delightful little films that Raina masterminded?" Jean-Claude asked.

We both looked at him. A brush of power lashed out, growing stronger. It was hard to breathe standing next to him, like trying to swallow a thunderstorm.

I shook my head. One problem at a time. "What do you know about the films?" I asked.

Jean-Claude looked at us, one and then the other. He ended staring into my eyes. "Your voice makes it sound more important than it should be. What has Raina done now?"

"How do you know about the films?" Richard asked. He moved a step closer. His chest touched my back, and I gasped. The skin up and down my back tingled as if someone had touched a live wire to the skin, but it didn't hurt. It was just an almost overwhelming sensation. Pleasurable, but you knew if it didn't stop soon, it would begin to hurt.

I stepped away from him, standing between both of them, giving my back to neither. They both looked at me. Almost identical expressions on their faces. Alien, as if they were thinking thoughts that I'd never dreamed of, listening to music that I could not dance to. I was the only human in this room.

"Jean-Claude, just tell me what you know about Raina's movies. No games, okay."

He stared at me for a heartbeat, then gave a graceful shrug. "Very well. Your alpha female invited me to join her in a dirty movie. I was offered a starring role."

I knew he'd turned her down. He was an exhibitionist, but he liked a certain decorum to his sideshow. Dirty movies would have been beyond the pale for him.

"Did you enjoy having sex with her on screen?" Richard asked. His voice was low, and that energy flooded into the room.

Jean-Claude turned to him, anger dancing in his eyes. "She brags about you, my furry friend. Says you were magnificent."

"Cheap shot, Jean-Claude," I said.

"You don't believe me. You are that sure of him?"

"That he wouldn't have sex with Raina, yeah."

A strange look crossed Richard's face.

I stared at him. "You didn't?"

Jean-Claude laughed.

"I was nineteen. She was my alpha female. I didn't think I had a choice."

"Yeah, right."

"She has her pick of the new males. It's one of the things I want to stop."

"You're still sleeping with her?" I asked.

"No, not once I had a choice," Richard answered.

"Raina speaks so fondly of you, Richard. In such loving detail. It can't have been that long ago."

"It's been seven years."

"Really?" That one word held a universe of doubt.

"I don't lie to you, Anita," said Richard.

Richard took a step forward. Jean-Claude moved towards him. The testosterone was rising higher than the supernatural powers. We were going to drown in both.

I stepped between them, bodily, putting a hand on each chest. The minute my hand touched Richard's bare skin, the power poured down my arm, like some cool electric liquid. My hand touched Jean-Claude a second later. Some trick of cloth, or vampire, put my hand on his bare skin, too. The skin was cool and soft, and I felt Richard's power cross my body and smash into that perfect skin.

The moment it touched, an answering roll of power spilled out of the vampire. The two energies did not fight each other, they mingled inside me, spilling back on each of them. Jean-Claude's power was a cool, rushing wind. Richard was all warmth and electricity. Each one fed the other like wood and flame. And under it all I could feel myself, that thing inside me that allowed me to call the dead. Magic for lack of a better word. The three powers melded into one skin-curling, heart-pumping, stomach-clenching rush.

My knees buckled, and I was left gasping on the floor on all fours. My skin felt as if it were trying to pull away from my body. I could taste my heart in my throat and couldn't breathe past it. Everything was sort of golden around the edges, and spots of light danced before my eyes. I was in danger of passing out.

"What the hell was that?" It was Richard. His voice seemed to come from farther away than it should have. I'd never heard him cuss before.

Jean-Claude knelt beside me. He didn't try to touch me. I looked into his eyes from inches away. The pupils were gone, nothing but that lovely midnight blue remained. It was the way his eyes looked when he was getting all vampiric on me. I didn't think he'd done it on purpose this time.

Richard knelt on the other side. He started to reach out to touch me. When his hand was an inch away, a little jump of power ran between us, like static electricity. He jerked his hand back. "What is that?" He sounded a little scared. Me, too.

"*Ma petite*, can you speak?"

I nodded. Everything was in hyperfocus, the way the world gets on an adrenaline high. The shadows on Jean-Claude's chest where his shirt spilled around him were solid and touchable. The cloth looked almost metallic black, like the back of a beetle.

"Say something, *ma petite*."

"Anita, are you all right?"

I turned in almost slow motion to Richard. His hair had fallen over one eye. Each strand was thick and perfect like a line drawn apart. I could see every eyelash around his brown eye in startling contrast.

"I'm all right." But was I?

"What happened?" Richard asked. I wasn't sure who he was asking. I hoped it wasn't me because I didn't know.

Jean-Claude sat beside me on the floor, back against the island. He closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. When he let it out, his eyes opened. They were still that drowning deep color as if he were about to feed on something. His voice came out normal, or as normal as it ever got. "I have never tasted such a rush of power without spilling blood first."

"Trust you to think of the perfect thing to say," I said.

Richard sort of hovered over me as if he'd like to help but was afraid to touch me. He glared at Jean-Claude. "What did you do to us?"

"I?" Jean-Claude's beautiful face was nearly slack, eyes half-closed, lips parted. "I did nothing."

"That's a lie," Richard said. He sat Indian fashion a little ways from me, far enough away to make sure we didn't accidentally touch but close enough that that lingering power crawled between us. I inched away and found that closer to Jean-Claude wasn't much better. Whatever it was, it wasn't a one-time deal. The potential was still there in the air, under our skins.

I looked at Richard. "You sound awfully sure that he's up to something. I'm willing to believe it. But what do you know that I don't?"

"I didn't do it. You didn't do it. I know magic when I smell it. It had to be him."

Smell it? I turned back to Jean-Claude. "Well?"

He laughed. The sound trailed down my spine like the brush of fur, soft, slick, startling. It was too soon after the rushing power we'd shared. I shuddered, and he laughed harder. It hurt and you knew you shouldn't be doing it, but it felt too good to stop. His laughter was always dangerously delicious, like poisoned candy.

"I swear by whatever oath you would trust that I did nothing on purpose."

"What did you do by accident?" I asked.

"Ask yourself the same question, *ma petite*. I am not the only master of the supernatural in this room."

Well, he had me there. "You're saying one of us did it."

"I am saying that I do not know who did it, nor do I know what *it* is. But Monsieur Zeeman is correct it was magic. Raw power to raise the hackles on any wolf."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Richard asked.

"If you could harness such power, my wolf, even Marcus might bow to it."

Richard pulled his knees up, hugging them to his chest. His eyes looked distant, thoughtful. The thought intrigued him.

"Am I the only person in this room not trying to consolidate my kingdom?"

Richard looked at me. He looked almost apologetic. "I don't want to kill Marcus. If I could make a great enough show of power, he might back down."

Jean-Claude smiled at me. It was a very satisfied smile. "You admit he is not human, and now he wants power, so he can be leader of the pack." His smile widened just this short of a laugh.

"I didn't know you were a fan of sixties music," I said.

"There are many things you do not know about me, *ma petite*."

I just stared at him. The image of Jean-Claude boogying down to the Shangri-Las was stranger than anything I'd seen tonight. After all I believed in nagas, I didn't believe that Jean-Claude had hobbies.

Chapter 31

A hot bath. Once more in the oversize T-shirt, sweatpants, and socks. I was going to be the worst-dressed person in the room. I was planning to replace that black robe at the first opportunity.

They were sitting on the couch, each as far away from the other as they could get. Jean-Claude was sitting like a mannequin, one arm on the back of the couch, the other on the arm of the couch. One foot rested atop his knee showing his soft boots to perfection. Richard was curled on his side of the couch, one knee clutched to his naked chest, the other knee curled on the couch.

Richard looked comfortable. Jean-Claude looked as if he were waiting for a roving photographer to come by. The two men in my life. I could barely stand it.

"I've got to get some sleep, so everybody who isn't staying, out."

"If you are referring to me, *ma petite*, I have no intention of leaving. Unless Richard goes with me."

"Stephen told you why I'm here," Richard said. "She's hurt and doesn't need to be alone."

"Look at her, Richard. Does she look hurt?" He held up a graceful hand. "I admit she has sustained some damage. But she does not need your help. Perhaps she doesn't even need mine."

"I invited Richard to stay over. I did not invite you."

"But you *did* invite me, *ma petite*."

"First, please stop calling me that. Second, when did I invite you?"

"The last time I was here. In August I believe."

Shit, I'd forgotten. It was beyond careless. I'd endangered Richard. Things were working out, but I hadn't known that when I left him here alone, alone in a place where Jean-Claude could come and go at will.

"I can take care of that right now," I said.

"If a dramatic gesture will please you, then be my guest. But Richard must not spend the night."

"Why not?"

"I think you are one of those women that where you give your body, there, too, is your heart. If you sleep with our Monsieur Zeeman, I think it might be the point of no return."

"Sex isn't a commitment," I said.

"For most people, no, but for you, I think it is."

The fact that he knew me that well brought heat in a rush up my face. Damn him. "I don't plan on sleeping with him."

"I believe you, *ma petite*, but I see the way your eyes follow him. He sits there looking luscious and warm and very alive. If I had not been here when you came home, would you have resisted?"

"Yes."

He shrugged. "Perhaps. Your strength of will is frightening, but I cannot take that chance."

"You don't trust me not to molest him?"

Again that shrug that could have meant anything. His smile was inviting and condescending.

"Why? You got the hots for him yourself?"

The question caught him off guard. The surprise on his face was worth the outraged look on Richard's face. Jean-Claude looked at Richard. He gave him his full attention. He stared at Richard, eyes roaming his body in a slow, intimate dance. His gaze ended not on his groin or his chest, but on his neck. "It is true that the blood of shapeshifters can be sweeter than human blood. It is a wild ride if you can manage it without getting torn apart."

"You sound like a rapist," I said.

His smile blossomed in a surprised flash of fangs. "It is not a bad comparison."

"That was an insult, you know," I said.

"I know it was meant as such."

"I thought we had an agreement," Richard said.

"We do."

"You can sit there and talk about taking me for food, and we've still got an agreement."

"It would be enjoyable to take you for many reasons, but we have an agreement. I won't go back on it."

"What agreement?" I asked.

"We are exploring our mutual powers," Jean-Claude said.

"What does that mean exactly?" I asked.

"We're not sure," Richard said. "We haven't worked out the details yet."

"We've just agreed not to kill each other, *ma petite*. Give us a little time to plan beyond that."

"Fine. Then both of you get out."

Richard sat up straighter on the couch. "Anita, you heard Lillian. You need to be woken every hour just in case."

"I'll set an alarm. Look, Richard, I'm fine. Get dressed and go."

He looked puzzled and a little hurt. "Anita."

Jean-Claude didn't look hurt or puzzled. He looked smug.

"Richard's not spending the night. Happy?"

"Yes."

"And you're not spending the night, either."

"I had not planned to." He stood, turning to face me. "I will leave as soon as I've had my good-night kiss."

"Your *what*?"

"My kiss." He came around the couch to stand in front of me. "I will admit I had envisioned you wearing something a little more"—he tugged on my sleeve—"salacious, but one takes what one can get."

I jerked the sleeve out of his fingers. "You haven't gotten anything yet."

"True, but I am hopeful."

"I don't know why," I said.

"The agreement between Richard and me is predicated on the fact that we are all dating. You date Richard, and you date me. We both woo you. One cozy little family."

"Can you speed this up? I want to get to bed."

A slight frown appeared between his eyes. "Anita, you are not making this easy."

"Hurrah," I said.

The frown smoothed out as he sighed. "You would think I would give up on you ever being easy."

"Yes," I said, "you would."

"A good-night kiss, *ma . . .* Anita. If you truly intend to date me, it will not be the last."

I glared up at him. I wanted to tell him to go to hell, but there was something about the way he stood there. "If I say no kiss, what then?"

"I go away for tonight." He took that step closer to me that put us almost touching. The cloth of his shirt brushed the front of my T-shirt. "But if you give Richard kisses and do not allow me such privileges, then the agreement is off. If I cannot touch you, and he can, it is hardly fair."

I'd agreed to the dating because it seemed like a good idea at the time, but now . . . I hadn't really thought through all the implications. Dating, kissing, making out. Yikes! "I don't kiss until after the first date."

"But you have already kissed me, Anita."

"Not willingly," I said.

"Tell me you did not enjoy it, *ma petite*."

I'd have loved to lie, but neither of them would have bought it. "You are an intrusive bastard."

"Not as intrusive as I would like to be," he said.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do," Richard said. He was on his knees on the couch, hands gripping the back.

I shook my head. I wasn't sure I could explain it out loud, but if we were really going to do this, Jean-Claude was right. I couldn't hold Richard's hand and not his. Though it did give me a real incentive not to go all the way with Richard. Tit for tat and all that.

"After our first date you can have a willing kiss, not before," I said. I was going to give it the old college try.

He shook his head. "No, Anita. You yourself told me you liked Richard, not just loved him. That you could see spending your life with him, but not with me. Perhaps he is a more likable fellow. I cannot compete in niceness."

"That's certainly gospel," I said.

He stared down at me with his blue, blue eyes. No drag of power, but there was a weight to his gaze. Not magic, but dangerous all the same.

"But in one area I can compete." I could feel his gaze on my body as if he'd touched me. The weight of his gaze made me shiver.

"Stop it."

"No." One word, soft, caressing. His voice was one of his best things.

"One kiss, Anita, or we can end it here, tonight. I will not lose you without a struggle."

"You'd fight Richard tonight, just because I won't kiss you."

"It is not the kiss, *ma petite*. It is what I saw tonight when you met him at the door. I see you forming a couple before my eyes. I must interfere now, or all is lost."

"You'll use your voice to trap her," Richard said.

"I promise, no tricks tonight."

If he said no tricks, he meant it. Once he gave his word he kept it. Which also meant he would fight Richard tonight over a kiss. I'd left both guns in the bedroom. I thought we were safe for tonight. I was too damn tired to do this tonight.

"Okay," I said.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to, Anita," Richard said.

"If we are all going to go down in a bloody mess, let it be over something more important than a kiss."

"You want to do it," Richard said. "You want to kiss him." He didn't sound pleased.

What was I supposed to say? "What I want most right this moment is to go to bed, alone. I want some sleep." That at least was the truth. Maybe not all of the truth, but enough to earn me a puzzled frown from Richard, and an exasperated sigh from Jean-Claude.

"Then if it is such a distasteful duty, let it be done quickly," Jean-Claude said.

We were standing so close, he didn't have to make a full step to press the line of his body against mine. I tried to put my hands up, to keep our bodies

apart. My hands slid over the bare skin of his stomach. I jerked back from him, balling my hands into fists. The feel of his skin clung to my hands.

"What is it, *ma petite*?"

"Leave her alone," Richard said. He was standing beside the couch, hands in loose fists. Power prickled along my skin. His power creeping outward like a slow-moving wind. His hair had spilled over one side of his face. He looked out through a curtain of hair. His face had fallen into shadows. Light gleamed along his naked skin, painting it in shades of grey, gold, and black. He stood there looking suddenly primal. A low, spine-brushing growl trickled through the room.

"Stop it, Richard."

"He is using his powers on you." His voice was unrecognizable. A low, bass growl that was sliding away from human. I was glad for the shadows. Glad I couldn't see what was happening to his face.

I'd been so worried about Jean-Claude starting a fight, it hadn't occurred to me that Richard might pick one. "He isn't using powers on me. I touched his bare skin. That's all."

He stepped forward into the light, and his face was normal. What was happening inside that smooth throat, behind those kissable lips, to make his voice sound monstrous?

"Get dressed and get out."

"What?" His lips moved but that growling voice rolled out. It was like watching a badly dubbed movie.

"If Jean-Claude isn't allowed to attack you, then you sure as hell aren't allowed to attack him. I thought he was the only monster I had to deal with. If you can't behave like a human being, Richard, get out."

"What of my kiss, *ma petite*?"

"You have both pushed it about as far as it's going to go tonight," I said. "Everybody out."

Jean-Claude's laugh filled the shadowed dark. "As you like, Anita Blake. I am suddenly not so worried about you and Monsieur Zeeman."

"Before you start congratulating yourself, Jean-Claude—I revoke my invitation."

There was a sound like a low sonic pop. A great roaring filled the room. The door smashed open, banging against the wall. A wind rushed in like an invisible river, tugging at our clothes, flinging our hair across our eyes.

"You don't have to do this," Jean-Claude said.

"Yes," I said, "I do."

It was as if an invisible hand shoved him through the door. Slamming the door shut behind him.

"I'm sorry," Richard said. The growl was slipping away. His voice was almost normal. "It is too close to the full moon to get this angry."

"I don't want to hear it," I said. "Just go."

"Anita, I am sorry. I don't usually lose control like this. Even this close to the full moon."

"What was different tonight?"

"I've never been in love before. It seems to break my concentration."

"Jealousy will do that to you," I said.

"Tell me I don't have reason to be jealous, Anita. Make me believe it."

I sighed. "Go away, Richard. I've still got to clean my guns and knife before I can go to bed."

He smiled and shook his head. "I guess tonight didn't reassure you about how human I am." He walked around the couch and bent over, retrieving his sweater from the floor, where it lay neatly folded.

He pulled the sweater over his head. He pulled a ponytail holder from his jeans pocket, and tied his hair back. I could see the muscles in his arms work even through the sweater. He slipped his shoes on, bending over to tie them.

His coat was long, falling to his ankles. In the half light it looked like a cape.

"I don't suppose I get a kiss, either."

"Good night, Richard," I said.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Good night, Anita."

He left. I locked the door. I cleaned my weapons and went to bed. After the show that Richard and Jean-Claude had put on, the Browning was about the only thing I wanted in bed with me tonight. All right, the gun and one stuffed penguin.

Chapter 32

The phone was ringing. It seemed to have been ringing a long time. I lay in bed listening to it ring, wondering when the hell the machine would pick up. I rolled over, reaching for the phone. It was missing. The ringing was coming from the other room. Shit. I'd forgotten to bring it back in last night.

I crawled out of the warm covers and staggered into the living room. The phone must have rung fifteen times before I got to it. I sank to the floor with the receiver clutched to my ear. "Who is it?"

"Anita?"

"Ronnie?"

"You sound awful."

"I look worse," I said.

"What's up?"

"Later, why are you calling at"—I glanced at my wristwatch—"seven o'clock in the freaking morning. This better be good, Ronnie."

"Oh, it's good, all right. I thought we should catch George Smitz before he goes to work."

"Why?" My face was throbbing. I lay down on the carpet, cradling the phone against my ear. The carpet was very soft.

"Anita, Anita, are you there?"

I blinked and realized I'd fallen asleep. I sat up and leaned against the wall. "I'm here, but I didn't hear a word you said after something about needing to talk to Smitz before work."

"I know you're not a morning person, Anita, but you've never fallen asleep on me before. How much sleep did you get last night?"

"About an hour."

"Oh, God, I am sorry. But I knew you'd want to know. I've found the smoking gun."

"Ronnie, please, what are you talking about?"

"I have pictures of George Smitz with another woman." She let that sink in for a moment or two. "Anita, are you there?"

"I'm here. I'm thinking." The last was harder to do than I wanted it to be. I am never at my best first thing in the morning. After an hour's sleep I wasn't even close to my best. "Why do you say it's a smoking gun?"

"Well, a lot of times a spouse will report the other spouse missing to divert suspicion."

"You think Smitz offed his wife?"

"How poetically you put it, but yes, I do."

"Why? A lot of men cheat on their wives, most of them don't kill them."

"Here's the clincher. After I took the pictures, I talked to a few gun stores in the area. He'd bought some silver bullets at a store near the butcher shop."

"Not very bright," I said.

"Most murderers aren't."

I nodded, realized she couldn't see it, and didn't care. "Fine, looks like Mr. Smitz isn't the grieving widower he pretended to be. What do you want to do about it?"

"Confront him at home."

"Why not go to the cops?"

"The store clerk isn't exactly positive it was George."

I closed my eyes. "Great, just great. You think he'll confess to us?"

"He might. He's shared a bed with her for fifteen years. Mother of his children. There's got to be a lot of guilt there."

I don't think real well on an hour's sleep. "Cops, we should have the cops waiting in the wings, at least."

"Anita, he's a client of mine. I don't turn clients over to the cops unless I have to. If he confesses, I'll bring them in. If he doesn't confess, I'll hand over what I have. But I've got to try it my way first."

"Fine, do you call him and tell him we're coming or do you want me to?"

"I'll do it. I just thought you'd like to be there."

"Yeah, let me know when."

"He hasn't gone to work yet. I'll call him and be over to pick you up."

I wanted to say, "No, I have to go back to sleep," but what if he had killed her? What if he'd taken the others? George hadn't struck me as dangerous enough to take out shapeshifters, but then I'd thought he was genuinely grieving. Genuinely worried about his wife. What the hell did I know?

"I'll be ready," I said. I hung up without saying good-bye. I was getting as bad as Dolph. I'd apologize when Ronnie got here.

The phone rang before I could crawl to my feet. "What is it, Ronnie?"

"Anita, it's Richard."

"Sorry, Richard, what's up?"

"You sound awful."

"You don't. You didn't get much more sleep than I did. How come you sound so much better? Please tell me you aren't a morning person."

He laughed. "Sorry, guilty as charged."

Furry I could forgive; a morning person, I'd have to think about that.

"Richard, don't take this wrong, but what do you want?"

"Jason's missing."

"Who's Jason?"

"Young male, blond, crawled all over you at the Lunatic Cafe."

"Ah, I remember him. He's missing."

"Yes. Jason is one of our newest pack members. Tonight is the full moon. He wouldn't risk going out alone today of all days. His sponsor went over to his house, and he was gone."

"Sponsor like in AA?"

"Something like that."

"Any signs of a struggle?"

"No."

I stood up dragging the phone in one hand. I tried to think past the leaden tiredness. How dare Richard sound so cheerful. "Peggy Smitz's husband—Ronnie caught him with another woman. A clerk may have sold him silver bullets."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. I could hear his soft breathing, but that was all. The breathing was a little fast.

"Talk to me, Richard."

"If he killed Peggy, then we'll handle it."

"Has it occurred to you that he could be behind all the disappearances?" I asked.

"I don't see how."

"Why not? A silver bullet will take care of any shapeshifter. No great skill involved. You just need to be someone that the shapeshifter trusts."

More silence finally. "Okay, what do you want to do?"

"Ronnie and I were going to confront him this morning. With Jason missing we don't have time to pussy-foot around. Can you supply me with a shapeshifter or two to help threaten Smitz? Maybe with a little muscle power we can get to the truth faster."

"I have to teach school today, and I can't afford for him to know what I am."

"I didn't ask for you to come. Just for some of you to come. Make sure they look intimidating, though. Irving may be a werewolf, but he isn't very scary."

"I'll send someone. To your apartment?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"Soon as you can. And, Richard."

"Yes."

"Don't tell anybody what we suspect about George Smitz. I don't want to find him clawed up when we get there."

"I wouldn't do that."

"You wouldn't, but Marcus might, and I know Raina would."

"I'll tell them you have a suspect and want some backup. I won't tell them who."

"Great, thanks."

"If you find Jason before they kill him, I'll owe you one."

"I'll take the payment in carnal favors," I said. The minute I said it, I wished I hadn't. It was sort of true, but after last night, not down to my toes.

He laughed. "Done. I've got to go to work. I love you."

I hesitated just a second. "I love you, too. Teach the kiddies well today."

He was quiet for a space of heartbeats. He'd heard the hesitation. "I will. Bye."

"Bye." When I'd hung up, I stood there for a minute. If someone was just walking up and shooting shifters, then Jason was dead. The best I'd be able to do would be to locate the body. It was better than nothing, but not much.

Chapter 33

We pulled up in front of George Smitz's house at a little after nine that morning. Ronnie was driving. I was riding shotgun. Gabriel and Raina were in the backseat. If asked, I would have chosen different people for backup. I also wouldn't have chosen my boyfriend's old lover for backup. What had Richard been thinking? Or maybe Raina hadn't given him a choice. Her coming today, not the sex. I still wasn't sure how I felt about that. All right. I knew how I felt. I was pissed. But I'd slept with someone else. Glass houses and all. In any case, Richard had given me exactly what I'd asked for: scary, intimidating shapeshifters. I wasn't used to getting exactly what I asked for. Next time I'd be more specific.

Gabriel was dressed in black leather again. It could almost have been the same outfit I'd first seen him in, down to the metal-studded gauntlet on his right hand. Maybe his whole closet was one great big leather fest. The earrings were gone. The holes even in the harder cartilage of the ears had healed.

Raina was dressed normally enough. Sort of. She was wearing an ankle-length fur coat. Fox. Cannibalism is one thing, but wearing the skin of your dead? It seemed a little cold blooded even for the psycho bitch from hell. All

right, she was a wolf, not a fox, but heck, I didn't wear fur on moral grounds. She flaunted it.

She leaned over the back of the seat. "What are we doing in front of Peggy's house?"

It was time to spill the beans. Why didn't I want to do it? I undid the seat belt and turned to face her. She was looking at me, face pleasant enough. On her lycanthrope bone structure she had all high cheekbones and a luscious mouth. Maybe she planned on doing something nefarious today.

Gabriel had draped himself over the backseat. The gauntleted hand trailed down Ronnie's arm. Even through her suede coat she shivered. "Touch me again, and I am going to feed you that hand." She'd scooted away from him as far as the steering wheel would allow, which wasn't far. Gabriel had touched her several times on the drive over. Teasing, nothing embarrassing, but it was bothersome.

"Hands are very bony. I prefer a more tender cut of meat. Breast or thigh is my preference," Gabriel said. His grey eyes were startling even in sunlight, maybe more so. They had a quality of light to the grey that was almost luminous. I'd seen eyes like that before, but I still couldn't place it.

"Gabriel, I know you are a pain in the ass. I know you're enjoying the hell out of teasing Ronnie, but if you don't stop it we're going to see just how good your recuperative powers are."

He slid across the seat, closer to me. Not necessarily an improvement. "I'm yours anytime you want me."

"Is coming that close to dying really your idea of sex?"

"As long as it hurts," Gabriel said.

Ronnie looked at us with wide eyes. "You have got to tell me about your evening."

"You really don't want to know," I said.

"Why are we here?" Raina asked again. She wasn't going to be distracted by Mr. Leather. Good for her. Bad for me. Her gaze was intense, as if my face were the most important thing in the world. Was this what Marcus saw in her? A lot of men are very flattered by undivided attention. Then aren't we all?

"Ronnie?"

She got the pictures out of her purse. They were the kind of pictures that didn't need any explanation. George had left his drapes up, very careless.

Gabriel curled back into the seat, flipping through the shots, a big smile on his face. He got to one particular shot, and laughed. "Very impressive."

Raina's reaction was very different. She wasn't amused. She was angry. "You brought us out here to punish him for cheating on Peggy?"

"Not exactly," I said. "We think he is responsible for her disappearance. If he's responsible for one disappearance, he could be responsible for more."

Raina looked at me. The concentration was just as pure but now I had to fight an urge to squirm. Her rage was pure and simple. George had hurt a pack member. He would pay for that. There was no uncertainty in her gaze, only an instant rage.

"Let Ronnie and I do the talking. The two of you are here to intimidate him if we need it."

"If there is any chance he has Jason, we don't have time to be subtle," Raina said.

I agreed with her, but not out loud. "We talk, you stay in the background and look menacing. Unless we ask. Okay?"

"I'm here because Richard asked me," Raina said. "He's an alpha male. I obey his orders."

"Somehow I don't picture you obeying anybody's orders," I said.

She flashed me a very nasty smile. "I obey the orders I want to obey."

That I believed. I jerked a thumb at Gabriel. "Who called in him?"

"I chose him. Gabriel is very good at intimidation."

He was big, leather clad, metal studded, and had sharp, pointy teeth. Yeah, I'd say that was intimidating.

"Your word that you'll stay in the background unless we need you."

"Richard said we are to obey you as we would obey him," Raina said.

"Great. Since you obey Richard only when it suits you, what does that mean?"

Raina laughed. It had a hard, brittle edge to it. The kind of laughter that made you think of mad scientists and people locked too long in solitary. "I will let you handle it, Anita Blake, as long as you are doing a good job. Jason is my pack member. I will not let your squeamishness endanger him."

I was liking this less and less. "I'm not squeamish."

She smiled. "That is true. My apologies."

"You're not a wolf," I said. "What are you getting out of this?"

Gabriel smiled, flashing sharp, pointy teeth. He was still flipping through the pictures. "Marcus and Richard will owe me a favor. The whole damn pack will owe me one."

I nodded. It was a motive I believed. "Give the pictures back to Ronnie. No smart remarks, just do it."

He pouted, sticking out his lower lip. It would have worked better without the fangs. But he handed the pictures to Ronnie. His fingertips brushed her hand, lingering a little, but he didn't say anything. That had been what I asked. Were all shapeshifters so damn literal?

His strange eyes stared at me. I suddenly remembered where I'd seen those eyes. Behind a mask in a film that I'd rather not have seen. Gabriel was the other man in the snuff film. I hadn't had enough sleep to hide the shock. I felt my face crumble with it and couldn't stop it.

Gabriel turned his head to one side, like a dog. "Why are you looking at me like I just sprouted a second head?"

What could I say? "Your eyes. I just figured out where I've seen them."

"Yes." He moved closer, putting his chin on the back of the seat, letting me have a good look at those luminous eyes. "Where?"

"The zoo. You're a leopard." Liar, liar, pants on fire, but I couldn't think of a better one, not this quick.

He blinked, staring at me. "Meow, but that wasn't what you were thinking." He sounded very sure of himself.

"Believe it or not, I don't give a damn. It's the best answer you're getting."

He stayed there, chin indenting the upholstery. You couldn't see his shoulders, so his head looked disembodied, like a head on a pike. Accurate, if Edward found out who he was. And Edward would find out. I'd tell him, gladly, if it would stop any more of those films from being made. Of course, I wasn't sure it would stop them. They were Raina's brainchild. Supposedly, she didn't know about the alternate ending. Yeah, right, and I moonlighted as the Easter Bunny.

Ronnie was staring at me. She knew me too well. I hadn't told her about the snuff film. Now I'd introduced her to two of the stars. Shit. We got out of the car into the bright, chilly winter sunlight. We walked up the sidewalk with a shapeshifter following at our backs that I had seen murder a woman on screen and feed from her still-twitching body. God help George Smitz if he was guilty. God help us all if he wasn't. Jason was missing. One of the newest pack members, Richard had said. If George Smitz didn't have him, who did?

Chapter 34

Raina grabbed my hand before it could touch the doorbell. Her grip had been very fast. I hadn't had time to react at all. Her nails were long and perfectly manicured with nail polish the color of burnt pumpkins. Those orange-brown nails dug into my wrist just enough to indent the skin. She let me feel the strength in that delicate hand. She didn't hurt me, but the smile on her face said she could. I smiled back. She was strong, but she wasn't a vampire. I was betting I could get to a gun before she could finish crushing my wrist.

She didn't crush my wrist. She let go. "Perhaps Gabriel and I should go in the back way. You did say you wanted us to stay in the background." She was smiling and looking oh, so reasonable. The nail marks in my skin hadn't filled out yet.

"I mean, look at us, Ms. Blake. Even if we say nothing, he can't ignore us."

She had a point. "How will the two of you get in the back door if it's locked?"

Raina gave me a look worthy of Edward, as if I'd asked a very stupid question. Was I the only one who didn't know how to pick a lock? "Fine, go to it."

Raina smiled and walked off through the snow. Her auburn hair gleamed against the fox fur coat. Her high-heeled brown boots left sharp little prints in the melting snow. Gabriel trailed after her. The chains on his leather jacket

jingled as he walked. His metal-studded cowboy boots smashed over Raina's daintier prints almost as if it were purposeful.

"Nobody's going to mistake them for door-to-door salespeople," Ronnie said.

I glanced at our jeans, my Nikes, her snow boots, my leather jacket, her long suede coat. "Us either," I said.

"Good point."

I rang the bell.

We stood on the little front porch listening to the eaves drip. We were having one of those strange winter thaws that Missouri is famous for. The snow was all soft and fading like a snowman in the sunshine. But it wouldn't last. Getting this much snow at all in December was unusual here. We usually didn't get real snow until January or February.

It was taking a long time for Mr. Smitz to come to the door. Finally I heard movement. Something heavy enough to be a person moving toward the door. George Smitz opened the door in a bloodstained apron over jeans and a pale blue T-shirt.

There was a bloodstain on one shoulder, as if he'd lifted a side of beef and it had bled on him. He wiped his hands on his apron, palms flat, skin stretching along the fabric as if he couldn't get them clean. Maybe he just wasn't used to being covered in blood. Or maybe his palms were sweating.

I smiled and offered him my hand. He took it. His palm was sweaty. Nervous. Great. "How are you, Mr. Smitz?"

He shook hands with Ronnie and ushered us inside. We were standing in a little entryway. There was a closet to one side, a mirror on the opposite wall with a low table. A vase full of yellow silk flowers sat on the table. The walls were pale yellow and matched the flowers.

"May I take your coats?"

If he was a murderer, he was the most polite one I'd ever met. "No, thanks, we'll keep them with us."

"Peggy always got on to me if I didn't ask for people's coats. 'George, you weren't raised in a barn, ask them if you can take their coats.'" The imitation sounded accurate.

We stepped out into the living room. It was wallpapered in pale yellow with brown flowers done very small. The couch, the love seat, the recliner were all a pale, pale yellow, almost white. There were more silk flowers on the pale wood end table. Yellow.

The pictures on the wall, the knickknacks on the shelves, even the carpet underfoot was yellow. It was like being inside a lemon drop.

Either it showed on my face or George was used to it. "Yellow was Peggy's favorite color."

"Was?"

"I mean is. Oh, God." He collapsed on the pale lemon couch, face hidden in his big hands. He was the only thing in the room that didn't match the yellow lace curtains. "It's been so awful, wondering." He looked up at us. Tears glistened in his eyes. It was Academy Award caliber.

"Ms. Sims said she had news about Peggy. Have you found her? Is she all right?" His eyes were so sincere it hurt to look into them. I still couldn't tell he was lying. If I hadn't seen the pictures of him with another woman, I wouldn't have believed it. Of course, adultery wasn't murder. He could be guilty of one and not the other. Sure.

Ronnie sat on the couch, as far away from him as she could get but still rather companionable. Cozier than I was willing to be with the son of a bitch. If I ever managed to get married and my husband cheated on me, it wouldn't be me to go missing.

"Please sit down, Ms. Blake. I'm sorry, I'm not being a very good host."

I perched on the edge of the yellow recliner. "I thought you worked construction, Mr. Smitz. What's with the apron?"

"Peggy's dad can't run the store by himself. He deeded it to her years ago. I may have to quit working construction. But you know, he's family. I can't leave him in the lurch. Peggy did most of the work. Dad's almost ninety-two. He just can't do it all."

"Do you inherit the butcher shop?" I asked. We'd automatically gone into good cop, bad cop. Guess which one I was.

He blinked at me. "Well, yes. I suppose so."

He didn't ask if she was all right this time. He just looked at me with his soulful eyes.

"You love your wife?"

"Yes, of course. What kind of question is that?" He looked less sad and more angry now.

"Ronnie," I said softly.

She took the pictures out of her purse and gave them to him. The front picture showed him embracing the dark-haired woman. Peggy Smitz had been a blond.

Color crept up his face. Not so much red as purplish. He slammed the pictures down on the coffee table without looking at the rest. They slid across the table, images of him and the woman in various states of undress. Kissing, groping, nearly doing it standing up.

His face went from red to purplish. His eyes bulged. He stood up, his breath coming in fast, harsh gasps. "What the hell are these?"

"I think the pictures are self-explanatory," I said.

"I hired you to find my wife, not to spy on me." He turned on Ronnie, towering over her. His big hands balled into even bigger fists. The muscles in his arms bulged, veins standing out like worms.

Ronnie stood up, using her five feet and nine inches to good advantage. She was calm. If she was worried about facing down a man that outweighed her by a hundred pounds, it didn't show.

"Where's Peggy, George?"

He glanced at me, then back to Ronnie. He raised a hand as if he would strike her.

"Where'd you hide the body?"

He whirled on me. I just sat there and looked at him. He'd have to come over or around the coffee table to get to me. I was pretty sure I could be out of reach. Or have a gun. Or put him through a window. That last was sounding better and better.

"Get out of my house."

Ronnie had stepped back out of reach. He stood there like a purple-faced mountain, swaying between us.

"Get out of my house."

"Can't do that, George. We know you killed her." Maybe *know* was too strong a word, but "we're pretty sure you killed her" didn't have the right ring. "Unless you really plan to start swinging, I'd sit down, Georgie-boy."

"Yes, by all means sit down, George." I didn't look behind me to see where Raina was. I didn't think George would really hurt me, but better to be cautious. Taking my eyes off a guy who weighed over two hundred pounds sounded like a bad idea.

He stared at Raina. He looked confused. "What the hell is this?"

Ronnie said, "Oh, my God." She was staring behind me with her mouth open.

Something was going on behind my back, but what? I stood, eyes all for George, but he wasn't looking at me anymore. I stepped away from him just to be safe. When I had enough distance to be safe. I could see the doorway.

Raina was wearing a brown silk teddy, high heeled boots and nothing else. The fur coat was held open, the bloodred lining outlining her body dramatically.

"I thought you were going to stay in the background unless I called for you."

She dropped the fur into a fuzzy puddle on the floor. She stalked into the room, swaying everything that would move.

Ronnie and I exchanged glances. She mouthed the words, "What's going on?" I shrugged. I didn't have the faintest idea.

Raina bent over the silk flowers on the coffee table, giving George Smitz a long, thorough view of her slim backside.

The color was draining from his face. His hands were slowly unclenching. He looked confused. Join the club.

Raina smiled up at him. She stood up very slowly, giving George a good view of her high, tight breasts. His eyes were glued to her décolletage. She stood up, running her hands down the teddy, ending with a pass over her groin. George seemed to be having a little trouble swallowing.

Raina walked up to him until she was just a finger's pull away from him. She looked up at him and whispered out of full, sensuous lips, "Where's Jason?"

He frowned. "Who's Jason?"

She caressed his cheek with her painted nails. The nails slid out of her skin long and longer, until they were great hooking claws. The tips were still the color of burnt pumpkins.

She hooked those claws under his chin, putting them just enough in not to break the skin. "The tiniest bit of pressure and you'll have a howling good time once a month."

It was a lie. She was still in human form. She wasn't contagious. All the color had drained from his face. His skin was the color of unbleached paper.

"Where's your wife's body, Mr. Smitz?" I asked. It was a good threat worth more than one question.

"I don't . . . don't know what you mean."

"Don't lie to me, George, I don't like it." She raised her other hand in front of his face, and the claws slid out like unsheathed knives.

He whimpered.

"Where's Peggy, George?" She whispered it. The voice was still seductive. She might have been whispering, I love you, instead of a threat.

She kept her claws under his jaw and lowered the other hand slowly. His eyes followed that hand. He tried to move his head down, but the claws stopped him. He gasped.

Raina sliced through the bloody apron. Two quick, hard slices. The clothes underneath were untouched. Talent.

"I . . . killed her. I killed Peggy. Oh, God. I shot her."

"Where's the body?" I asked that. Raina seemed to be enjoying her game too much to pay attention to all the details.

"Shed out back. It's got a dirt floor."

"Where's Jason?" Raina asked. She touched claw tips to his jeans, over his groin.

"Oh, God, I don't know who Jason is. Please, I don't know. I don't know." His voice was coming in breathy gasps.

Gabriel walked into the room. He'd lost the jacket somewhere and wore a tight black T-shirt with his leather pants and boots. "He doesn't have the guts to have taken Jason or the others."

"Is that right, George? You don't have the guts?" Raina pressed her breasts against his chest, claws still at his jawline and groin. The lower claws pressed into the jean fabric, not quite tearing.

"Please, please don't hurt me."

Raina put her face very close to his. Claws forcing him to stand on tiptoes or have his chin spitted. "You are pathetic." She shoved the claws into his jeans, tearing into the fabric.

George fainted. Raina had to pull her hands away to keep from slicing him up. She kept a near perfect circle of jeans. His white briefs showed through the hole in his pants.

Gabriel knelt by the body, balancing on the balls of his feet. "This human did not take Jason."

"Pity," Raina said.

It was a pity. Somebody had taken eight, no seven shapeshifters. The eighth had been Peggy Smitz. We had her murderer on the carpet with his fly torn out. Who had taken them, and why? Why would anybody want seven lycanthropes? Something clicked. The naga had been skinned alive. If he'd

been a lycanthrope instead of a naga, a witch could have used the skin to become a snake. It was a way to be a shapeshifter with all the advantages and none of the bad stuff. The moon didn't control you.

"Anita, what is it?" Ronnie asked.

"I have to go to the hospital and talk to someone."

"Why?" A look was enough for Ronnie to say, "Fine, I'll call the cops. But I drove."

"Damn." I glanced up and caught sight of a car driving by on the street. It was a Mazda, green. I knew that car.

"I may have a ride." I opened the door and walked down the sidewalk, waving. The car slowed, then double-parked beside Ronnie's car.

The window whirred down at the press of a button. Edward sat behind the wheel, a pair of dark glasses covering his eyes. "I've been following Raina for days. How'd you spot me?"

"Dumb luck."

He grinned. "Not so dumb."

"I need a ride."

"What about Raina and her little leather friend?"

It occurred to me to tell him that Gabriel was the other lycanthrope in the snuff film, but if I did that now, he'd go in and kill him. Or at least wouldn't want to take me to the hospital. Priorities.

"We can either give them a ride home or they can take a taxi."

"Taxi," he said.

"My preference, too."

Edward drove around the block to wait for me. Raina and Gabriel were persuaded to call a taxi to pick them up in front of another house. They didn't want to talk to the police. Fancy that. George Smitz came to, and Raina convinced him to confess to the police when they arrived. I apologized to Ronnie for deserting her and walked down the block to meet Edward. We were off to the hospital to talk to the naga. Here's hoping he'd gained consciousness.

Chapter 35

There was a uniformed officer standing outside the naga's room. Edward had stayed in the car. After all, he was wanted by the police. One of the bad things about working with Edward and the cops is that you can't necessarily work with them at the same time.

The cop at the door was a small woman with a blond ponytail. There was a chair beside the door, but she was standing, one hand on her gun butt. Her pale eyes squinted suspiciously at me.

She gave a curt nod. "You Anita Blake?"

"Yeah."

"See some ID?" she said, real tough, no nonsense. Had to be a rookie. Only a rookie had that hard-on attitude. Older cops would have asked for ID, but they wouldn't have tried to make their voices lower.

I showed her my plastic ID badge. The one I clipped to my shirt when I had to cross a police line. It wasn't a police badge, but it was the best I had.

She took it in her hand and looked at it for a long time. I fought the urge to ask if she was going to be tested later. It never helps to piss the police off. Especially over trivialities.

She finally gave the badge back to me. Her eyes were blue and cold as a winter sky. Very tough. Probably practiced that look in the mirror every morning. "No one can question the man without police being present. When you called up to ask to speak with him, I contacted Sergeant Storr. He's on his way."

"How long will I have to wait?"

"I don't know."

"Look, a man's missing, any delay could cost him his life."

I had her attention now. "Sergeant Storr didn't mention a missing person."

Shit. I'd forgotten that the cops didn't know about the missing shapeshifters. "I don't suppose that you'd buy time is of the essence. How about lives are at stake?"

Her eyes went from hard to bored. She was impressed. "Sergeant Storr was very specific. He wants to be present when you question the man."

"Are you sure you spoke with Sergeant Storr, and not Detective Zerbrowski?" It would be like Zerbrowski to screw this up for me, just to irritate.

"I know who I spoke with, Ms. Blake."

"I didn't mean to imply that you didn't, Officer. I just meant that Zerbrowski could have gotten confused about how much access I'm allowed to the . . . ah, witness."

"I talked to the sergeant, and I know what he told me. You're not going in until he gets here. Those are my orders."

I started to say something unpleasant and stopped. Officer Kirlin was right. She had her orders, and she wasn't going to budge from them.

I glanced at her nameplate. "Fine, Officer Kirlin. I'll just wait around the corner in the patient waiting room." I turned and walked away before I said something not so nice. I wanted to push my way into the room, pull rank. But I didn't have any rank. It was one of those times when I was forcibly reminded that I was a civilian. I didn't like being reminded.

I sat down on a multicolored couch that backed a raised area of real plants. The chest-high planting area gave the illusion of walls, dividing the waiting room into three pseudo rooms. The illusion of privacy if you needed it. A television set was mounted high on one wall. No one had bothered to turn it on yet. It was hospital quiet. The only noise was the heater coming through the wall registers.

I hated waiting. Jason was missing. Was he dead? If he were alive, how much longer would he be alive? How long would Dolph keep me waiting?

Dolph came around the corner. Bless his little heart, he hadn't kept me waiting long at all.

I stood. "Officer Kirlin says you mentioned a missing person to her. Are you holding out on me?"

"Yeah, but not by choice. I've got a client that won't go to the police. I've tried to persuade them . . ." I shrugged. "Just because I'm right and they're wrong doesn't mean I can spill their secrets without clearing it with them first."

"There's no client-animator privilege, Anita. If I asked for the information you're legally obligated to give it to me."

I hadn't had enough sleep to deal with this. "Or what?"

He frowned. "Or you go to jail for obstruction of justice."

"Fine, let's go," I said.

"Don't push me, Anita."

"Look, Dolph, I'll tell you everything I know when they give me the okay. I may tell you anyway because they're being stupid, but I won't tell you shit because you bullied me."

He took a deep breath through his nose and let it out slow. "Fine, let's go talk to our witness."

I appreciated the naga still being "our" witness. "Yeah, let's go." Dolph motioned me out of the waiting room. We walked down the hallway together in silence. But the silence was companionable. No need to fill it with idle chitchat or accusations.

A doctor in a white coat with a stethoscope draped over his shoulders like a feather boa opened the door. Officer Kirlin was still at her post, ever vigilant. She gave me her best flinty steel look. It needed work. But when you're small, blond, female, and a cop, you have to at least try to look tough.

"He can talk for a very short time, It's a miracle that he's alive, let alone talking. I'll monitor the questioning. If he gets upset, I'll stop the interview."

"That's fine with me, Dr. Wilburn. He's a victim and a witness, not a suspect. We don't mean him any harm."

The doctor didn't look completely convinced but he stepped back into the room, and held the door for us.

Dolph loomed up behind me. He was like an immovable force at my back. I could see why the doctor thought we might browbeat the witness. Dolph couldn't look harmless if he tried, so he just didn't try.

The naga lay in the bed, thick with tubes and wires. His skin was growing back. You could see it spreading in raw, painful patches, but it was growing back. He still looked as though he'd been boiled alive, but it was an improvement.

He turned his eyes to look at us. He moved his head very slowly, the better to see us. "Mr. Javad, you remember Sergeant Storr. He's brought some people to talk with you."

"The woman . . ." he said. His voice was low and sounded painful. He swallowed carefully and tried again. "The woman at the river."

I walked forward. "Yes, I was at the river."

"Helped me."

"I tried."

Dolph stepped forward. "Mr. Javad, can you tell us who did this to you?"

"Witches," he said.

"Did you say 'witches'?" Dolph asked.

"Yes."

Dolph looked at me. He didn't have to ask. This was my area. "Javad, did you recognize the witches? Names?"

He swallowed again and it sounded dry. "No."

"Where did they do this to you?"

He closed his eyes.

"Do you know where you were when they . . . skinned you?"

"Drugged me."

"Who drugged you?"

"Woman . . . eyes."

"What about her eyes?"

"Ocean." I had to lean forward to hear that last. His voice was fading.

He opened his eyes suddenly, wide. "Eyes, ocean." He let out a low guttural sound, as if he were swallowing screams.

The doctor came up. He checked his vitals, touching the ruined flesh as gently as he could. Even that touch made him writhe with pain.

The doctor pressed a button on the bedside. "It's time for Mr. Javad's medication. Bring it now."

"No," Javad said. He grabbed my arm. He gasped, but held on. His skin felt like warm raw meat. "Not first."

"Not first? I don't understand."

"Others."

"They did this to others?"

"Yes. Stop them."

"I will. I promise."

He slumped back against the bed but couldn't hold still. It hurt too much for that. Every movement hurt, but he couldn't hold still against the pain.

A nurse in a pink jacket came in with a shot. She put the needle into his IV. Moments later he began to ease. His eyes fluttered shut. Sleep came and something in my chest loosened. That much pain was hard to endure, even if you were only just watching.

"He'll wake up and we'll have to sedate him again. I've never seen anyone that could heal like this. But just because he can heal the damage doesn't mean it doesn't hurt."

Dolph took me to one side. "What was all that about eyes and others?"

"I don't know." Half-true. I didn't know what the eye comment meant, but I suspected the others were the missing shapeshifters.

Zerbrowski came in. He motioned to Dolph. They walked out into the hall. The nurse and doctor were fussing with the naga. No one had invited me out

into the hall, but it was only fair. I wasn't sharing with them, why should they share with me?

The door opened, and Dolph motioned me out into the hall. We went. Officer Kirlin wasn't at her post. Probably told to leave for a little while.

"Can't find any missing-person case that has your name associated with it," Dolph said.

"You had Zerbrowski check me out?"

Dolph just looked at me. His eyes had gone all cool and distant-cop eyes.

"Except for Dominga Salvador," Zerbrowski said.

"Anita said she didn't know what happened to Mrs. Salvador," Dolph said. He was still giving me his hard look. It was a hell of a lot better than Officer Kirlin's.

I fought the urge to squirm. Dominga Salvador was dead. I knew that because I'd seen it happen. I'd pulled the trigger, metaphorically speaking. Dolph suspected I had something to do with her disappearance but he couldn't prove it, and she had been a very evil woman. If she'd been convicted of everything she was suspected of doing, it would have been an automatic death penalty. The law doesn't like witches much better than it likes vampires. I'd used a zombie to kill her. It was enough to earn me my own trip to the electric chair.

My beeper sounded. Saved by the bell. I checked the number. I didn't recognize the number, but no need sharing that. "An emergency, I've got to find a phone." I walked off before Dolph could say anything else. Seemed safer that way.

They let me use the phone at the nurses' station. Kind of them. Richard picked up the phone on the first ring. "Anita?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"I'm at school. Louie never showed up for his morning classes." He lowered his voice until I had to plug one ear just to hear him. "Tonight is full moon. He wouldn't miss classes. It raises suspicions."

"Why call me?"

He said he was going to meet your writer friend, Elvira something."

"Elvira Drew?" As I said her name, I could picture her face. Her green-blue eyes the color of ocean water. Shit.

"I think so."

"When was he supposed to meet her?"

"This morning."

"Did he make the meeting?"

"I don't know. I'm at work. I haven't been by his place yet."

"You're afraid something happened to him, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I didn't set up the meeting. I'll call work and find out who did. Will you be at this number?"

"I've got to get back to class. But I'll check back with you as soon as I can."

"Okay. I'll call you as soon as I know anything."

"I've got to go," he said.

"Wait, I think I know what happened to the missing shapeshifters."

"What!"

"This is an ongoing police investigation. I can't talk about it, but if I could tell the police about the missing shapeshifters, we might find Louie and Jason faster."

"Marcus said not to tell?"

"Yeah."

He was quiet for a minute. "Tell them. I'll take the responsibility."

"Great. I'll get back with you." I hung up. It wasn't until I heard the dial tone that I realized I hadn't said, I love you. Oh, well.

I dialed work. Mary answered. I didn't wait for her to get through her greeting. "Put me through to Bert."

"Are you all right?"

"Just do it."

She didn't argue. Good woman. "Anita, this better be important. I've got a client with me."

"Did you speak with someone about finding a wererat today?"

"As a matter of fact, I did."

My stomach hurt. "When and where was the appointment set up?"

"This morning, about six. Mr. Fane wanted to get it in before he had to go to work."

"Where?"

"Her house."

"Give me the address."

"What's wrong?"

"I think Elvira Drew may have set him up to be killed."

"You are kidding me, right?"

"Address, Bert."

He gave it to me.

"I may not be in for work tonight."

"Anita . . ."

"Save it, Bert. If he gets killed, we set him up."

"Fine, fine. Do what you have to."

I hung up. It was a first, Bert giving in. If I hadn't known that visions of lawsuits were dancing in his head, I'd have been more impressed.

I went back to our little group. No one was talking to anyone. "There have been seven shapeshifters taken in this area."

"What are you talking about?" Dolph asked.

I shook my head. "Just listen." I told him everything about the disappearances. Ending with, "Two more shifters have gone missing. I think whoever skinned the naga thought he was a lycanthrope. It is possible by magic to take a shifter's skin and use it to shapeshift yourself. You get all of the advantages, greater strength, speed, etc . . . and you are not tied to the moon."

"Why didn't it work with the naga?" Zerbrowski asked.

"He's immortal. The shifter has to die at the end of the spell."

"We know why. Now, where the hell are they?" Dolph asked.

"I've got an address," I said.

"How?"

"I'll explain on the way. The spell doesn't work until dark, but we can't take the chance they'll keep them alive. They have to be worried that the naga healed enough to talk."

"After seeing him last night, I wouldn't be," Zerbrowski said.

"You're not a witch," I said.

We left. I would have liked Edward at my back. If we did find renegade witches and a few shapeshifters on the night of the full moon, Edward at my back was not a bad idea. But I couldn't figure out how to manage it. Dolph and Zerbrowski were no slouches, but they were cops. They aren't allowed to shoot people without giving them every opportunity to give up. Elvira Drew had skinned a naga. I wasn't sure I wanted to give her an opportunity. I wasn't sure we'd survive it.

Chapter 36

Elvira Drew's house was a narrow two-story set off from the road by a thick line of bushes and trees. You couldn't even see the yard before you turned into the driveway. Woods stretched out all around the small yard, as if someone had put the house here and forgotten to tell anybody.

A patrol car followed us down the gravel driveway. Dolph parked behind a vivid green Grand Am. The car matched her eyes.

There was a For Rent sign in the yard. Another lay beside it, waiting to be stuck in the ground. It would probably go out by the road.

Two clothes bags hung inside the car. The backseat was packed with boxes. A quick getaway was in the offing.

"If she's a murderer, why'd she give you her actual address?" Zerbrowski asked.

"We check out clients. They have to have a place of residence or some way of proving who they are. We demand more ID than most banks."

"Why?"

"Because every once in a while we get a crazy. Or a tabloid reporter. We have to know who we're dealing with. I bet she tried to pay cash with no ID and when asked for three forms of it, she wasn't prepared."

Dolph led the way to the door. We followed behind like good soldiers. Officer Kirlin was one of the uniforms. Her partner was an older guy with greying hair and a round little belly. I bet it didn't shake like a bowlful of jelly. He had a sour expression on his face that said he'd seen it all and didn't like any of it.

Dolph knocked on the door. Silence. He knocked harder. The door trembled. Elvira opened the door. She was wearing a brilliant green robe, tied at the waist. Her makeup was still perfect. The polish on her fingernails matched the robe. Her long blond hair was combed straight back, held from her face with a scarf that was just a touch bluer green than the robe. Her eyes blazed with the color.

Dolph muttered, "Eyes like the ocean."

"Excuse me, what's all this about?"

"May we come in, Ms. Drew?"

"Whatever for?"

There hadn't been time to get a warrant. Dolph wasn't even sure we could have gotten one with what we had. The color of someone's eyes wasn't exactly proof.

I sort of peeked around Dolph, and said, "Hello, Ms. Drew, we need to ask you a few questions about Louis Fane."

"Ms. Blake, I didn't know you were with the police."

She smiled, I smiled. Was Louie here? Was she stalling while someone killed him? Dammit. If the police hadn't been here, I'd have pulled the gun and gone in. There are disadvantages to being law abiding.

"We're checking into the disappearance of Mr. Fane. You were the last one to see him."

"Oh, dear." She didn't back away from the door.

"May we come in and ask you a few questions?" Dolph asked.

"Well, I don't know what I can tell you. Mr. Fane never made our meeting. I didn't see him at all."

She stood there like a pretty smiling wall.

"We need to come in and look around, Ms. Drew, just in case."

"Do you have a warrant?"

Dolph looked at her. "No, Ms. Drew, we do not."

Her smile was dazzling. "Then I'm sorry, but I can't let you in."

I grabbed the front of her robe, yanking it tight enough to know she wasn't wearing a bra. "We either go past you or through you."

Dolph's hand descended on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Ms. Drew. Ms. Blake gets a little overzealous." The words were squeezed out between his teeth, but he said them.

"Dolph . . ."

"Let her go, Anita, right now."

I looked up into her strange eyes. She was still smiling but there was something else there now. Fear. "If he dies, you die."

"They don't put you to death for suspicions," she said.

"I wasn't talking about a legal execution."

Her eyes widened. Dolph jerked back on my shoulder. He pushed me down the steps. Zerbrowski was already apologizing for my faux pas.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Dolph asked.

"He's in there, I know it."

"You don't know it. I've called in for a warrant. Until we get it, unless she lets us in or he comes to a window and yells for help, we can't go in. That's the law."

"Well, it sucks."

"Maybe, but we're the police. If we don't obey the law, then who else will?"

I hugged myself, fingers digging into my elbows. It was either that or run up and smash Elvira Drew's perfect face in. Louie was in there, and it was my fault.

"Take a walk, Anita, cool off."

I looked up at him. He could have told me to sit in the car, but he hadn't. I tried to read his face, but it had gone cop blank. "A walk, good idea."

I walked towards the trees. No one stopped me. Dolph didn't call me back. He had to know what I'd do. I walked into the winter-bare trees. Melt fell in droplets onto my head and face. I walked out until I couldn't see them clearly anymore. In winter you can catch glimpses of things for yards, but it was far enough for our little game of pretend.

I angled back for the back of the house. The melting snow soaked into my Nikes. The leaves were a soggy mat underfoot. I had both guns and two knives. I'd replaced the one that Gretchen never returned. They were a set of four that I'd had made for me. Hard to find a knife with a high enough silver content to kill monsters and still take a hard edge.

But I couldn't kill anyone. My job was to get inside, find Louie, and yell for help. If someone in the house yelled for help, the police could come in. Those were the rules. If Dolph hadn't been scared they'd kill Louie, he wouldn't have let me do this. But law or no law, sitting outside while your suspect kills her next victim was hard to swallow.

I hunkered down at the tree line looking at the back of the house. A back door led onto an enclosed porch. There was a door with glass in it that led into the house, and a second door off to one side. Most houses in St. Louis have basements. Some of the older houses originally had only outside access to them. Add a little porch, add a little door. If I was hiding somebody, a basement sounded like a good place. If it was a broom closet, I just wouldn't go in.

I checked the upper-story windows. The drapes were closed. If there were people up there watching, I couldn't see them. Here was hoping they couldn't see me.

I crossed the open ground without getting out a gun. They were witches. Witches didn't shoot you, as a general rule. In fact, witches, real witches, didn't practice a lot of violence. A Wiccan wouldn't have had anything to do with human sacrifice. But the word witch means a lot of different things. Some of them can get pretty scary, but they seldom shoot you.

I knelt by the screen door that led onto the porch. I held my hand as close to the door handle as I could without touching it. No heat, no . . . hell there's no word for it. But there was no spell on the handle. Even good witches will sometimes bespell their outer doors so they're either alerted to a burglar's

presence or some attachment occurs. Say, you break in and don't take a thing. The spell will stick to you and let the witch and friends find you. Bad witches can put worse things on their doors. We'd already established what sort of witches were inside, so caution seemed best.

I slipped the tip of my knife through the edge of the door. A little jiggling and the door opened. No breaking yet, but I had definitely entered. Would Dolph arrest me for it? Probably not. If Elvira forced me to shoot her out of sight of witnesses, he might.

I went to the second door. The one I hoped led to the basement. I ran my hand over it, and there it was. A spell. I'm not a witch. I don't know how to decipher spells. Sensing them is about my limit. Oh, one other thing. I can break them. But it's a raw burst of power directed at the spell. I just call up whatever it is that allows me to raise the dead and grab the doorknob. It's worked up to this point, but it's like kicking in a door without knowing what's on the other side. Eventually, you're going to get a shotgun blast in your face.

The real problem was even if I got past it safely, whoever laid the spell would know it. Hell, a good witch would feel the buildup of power before I touched it. If Louie was behind this door, great. I'd go in and keep him safe until my screams brought the cavalry. If he wasn't behind this door, they might panic and kill him.

Most witches, good or bad, are nature worshipers to a certain extent. If it had been Wiccans, their ceremonial area would have been outside somewhere. But for this, darkness and an enclosed space might suffice.

If I had a human sacrifice lying about, I'd want him stored as close to the ceremonial area as possible. It was a gamble. If I was wrong and they killed Louie . . . No. No dwelling on worst-case scenarios.

It was still daylight. It was afternoon. The winter sunlight was grey and soft, but it wasn't dark. My abilities don't come out until after dark. I can sense the dead and certain other things in daylight, but I'm limited. The last time I did this, it had been dark. I approached magic the same way I did everything else. Straight ahead, brute force. What I was really gambling on was that my powers were greater than whoever laid the spell. Sort of the theory that I could take a better beating than she or he could dish out.

Was that true in daylight? We'd find out. Question, was the spell just on the doorknob? Maybe. I'd have locked the door, spell or no spell. Why not just cut out the middle man?

I drew the Browning and backed up. I centered myself, concentrating on a point near the lock but not on it. I waited until that piece of wood was all there was. There was a quality of silence in my ears. I kicked it with everything I had. The door shuddered but did not open. Two more kicks and the wood splintered. The lock gave.

It wasn't a burst of light. If someone had been watching, they wouldn't have seen a damn thing but me falling backwards. My whole body tingled as if I'd put my finger in an electric socket.

I heard running footsteps in the house. I crawled to the open door. I dragged myself to my feet using the banister. A wash of cool air swept against

my face. I started down the steps before I was sure I could walk. I had to find Louie before Elvira caught me. If I didn't find proof, she could have me arrested for breaking and entering and we'd be worse off than we were before.

I stumbled down the stairs, one hand in a death grip on the banister, gun in the other. The darkness was velvet black. I couldn't see a damn thing beyond the finger of daylight. Even my night vision needs some light. I heard footsteps behind me.

"Louie, are you down here?"

Something moved in the darkness below me. It sounded big. "Louie?"

Elvira was standing at the head of the stairs. She was framed by the light, as if standing in a body-sized halo. "Ms. Blake, I must insist you get off my property this moment."

My skin was still twitching with whatever had been on the lock. Only my hand on the banister kept me standing. "You do the spell on the door?"

"Yes."

"You're good."

"Not good enough apparently. Now, really I must insist you come up the stairs and get off my property."

A low growl came up from the darkness. It didn't sound much like a rat, and it certainly didn't sound human.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," I said.

The growling got louder, closer. Something large and furry darted across the pale band of light. The glimpse was enough. I could always say I thought it was Louie. I leaned against the banister and screamed. I screamed for help with every ounce of sound I could make.

Elvira darted a look behind her. I heard the distant yells of police coming in the front door.

"Curse you."

"Words are cheap," I said.

"It will be more than words when I have the time."

"Knock yourself out."

She ran into the house, not away. Was I wrong? Had Louie been inside all along, and I was down here with a different fur ball? Was it Jason?

"Jason?"

Something came to the stairs and peered up into the dim light. It was a dog. A big, furry mutt dog, the size of a pony, but it wasn't a shapeshifter.

"Damn."

It growled at me again. I got up and started to back up the stairs. I didn't want to hurt it if I didn't have to. Where was Dolph? He should have been back here by now.

The dog let me ease back up the steps. Apparently it was only supposed to protect the basement. Fine with me.

"Nice doggy."

I eased up until I could touch the broken door. I slammed it shut, holding the doorknob. The dog hit it with a roaring crash. Its own weight kept the door closed.

I opened the back door, slowly. The kitchen was long, narrow, and mostly white. Voices came from farther in the house. A low growl filled the house, reverberating. The sound raised the hair on my neck.

"No one has to get hurt here," Dolph said.

"That's right," Elvira said. "Leave now, and no one gets hurt."

"We can't do that."

A hallway made up of one wall and the stairs led out of the kitchen towards the living room and the voices. I checked the stairs, empty. I kept going, easing towards the voices. The growl came again, closer.

Dolph yelled, "Anita, get your butt up here!"

It made me jump. He couldn't have seen me yet. The entrance to the living room was an open doorway. I went to one knee and peered around the wall. Elvira stood facing them. A wolf the size of a pony was at her side. If you just glanced at them, you might mistake it for the big dog. It was a good cover. Neighbors see it and think the wolf is a dog.

The other one was a leopard. A black leopard that put every Halloween kitty-cat to shame. It had backed Zerbrowski into a corner. Its slick, furred back came to his waist. Big as a hellcat. Jesus.

Why hadn't they shot? Police were allowed to shoot for self-protection.

"Are you Louie Fane or Jason?" Dolph asked. I realized he was asking the shapeshifters. I hadn't told him what kind of shifter Louie was, and Jason was a wolf. The wolf could be Jason. Though why he'd be helping Elvira I did not know. Maybe I didn't have to know.

I stood up and came around the corner. Maybe the movement was too sudden. Maybe the cat had just grown impatient. The leopard leaped at Zerbrowski. His gun fired.

The wolf turned on me. It all slowed down. I had forever to look down the barrel and pull the trigger. Every gun in the room fired. The wolf went down with a bullet in its brain from me. I wasn't sure who else had gotten a piece of it.

Zerbrowski's screams filled the echoing silence. The leopard was on him, slashing at him.

Dolph fired one more time, then threw the gun to the floor and waded in. He grabbed for the cat and it turned on him, slashing with daggerlike claws. He screamed but didn't back off.

"Dolph, down, and I'll nail it." He tried to get out of the way but the cat leaped on him, carrying them both to the floor. I walked forward, gun extended. They were a rolling mass. If I shot Dolph, he'd be just as dead as the leopard would make him.

I knelt by them and shoved the gun into that warm, furred body. Claws slashed my arm, but I pulled the trigger twice. The thing slumped, twitched, and died.

Dolph blinked up at me. There was a bloody slash on his cheek. But he was alive. I got to my feet. My left arm was numb, which meant it was really hurt. When the numbness wore off, I'd want to be somewhere with doctors.

Zerbrowski lay on his back. There was a lot of blood. I fell to my knees beside him. I laid the Browning on the ground and searched for the big pulse in his neck. It was there, thready, but there. I wanted to cry with relief, but there was no time. There was a black stain of blood near the lower center of his body. I pulled his coat back and nearly threw up on him. Wouldn't he laugh at that? The cat had damn near eviscerated him. His intestines bulged out at the tear.

I tried to pull my jacket off to hold over the wound, but my left arm didn't want to work. "Someone help me." No one did.

Officer Kirlin had Ms. Drew handcuffed. Her green robe was gaping open and it was clear she had nothing on under it. She was crying, crying for her fallen comrades.

Dolph said, "He alive?"

"Yeah."

"I've called for an ambulance," the male uniform said.

"Get over here and help me stop the bleeding."

He just looked at me, sort of shamefaced but neither he nor Kirlin moved to help.

"What the fuck is the matter with you two? Help them."

"We don't want to get it."

"It?"

"The disease," he said.

I crawled back to the leopard. It looked big, even dead. Nearly three times the size of a natural cat. I fumbled at its belly, and found the catch. Not a button, not a belt, but a catch where the fur peeled away. Inside was a naked human body. I pulled the skin back so they could see. "They're shapeshifters but not lycanthropes. It's a spell. It's not contagious, you chicken-shit son of a bitch."

"Anita, don't pick on him," Dolph said. His voice sounded so strange, so distant that I minded him.

The man pulled off his own jacket and sort of laid it on top of Zerbrowski. He pressed down, but gingerly, as if he still didn't trust the blood.

"Get away from him." I leaned on the coat, using my body weight to hold his intestines inside. They moved under my hand like something alive, squishy and so warm they were hot.

"When the hell are you going to get some silver bullets for your squad?" I asked.

Dolph almost laughed. "Soon, I hope."

Maybe I could buy them a few boxes for Christmas. Please, dear God, let there be a Christmas for all of us. I stared at Zerbrowski's pale face. His glasses had fallen off in the struggle. I looked around and couldn't see them. It seemed important to find his glasses. I knelt there in his blood and cried because I couldn't find his damn glasses.

Chapter 37

Zerbrowski was being sewn back together. None of the doctors were telling us anything. Guarded. His condition was guarded. Dolph was also in the hospital. Not as bad off but enough to stay for a day or so. Zerbrowski hadn't regained consciousness before they took him away. I waited. Katie, his wife, arrived sometime in the middle of all that waiting.

It was only the second time we'd ever met. She was a small woman with a mane of dark hair tied in a loose ponytail. Without a spot of makeup she was lovely. How Zerbrowski had managed to snag her I'd never figured out.

She walked towards me, dark eyes wide. She was clutching her purse like a shield, fingers digging into the leather. "Where is he?" Her voice was high and breathy, like a little girl's. It always sounded like that.

Before I could say anything, the doctor came out of the swinging doors at the end of the hall. Katie stared at him. All the blood had drained from her face.

I stood up and moved to stand beside her. She stared at the approaching doctor like he was some monster in her worst nightmare. Probably more accurate than I wanted it to be.

"Are you Mrs. Zerbrowski?" the doctor asked.

She nodded. Her hands where they gripped the purse were mottled, trembling with tension.

"Your husband is stable. It looks good. He's going to make it."

Christmas was coming after all.

Katie gave a small sigh and her knees buckled. I caught her and stood there supporting her dead weight. She couldn't have weighed ninety pounds.

"We've got a lounge in here if you can . . ." He looked at me, then shrugged.

I lifted Katie Zerbrowski in my arms, got the balance of it, and said, "Lead on."

I left Katie sitting by Zerbrowski's bedside. His hand wrapped around hers, like he knew she was there. Maybe he did. Lucille, Dolph's wife, was there now to hold her hand just in case. Staring down at Zerbrowski's pale face, I prayed that there was no "just in case."

I wanted to wait until Zerbrowski woke up, but the doctor told me it would probably be tomorrow. I couldn't go without sleep that long. My new stitches made the cross-shaped burn scar on my left arm crooked. The claw marks twisted to one side, missing the mound of scar tissue at the bend of my arm.

Carrying Katie had broken some of my stitches, and they bled through the bandage. The doctor who had operated on Zerbrowski resealed it personally. He looked at the scars a lot.

My arm hurt and was bandaged from wrist to elbow. But we were all alive. Yea.

The taxi dropped me off at my apartment building at what would have been a decent hour. Louie had been drugged and tied in the basement. Elvira had admitted to taking the skins of a werewolf, a wereleopard, and trying for

the naga. Jason hadn't been in the house. She denied ever having seen him. What did she need with another werewolf skin? The wererat skin would have been for her, she said. When asked who the snakeskin would have been for, she said her. There was at least one other person involved that she wasn't willing to give up.

She was a witch and had used magic to kill. It was an automatic death sentence. Once convicted, the sentence would be carried out within forty-eight hours. No appeals. No pardons. Dead. The lawyers were trying to get her to admit to the other disappearances. If she'd admit to it they might commute her sentence. Might. A killer witch. I didn't believe they'd lighten her sentence, but maybe they would.

Richard was sitting outside my apartment door. I hadn't expected to see him, night of the full moon and all. I'd left a message on his answering machine about finding Louie and him being all right.

The police were trying to keep it all quiet, especially Louie's secret identity. I hoped they could manage it. But at least he was alive. Animal control had the dog.

"I got your message," he said. "Thanks for saving Louie."

I put my key in the lock. "You're welcome."

"We haven't found Jason. Do you really think the witches took him?"

I opened the door. He followed me in and closed the door. "I don't know. That's been bothering me, too. If she'd taken Jason. He should have been there." The wolf, once out of its skin, had been a woman that I didn't know.

I walked into the bedroom as if I'd been alone. Richard followed me. I felt light and distant and faintly unreal. They'd cut off the sleeve of my jacket and sweater. I'd tried to save the jacket but I guess it had been ruined anyway. They'd also cut through the left arm sheath. I had it and the knife shoved in my jacket pocket. Why do they always cut everything off in the emergency room?

He came up behind me, not touching, hands hovering over my arm. "You didn't tell me you were hurt."

The phone rang. I picked it up without thinking.

A man's voice said, "Anita Blake?"

"Yes."

"This is Williams, the naturalist at the Audubon Center. I played back some of my owl tapes that I'd recorded at night. One of them has what I'd swear was hyenas on it. I told the police, but they didn't seem to understand the significance. Do you understand what it might mean to have hyena sounds out here?"

"A werehyena," I said.

"Yes, I thought so, too."

No one had told him the killer was probably a werewolf. But one of the missing shifters was a hyena. Maybe Elvira really didn't know what happened to all the missing lycanthropes.

"Did you say you told the police?"

"Yes, I did."

"Who'd you tell?"

"I called Sheriff Titus's office."

"Who'd you speak to?"

"Aikensen."

"Do you know if he told Titus?"

"No, but why wouldn't he?"

Why indeed.

"Someone's at the door. Can you hold on a minute?"

"I don't think . . ."

"I'll be right back."

"Williams, Williams, don't answer the door." But I was talking to empty air. I heard him walk across the floor. The door opened. He made a surprised sound. Heavier footsteps came back across the floor.

Someone picked up the phone. I could hear them breathing. They didn't say anything.

"Talk to me, you son of a bitch."

The breathing got heavy.

"If you hurt him, Aikensen, I will feed you your dick on knife point."

He laughed and hung up. And I'd never be able to testify in court who was on the other end of that phone.

"Dammit, damn it, damn it."

"What's wrong?"

I called information to get the number for the Willoton Police Department. I pressed the button that dialed it automatically for a small fee.

"Anita, what is it?"

I held up a hand, telling him to wait. A woman answered. "Is this Deputy Holmes?"

It wasn't. I got Chief Garroway after impressing on the dispatcher that this was a matter of life and death. I did not scream at her. I deserved mucho brownie points for that.

I gave Garroway the *Reader's Digest* version. "I can't believe even Aikensen would be involved in something like this, but I'll send a car."

"Thanks."

"Why didn't you just call 911?" Richard asked.

"They'd call the county police. Aikensen might even be assigned the call."

I was struggling out of my butchered jacket. Richard eased it off my left shoulder or I might never have gotten it off. When it was off, I realized I was out of coats. I'd ruined two in as many days. I grabbed the only coat I had left. It was crimson, long and full. I'd worn it twice. The last time was Christmas. The red coat would show up even at night. If I needed to sneak up on anybody, I could take it off.

Richard had to help me get my left arm in the sleeve. It still hurt.

"Let's go get Jason," he said.

I looked at him. "You're not going anywhere but wherever lycanthropes go when there's a full moon."

"You can't even put your own coat on. How are you going to drive?"

He had a point.

"This may put you in danger."

"I'm a full-grown werewolf and tonight is the full moon. I think I can handle it." He had a faraway look in his eyes as if he were hearing voices I would never know.

"All right. Let's go, but we're going to save Williams. I think the weres are close to his place, but I don't know exactly where."

He was standing there with his long duster coat on. He was wearing a white T-shirt, a pair of jeans with one knee gone, and a pair of less than reputable shoes.

"Why the scuffy clothes?"

"If I shift in my clothes, they're always torn apart. Precaution. You ready?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go," he said. There was something about him that was different. A waiting tension like water just before it spills over the edge. When I looked into his brown eyes, something slid behind them. Some furred shape was inside there, waiting to get out.

I realized what I was sensing from him. Eagerness. Richard's beast was looking out of his true brown eyes, and it was eager to be about its business.

What could I say? We went.

Chapter 38

Edward was leaning against my Jeep, arms crossed, breath fogging in the air. The temperature had dropped by twenty degrees with the dark. The freeze was back on. All the meltwater had turned to ice. The snow crunched underfoot.

"What are you doing here, Edward?"

"I was about to come up to your apartment when I saw you coming down."

"What do you want?"

"I want to play," he said.

I stared at him. "Just like that. You don't know what I'm involved in, but you want a piece of it."

"Following you around lets me kill a lot of people."

Sad, but true. "I don't have time to argue. Get in."

He slid in the backseat. "Who exactly are we going to kill tonight?"

Richard started the engine. I buckled up. "Let's see. There's a renegade policeman, and whoever's kidnapped seven shapeshifters."

"The witches didn't do it?"

"Not all of it."

"You think I'll get to kill any lycanthropes tonight?" He was teasing Richard, I think.

Richard wasn't offended. "I've been thinking about who could have taken them all without a struggle. It had to be someone they trusted."

"Who would they trust?" I asked.

"One of us," he said.

"Oh, boy," Edward said, "lycanthrope on the menu for tonight."

Richard didn't correct him. If it was all right with him, it was all right with me.

Chapter 39

Williams lay crumpled on his side. He'd been shot at close range through the heart. Two shots. So much for the doctorate.

One hand was wrapped around a .357 Magnum. I was even betting that there would be powder on his skin, as though he'd really fired the gun.

Deputy Holmes and her partner, whose name I couldn't remember, were lying in the snow dead. The Magnum had taken most of her chest. Her pixelike features were slack and not half so pretty. With her eyes staring straight up she didn't look asleep. She just looked dead.

Her partner was missing most of his face. He was collapsed in the snow, blood and brains melting through the frozen snow. His gun was still gripped in his hand.

Holmes had gotten her gun out, too. For what good it did her. I doubted either one of them had shot Williams, but I'd have bet a month's pay that one of their guns had.

I knelt in the snow and said, "Shit."

Richard stood by Williams. He was staring at him as if he'd memorize him. "Samuel didn't own a gun. He didn't even believe in hunting."

"You knew him?"

"I'm in Audubon, remember."

I nodded. None of it seemed real. It looked staged. Would he get away with it? No. "He's dead," I said, softly.

Edward came to stand beside me. "Who's dead?"

"Aikensen. He's still walking and talking but he's dead. He just doesn't know it yet."

"Where do we find him?" Edward asked.

Good question. I didn't have a good answer. My beeper went off, and I screamed. One of those little yip screams that are always so embarrassing. I checked the number with my heart thundering in my chest.

I didn't recognize the number. Who could it be, and could it possibly be important enough to call back tonight? I'd left my beeper number with the hospital. I didn't know their number, either. I had to answer it. Hell, I needed to call Chief Garroway and tell him his people had walked into an ambush. I could make both calls from Williams's house.

I trudged towards the house. Edward followed. We were on the porch before I realized that Richard wasn't with us. I turned back. He had knelt down beside Williams. I thought at first he was praying, then realized he was touching the bloody snow. Did I really want to know? Yeah.

I walked back over. Edward stayed on the porch without being asked. Point for him. "Richard, are you all right?" It was a stupid question with a man he knew dead at his feet. But what else was I supposed to ask?

His hand closed over the bloody snow, crushing it. He shook his head. I thought he was just angry, or grief stricken, until I saw the sweat on his face.

He turned his face upward, eyes closed. The moon rode full and bright, heavy and silver white. The light was almost daylight bright this far away from the city. Wisps of cloud rode the sky, made luminous with moonshine.

"Richard?"

"I knew him, Anita. We've gone birding together. We talked about his doctorate thesis. I knew him, and now all I can think of is the smell of blood and how warm he still is."

He opened his eyes and looked at me. There was sorrow in his eyes, but mostly there was darkness. His beast was looking out through his eyes.

I turned away. I couldn't hold his gaze. "I've got to make this phone call. Don't eat any of the evidence." I walked away across the snow. It had been too long a night.

I called from the phone in Williams's kitchen. I called Garroway first, told him what we'd found. Once he could breathe, he cursed a bit and said he'd come himself. Probably wondering if things would have turned out differently if he'd come in the first place. Command decisions are always hard.

I hung up and dialed the number on my beeper. "Hello."

"This is Anita Blake. This number was left on my beeper."

"Anita, this is Kaspar Gunderson."

The swan man. "Yes, Kaspar, what is it?"

"You sound awful. Has something happened?"

"Lots, but why did you beep me?"

"I found Jason."

I stood a little straighter. "You're kidding."

"No, I found him. I've got him at my house now. I've been trying to contact Richard. Do you know where he is?"

"With me."

"Perfect," he said. "Can he come take charge of Jason before he changes?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so, why?"

"I'm just a bird, Anita. I'm not a predator. I can't control an inexperienced werewolf."

"Okay, I'll tell him. Where's your house?"

"Richard knows where it is. I've got to get back to Jason, keep him calm. If he loses it before Richard arrives, I'm running for cover. So if I don't answer the doorbell, you'll know what happened."

"Are you in danger from him?"

"Just hurry." He hung up.

Richard had come inside. He was standing in the doorway looking bemused, as if listening to music only he could hear.

"Richard?"

His head moved slowly towards the sound of my voice like a video running on slow speed. His eyes were pale golden yellow, the color of amber.

"Jesus," I said.

He didn't look away. He blinked his new eyes at me. "What is it?"

"Kaspar called. He found Jason. He's been trying to get you. Says he can't control him once he changes."

"Jason's all right," he said. He gave it that questioning lilt.

"Yes, are you all right?"

"No, I have to change soon or the moon will pick the time for me."

I didn't exactly understand that statement, but he could explain in the car. "Edward can drive, in case the moon picks going down Highway Forty-four as the perfect time."

"Good idea, but Kaspar's house is just up the mountain."

"What do you mean?"

"Kaspar lives just up the road."

"Great, let's go."

"You'll have to leave Jason and me up there," he said.

"Why?"

"I can make sure he doesn't hurt anybody, but he has to hunt. I'll take him out here. There are deer in the woods."

I stared at him. He was still Richard. Still my sweetie, but . . . His eyes were the color of pale amber, startling in his dark face.

"You're not going to change in the car, are you?" I asked.

"No. I would never endanger you. I have complete control over my beast. It's what being an alpha wolf means."

"I wasn't worried about being eaten," I said. "I just didn't want you to get that clear junk all over my new seats."

He flashed a smile. It would have been more comforting if his teeth hadn't been just a little pointier than usual.

Jesus H. Christ.

Chapter 40

Kaspar Gunderson's house was made of stone, or at least sided with it. Pale chunks of granite formed the walls. The trim was white, the roof shingles pale grey. The door was white as well. It was clean, neat, and still managed to be rustic. It sat in a clearing at the top of the mountain. The road stopped at his house. There was a turnaround but the road didn't go past.

Richard rang the bell. Kaspar opened it. He looked very relieved to see us. "Richard, thank God. He's managed to hold on to human form so far, but I don't think he can last much longer." He held the door for us.

We walked in and found two strange men sitting in his living room. The man to the left was short, dark, and had wire-framed glasses on. The other man was taller, blond, with a reddish beard. They were the only things that didn't match the decor. The entire living room was white—carpet, couch, two chairs, walls. It was like standing in the middle of a vanilla ice-cream cone. He had the same couch that I did. I needed new furniture.

"Who are they?" Richard asked. "They aren't one of us."

"You could say that." It was Titus. He stood in the doorway leading to the kitchen, a gun in his hand. "Don't anybody move," he said. His southern accent was thick as corn pone.

Aikensen stepped out of the door leading to the rest of the house. He had another big Magnum in his hand.

"You buy those by the caseload?" I asked.

"I liked your threat on the phone. It got me hot."

I took a step forward, hadn't meant to. "Please," Aikensen said. He was pointing the big gun at my chest. Titus was pointing at Richard. The two men in the chairs had guns out now, too. One big happy party.

Edward was very still at my back. I could almost feel him weighing the odds. A bolt action on a rifle shot back behind us. We all jumped, even Edward. Another man was behind us in the door. His solid grey hair was balding. The grey man had a rifle in his hands, pointed at Edward's head. There wouldn't be enough left to pick up in a baggie.

"Hands up, y'all."

We put our hands up. What else could we do?

"Lace your fingers atop your head," Titus said.

Edward and I did it like we'd done it before. Richard was slower.

"Now, wolfman, or I will drop you where you stand, and your little girlfriend might get all shot up in the bargain."

Richard laced his fingers. "Kaspar, what's going on?"

Kaspar was sitting on the couch, no, reclining was the word. He looked comfortable, happy as a well-fed cat . . . er, swan.

"These gentlemen here have paid a small fortune to hunt lycanthropes. I supply them prey and a place to hunt."

"Titus and Aikensen make sure that no one finds out, right?"

"I told you I did a little hunting, Ms. Blake," Titus said.

"The dead man one of your hunters?"

His eyes flicked, not exactly looking away but flinching. "Yes, Ms. Blake, he was."

I looked at the two men with their guns out. I didn't turn around to see Grey Hair at the door. "You three think that hurting shapeshifters is worth dying over?"

The dark-haired one looked at me from behind his round glasses. His eyes were distant, calm. If it bothered him to be pointing a gun at fellow human beings, it didn't show.

The bearded man's eyes flicked around the room, never settling on anything. He wasn't having a good time.

"Why didn't you and Aikensen clean up the mess before Holmes and her partner saw the body?"

"We were out hunting werewolf," Aikensen said.

"Kaspar, we're your people," Richard said.

"No," Kaspar said. He stood. "You aren't. I am not a lycanthrope. I'm not even an inherited condition. I was cursed by a witch so long ago that I don't care to remember how long."

"Is that supposed to make us feel sorry for you?" I asked.

"No. In fact, I don't suppose I have to explain myself. You have both been decent to me. I suppose I feel guilty about that." He shrugged. "This will be our last hunt. One big gala event."

"If you had slaughtered Raina and Gabriel, I could almost understand it," I said. "But what did the lycanthropes you helped murder ever do to you?"

"When the witch told me what she had done, I remember thinking that being a great ravening beast would be a fine thing. I could still hunt. I could even slay my enemies. Instead she made . . ." He spread his hands wide.

"You kill them because they are what you want to be," I said.

He gave a small smile. "Jealousy, Anita, envy. They are very bitter emotions."

I thought about calling him a bastard, but it wouldn't help. Seven people had died because this son of a bitch didn't like being a bird. "The witch should have killed you, slowly."

"She wanted me to learn my lesson and repent."

"I'm not real big on repentance," I said. "I like revenge better."

"If I wasn't confident you would die tonight, that might worry me."

"Worry," I said.

"Where's Jason?" Richard asked.

"We'll take you to him, won't we, boys," Titus said.

Edward hadn't said a word. I wasn't sure what he was thinking, but I hoped he didn't go for a gun. If he did, most of the people in this room were dead. Three of them would be us.

"Pat 'em down, Aikensen."

Aikensen grinned. He holstered his big gun. That left one revolver, two automatics, and a high-powered rifle. It was enough. Dream team that we are, Edward and I had our limits.

He patted Richard down, a quick search. He was having a good time until he got up to where he could see Richard's eyes. He paled just a little looking into those wolf eyes. Nervous was good.

He kicked my legs farther apart. I glared at him. His hands hovered over my breasts, not where you start a search. "If he does anything but search me for weapons, I am going to draw a gun and take my chances."

"Aikensen, you treat Ms. Blake here like a lady. No hanky-panky."

Aikensen dropped to his knees in front of me. He ran just the palm of his hand over my breast, lightly just over the nipples. I smashed my right elbow into his nose. Blood sprayed outward. He rolled around on the ground, hands to his busted nose.

The dark-haired man was standing. He was pointing his gun very steadily at me. His glasses reflected the light hiding his eyes.

"Everybody calm down, now," Titus said. "Aikensen deserved that, I guess."

Aikensen came up off the floor, blood covering the lower half of his face. He fumbled for his gun.

"If that gun clears your holster, I will shoot you myself," Titus said.

Aikensen was breathing fast and heavy through his mouth. Little bubbles of blood showed at his nose when he tried to breathe through it. It was definitely broken. It wasn't as good as eviscerating him, but it was a start. He kept his hands on his gun, but he didn't pull it. He stayed on his knees for a long time. You could see the struggle in his eyes. He wanted to shoot me almost enough to try for it. Great. The feeling was mutual.

"Aikensen," Titus said softly. His voice was very serious, as if he were just realizing that Aikensen might go for it. "I mean what I say, boy. Don't you be toying with me."

He got to his feet, spitting blood, trying to get it away from his mouth. "You're going to die tonight."

"Maybe, but it won't be you."

"Ms. Blake, if you could refrain from teasing Aikensen long enough for me to get him away from you, I'd appreciate it."

"Always glad to cooperate with the police," I said.

Titus laughed. The bastard. "Well, now the criminals pay better, Ms. Blake."

"Fuck you."

"No need to get abusive." He tucked his own gun into his side holster. "Now, I'm not going to do a thing but search you for weapons. Any more of this nonsense and we're going to have to shoot one of you to prove we're serious. You don't want to lose your sweetheart here. Or your friend here." He smiled. Just good ol' Sheriff Titus. Friendly. Jesus.

He found both guns, then patted me down a second time. I must have winced, because he said, "How'd you hurt your arm, Ms. Blake?"

"I was helping the police on another case."

"They let a civvie get hurt?"

"Sergeant Storr and Detective Zerbrowski are in the hospital. They were injured in the line of duty."

Something passed over his chubby face. It might have been regret.

"Heroes don't get anything but dead, Ms. Blake. You best remember that."

"Bad guys die, too, Titus."

He pushed the sleeve of the red coat up and took the knife. He hefted it, testing its balance. "Custom made?"

I nodded.

"I do admire good equipment."

"Keep it. I'll get it later."

He chuckled. "You have guts, girl, I'll give you that."

"And you're a fucking coward."

The smile vanished. "Always needing to have the last word is a bad trait, Ms. Blake. Pisses people off."

"That's the idea."

He moved to Edward. I'd give Titus one thing, he was thorough. He took two automatics, a derringer, and a knife big enough to pass for a short sword from Edward. I had no idea where he'd been hiding the knife.

"Who do the two of you think you are? The freaking cavalry?"

Edward didn't say a thing. If he could be quiet, so could I. There were too many guns to make one of them angry and try to jump the rest. We were outnumbered and outgunned. It was not a good way to start the week.

"Now we are all going to go downstairs," Titus said. "We want you all to join us in the hunt. You will be let out into the woods. If you can get away from us, then you are free. You can run to the nearest police and turn us in. You try anything funny before we let you go, and we will just kill you. You all understand that?"

We just looked at him.

"I can't hear you."

"I heard what you said," I said.

"How 'bout you, blondie?"

"I heard you, too," Edward said.

"Wolfman, you hear me?"

"Don't call me that," Richard said. He didn't sound particularly scared, either. Good.

If you're going to die, at least die brave. It pisses your enemies off.

"Can we put our hands down now?" I asked.

"No," Titus said.

My left arm was beginning to throb. If that was the most painful thing that happened to me tonight, I'd be ahead of the game.

Aikensen went first. Richard next with the dark-haired man and his calm eyes at his back. The bearded man. Then me. Titus. Edward. Grey Hair and his rifle next. Kaspar brought up the rear. It was a parade.

The stairs led into a natural cavern below the house. It was about sixty by thirty feet, with a ceiling that wasn't higher than twelve feet. A tunnel led out the far wall. Electric lights gave a harsh yellow glow to everything. Two cages were set into the granite walls. In the far cage Jason was huddled into a fetal ball. He didn't move as we all trooped in.

"What have you done to him?" Richard said.

"Tried to get him to change for us," Titus said. "Birdie here said he'd be an easy mark."

Kaspar looked uncomfortable. Whether it was the Birdie remark or Jason's stubbornness, it was hard to tell. "He will change for us."

"So you say," Grey Hair said.

Kaspar frowned at him.

Aikensen opened the empty cage. His nose was still bleeding. He had a wad of Kleenex held to it, but it wasn't helping much. The Kleenexes were crimson.

"In ya go, Wolfie," Titus said.

Richard hesitated.

"Mr. Carmichael, the boy, if you please."

Dark Hair put up his 9mm, and got out a .22 from his waistband. He pointed it at Jason's huddled form.

"We'd been discussing putting a bullet in him anyway. See if it would help persuade him to change for us. Now get in the cage."

Richard stood there.

Carmichael pointed the gun through the bars, sighting down his arm.

"Don't," Richard said. "I'll do it." He walked into the cage.

"Now you, Blondie."

Edward didn't argue. He just walked in. He was taking this a lot better than I thought he would.

Aikensen shut the door. He locked the door, then walked across to the second cage. He didn't unlock it. He waited with the soggy Kleenex pressed to his nose. A drop of blood fell to the floor.

"You get to share accommodations with our young friend."

Richard gripped the bars of his cage. "You can't put her in there. When he changes, he'll need to feed."

"Two things help the change happen," Kaspar said, "sex and blood. I saw how much Jason likes your lady friend."

"Don't do this, Kaspar."

"Too late," he said.

If I went in the cage, I was going to end up eaten alive. That was actually one of my top five ways not to die. I wasn't going in the cage. I'd make them shoot me first.

"Aikensen is going to open the cage, then you step inside, Ms. Blake."

"No," I said.

Titus looked at me. "Ms. Blake, Mr. Fienstien here will shoot you, won't you Mr. Fienstien?"

The bearded man, uncertain eyes and all, pointed a 9mm Beretta at me. A nice gun, if you didn't insist on buying American. The barrel looked very big, and solid from the wrong end.

"Fine, shoot me."

"Ms. Blake, we are not joking."

"Neither am I. My choices are being eaten alive or being shot. So shoot me."

"Mr. Carmichael, if you will point your .22 over here." Carmichael did. "We can wound you, Ms. Blake. Put a bullet in your leg and then shove you in that cage."

I looked into his beady little eyes and knew he would do it. I didn't want to go into the cage, but I really didn't want to go in wounded.

"I'm going to count to five, Ms. Blake, then Carmichael here is going to wound you and we will drag you into that cage. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . ."

"All right, all right, damn you. Unlock the damn door."

Aikensen did. I walked in. The door clanged shut behind me. I stood there near the door. Jason was shivering as if he had a fever, but he never moved otherwise.

The men outside seemed disappointed. "We paid good money to hunt a werewolf," Grey Hair said. "We are not getting our money's worth."

"We've got all night, gentlemen. He won't resist this luscious tidbit forever," Kaspar said.

I didn't like being called a tidbit. Luscious or otherwise. "I called Garroway before we drove up here. I told him about his deputies getting ambushed. I told him it was Aikensen."

"Liar."

I looked straight at Titus. "You think I'm lying."

"Maybe we'll just shoot all of you now, and flee, Ms. Blake."

"You going to give these gentlemen their money back?"

"We want a hunt, Titus." The three armed men didn't look like leaving before the fun was an option. "The police don't know about the birdman's involvement," Carmichael of the .22 said. "He can stay upstairs. If they come asking questions, he can answer them."

Titus wiped his palms against his pants. Sweating palms, nerves? I hoped so.

"She didn't call. She's just bluffing," Aikensen said.

"Make him change," Carmichael said.

"He's not paying any attention to her," Grey Hair said.

"Give it time, gentlemen."

"You said we don't have time."

"You're the expert, Kaspar. Thinka something."

Kaspar smiled, staring at something behind me. "I don't think we'll have to wait much longer."

I turned around slowly, looking behind me. Jason was still huddled on the ground but his face was turned to me. He rolled onto all fours in one easy motion.

His eyes flicked to me, then stared at the men on the outside of the cage. "I won't do it. I won't change for you." His voice was strained but normal. Human sounding.

"You've held out a long time, Jason," Kaspar said, "but the moon is rising. Smell her fear, Jason. Smell her body. You know you want her."

"No!" He bowed his head to the ground, hands and arms flat to the floor, knees drawn up. He shook his head, face pressed into the rock. "No." He raised his face up. "I won't do it like some sideshow freak."

"Do you think giving Jason and Ms. Blake here a little privacy would help matters along?" Titus asked.

"It might," Kaspar said. "He doesn't seem to like an audience."

"We'll just give you a little breathin' space, Ms. Blake. If you aren't alive when we get back, well, it's been nice meetin' ya."

"I can't say the same, Titus," I said.

"Well, now that is the God's honest truth. Good-bye, Ms. Blake."

"Rot in hell, bitch," was Aikensen's parting shot.

"You'll remember me every time you look in a mirror, Aikensen."

His hand went to his nose. Even that touch hurt. He scowled at me, but it's hard to look tough with Kleenex sticking out of your nose. "I hope you die slow."

"Same to you," I said.

"Kaspar, please," Richard said. "Don't do this. I'll change for you. I'll let you hunt me. Just get Anita out of there."

The men stopped and looked at him.

"Don't help me, Richard."

"I'll give you the best hunt you've ever had." He was pressed against the bars, hands wrapped around them. "You know I can do it, Kaspar. Tell them."

Kaspar looked at him for a long moment. He shook his head. "I think you'd kill them all."

"I'd promise not to."

"Richard, what are you saying?"

He ignored me. "Please, Kaspar."

"You must love her a great deal."

Richard just stared at him.

"No matter what you do, Richard, they're not going to let me go."

He wasn't listening to me.

"Richard!"

"I'm sorry," Kaspar said. "I trust you, Richard, but your beast . . . I think your beast isn't so trustworthy."

"Come on, we're wasting time. Garroway doesn't know where to look but he might come up here. Let's give 'em some privacy," Titus said.

They all trooped out after the chubby sheriff. Kaspar was last up the stairs. "I wish it were Gabriel and Raina in the cages. I am sorry about that." The swan man disappeared into the rock tunnel.

"Kaspar, don't leave us like this. Kaspar!" Richard's yells echoed in the cavern. But nothing answered the echoes. We were alone. Scuffling sounds made me whirl. Jason was on his knees again. Something moved behind his pale blue eyes, something monstrous and not friendly at all. I wasn't half as alone as I wanted to be.

Chapter 41

Jason took one crawling step towards me and stopped. "No, no, no." Each word was a low moan. His head fell forward. His yellow hair swept forward not long enough to touch the ground, but thick. He was wearing an oversize blue dress shirt and jeans. Clothes you wouldn't mind ruining if you happened to shapeshift in them.

"Anita," Richard said.

I moved so I could see the other cage, without losing sight of Jason.

Richard was reaching through the bars. One hand stretching out towards me as if he could bridge the space and somehow drag me to him.

Edward crawled to the door and began running hands over the lock. He couldn't really see the lock from inside the cage. He pressed his cheek to the bars and closed his eyes. When you can't use your eyes they become a distraction.

He leaned back and drew a slender leather case from his pocket. He unzipped it to reveal tiny tools. From this distance I couldn't really see them clearly but I knew what they were. Edward was going to pick the lock. We could be out in the woods before they knew we were missing. The night was looking up.

Edward settled back against the bars, one arm on either side of the lock, a pick in each hand. His eyes were closed, his face blank, all concentration to his hands.

Jason made a small sound low in his chest. He crawled towards me, two slow, dragging steps. His head flung upward. His eyes were still the innocent blue of spring skies but there was nobody home now. He looked at me as though he could see inside my body, watch my heart thudding in my chest, smell the blood in my veins. It was not a human look.

"Jason," Richard said, "hold on. We'll be free in a few minutes. Just hold on."

Jason didn't react. I don't think he heard.

I thought the few minutes was being overly optimistic, but hey, I was willing to believe it if Jason would.

Jason crawled towards me. I plastered my back against the cage bars.

"Edward, how are you coming with that lock?"

"These are not the tools I would have chosen for this particular lock, but I'll get it."

There was something in the way Jason crawled towards me, as if he had muscles in places that he shouldn't have. "Make it soon, Edward."

He didn't answer me. I didn't have to look to know that he was working at the lock. I had every faith that he'd unlock the door. I backed down the bars,

trying to keep an even distance between me and the werewolf. Edward would get the door open, but would it be in time? That was the \$64,000 question.

A sound at the entrance caused me to glance back. Carmichael stepped into the cavern. He had the 9mm in his hand. He smiled. It was the happiest I'd seen him.

Edward ignored him, working at the lock as if an armed man hadn't stepped into the room.

Carmichael raised the gun and pointed it at Edward. "Get away from the lock, now." He cocked the hammer back, not necessary, but always dramatic. "We don't need you alive. Stop . . . working . . . on . . . the . . . lock." He stepped closer with each word.

Edward looked up at him. His face was still blank, as if his concentration were still in his hands, not quite focused on the gun being pointed at him.

"Throw the tools away from you. Right now."

Edward stared at him. His expression never changed but he tossed the two small tools away.

"Take the complete kit out of your pocket and toss it out of the cage. Don't even try to say you don't have one. If you've got those two pieces, you've got the rest."

I wondered what Carmichael did in the real world. Something not nice. Something where he knew what tools would be in a professional lock-picking kit.

"I won't warn you again," Carmichael said. "Throw it out or I pull the trigger. I am tired of screwing with this mess."

Edward threw out the slim leather pouch. It made a small slapping sound on the rock. Carmichael made no move to pick up the lock picks. They were out of our reach. That was what counted. He walked backwards, keeping us all in sight. He directed some of his attention to Jason and me. Oh, joy.

"Our little werewolf's awake. I was hoping he would be."

A low, ragged growl crawled up Jason's throat.

Carmichael gave a delighted bark of laughter. "I wanted to see him change. Good thing I checked back in."

"I'm thrilled that you're here," I said.

He came to stand just out of reach of our cage bars. He was staring at Jason. "I've never seen one of them change."

"Let me out and we'll watch him together."

"Now, why would I do that? I paid to see the whole show."

His eyes were sparkling with anticipation. Bright and shiny as a kid on Christmas morning. Shit.

A growl brought my attention completely back to Jason. He was crouched on the rock floor, hands and legs bunched under him. Watching that growl trickle from between his human lips raised the hair on the back of my neck.

He wasn't looking at me. "I think he's growling at you, Carmichael."

"But I'm not in the cage," he said. He had a point.

"Jason, don't get angry at him," Richard said. "Anger will feed the beast. You can't afford to get angry." Richard's voice was amazingly calm, even

soothing. He was trying to talk Jason down, or out, or in, or whatever word you used for keeping a werewolf from shifting.

"No," Carmichael said, "get angry, wolf. I'm going to cut your head off and mount it on my wall."

"He'll revert back to human form after he's dead," I said.

"I know," Carmichael said.

Jesus. "Police find you with a human head in your possession, they may get a little suspicious."

"I've got a lot of trophies that I wouldn't want the police to find," he said.

"What do you do in the real world?"

"This is as real as it gets."

I shook my head. It was hard to argue with him, but I wanted to.

Jason crawled towards the bars, in a sort of monkey crouch. It wasn't as graceful but it had an energy to it, as if he were about to launch himself into the air. As if when he jumped he could fly.

"Calm, Jason, easy," Richard said.

"Come on, boy, try it. Rush the bars and I'll pull the trigger."

I watched him bunch every muscle and launch himself at the bars. He clung to the bars, hands clawing between them. Arms stretched as far as they would go. He wedged a shoulder between the bars as if he'd slip through. For one moment Carmichael looked uncertain, then he laughed.

"Shoot me," Jason said. His voice was more growl than words. "Shoot me."

"I don't think so," Carmichael said.

Jason gripped the bars with his hands and slid down to his knees, forehead pressed to the bars. His breathing was fast, panting, as if he'd run a mile in a minute flat. If he'd been human he'd have hyperventilated and passed out. His head turned slowly towards me, painfully slow, as if he didn't want to do it. He'd tried to force Carmichael to shoot him. Risked being killed to keep from turning on me. He didn't know me well enough to risk his life. It got him a lot of points in my book.

He looked at me, and his face was naked, raw with need. Not sex, not hunger, both, neither, I didn't understand the look in his eyes, and didn't want to.

He scrambled towards me. I backed away, almost running backwards.

"Don't run," Richard called. "It excites him."

Staring into Jason's alien expression, it took everything I had to stand still. My hands gripped the bars behind me hard enough to hurt, but I stopped running. Running was bad.

Jason stopped when I did. He crouched just out of reach. He put one hand on the ground and crawled towards me. It was slow, as if he didn't want to, but he kept coming.

"Any more bright ideas?" I asked.

"Don't run. Don't struggle. It's exciting. Try to be calm. Try not to be afraid. Fear is very exciting."

"Speaking from personal experience?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

I wanted to turn, see his face, but I couldn't. I had eyes only for the werewolf that was crawling towards me. The werewolf in the other cage could take care of himself.

Jason knelt on all fours by my legs, like a dog awaiting a command. He raised his head and looked at me. A spot of pale green color spilled into his eyes. The blue of his irises drowned in a swirl of new color. When it was done his eyes were the color of new spring grass, pale, pale green, and not human at all.

I gasped. I couldn't help it. He moved closer, sniffing the air around me. His fingertips brushed my leg. I jerked. He let out a long sigh and rubbed his cheek against my leg. He'd done more than this at the Lunatic Cafe, but his eyes had still been mostly human. And I had been armed. I'd have given nearly anything for a gun right now.

Jason grabbed the hem of my coat, balling his hands into fists, tugging at the cloth. He was going to pull me to the ground. No way. I shrugged the coat off my shoulders. Jason pulled it off me. I stepped out of the circle of cloth. He bundled the coat to his face with both arms. He rolled on the ground with it pressed to his body like a dog with a piece of carrion. Wallowing in the scent.

He came to his knees. He stalked towards me, moving with a liquid grace that was unnerving as hell. Human beings did not crawl gracefully.

I backed up, slowly, no running. But I didn't want him to touch me again. He moved faster, each movement precise. Pale green eyes locked on me as if I were all that existed in the world.

I started backing up faster. He moved with me.

"Don't run, Anita, please," Richard said.

My back thumped into the corner of the cage. I gave a little yelp.

Jason covered the distance between us in two smooth movements. His hands touched my legs. I swallowed a scream. My pulse was threatening to choke me.

"Anita, control your fear. Calm, think calm."

"You think fucking calm." My voice sounded strident, panicked.

Jason had his fingertips hooked in my belt. He pressed his body into my legs, pinning me to the bars. I made a small gasp and hated it. If this was going to be it, then dammit, I wasn't going to go out whimpering.

I listened to my heart pounding in my ears, and took slow, even breaths. I stared into those spring green eyes and relearned how to breathe.

Jason pressed his cheek against my hip, hands sliding around my waist. My heart gave a little pitty-pat and I swallowed it. I concentrated on my own heart until my pulse slowed. It was the kind of concentration that let you do that new throw in judo. The concentration that fed a zombie raising.

When Jason lifted his head and looked at me again, I gave him calm eyes. I felt my face blank, neutral, calm. I wasn't sure how long it would last but it was the best I could do.

His fingers slid under my sweater, up my back. I swallowed and my heartbeat sped up. I tried to slow it down, tried to concentrate, but his hands

slid around my waist over my skin. His fingers traced my ribs moving upward. I grabbed his wrists, stopping his hands short of my breasts.

As he rose, my hands stayed on his arms. Standing with his hands still under my sweater raised the cloth, baring my stomach. Jason seemed to like the sight of bare skin. He knelt again, letting me keep hold of his arms. I felt his breath almost burning warm on my bare stomach. His tongue flicked out, a quick touch to one side of my belly button. His lips brushed my skin, soft, caressing.

I felt him take a deep, shaking breath. He pressed his face into the soft flesh of my belly. His tongue lapped my stomach, mouth pressing hard. His teeth grazed my waist. It made me squirm, and not with pain. His hands balled into fists under my sweater, hands convulsing. I didn't really want to let go of his wrists but I wanted him away from me.

"Is he going to eat me or . . ."

"Fuck you," Carmichael added. I'd almost forgotten him. Careless forgetting the man with the gun. Maybe it was the realization that he wasn't a danger to me. The danger was kneeling at my feet.

"Jason's only been one of us for a few months. If he can channel the energy into sex instead of violence I'd take it. I'd try to keep him away from killing zones."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Keep him away from your throat and your stomach."

I stared down at Jason. He looked up at me, rolling his eyes. There was a darkness in those pale eyes, a darkness deep enough to drown in.

I drew Jason's hands out from under my sweater. He slid his hands into mine, fingers interlocking. He nuzzled my stomach, trying to bury his face where the sweater had slid over my skin. I raised him up with our hands still locked together.

He raised our hands upward, pressing my arms backwards against the bars. I fought the urge to struggle, to jerk away. Struggling was exciting, and that was a bad thing.

We were almost the same height. His eyes were too startling from an inch away. His lips parted and I caught a glimpse of fangs. Jesus.

He rubbed his cheek along mine. His lips moved down my jawline. I turned my head, trying to keep him away from the big pulse in my neck. He came up for air, and brushed his mouth against mine. He pressed his body against mine hard enough that I knew he was glad to be there. Or at least his body was. He buried his face in my hair and stood there pressed against me, our hands on the bars of the cage.

I could feel the pulse in his neck thudding against the bone of my jaw. His breathing was too fast, his chest rising and falling as if he were doing a lot more than foreplay. Was I about to move from foreplay to appetizer?

Power prickled along my skin but it wasn't Jason. I'd tasted this particular power before. Was the show exciting Richard? Would watching me die like this be a thrill like the woman on the film?

"She's mine, Jason." It was Richard's voice but with a bass undertone. The change was coming.

Jason whimpered. It was the only word for it.

Richard's power rode the air like distant thunder, drawing close. "Get off her, Jason. Now!" That last word lunged out in something close to a scream. But it was the kind of scream that cougars gave; no fear, but warning.

I felt Jason shake his head against my hair. His hands convulsed against mine. The strength of it made me gasp. It was the wrong thing to do.

He let go of my hands so suddenly I would have stumbled, but the line of his body kept me upright. He jerked away from me and I did stumble. He grabbed me around the thighs and lifted me into the air, too fast for me to stop even if I could have. He smacked me back against the bars. I took most of the blow on my back. Bruised, but alive.

He supported me with one arm and shoved my sweater upward with the other. I shoved the sweater back down. He made a sound low in his throat and slammed me into the floor. Hitting the rock took all the fight out of me for just a minute. He ripped the sweater as if it were paper, spreading it away from my stomach. He threw his head skyward and screamed, but the mouth he opened wasn't human anymore.

If I'd had enough air I'd have screamed.

"Jason, no!" The voice wasn't human anymore. Richard's power flooded the cage, thick enough to choke on. Jason struggled almost as if the power were thicker than air. He swiped at nothing that I could see with hands that had claws for fingers.

"Back off," the words were a snarl, barely recognizable.

Jason snarled back, teeth snapping the air, but not at me. He rolled off me, crawling along the rock, growling.

I just lay there on my back, afraid to move. Afraid that any movement would tip the balance and make him finish what he'd started.

"Shit," Carmichael said. "I'll be right back, folks, and the birdman better think of something to make one of you change." He marched off, leaving us to a silence that was replaced with a low, steady growl. I realized that it wasn't Jason anymore.

I rose up slowly on my elbows. Jason didn't try to eat me. Richard was still standing by the bars of his cage, but his face had lengthened. He had a muzzle. His thick brown hair was longer. The hair seemed to have flowed down his back, as if attached to the spine. He was holding onto his humanity with a string. A weak, shiny string.

Edward was standing very still near the door. He hadn't tried to run when Richard went all spooky. Edward always did have nerves of steel.

Chapter 42

Titus was the first one through the door. "I am mighty disappointed in you all. Carmichael here tells me you almost had it, and this one interfered."

Kaspar stared at Richard as if he'd never seen him before. Maybe he'd never seen half-human, half-wolf before, but something about the way he was staring said that wasn't it. "Marcus couldn't have done what you did."

"Jason didn't want to hurt her," Richard said. "He wanted to do the right thing."

"Well, Birdman," Carmichael said, "what next?"

I stayed sitting on the rock floor. Jason was huddled against the far wall on his hands and knees, rocking back and forth, back and forth. A low, moaning sound crawled out of his throat.

"He's near the edge," Kaspar said. "Blood will push him over. Not even an alpha can hold him in the presence of fresh blood."

I did not like the sound of that.

"Ms. Blake, could you come over to the bars, please."

I moved so I could keep an eye on the moaning werewolf and the armed camp outside. "Why?"

"Either do it or Carmichael will shoot you. Don't make me start counting again, Ms. Blake."

"I don't think I want to come over to the bars."

Titus took out his .45 and walked over to the other cage. Edward was sitting down. He looked at me across the room, and I knew that if we ever got out, they were all dead. Richard was still standing at the bars, hands wrapped around them.

Titus stared up at Richard's animalistic face and gave a low whistle. "Good lord." He pointed the gun at Richard's chest. "These are silver bullets, Ms. Blake. If you called Garroway, we don't have time for two hunts anyway. Garroway doesn't know you're here, so we have a little time, but we don't have all night. Besides, I think the wolfman here might be too dangerous. So if you keep pissing me off, I'll kill him."

I met Richard's new eyes. "They're going to kill us anyway. Don't do it," he said. His voice was still a growl that was such a deep bass that it crawled down my spine.

They were going to kill us. But I couldn't stand there and watch, not if I could prolong the inevitable. I walked to the bars nearest them. "Now what?"

Titus stayed with the gun pointed at Richard. "Put your arms through the bars, please."

I wanted to say no, but we'd already established that I wasn't willing to watch Richard die just yet. It made saying no sort of hollow. I slipped my arms through the bars, which put my back to the werewolf. Not good.

"Grab her wrists, gentlemen."

I balled my hands into fists but didn't pull back. I was going to do this, right.

Carmichael grabbed my left wrist. The bearded Fienstien took my right. Fienstien wasn't holding on very hard. I could have pulled away, but

Carmichael's hand was like warm steel. I stared into his eyes, and found no pity there. Fienstien was getting squeamish. Grey Hair, with his rifle, was in the middle of the room, distancing himself from it. Carmichael was here for the whole ride.

Titus came over and started unwrapping the bandage on my arm. I fought the urge to ask what he was doing. I had an idea. I hoped I was wrong.

"How many stitches did you get, Ms. Blake?"

I wasn't wrong. "I don't know. I stopped counting at twenty." He let the bandages fall to the ground. He got out my own knife and held it up where it would catch the light. Nothing like a little showmanship.

I pressed my forehead to the cage bars and took a deep breath.

"I'm going to reopen some of this wound. Cut out your stitches."

"I figured that out," I said.

"No struggles?"

"Get on with it."

Aikensen came over. "Let me do it. I owe her a little blood."

Titus looked at me, almost as if asking permission. I gave him my best blank look. He handed the knife to Aikensen.

Aikensen held the point just over the first stitch near my wrist. I felt my eyes widen. I didn't know what to do. Looking seemed a bad idea. Not looking seemed worse. Begging them not to do it seemed futile and humiliating. Some nights there are no good choices.

He cut the first stitch. I felt it snap, but surprisingly it didn't really hurt all that much. I looked away. The stitches went snip, snip, snip. I could do this.

"We need blood," Carmichael said.

I looked back in time to see Aikensen put the point of the knife against the wound. He was going to reopen the wound, slowly. That was going to hurt. I caught a glimpse of Edward in his cage. He was standing now. Looking at me. He was trying to tell me something. His eyes slid right.

Grey Hair had walked away from the show. He was standing close to the other cage. Evidently, he could shoot you, but he didn't like torture.

Edward looked at me. I thought I knew what he wanted. I hoped so.

The knife bit into my skin. I gasped. The pain was sharp and immediate, like all shallow wounds, but this one was going to last a long time. Blood flowed in a heavy line down my skin. Aikensen pulled the point down a fraction of an inch. I pulled suddenly on my arms. Fienstien lost his grip. He grabbed for my flaying arm. Carmichael tightened his grip. I couldn't get free but I could drop to the floor and make my arm move too much to use a knife on it.

I started to scream and fight in earnest. If Edward needed a diversion, I could give him one.

"One woman in a cage and the three of you can't handle her." Titus waddled up. He grabbed my left arm while Carmichael had my wrist. My right hand was back in the cage with me.

Fienstien was sort of hovering near the cage, not sure what to do. If you were going to pay money to hunt monsters, you should be better at violence than this. His holster was close to the bars.

I screamed over and over, jerking at my left arm. Titus held my arm under his, pinned next to his body. Carmichael's grip on my wrist was bruising. They had me at last. Aikensen put the knife to the wound and started to cut.

Fienstien bent down as if to help. I screamed and leaned into the bars. I didn't draw his gun. I grabbed the trigger and pushed it into his body. The shot took him in the stomach. He fell backwards.

A second shot echoed in the cavern. Carmichael's head exploded all over Titus. His Smokey Bear hat was covered in blood and brains.

Edward was standing with the rifle to his shoulder. Grey Hair was slumped against the cage bars. His neck was at an odd angle. Richard knelt by the body. Had he killed him?

There was a sound behind me. A low guttural cry. Titus had his gun out. He still had my arm pinned. Fienstien was rolling around on the ground. His gun was out of reach.

There was a low growl coming from behind me. I heard movement. Jason was coming back to play. Great.

Titus jerked my arm forward, nearly wrenching it out of the socket. He shoved his .45 against my cheek. The barrel was cold.

"Put down the rifle or I pull this trigger."

My face was pressed into the bars and the gun. I couldn't look behind me, but I could hear something crawling closer.

"Is he changing?"

"Not yet," Richard said.

Edward still had the rifle up, sighted on Titus. Aikensen seemed frozen, standing there with the bloody knife.

"Put it down, blondie, right now, or she's dead."

"Edward."

"Anita," he said. His voice sounded like it always did. We both knew he could drop Titus, but if the man's finger twitched while he died, I died, too. Choices.

"Do it," I said.

He pulled the trigger. Titus jerked back against the bars. Blood splattered over my face. A glob of something thicker than blood slid down my cheek. I breathed in shallow gasps. Titus slumped along the bars, gun still gripped in his hands.

"Open her cage," Edward said.

Something touched my leg. I jerked and whirled. Jason grabbed my bleeding arm. The strength was incredible. He could have crushed my wrist. He lowered his face to the wound and lapped at the blood like a cat with cream.

"Open her door now, or you're dead, too."

Aikensen just stood there.

Jason licked my arm. His tongue caressed the wound. It hurt, but I swallowed the gasp. No sounds. No struggles. He'd done damn good not to

jump me while I fought the men outside. But a werewolf's patience isn't endless.

"Now!" Edward said.

Aikensen jumped, then went for the door. He dropped my knife by the door and fumbled at the lock.

Jason bit into my arm, just a little. I did gasp. I couldn't help it. Richard screamed, wordless and thundering.

Jason jerked away from me. "Run," he said. He buried his face in a puddle of blood on the floor, lapping at it. His voice was strangled, more growl than word. "Run."

Aikensen opened the door. I crab-walked backwards.

Jason threw his head skyward and shrieked, "Run!"

I got to my feet and ran. Aikensen slammed the door shut behind me. Jason was writhing on the floor. He fell to the ground in convulsions. Foam ran from his mouth. His hands spasmed, reaching for nothing that I could see. I'd seen people shift before but never this violently. It looked like a bad *grand mal* seizure or someone dying of strychnine.

The wolf burst out of his skin in a nearly finished product, like a cicada pulling out of its old skin. The wolfman raced for the bars. Claws grabbed for us. We both backed up. Foam fell from the wolf jaws. Teeth snapped the air. And I knew that he'd kill me and eat me afterwards. It was what he did, what he was.

Aikensen was staring at the werewolf. I knelt and picked up the dropped knife. "Aikensen?"

He turned to me, still startled and pale.

"Did you enjoy shooting Deputy Holmes in the chest?"

He frowned at me. "I let you go. I did what he asked."

I stepped up close to him. "Remember what I told you would happen if you hurt Williams?"

He looked at me. "I remember."

"Good." I drove the knife upward into his groin. I shoved it hilt deep. Blood poured over my hand. He stared at me, eyes going glassy.

"A promise is a promise," I said.

He fell and I let his own weight pull the knife up through his abdomen. His eyes closed and I pulled the knife out.

I wiped the knife on his jacket and took the keys from his limp hand. Edward had the rifle slung over his shoulder by the strap. Richard was watching me as if he'd never seen me before. Even with his odd-shaped face and amber eyes I could tell he disapproved.

I unlocked their door. Edward walked out. Richard followed but he was staring at me. "You didn't have to kill him," he said. The words were Richard's even if the voice wasn't.

Edward and I stood there looking at the alpha werewolf. "Yes, I did."

"We kill because we have to, not for pleasure and not for pride," Richard said.

"Maybe you do," I said. "But the rest of the pack, the rest of the shifters, aren't so particular."

"The police may be on their way," Edward said. "You don't want to be here."

Richard glanced at the ravening beast in the other cage. "Give me the keys. I'll take Jason out through the tunnel. I can smell the outside."

I handed him the keys. His fingertips brushed my hand. His hand convulsed around the keys. "I can't last much longer. Go."

I looked into those strange amber eyes. Edward touched my arm. "We've got to go. I heard sirens. They must have heard the gunshots."

"Be careful," I said.

"I will be." I let Edward pull me up the stairs. Richard fell to the ground, face hidden in his hands. His face came up, and the bones were longer. They flowed out of his face as if it were clay.

I tripped on the stairs. Only Edward's hand kept me from falling. I turned around and we ran up the stairs. When I glanced back, Richard wasn't in sight.

Edward dropped the rifle on the stairs. The door burst open, and the police came through the door. It was only then that I realized Kaspar was gone.

Chapter 43

Neither Edward nor I had to go to jail, even though the cops found the people we killed. Everyone pretty much thought it was a miracle that we had gotten away with our lives. People were impressed. Edward surprised me by showing ID for a Ted Forrester, bounty hunter. Slaughter of a bunch of illegal lycanthrope hunters enhanced the reputation of all bounty hunters, Ted Forrester's in particular. I got a lot of good press out of it, too. Bert was pleased.

I asked Edward if Forrester was his real last name. He just smiled.

Dolph was released in time for Christmas. Zerbrowski had to stay longer. I bought them both a case of silver bullets. It was only money. Besides, I never wanted to watch one of them drip their life away through tubes.

I made one last visit to the Lunatic Cafe. Marcus told me that Alfred had killed the girl all on his own. Gabriel hadn't known it was going to happen, but once she was dead, waste not, want not. Lycanthropes are nothing if not practical. Raina had distributed the film for the same reason. I didn't really believe them. Awful damn convenient to blame a dead man. But I didn't tell Edward. I did tell Gabriel and Raina that if any other snuff films surfaced, they could kiss their furry asses good-bye. I'd sic Edward on them. Though I didn't tell them that.

I got Richard a gold cross and made him promise to wear it. He got me a stuffed toy penguin that played "Winter Wonderland," a bag of black-and-white gummy penguins, and a small velvet box, like one for a ring. I thought I would swallow my heart. There was no ring in it, just a note that said, "Promises to keep."

Jean-Claude got me a glass sculpture of penguins on an ice floe. It's beautiful and expensive. I'd have liked it better if Richard had gotten it.

What do you get the Master of the City for Christmas? A pint of blood? I settled for an antique cameo. It'd look great at the neck of one of his lacy shirts.

Sometime in February a box arrived from Edward. It was a swan skin. The note read, "I found a witch to lift his curse." I lifted the feathered skin from the box, and a second note fluttered to the ground. This one said, "Marcus paid me." I should have known he'd find a way to make a profit from a kill he'd have made for free.

Richard doesn't understand why I killed Aikensen. I've tried to explain, but saying I killed a man because I said I'd do it does sound like pride. But it wasn't pride. It was for Williams, who would never finish his doctorate or see his owls again. For Holmes, who never got to be the first female chief of police. For all the people he killed who never got a second chance. If they couldn't have one, neither could he. I haven't lost any sleep over killing Aikensen. Maybe that should bother me more than the killing—the fact that it doesn't bother me at all. Naw.

I had the swan skin mounted in a tasteful frame, behind glass. I hung it in the living room. It matched the couch. Richard doesn't like it. I like it just fine.

Bloody Bones

by

Laurell K. Hamilton

Book 5 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Chapter 1

It was St. Patrick's Day, and the only green I was wearing was a button that read, "Pinch me and you're dead meat." I'd started work last night with a green blouse on, but I'd gotten blood all over it from a beheaded chicken. Larry Kirkland, zombie-raiser in training, had dropped the decapitated bird. It did the little headless chicken dance and sprayed both of us with blood. I finally caught the damn thing, but the blouse was ruined.

I had to run home and change. The only thing not ruined was the charcoal grey suit jacket that had been in the car. I put it back on over a black blouse, black skirt, dark hose, and black pumps. Bert, my boss, didn't like us wearing black to work, but if I had to be at the office at seven o'clock without any sleep at all, he would just have to live with it.

I huddled over my coffee mug, drinking it as black as I could swallow it. It wasn't helping much. I stared at a series of 8-by-10 glossy blowups spread across my desktop. The first picture was of a hill that had been scraped open, probably by a bulldozer. A skeletal hand reached out of the raw earth. The next photo showed that someone had tried to carefully scrape away the dirt, showing the splintered coffin and bones to one side of the coffin. A new body. The bulldozer had been brought in again. It had plowed up the red earth and found a boneyard. Bones studded the earth like scattered flowers.

One skull spread its unhinged jaws in a silent scream. A scraggle of pale hair still clung to the skull. The dark, stained cloth wrapped around the corpse was the remnants of a dress. I spotted at least three femurs next to the upper half of a skull. Unless the corpse had had three legs, we were looking at a real mess.

The pictures were well done in a gruesome sort of way. The color made it easier to differentiate the corpses, but the high gloss was a little much. It looked like morgue photos done by a fashion photographer. There was probably an art gallery in New York that would hang the damn things and serve cheese and wine while people walked around saying, "Powerful, don't you think? Very powerful."

They were powerful, and sad.

There was nothing but the photos. No explanation. Bert had said to come to his office after I'd looked at them. He'd explain everything. Yeah, I believed that. The Easter Bunny is a friend of mine, too.

I gathered the pictures up, slipped them into the envelope, picked my coffee mug up in the other hand, and went for the door.

There was no one at the desk. Craig had gone home. Mary, our daytime secretary, didn't get in until eight. There was a two-hour space of time when the office was unmanned. That Bert had called me into the office when we were the only ones there bothered me a lot. Why the secrecy?

Bert's office door was open. He sat behind his desk, drinking coffee, shuffling some papers around. He glanced up, smiled, and motioned me closer. The smile bothered me. Bert was never pleasant unless he wanted something.

His thousand-dollar suit framed a white-on-white shirt and tie. His grey eyes sparkled with good cheer. His eyes are the color of dirty window glass, so sparkling is a real effort. His snow-blond hair had been freshly buzzed. The crewcut was so short I could see scalp.

"Have a seat, Anita."

I tossed the envelope on his desk and sat down. "What are you up to, Bert?" His smile widened. He usually didn't waste the smile on anybody but clients. He certainly didn't waste it on me. "You looked at the pictures?"

"Yeah, what of it?"

"Could you raise them from the dead?"

I frowned at him and sipped my coffee. "How old are they?"

"You couldn't tell from the pictures?"

"In person I could tell you, but not just from pictures. Answer the question."

"Around two hundred years."

I just stared at him. "Most animators couldn't raise a zombie that old without a human sacrifice."

"But you can," he said.

"Yeah. I didn't see any headstones in the pictures. Do we have any names?"

"Why?"

I shook my head. He'd been the boss for five years, started the company when it was just him and Manny, and he didn't know shit about raising the dead. "How can you hang around a bunch of zombie-raisers for this many years and know so little about what we do?"

The smile slipped a little, the glow beginning to fade from his eyes. "Why do you need names?"

"You use names to call the zombie from the grave."

"Without a name you can't raise them?"

"Theoretically, no," I said.

"But you can do it," he said. I didn't like how sure he was.

"Yeah, I can do it. John can probably do it, too."

He shook his head. "They don't want John."

I finished the last of my coffee. "Who's they?"

"Beadle, Beadle, Stirling, and Lowenstein."

"A law firm," I said.

He nodded.

"No more games, Bert. Just tell me what the hell's going on."

"Beadle, Beadle, Stirling, and Lowenstein have some clients building a very plush resort in the mountains near Branson. A very exclusive resort. A place where the wealthy country stars that don't own a house in the area can go to get away from the crowds. Millions of dollars are at stake."

"What's the old cemetery have to do with it?"

"The land they're building on was in dispute between two families. The courts decided the Kellys owned the land, and they were paid a great deal of money. The Bouvier family claimed it was their land and there was a family plot on it to prove it. No one could find the cemetery."

Ah. "They found it," I said.

"They found an old cemetery, but not necessarily the Bouvier family plot."

"So they want to raise the dead and ask who they are?"

"Exactly."

I shrugged. "I can raise a couple of the corpses in the coffins. Ask who they are. What happens if their last name is Bouvier?"

"They have to buy the land a second time. They think some of the corpses are Bouviers. That's why they want all the bodies raised."

I raised my eyebrows. "You're joking."

He shook his head, looking pleased. "Can you do it?"

"I don't know. Give me the pictures again." I set my coffee mug on his desk and took the pictures back. "Bert, they've screwed this six ways to Sunday. It's a mass grave, thanks to the bulldozers. The bones are all mixed together. I've only read about one case of anyone raising a zombie from a mass grave. But they were calling a specific person. They had a name." I shook my head. "Without a name it may not be possible."

"Would you be willing to try?"

I spread the pictures over the desk, staring at them. The top half of a skull had turned upside down like a bowl. Two finger bones attached by something

dry and desiccated that must once had been human tissue lay next to it. Bones, bones everywhere but not a name to speak.

Could I do it? I honestly didn't know. Did I want to try? Yeah. I did.

"I'd be willing to try."

"Wonderful."

"Raising them a few every night is going to take weeks, even if I can do it. With John's help it would be quicker."

"It will cost them millions to delay that long," Bert said.

"There's no other way to do it."

"You raised the Davidsons' entire family plot, including Great-Grandpa. You weren't even supposed to raise him. You can raise more than one at a time."

I shook my head. "That was an accident. I was showing off. They wanted to raise three family members. I thought I could save them money by doing it in one shot."

"You raised ten family members, Anita. They only asked for three."

"So?"

"So can you raise the entire cemetery in one night?"

"You're crazy," I said.

"Can you do it?"

I opened my mouth to say no, and closed it. I had raised an entire cemetery once. Not all of them had been two centuries old, but some of them had been older, nearly three hundred. And I raised them all. Of course, I had two human sacrifices to ride for power. It was a long story how I ended up with two people dying inside a circle of power. Self-defense, but the magic didn't care. Death is death.

Could I do it? "I really don't know, Bert."

"That's not a no," he said. He had an eager, anticipatory look on his face.

"They must have offered you a bundle of money," I said.

He smiled. "We're bidding on the project."

"We're what?"

"They sent this package to us, the Resurrection Company in California and the Essential Spark in New Orleans."

"They prefer *Élan Vital* to the English translation," I said. Frankly, it sounded more like a beauty salon than an animating firm, but nobody had asked me. "So what? The lowest bid gets it?"

"That was their plan," Bert said.

He looked entirely too satisfied with himself. "What?" I asked.

"Let me play it back to you," he said. "There are what, three animators in the entire country that could raise a zombie that old without a human sacrifice? You and John are two of them. I'm including Phillipa Freestone of Resurrection in this."

"Probably," I said.

He nodded. "Okay. Could Phillipa raise without a name?"

"I don't have any way of knowing that. John could. Maybe she could."

"Could either she or John raise from the mass bones, not the ones in the coffin?"

That stopped me. "I don't know."

"Would either of them stand a chance of raising the entire graveyard?" He was staring at me very steadily.

"You're enjoying this too much," I said.

"Just answer the question, Anita."

"I know John couldn't do it. I don't think Phillipa is as good as John, so no, they couldn't do it."

"I'm going to up the bid," Bert said.

I laughed. "Up the bid?"

"Nobody else can do it. Nobody but you. They tried treating this like any other construction problem. But there aren't going to be any other bids, now are there?"

"Probably not," I said.

"Then I'm going to take them to the cleaners," he said with a smile.

I shook my head. "You greedy son of a bitch."

"You get a share of the fee, you know."

"I know." We looked at each other. "What if I try and can't raise them all in one night?"

"You'll still be able to raise them all eventually, won't you?"

"Probably." I stood, picking up my coffee mug. "But I wouldn't spend the check until after I've done it. I'm going to go get some sleep."

"They want the bid this morning. If they accept our terms, they'll fly you up in a private helicopter."

"Helicopter—you know I hate to fly."

"For this much money you'll fly."

"Great."

"Be ready to go at a moment's notice."

"Don't push it, Bert." I hesitated at the door. "Let me take Larry with me."

"Why? If John can't do it, then Larry certainly can't."

I shrugged. "Maybe not, but there are ways to combine power during a raising. If I can't do it alone, maybe I can get a boost from our trainee."

He looked thoughtful. "Why not take John? Combined, you could do it."

"Only if he'd give his power willingly to me. You think he'd do that?"

Bert shook his head.

"You going to tell him that the client didn't want him? That you offered him to the client and they asked for me by name?"

"No," Bert said.

"That's why you're doing it like this; no witnesses."

"Time is of the essence, Anita."

"Sure, Bert, but you didn't want to face Mr. John Burke with yet another client that wants me over him."

Bert looked down at his blunt-fingered hands clasped on the desktop. He looked up, grey eyes serious. "John is almost as good as you are, Anita. I don't want to lose him."

"You think he'll walk if one more client asks for me?"

"His pride's hurt," Bert said.

"And there's so much of it to hurt," I said.

Bert smiled. "You needling him doesn't help."

I shrugged. It sounded petty to say he'd started it, but he had. We'd tried dating, and John couldn't handle me being a female version of him. No; he couldn't handle me being a better version of him.

"Try to behave yourself, Anita. Larry's not up to speed yet; we need John."

"I always behave myself, Bert."

He sighed. "If you didn't make me so much money, I wouldn't put up with your shit."

"Ditto," I said.

That about summed up our relationship. Commerce at its best. We didn't like each other, but we could do business together. Free enterprise at work.

Chapter 2

At noon Bert called and said we had it. "Be at the office packed and ready to go at two o'clock. Mr. Lionel Bayard will fly up with you and Larry."

"Who's Lionel Bayard?"

"A junior partner in the firm of Beadle, Beadle, Stirling, and Lowenstein. He likes the sound of his own voice. Don't give him a rough time about it."

"Who, me?"

"Anita, don't tease the help. He may be wearing a three-thousand-dollar suit, but he's still the help."

"I'll save it up for one of the partners. Surely Beadle, Beadle, Stirling, or Lowenstein will appear in person sometime this weekend."

"Don't tease the bosses either," he said.

"Anything you say." My voice was utterly mild.

"You'll do whatever you want no matter what I say, won't you?"

"Gee, Bert, who says you can't teach an old dog new tricks?"

"Just be here at two o'clock. I called Larry. He'll be here."

"I'll be there, Bert. I've got one stop to make, so if I'm a few minutes late, don't worry."

"Don't be late."

"Be there as soon as I can." I hung up before he could argue with me.

I had to shower, change, and go to Seckman Junior High School. Richard Zeeman taught science there. We had a date set up for tomorrow. At one point Richard had asked me to marry him. That was sort of on hold, but I did owe him more than a message on his answering machine, saying sorry, honey, can't

make the date. I'm going to be out of town. A message would have been easier for me, but cowardly.

I packed one suitcase. It was enough for four days and then some. If you pack extra underwear and clothes that mix and match, you can live for a week out of a small suitcase.

I did add a few extras. The Firestar 9mm and its inner pants holster. Enough extra ammo to sink a battleship and two knives plus wrist sheaths. I'd had four knives. All handcrafted for little ol' *moi*. Two of them had been lost beyond recovery. I was having them replaced, but hand forging takes time, especially when you insist on the highest silver content possible in the steel. Two knives, two guns should be enough for one weekend business trip. I'd wear the Browning Hi-Power.

Packing wasn't a problem. What to wear today was the problem. They'd want me to raise them tonight if I could. Hell, the helicopter might fly directly to the construction site. Which meant I'd be walking over raw dirt, bones, shattered coffins. It didn't sound like high-heel territory. Yet, if a junior partner was wearing a three-thousand-dollar suit, the people who'd just hired me would expect me to look the part. I could either dress professionally or in feathers and blood. I'd actually had one client who was disappointed that I didn't show up nude smeared with blood. There could have been more than one reason for his disappointment. I don't think I've ever had a client that would have objected to some kind of ceremonial getup, but jeans and jogging shoes didn't seem to inspire confidence. Don't ask me why.

I could pack my coverall and put it over whatever I wore. Yeah, I liked that. Veronica Sims—Ronnie, my very best friend—had talked me into buying a fashionably short navy skirt. It was short enough that I was a little embarrassed, but the skirt fit inside the coverall. The skirt didn't wrinkle or bunch up after I'd worn the outfit to vampire stakings or murder scenes. Take the coverall off, and I was set to go to the office or out for the evening. I was so pleased, I went out and bought two more in different colors.

One was crimson, the other purple. I hadn't been able to find one in black yet. At least not one that wasn't so short that I refused to wear it. Admittedly, the short skirts made me look taller. They even made me look leggy. When you're five-foot-three, that's saying something. But the purple didn't match much that I owned, so crimson it was.

I'd found a short-sleeved blouse that was the exact same shade of red. Red with violet undertones, a cold, hard color that looked great with my pale skin, black hair, and dark brown eyes. The shoulder holster and 9mm Browning Hi-Power looked very dramatic against it. A black belt cinched tight at the waist held down the loops on the holster. A black jacket with rolled-back sleeves went over everything to hide the gun. I twirled in front of the mirror in my bedroom. The skirt wasn't much longer than the jacket, but you couldn't see the gun. At least not easily. Unless you're willing to have things tailor-made, it's hard to hide a gun, especially in women's dress-up clothes.

I put on just enough makeup so the red didn't overwhelm me. I was also going to be saying good-bye to Richard for several days. A little makeup

couldn't hurt. When I say makeup, I mean eye shadow, blush, lipstick, and that's it. Outside of a television interview that Bert talked me into, I don't wear base.

Except for the hose and black high heels, which I would've had to wear no matter what skirt I wore, the outfit was comfortable. As long as I remembered not to bend directly at the waist, I was safe.

The only jewelry I wore was the silver cross tucked into the blouse, and the watch on my wrist. My dress watch had broken and I just had never gotten around to getting it fixed. The present watch was a man's black diving watch that looked out of place on my small wrist. But hey, it glowed in the dark if you pressed a button. It showed me the date, what day it was, and could time a run. I hadn't found a woman's watch that could do all that.

I didn't have to cancel running with Ronnie tomorrow morning. She was out of town on a case. A private detective's work is never done.

I loaded the suitcase into my Jeep and was on the way to Richard's school by one o'clock. I was going to be late to the office. Oh, well. They'd wait for me or they wouldn't. It wouldn't break my heart to miss the helicopter ride. I hated planes, but a helicopter . . . scared the shit out of me.

I hadn't been afraid of flying until I was on a plane that plunged several thousand feet in seconds. The stewardess ended up plastered against the ceiling, covered in coffee. People screamed and prayed. The elderly woman beside me recited the Lord's Prayer in German. She'd been so scared, tears had come down her face. I offered her my hand, and she gripped it. I knew I was going to die and there was nothing I could do to prevent it. But we would die holding on to human hands. Die covered in human tears, and human prayers. Then the plane straightened out and suddenly we were safe. I haven't trusted air transportation since.

Normally in St. Louis there is no real spring. There's winter, two days of mild weather, and summer heat. This year spring had come early and stayed. The air was soft against your skin. The wind smelled of green growing things, and winter seemed to have been a bad dream. Redbuds bent from the trees on either side of the road. Tiny purple blossoms like a delicate lavender mist here and there through the naked trees. There were no leaves yet, but there was a hint of green. Like someone had taken a giant paintbrush and tinted everything. Look directly at them and the trees were bare and black, but look sideways, not at a particular tree but at all the trees, and there was a touch of green.

270 South is about as pleasant as a highway can be; it gets you where you're going fairly fast, and it's over quickly. I exited at Tesson Ferry Road. The road is thick with strip malls, a hospital, and fast-food restaurants, and when you leave the commerce behind you hit new housing developments so thick they nearly touch. There are still stands of woods and open spaces, but they won't last.

The turn to Old 21 is at the crest of a hill just past the Meramec River. It is mostly houses with a few gas stations, the area water district office, and a large gas field to the right. Where the hills march out and out.

At the first stoplight I turned left past a little shopping area. The road is a curving narrow thing that snakes between houses and woods. There were glimpses of daffodils in the yards. The road dips down into a valley, and at the bottom of a steep hill is a stop sign. The road climbs quickly to the crest of a hill, to a T, turn left and you're almost there.

The one-story school sits on the floor of a wide, flat valley surrounded by hills. Having been raised in Indiana farm country, I'd have called them mountains once. The elementary school sits separate, but close enough to share a playground. If you got recess in junior high. When I was too little to go to junior high, it seemed you did get recess. By the time I got there, you didn't. The way of the world.

I parked as close to the building as I could. This was my second visit to Richard's school, and my first during the actual school day. We'd come once to get some papers he'd forgotten. No students then. I entered the main entrance and ran into a crowd. It must have been between classes when they moved the warm bodies from one room to another.

I was instantly aware that I was about the same height as or shorter than everyone I saw. There was something claustrophobic about being jostled by the book-carrying, backpack-wearing crowd. There had to be a circle of Hell where you were eternally fourteen, eternally in junior high. One of the lower circles.

I flowed with the crowd towards Richard's room. I admit I took comfort in the fact that I was better dressed than most of the girls. Petty as hell, but I had been chunky in junior high. There isn't a lot of difference between chunky and fat when it comes to teasing. I'd had my growth spurt and never been fat again. That's right; I'd been even tinier once. Shortest kid in school for years and years.

I stood to one side of the doorway, letting the students come and go. Richard was showing something in a textbook to a young girl. She was blonde, wearing a flannel shirt over a black dress that was three sizes too big for her. She was wearing what looked like black combat boots with heavy white socks rolled over the tops of them. The outfit was very now. The look of adoration on her face was not. She was shiny and eager just because Mr. Zeeman was giving her some one-on-one help.

I had to admit that Richard was worth a crush or two. His thick brown hair was tied back in a ponytail that gave the illusion that his hair was very short and close to his head. He has high, full cheekbones and a strong jaw, with a dimple that softens his face and makes him look almost too perfect. His eyes are a solid chocolate brown with those thick lashes that so many men have and women want. The bright yellow shirt made his permanently tanned skin seem even darker. His tie was a dark, rich green that matched the dress slacks he wore. His jacket was draped across the back of his desk chair. The muscles in his upper arms worked against the cloth of his shirt as he held the book.

The class was mostly seated, the hallway nearly silent. He closed the book and handed it to the girl. She smiled and scrambled for the door, late to her next class. Her eyes flicked over me as she passed, wondering what I was doing there.

She wasn't the only one. Several of the seated students were glancing my way. I stepped into the room.

Richard smiled. It warmed me down to my toes. The smile saved him from being too handsome. It wasn't that it wasn't a great smile. He could have done toothpaste commercials. But the smile was a little boy's smile, open and welcoming. There was no guile to Richard, no deep, dark plan. He was the world's biggest Boy Scout. The smile showed that.

I wanted to go to him, have him wrap his arms around me. I had a horrible urge to grab his tie and lead him out of the room. I wanted to touch his chest underneath the yellow shirt. The urge was so strong, I put my hands in the pockets of my jacket. Mustn't shock the students. Richard affects me like that sometimes. Okay, most of the time when he's not furry, or licking blood off his fingers. He's a werewolf. Did I mention that? No one at the school knows. If they did, he'd be out of a job. People don't like lycanthropes teaching their precious kiddies. It's illegal to discriminate against someone for a disease, but everyone does it. Why should the educational system be different?

He touched my cheek, just his fingertips. I turned my face into his hand, brushing lips against his fingers. So much for being cool in front of the kiddies. There were a few oohs and nervous laughs.

"I'll be right back, guys." More oohs, louder laughter, one "Way to go, Mr. Zeeman." Richard motioned me out the door and I went, hands still in my pockets. Normally, I'd have said I wasn't going to embarrass myself in front of a bunch of eighth-graders, but lately I wasn't entirely trustworthy.

Richard led me a little ways from his classroom into the deserted hallway. He leaned up against the wall of lockers and looked down at me. The little-boy smile was gone. The look in his dark eyes made me shiver. I ran my hand down his tie, smoothing it against his chest.

"Am I allowed to kiss you, or would that scandalize the kiddies?" I didn't look up at him as I asked. I didn't want him to see the raw need in my eyes. It was embarrassing enough that I knew he sensed it. You can't hide lust from a werewolf. They can smell it.

"I'll risk it." His voice was soft, low, with a warm edge that made my stomach clench.

I felt him bend over me. I raised my face to his. His lips were so soft. I leaned against his body, palms flat against his chest. I could feel his nipples harden under my skin. My hands slid to his waist, smoothing along the cloth of his shirt. I wanted to pull his shirt out of his pants and run my hands over bare skin. I stepped back from him feeling just a little breathless.

It was my idea that we wouldn't have sex before marriage. My idea. But damn, it was hard. The more we dated, the harder it got.

"Jesus, Richard." I shook my head. "It gets harder, doesn't it?"

Richard's smile didn't look innocent or Boy Scoutish in the least. "Yes, it does."

Heat rushed up my face. "I didn't mean that."

"I know what you meant." His voice was gentle, taking the sting out of the teasing.

My face was still hot with embarrassment, but my voice was steady. Point for me. "I've got to go out of town on business."

"Zombie, vampire, or police?"

"Zombie."

"Good."

I looked up at him. "Why good?"

"I worry more when you go away on police business, or vampire stakings. You know that."

I nodded. "Yeah, I know that." We stood there in the hallway, staring at each other. If things had been different, we'd be engaged, maybe planning a wedding. All this sexual tension would have been coming to some kind of conclusion. As it was . . .

"I'm going to be late as it is. I've got to go."

"Are you going to tell Jean-Claude bye in person?" His face was neutral when he asked, but his eyes weren't.

"It's daylight. He's in his coffin."

"Ah," Richard said.

"I didn't have a date planned with him this weekend, so I don't owe him an explanation. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Close enough," he said. He took a step away from the lockers, bringing our bodies very close together. He bent to kiss me good-bye. Giggles erupted down the hall.

We turned to see most of his class huddled in the doorway gazing at us. Great.

Richard smiled. He raised his voice enough so they'd hear him. "Back inside, you monsters."

There were catcalls, and one small brunette girl gave me a very dirty look. I think there must have been a lot of girls that had a crush on Mr. Zeeman.

"The natives are restless. I've got to get back."

I nodded. "I'm hoping to be back by Monday."

"We'll go hiking next weekend, then."

"I put Jean-Claude off this weekend. I can't not see him two weeks in a row."

Richard's face clouded up with the beginnings of anger. "Hike during the day, see the vampire at night. Only fair."

"I don't like this any better than you do," I said.

"I wish I believed that."

"Richard."

He gave a long sigh. The anger sort of leaked out of him. I never understood how he did that. He could be furious one minute and calm the next. Both emotions seemed genuine. Once I was angry, I was angry. Maybe it's a character flaw?

"I'm sorry, Anita. It's not like you're dating him behind my back."

"I would never do anything behind your back; you know that."

He nodded. "I know that." He glanced back at his classroom. "I've got to go before they set the room on fire." He walked down the hallway without looking back.

I almost called after him, but I let him go. The mood was sort of spoiled. Nothing like knowing your girlfriend is dating someone else to take the wind out of your sails. I wouldn't have put up with it if it was the other way around. A double standard that, but one we could all three live with. If living was the term for Jean-Claude.

Oh, hell, my personal life was too confusing for words. I walked off down the hall, having to pass by his open classroom door. My high heels made loud, rackety echoes. I didn't try to catch a last glimpse of him. It would make me feel worse about leaving.

It hadn't been my idea to date the Master of the City. Jean-Claude had given me two choices; either he could kill Richard, or I could date both of them. It had seemed a good idea at the time. Five weeks later I wasn't so sure.

It had been my morals that had kept Richard and me from consummating our relationship. Consummating, nice euphemism. But Jean-Claude had made it clear that if I did something with Richard, I had to do it with him too. Jean-Claude was trying to woo me. If Richard could touch me but he couldn't, it wasn't fair. He had a point, I guess. But the thought of having to have sex with the vampire was more likely to keep me chaste than any high ideals.

I couldn't date both of them indefinitely. The sexual tension alone was killing me. I could move. Richard might even let me do that. He wouldn't like it, but if I wanted free of him, he'd let me go. Jean-Claude, on the other hand . . . He'd never let me go. The question was, did I want him to let me go? Answer: hell, yes. The real trick was how to break free without anybody dying.

Yeah, that was the \$64,000 question. Trouble was, I didn't have an answer. We were going to need one sooner or later. And later was getting closer all the time.

Chapter 3

I huddled against the side of the helicopter, one hand in a death grip on the strap that was bolted to the wall. I wanted to use both hands to hold on, as if by holding very tightly to the stupid strap it would save me when the helicopter plummeted to earth. I used one hand because two hands looked cowardly. I was wearing a headset, sort of like ear protection for the shooting range, but with a microphone so you could talk above the teeth-rattling noise. I hadn't realized that most of a helicopter was clear, like being suspended in a great buzzing, vibrating bubble. I kept my eyes closed as much as possible.

"Are you all right, Ms. Blake?" Lionel Bayard asked.

The voice startled me. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"You don't look well."

"I don't like to fly," I said.

He gave a weak smile. I don't think I was inspiring confidence in Lionel Bayard, lawyer and flunkie of Beadle, Beadle, Stirling, and Lowenstein. Lionel Bayard was a small, neat man with a tiny blond mustache that looked like it was as much facial hair as he would ever get. His triangular jaw was as smooth as my own. Maybe the mustache was glued on. His brown suit with a thin yellow tweed fit his body like a well-tailored glove. His thin tie was brown-and-yellow striped with a gold tie tack. The tie tack was monogrammed. His slender leather briefcase was monogrammed as well. Everything matched, down to his gold-tasseled loafers.

Larry twisted in his seat. He was sitting beside the pilot. "You're really afraid of flying?" I could see his lips move, but all the sound came out of my headset; without them we'd never have been able to talk over the noise. He sounded amused.

"Yes, Larry, I'm really afraid of flying." I hoped sarcasm traveled the headsets as clearly as amusement did.

Larry laughed. Evidently, sarcasm traveled. Larry looked freshly scrubbed. He was dressed in his other blue suit, his white shirt—which was one of three he owned—and his second-best tie. His best tie had blood all over it. He was still in college, working weekends for us until he graduated. His short hair was the color of a surprised carrot. He was freckled and about my height, short, with pale blue eyes. He looked like a grown-up Opie.

Bayard was working hard at not frowning at me. The effort showed enough that he shouldn't have bothered. "Are you sure you're up to this assignment?"

I met his brown eyes. "You better hope I am, Mr. Bayard, because I'm all you got."

"I am aware of your specialized skills, Ms. Blake. I spent the last twelve hours contacting every animating firm in the United States. Phillipa Freestone of the Resurrection Company told me she couldn't do what we wanted, that the only person in the country who might be able to do it was Anita Blake. Élan Vital in New Orleans told us the same thing. They mentioned John Burke but weren't confident that he could do all we wanted. We must have all the dead raised or it's useless to us."

"Did my boss explain to you that I am not a hundred percent sure that I can do it?"

Bayard blinked at me. "Mr. Vaughn seemed very confident that you could do what we asked."

"Bert can be as confident as he wants. He doesn't have to raise this mess."

"I realize the earthmoving equipment has complicated your task, Ms. Blake, but we did not do it deliberately."

I let that go. I'd seen the pictures. They'd tried to cover it up. If the construction crew hadn't been local with some Bouvier sympathizers, they'd have plowed up the boneyard, poured some concrete, and voilà, no evidence.

"Whatever. I'll do what I can with what you've left me."

"Would it have been that much easier if you had been brought in before the graves were disturbed?"

"Yeah."

He sighed. It vibrated through the headphones. "Then my apologies."

I shrugged. "Unless you did it personally, you're not the one who owes me an apology."

He shifted a little in his seat. "I did not order the digging. Mr. Stirling is on site."

"*The* Mr. Stirling?" I asked.

Bayard didn't seem to get the humor. "Yes, that Mr. Stirling." Or maybe he really expected me to know the name.

"You always have a senior partner looking over your shoulder?"

He used one finger to adjust his gold-framed glasses. It looked like an old gesture from a time before new glasses and designer suits. "With this much money at stake, Mr. Stirling thought he should be in the area in case there were more problems."

"More problems?" I asked.

He blinked at me rapidly, like a well-groomed rabbit. "The Bouvier matter."

He was lying. "What else is going wrong with your little project?"

"Whatever do you mean, Ms. Blake?" His manicured fingers smoothed down his tie.

"You've had more problems than just the Bouviers." I made it a statement.

"Any problems we may or may not be having, Ms. Blake, are not your concern. We hired you to raise the dead and establish the identity of said deceased persons. Beyond that, you have no duties here."

"Have you ever raised a zombie, Mr. Bayard?"

He blinked again. "Of course not." He sounded offended.

"Then how do you know the other problems won't affect my job?"

Small frown lines formed between his eyebrows. He was a lawyer and was earning a good living, but thinking seemed to be hard for him. Made you wonder where he'd graduated from.

"I don't see how our little difficulties could affect your job."

"You've just admitted you don't know anything about my job," I said.

"How do you know what will affect it and what won't?" Alright, I was fishing. Bayard was probably right. The other problems probably wouldn't affect me, but you never know. I don't like being kept in the dark. And I don't like being lied to, not even by omission.

"I think Mr. Stirling would have to make the call about whether you are enlightened or not."

"Not senior enough to make the decision," I said.

"No," Bayard said, "I am not."

Geez, some people you can't even needle. I glanced at Larry. He shrugged. "Looks like we're going to land."

I glanced out at the rapidly growing land. We were in the middle of the Ozark Mountains, hovering over a blasted scar of reddish naked earth. The construction site, I presume.

The ground swelled up to meet us. I closed my eyes and swallowed hard. The ride was almost over. I would not throw up this close to the ground. The ride was almost over. Almost over. Almost over. There was a bump that made me gasp.

"We've landed," Larry said. "You can open your eyes now."

I did. "You are enjoying the hell out of this, aren't you?"

He grinned. "I don't get to see you out of your element often."

The helicopter was surrounded by a fog of reddish dirt. The blades began to slow with a thick *whump, whump* sound. As the blades stopped, the dirt settled down and we could see where we were.

We were in a small, flat area between a cluster of mountains. It looked like it had once been a narrow valley, but bulldozers had widened it, flattened it, made it a landing pad. The earth was so red it looked like a river of rust. The mountain in front of the helicopter was one red mound. Heavy equipment and cars were clustered to the far side of the valley. Men were clustered around the equipment, shielding their eyes from the dust.

When the blades came to a sliding stop, Bayard unbuckled his seat belt. I did, too. We lifted off the headsets and Bayard opened his door. I opened mine and found that the ground was farther away than you'd think. I had to expose a long line of thigh to touch the ground.

The construction workers were appreciative. Whistles, catcalls, and one offer to check under my skirt. No, those weren't the exact words used.

A tall man in a white hard hat strode towards us. He was wearing a pair of tan coveralls, but his dirt-covered shoes were Gucci and his tan was health-club perfect. A man and a woman followed at his back.

The man looked like the real foreman. He was dressed in jeans and a work shirt with the sleeves rolled over muscular forearms. Not from racquetball or a little tennis, but from plain hard work.

The woman wore the traditional skirt suit complete with little blousy tie at her throat. The suit was expensive, but was an unfortunate shade of puce that did nothing for the woman's auburn hair but did match the blush that she'd smeared on her cheeks. I checked her neckline, and yes, she did have a pale line just above her collar where the base had not been blended in. She looked like she'd been made up at clown school.

She didn't look that young. You'd think someone somewhere would have clued her in to how bad she looked. Of course, I wasn't going to tell her either. Who was I to criticize?

Stirling had the palest grey eyes I'd ever seen. The irises were only a few shades darker than the whites of his eyes. He stood there with his entourage behind him. He looked me up and down. He didn't seem to like what he saw. His strange eyes flicked to Larry in his cheap, wrinkled suit. Mr. Stirling frowned.

Bayard came around, smoothing his jacket into place. "Mr. Stirling, this is Anita Blake. Ms. Blake, this is Raymond Stirling."

He just stood there, looking at me like he was disappointed. The woman had a clipboard notebook, pen poised. Had to be his secretary. She looked worried, as if it was very important that Mr. Raymond Stirling like us.

I was beginning not to care if he liked us or not. What I wanted to say was, "You got a problem?" What I said was, "Is there a problem, Mr. Stirling?" Bert would have been pleased.

"You're not what I expected, Ms. Blake."

"How so?"

"Pretty, for one thing." It wasn't a compliment.

"And?"

He motioned at my outfit. "You're not dressed appropriately for the job."

"Your secretary's wearing heels."

"Ms. Harrison's attire is not your concern."

"And my attire is none of yours."

"Fair enough, but you're going to have a hell of time getting up that mountain in those shoes."

"I've got a coverall and Nikes in my suitcase."

"I don't think I like your attitude, Ms. Blake."

"I know I don't like yours," I said.

The foreman behind him was having trouble not smiling. His eyes were getting shiny with the effort. Ms. Harrison looked a little scared. Bayard had moved to one side, closer to Stirling. Making clear whose side he was on. Coward.

Larry moved closer to me.

"Do you want this job, Ms. Blake?"

"Not enough to take grief about it, no."

Ms. Harrison looked like she'd swallowed a bug. A big, nasty, squirming bug. I think I'd missed my cue to fall down and worship at her boss's feet.

The foreman coughed behind his hand. Stirling glanced at him, then back to me. "Are you always this arrogant?" he asked.

I sighed. "I prefer the word 'confident' to 'arrogant,' but I'll tell you what. I'll tone it down if you will."

"I am so sorry, Mr. Stirling," Bayard said. "I apologize. I had no idea . . ."

"Shut up, Lionel," Stirling said.

Lionel shut up.

Stirling was looking at me with his strange pale eyes. He nodded.

"Agreed, Ms. Blake." He smiled. "I'll tone it down."

"Great," I said.

"All right, Ms. Blake, let's go up to the top and see if you're really as good as you think you are."

"I can look at the graveyard, but until full dark I can't do anything else."

He frowned and glanced at Bayard. "Lionel." That one word had a lot of heat in it. Anger looking for a target. He'd stop picking on me, but Lionel was fair game.

"I did fax you a memo, sir, as soon as I realized that Ms. Blake would be unable to help us until after dark."

Good man. When in doubt, cover your ass with paper.

Stirling glared at him. Bayard looked apologetic but he stood his ground, safe behind his memo.

"I called Beau and had him bring everybody down here on the understanding we could get some work done today." His gaze was very steady on Bayard. Lionel wilted just a little; evidently one memo was not protection enough.

"Mr. Stirling, even if I can raise the graveyard in one night, and that's a big if, what if the dead are all Bouviers? What if it is their family plot? My understanding is that construction will stop until you rebuy the land."

"They don't want to sell," Beau said.

Stirling glared at him. The foreman just smiled softly.

"Are you saying that the entire project is off if this is the Bouvier family plot?" I asked Bayard. "Why, Lionel, you didn't tell me that."

"There was no need for you to know," Bayard said.

"Why wouldn't they want to sell the land for a million dollars?" Larry asked. It was a good question.

Stirling looked at him like he'd just appeared out of thin air. Evidently, the flunkies weren't supposed to talk. "Magnus and Dorcas Bouvier have only a restaurant, called Bloody Bones. It is nothing. I have no idea why they wouldn't want to be millionaires."

"Bloody Bones? What kind of name is that for a restaurant?" Larry asked.

I shrugged. "It doesn't exactly say bon appetit." I looked at Stirling. He looked angry but that was all. I would have bet a million dollars that he knew exactly why the Bouviers didn't want to sell. But it didn't show on his face. His cards were close to his chest and unreadable.

I turned to Bayard. There was an unhealthy flush to his cheeks, and he avoided my gaze. I'd play poker with Bayard any day. But not in front of his boss.

"Fine. I'll change into something more bulky and we'll go take a look."

The pilot handed out my suitcase. The coverall and shoes were on top.

Larry came up to me. "Gee, I wished I'd thought of the coverall. This suit's not going to survive the trip."

I pulled out two pairs of coveralls. "Be prepared," I said.

He grinned. "Thanks."

I shrugged. "One good thing about being nearly the same size." I slipped off the black jacket, which left the gun in plain sight.

"Ms. Blake," Stirling said. "Why are you armed?"

I sighed. I was tired of Raymond. I hadn't even gone up the hill and I didn't want to go. The last thing I wanted to do was stand here and debate whether I needed a gun. The red blouse was short-sleeved. Visual aids are always better than lectures.

I walked over to him with my arms bent outward, exposing the inside of both forearms. There's a rather neat knife scar on my right arm, nothing too

dramatic. My left arm is a mess. It had only been a little over a month since a shapeshifting leopard had opened my arm. A nice doctor had stitched it back together, but there is only so much you can do with claw marks. The cross-shaped burn scar that some inventive vampire servants had put on me was now a little crooked because of the claws. The mound of scar tissue at the bend of my arm where a vampire had bitten through the flesh and gnawed the bone dribbled white scars like water.

"Jesus," Beau said.

Stirling looked a touch pale but he held up well, like he'd seen worse. Bayard looked green. Ms. Harrison paled so that the makeup floated on her suddenly pale skin like impressionist water lilies.

"I don't go anywhere unarmed, Mr. Stirling. Live with it, because I have to."

He nodded, eyes very serious. "Fine, Ms. Blake. Is your assistant armed as well?"

"No," I said.

He nodded again. "Fine. Change, and when you're ready we'll go up."

Larry was zipping up his coverall when I walked back. "I could have been armed, you know," he said.

"You brought your gun?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Unloaded in your suitcase?"

"Just like you told me."

"Good." I let it go. Larry wanted to be a vampire executioner as well as an animator, which meant he needed to know how to use a gun. A gun with silver-plated bullets that could slow a vampire down. We'd work up to shotguns, which could take out a head and heart from a relatively safe distance. Beat the hell out of staking.

I'd gotten him a carry permit on the condition he didn't carry it concealed until I thought he was a good enough shot not to blow a hole in himself or me. I'd gotten him the permit mainly so we could carry it around in the car and go to the range in any spare moments.

The coverall went over the skirt like magic. I took off the heels and put the Nikes on. I left the coverall unzipped enough that I could go for the gun if needed, and I was set to go.

"Are you going up with us, Mr. Stirling?"

"Yes," he said.

"Then lead the way," I said.

He walked past me, glancing at the coveralls. Or maybe visualizing the gun under it. Beau started to follow but Stirling said, "No, I'll take her up alone."

Silence among the three flunkies. I'd expected Ms. Harrison to stay behind in her high-heeled pumps, but I'd been sure the two men would come along. So, from the looks on their faces, had they.

"Wait a minute. You said 'her.' You want Larry to wait down here, too?"

"Yes."

I shook my head. "He's in training. You can't learn if you don't see it done."

"Will you be doing anything that he needs to see today?"

I thought about that for a minute. "I guess not."

"I do get to come up after dark?" Larry asked.

"You'll get to see the down and dirty, Larry. Don't worry."

"Of course," Stirling said. "I have no problem with your associate doing his job."

"Why can't he come along now?" I asked.

"At the price we're paying, humor me, Ms. Blake."

He was being strangely polite, so I nodded. "Okay."

"Mr. Stirling," Bayard said, "are you sure you should go up alone?"

"Why ever not, Lionel?"

Bayard opened his mouth, closed it, then said, "No reason, Mr. Stirling."

Beau shrugged. "I'll tell the men to go home for the day." He started to turn away, then stopped. "Do you want the crew back tomorrow?"

Stirling looked at me. "Ms. Blake?"

I shook my head. "I don't know yet."

"What's your best guess?" he asked.

I looked over at the waiting men. "Do they get paid whether they show up or not?"

"Only if they show up," Stirling said.

"Then no work tomorrow. I can't guarantee they'll have anything to do."

Stirling nodded. "You heard her, Beau."

Beau looked at me, then back to Stirling. He had a strange look on his face, half amused, half something I couldn't read. "Anything you say, Mr. Stirling, Ms. Blake." He turned and strode off over the raw ground, waving at the men as he moved. The men began to leave long before he got to them.

"What do you want us to do, Mr. Stirling?" Bayard asked.

"Wait for us."

"The helicopter, too? It has to leave before dark."

"Will we be down before dark, Ms. Blake?"

"Sure. I'm just going to take a quick look around. I'll need to get back in here after dark, though."

"I'll give you a car and driver for your stay."

"Thanks."

"Shall we, Ms. Blake?" He motioned me forward. Something had changed in the way he was treating me. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I didn't like it.

"After you, Mr. Stirling."

He nodded and took the lead, striding over the red earth in his thousand-dollar shoes.

Larry and I exchanged glances. "I won't be long, Larry."

"Us flunkies aren't going anywhere," he said.

I smiled. He smiled. I shrugged. Why did Stirling want it to be just the two of us? I watched the senior partner's broad back as he marched across the torn earth. I followed him. I'd find out what the secrecy was all about when we got

to the top. I was betting I wouldn't like what I'd hear. Just me and the big cheese on top of the mountain with the dead. What could be better?

Chapter 4>

The view from the top of the mountain was worth the hike. Trees stretched out and out to the horizon. We stood in a circle of forest that showed no hand of man as far as the eye could see. That first blush of green was more pronounced here. But the thing you noticed most was the lavender color of redbuds through the dark trees. Redbuds are such delicate things that if they came out in the height of summer they'd get lost in all the leaves and flowers, but here with nothing but naked trees the redbuds were eye-catching. A few dogwoods had started to bloom, adding their white to the lavender. Spring in the Ozarks, ah.

"The view is magnificent," I said.

"Yes," Stirling said, "it is, isn't it?"

My black Nikes were covered in rust-colored dirt. The raw, wounded earth filled the mountaintop. This hilltop had probably been just as pretty as the rest once. There was an arm bone sticking out of the dirt next to my feet. The lower arm, judging from the length. The bones were slender and still connected by a dry remnant of tissue.

Once I'd seen one bone, my eyes found more to look at. It was like one of those magic-eye pictures where you stare and stare and suddenly see what's there. I saw them all, studding the ground like hands reaching up through a river of rust.

There were a few splintered coffins, their broken halves spilling out into the air, but mostly it was just bones. I knelt and put my hands palm down on the ruined earth. I tried to get some sense of the dead. There was something faint and far-off like a whiff of perfume, but it was no good. In the bright spring sunlight I couldn't work my . . . magic. Raising the dead isn't evil, but it does require darkness. I don't know why.

I stood up, brushing my hands against the coverall, trying to clean the red dust away. Stirling was standing at the edge of the naked dirt staring off into space. There was a distance to his gaze that said he wasn't admiring the trees.

He spoke without looking at me, "I can't bully you, can I, Ms. Blake?"

"Nope," I said.

He turned to me with a smile, but it left his eyes empty, haunted. "I invested everything I had into this project. Not just my money, but clients' money. Do you understand what I am saying, Ms. Blake?"

"If the bodies up here are Bouviers, you're screwed."

"How eloquently you put it."

"Why are we up here alone, Mr. Stirling? Why all the skullduggery?"

He took a deep breath of the gentle air and said, "I want you to say they aren't Bouvier ancestors even if they are." He looked at me when he said it. Watched my face.

I smiled and shook my head. "I won't lie for you."

"Can't you make the zombies lie?"

"The dead are very honest, Mr. Stirling. They don't lie."

He took a step towards me, face very sincere. "My entire future is riding on you, Ms. Blake."

"No, Mr. Stirling, your future rides on the dead at your feet. Whatever comes out of their mouths will decide it."

He nodded. "I suppose that is fair."

"Fair or not, it's the truth."

He nodded again. Some light had gone out of his face, like someone had turned down the power. The lines in his face were suddenly clearer. He aged ten years in a few seconds. When he met my gaze, his dramatic eyes were woeful.

"I'll give you a piece of the profits, Ms. Blake. You could be a billionaire in a few years."

"You know bribing won't work."

"I knew it wouldn't work just a few minutes after we met, but I had to try."

"You really do believe this is the Bouvier family plot, don't you?" I asked.

He took a deep breath and walked away from me to gaze off at the trees. He wasn't going to answer my question, but he didn't have to. He wouldn't be so desperate if he didn't believe he was screwed.

"Why won't the Bouviers sell?"

He glanced back at me. "I don't know."

"Look, Stirling, there are just the two of us up here, nobody to impress, no witnesses. You know why they won't sell. Just tell me."

"I don't know, Ms. Blake," he said.

"You're a control freak, Mr. Stirling. You've overseen every detail of this deal. You have personally seen that every 'i' was dotted, every 't' crossed. This is your baby. You know everything about the Bouviers and their problem. Just tell me."

He just looked at me. His pale eyes were opaque, empty as a window with no one home. He knew, but he wasn't going to tell me. Why?

"What *do* you know about the Bouviers?"

"The locals think they're witches. They do a little fortune-telling, a few harmless spells." There was something about the way he said it, too casual, too offhand. Made me want to meet the Bouviers in person.

"They any good at magic?" I asked.

"How am I supposed to know?"

I shrugged. "Just curious. Is there a reason why it had to be this mountain?"

"Look at it." He spread his arms wide. "It's perfect. It is perfect."

"It is a great view," I said. "But wouldn't the view be equally good over on that mountaintop? Why did you have to have this one? Why did you have to have the Bouviers' mountain?"

His shoulders slumped; then he straightened and glared at me. "I wanted this land, and I got it."

"You got it. Trick is, Raymond, can you keep it?"

"If you are not going to help me, then don't taunt me. And don't call me Raymond."

I opened my mouth to say something else and my beeper went off. I fished under the coverall for it, and checked the number. "Shit," I said.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm being paged by the police. I've got to get to a phone."

He frowned at me. "Why would the police be calling you?"

So much for being a household name. "I'm the legal vampire executioner for a three-state area. I'm attached to the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team."

He was looking very steadily at me. "You surprise me, Ms. Blake. Not many people do that."

"I need to find a phone."

"I have a portable with a battery pack at the bottom of this damned hill."

"Great. I'm ready to head down if you are."

He did one last turn, taking in that breath-stealing billion-dollar view. "Yes, I'm ready to go down."

It was an interesting choice of words, a Freudian slip you might say. Stirling had wanted this land for some perverse reason. Maybe because he was told he couldn't have it. Some people are like that. The more you say no, the more they want you. It reminded me of a certain master vampire I knew.

Tonight I'd walk the land, visit with the dead. It would probably be tomorrow night before I actually tried to raise them. If the police matter was pressing enough, it might be longer. I hoped it wasn't pressing. Pressing usually meant dead bodies. When the monsters are involved, it's never just one dead body. One way or another, the dead multiply.

Chapter 5

We got back to the valley. The construction crew was gone except for Beau the foreman. Ms. Harrison and Bayard stood next to the helicopter, as if huddling against the wilderness. Larry and the pilot stood to one side, smoking, sharing that comradery of all people who are determined to blacken their lungs.

Stirling walked towards them all, his stride firm and confident once more. He'd left his doubts on top of the mountain. or so it seemed. He was the impervious senior partner once more. Illusion is all.

"Bayard, get the phone. Ms. Blake needs to use it."

Bayard gave a startled little jump, like he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't have. Ms. Harrison looked a little flushed. Was there romance in the air? And was that not allowed? No fraternizing among the flunkies.

Bayard ran off across the dirt towards the last car. He fetched what looked like a small, black leather backpack with a handle. He pulled a phone out and handed it to me. It looked like an antennaed walkie-talkie.

Larry walked over smelling of smoke. "What's up?"

"I got beeped."

"Bert?"

I shook my head. "Police." I walked a little ways from our group. Larry was polite enough to stay with them, though he didn't have to. I dialed Dolph's number. Detective Sergeant Rudolf Storr was head of the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team.

He answered on the second ring. "Anita?"

"Yeah, Dolph, it's me. What's up?"

"Three dead bodies."

"Three? Shit," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

"I can't be there soon, Dolph."

"Yes, you can," he said.

There was something in his voice. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The victims are right near you."

"Near Branson?"

"Twenty-five minutes east of Branson," he said.

"I'm already forty miles from Branson in the middle of freaking nowhere."

"The middle of nowhere is where this one is," Dolph said.

"Are you guys flying up?" I asked.

"No, we got a vampire victim in town."

"Jesus, are the other three vamp victims?"

"I don't think so," he said.

"What do you mean, you don't think so?" I asked.

"Missouri State Highway Patrol has this one. Sergeant Freemont is the investigator in charge. She doesn't think it was a vampire because the bodies are cut up. Pieces of the bodies are missing. I had to do a lot of tap dancing to get that much information out of her. Sergeant Freemont seems convinced that RPIT is going to come in and steal all the glory. She was particularly worried about our headline-stealing pet zombie queen."

"It's the pet part that I mind the most," I said. "But she sounds charming."

"I'll bet she's even more charming in person," Dolph said.

"And I get to meet her?"

"Given the choice between a large chunk of the squad coming down later and just you right now, she chose you. I think she sees you alone, without us to back you up, as the lesser evil."

"Nice to be the lesser evil for a change," I said.

"You might get upgraded," Dolph said. "She doesn't know you too well yet."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. Let me test my understanding here. None of you are coming up to the scene?"

"Not right away. You know we're shorthanded until Zerbrowski gets back on duty."

"What does the Missouri State Highway Patrol think about a civilian helping them in a murder investigation?"

"I made it clear that you are a valuable member of my squad."

"Thanks for the compliment, but I still don't have a badge to flash."

"You may if that new federal law goes into effect," Dolph said.

"Don't remind me."

"Don't you want to be a federal marshal?" His voice was very mild. Nah, amused.

"I agreed they should license us, but giving us what amounts to federal marshal status is ridiculous."

"You could handle it."

"But who else? John Burke with the power of the law behind him? Give me a break."

"It won't get passed, Anita. The pro-vampire lobby is too strong."

"From your lips to God's ear. Unless they revoke the need for court orders of execution, it won't make killing them any easier, and they won't do that. I've already gone out of state to execute vamps. I don't need no stinking badge."

Dolph laughed. "If you run into trouble, give a yell."

"I really don't like this, Dolph. I'm out here investigating a murder without any official status."

"See, you do need a badge." I heard him sigh over the phone. "Look, Anita, I wouldn't leave you solo if we didn't have problems of our own. I've got a body on the ground here. When I can, I'll send somebody. Hell, I'd like you to come take a look at our corpse. You're our resident monster expert."

"Give me some details and I'll try to play Kreskin."

"Male, early twenties, rigor hasn't set in."

"Where's the body?"

"His apartment."

"How'd you get there so soon?"

"Neighbor heard a fight, called 911. They called us."

"Give me his name."

"Fredrick Michael Summers, Freddy Summers."

"He got any old vampire bites on his body? Healed bites?"

"Yeah, quite a few. Looks like a damn pincushion. How'd you know?"

"What's the first rule of a homicide?" I said. "You check the nearest and dearest. If he had a vamp lover, there'd be healed bite marks. The more of them,

the longer the relationship has gone on. No vamp can bite a victim three times within a month without running the risk of killing them and raising them as a vamp. You can have different vamps bite somebody, but that would make Freddy a vampire junkie. Ask the neighbors if there were a lot of different guys or girls going in and out at night."

"It never occurred to me that a vampire could be someone's nearest and dearest," Dolph said.

"Legally, they're people. Means they get to have sweethearts, too."

"I'll check the bite radiuses," Dolph said, "If they match one vamp, a lover; different ones, and our boy was doing groups."

"Hope for a lover," I said. "If it's all one vamp, he might even rise from the dead."

"Most vamps know enough to slit the throat or take the head," he said.

"Doesn't sound well planned. Crime of passion, maybe."

"Maybe. Freemont is holding the bodies for you. Eagerly awaiting your expertise."

"I bet."

"Don't bust Freemont's balls on this, Anita."

"I won't start anything, Dolph."

"Be polite," he said.

"Always," I said in my mildest voice.

He sighed. "Try to remember that the stacies may never have seen bodies with pieces missing."

It was my turn to sigh. "I'll be good, scout's honor. Do you have directions?" I got a small notebook with a pen stuck in its spiral top out of a pocket of the coverall. I'd started carrying notebooks just for such occasions.

He gave me what Freemont had given him. "If you see anything fishy at the crime scene, keep the scene intact and I'll try to send some people down. Otherwise, look over the victim, give the stacies your opinion, and let them do their job."

"You really think Freemont would let me close up her shop and force her to wait for RPIT?"

Silence for a second; then, "Do the best you can, Anita. Call if we can do anything from this end."

"Yeah, sure."

"I'd rather have you on a murder than a lot of the cops I know," Dolph said.

That was a very big compliment coming from Dolph. He is the world's ultimate policeman. "Thanks, Dolph."

I was talking to empty air. Dolph had hung up. He was always doing that. I hit the button, turning the phone off, and just stood there for a minute.

I didn't like being out here in unfamiliar territory with unfamiliar police, and partially eaten victims. Hanging around with the Spook Squad legitimized me. I'd even pulled that "I'm with the squad" at crime scenes. I had a little ID badge that clipped to my clothes. It wasn't a police badge, but it did look

official. But pretending on home turf, where I knew I could run to Dolph if I got in trouble for it, was one thing; out here with no backup was another story.

The police have absolutely no sense of humor about civilians meddling in their homicide cases. Can't really blame them. I wasn't really a civilian, but I had no official status. No clout. Maybe the new law would be a good thing.

I shook my head. Theoretically, I'd be able to go into any police station in the country and demand help, or involve myself uninvited in any case. Theoretically. In the real world, the cops would hate it. I'd be as welcome as a wet dog on a cold night. Not federal, not local, and there weren't enough licensed vamp executioners in the country to fill a dozen slots. I could only name eight of us; two of those were retired.

Most of them specialized in vampires. I was one of the few who would look at other types of kills. There was talk of the new law being expanded to include all preternatural kills. Most of the vampire executioners would be out of their depth. It was an informal apprenticeship. I had a college degree in preternatural biology, but that wasn't common. Most of the rogue lycanthropes, occasional trolls run amok, and other more solid beasties were taken out by bounty hunters. But the new law wouldn't give special powers to bounty hunters. Vampire executioners, most of them, worked very strictly within the confines of the law. Or maybe we just had better press.

I'd been screaming about vamps being monsters for years. But until a senator's daughter got herself attacked just a few weeks ago, nobody did shit. Now suddenly it's a cause celebre. The legitimate vampire community delivered the supposed attacker in a sack to the senator's home. They left his head and torso intact, which meant even without arms and legs he wouldn't die. He confessed to the attack. He'd been the new dead and just got carried away on a date, like any other twenty-one-year-old red-blooded male. Yeah, right.

The local hitter, Gerald Mallory, had done the execution. He's based out of Washington, D.C. He has to be in his sixties now. He still uses a stake and hammer. Can you believe it?

There had been some talk that cutting off their arms and legs would allow us to keep vamps in jail. This was vetoed mainly on the grounds of cruel and unusual punishment. It also wouldn't have worked, not for the really old vampires. It isn't just their bodies that are dangerous.

Besides, I didn't believe in torture. If cutting someone's arms and legs off and putting them in a little box for all eternity isn't torture, I don't know what is.

I walked back to the group. I handed the phone to Bayard. "I hope it isn't bad news," he said.

"Not personally," I said.

He looked puzzled. Not an uncommon occurrence for Lionel.

I talked directly to Stirling. "I've got to go to a crime scene near here. Is there someplace to rent a car?"

He shook his head. "I said you'd have a car and driver while you were here. I meant it."

"Thanks. I'm not so sure about the driver, though. This is a crime scene they won't want civilians hanging around."

"A car, then; no driver. Lionel, see that Ms. Blake gets anything she wants."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll meet you back here at full dark, Ms. Blake."

"I'll be here at dusk if I can, Mr. Stirling, but the police matter takes precedence."

He frowned at me. "You are working for me, Ms. Blake."

"Yes, but I'm also a licensed vampire executioner. Cooperation with the local police takes precedence."

"So it's a vampire kill?"

"I am not free to share police information with anyone," I said. But I cursed myself. By bringing up the word "vampire," I'd started a rumor that would grow with the telling. Damn.

"I can't leave the investigation early just to come look at your mountain. I'll be here when I can. I'll definitely look the dead over before daylight, so you won't really lose any time."

He didn't like it, but he let it go. "Fine, Ms. Blake. I will wait here for you even if it takes all night. I'm curious about what you do. I've never seen a zombie raised before."

"I won't raise the dead tonight, Mr. Stirling. We've been over that."

"Of course." He just looked at me. For some reason it was hard to meet his pale eyes. I made myself meet his gaze and didn't look away, but it was an effort. It was like he was willing me to do something, trying to compel me with his eyes like a vampire. But a vampire, even a little one, he was not.

He blinked and walked away without saying another word. Ms. Harrison toddled after him in her high heels on the uneven ground. Beau nodded at me and followed. I guess they'd all come in the same car. Or maybe Beau was Stirling's driver. What a joyous job that must be.

"We'll fly you to the hotel where we booked your rooms. You can unpack, and I'll have a car brought around for you," Bayard said.

"No unpacking, just a car. Murder scenes age fast," I said.

He nodded. "As you like. If you'll get back into the helicopter, we'll be off."

It wasn't until I was taking off the coveralls and repacking both of them that I realized I could have gone with Mr. Stirling. I could have driven out of here, instead of flying. Shit.

Chapter 6

Bayard had gotten us a black Jeep with black-tinted windows and more bells and whistles than I could even guess at. I'd been worried they'd saddle me

with a Cadillac or something equally ridiculous. Bayard had given me the keys with the comment, "Some of these roads are not even paved. I thought you might need something more substantial than just a car."

I resisted the urge to pat him on the head and say "Good flunkie." Hell, he'd made a great choice. Maybe he'd make full partner someday after all.

The trees made long, thin shadows across the road. In the valleys between mountains, the sunlight had softened to a late-afternoon haze. We might make it back to the graveyard by full dark.

Yes, we. Larry sat beside me in his wrinkled blue suit. The cops wouldn't mind his cheap suit. My outfit, on the other hand, might raise a few eyebrows. There aren't many female cops out in the boonies. And fewer who wear short red skirts. I was beginning to really regret my choice of clothes. Insecure: who, me?

Larry's face was shiny with excitement. His eyes sparkled like a kid's on Christmas Day. He was drumming his fingers on the armrest. Nervous tension.

"How you doing?"

"I've never been to a murder scene before," he said.

"There's always a first time."

"Thanks for letting me come along."

"Just remember the rules."

He laughed. "Don't touch anything. Don't walk through the blood. Don't speak unless spoken to." He frowned. "Why the last? I understand all the others, but why can't I talk?"

"I'm a member of the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. You're not. If you go around saying golly gee whiz a dead body, they may catch on."

"I won't embarrass you." He sounded insulted; then a thought occurred to him. "Are we impersonating police officers?"

"No. Keep repeating I'm a member of the Spook Squad, I'm a member of the Spook Squad, I'm a member of the Spook Squad."

"But I'm not," he said.

"That's why I don't want you talking."

"Oh," he said. He settled back into his seat, a little of the shine dimming around the edges. "I've never actually seen a freshly dead body before."

"You raise the dead for a living, Larry. You see corpses all the time."

"It's not the same thing, Anita." He sounded grumpy.

I glanced at him. He had slumped down as far into the seat as the seat belt would allow, arms crossed over his chest. We were at the crest of a hill. A band of sunlight fell like an explosion over his orange hair. His blue eyes looked translucent for a moment as we passed from light into shadow. He looked all scrunched and sulky.

"Have you ever seen a dead person outside of a funeral or a freshly raised zombie?"

He was quiet for a minute. I concentrated on driving, letting the silence fill the Jeep. It was a comfortable silence, at least for me.

"No," he said at last. He sounded like a little boy who had been told he couldn't go outside and play.

"I'm not always good around fresh bodies either," I said.

He looked at me sort of sideways. "What do you mean?"

It was my turn to scrunch into the seat. I fought the urge and sat up straighter. "I threw up on a murder victim once." Even saying it very fast, it was still embarrassing.

Larry scooted up in his seat, grinning. "You're just telling me that to make me feel better."

"Would I tell a story like that about myself if it wasn't true?" I asked.

"You really threw up on a body at a crime scene?"

"You don't have to sound so happy about it," I said.

He giggled. I swear he giggled. "I don't think I'll throw up on the body."

I shrugged. "Three bodies, with parts missing. Don't make promises you can't keep."

He swallowed loud enough for me to hear it. "What do they mean, parts missing."

"We'll find out," I said. "This isn't part of your job description, Larry. I get paid for helping the cops; you don't."

"Will it be awful?" His voice was low, uncertain.

Chopped-up bodies. Was he kidding? "I don't know until we get there."

"But what do you think?" He was staring at me very earnestly.

I glanced back at the road, then at Larry. He looked very solemn, like a relative who'd asked the doctor for the truth. If he would be brave, I could be truthful. "Yeah, it'll be awful."

Chapter 7

It was awful. Larry had managed to stagger from the crime scene before he threw up. The only comfort I could offer him was that he wasn't the only one. Some of the cops were looking a little green around the edges, too. I hadn't thrown up yet, but I was keeping it as an option for later.

The bodies lay in a small hollow near the base of a hill. The ground was nearly knee-deep with leaves. Nobody rakes in the woods. The drought had dried the leaves to a fine, biting crunch underfoot. The hollow was ringed by naked trees and bushes with branches like thin brown whips. When the leaves came out, the hollow would be hidden on all sides.

The body nearest to me was a blond man with hair cut so short it looked like an old-fashioned butch. Blood pooled around the eyeballs, flowing from them down the face. There was something wrong with the face, besides the eyes, but I couldn't quite figure out what. I knelt in the dry leaves, glad that the leg of the coverall was protecting my hose from the leaves and the blood. Blood had pooled to either side of the boy's face, soaking into the leaves. The

blood had dried to a tacky maroon substance. It looked like the teenager's eyes had been crying dark tears.

I touched the tip of my gloved fingers to the blond's chin. It moved in a boneless, wiggling movement that chins were not meant to do.

I swallowed hard and tried to take shallow breaths. I was glad it was still spring. If the bodies had been sitting this long in full summer heat, they'd have been ripe in more ways than one. Cool weather was a blessing.

I put my hands in the leaves and bent from the waist in an awkward sort of push-up motion. I was trying to see under his chin without moving the body again. There, nearly lost in the blood on the neck, was a puncture mark. A puncture mark wider than my outspread hand. I'd seen knife wounds and claw marks that could make a similar wound, but it was too big for a knife and too clean for a claw. Besides, what the hell had a claw that big? It looked like a massive blade had been shoved under the blond's chin, close enough to the front of his face to slice the eyes up from inside the head. That's why the eyes were bleeding, but still looked intact. The sword had nearly pulled the blond's face off his skull.

I ran my gloved fingers over the blond's short hair and found what I was looking for. The tip of the sword, if that's what it was, had come out the top of his head. Then the blade had been withdrawn and the blond had dropped to the leaves. Dead, I hoped, but dying I was sure of.

His legs were missing just below the hip joint. There was almost no blood where the legs had been bisected. They'd been cut off after he'd died. Small blessing, that. He'd died relatively quickly, and had not been tortured. There were worse ways to die.

I knelt by the stubs of his legs. The left bone had been cut clean with one blow. The right bone had splintered, as if the sword struck from the left side, cut the left cleanly, but only got a piece of the right leg. A second blow had been needed to sever the right leg.

Why take the legs? A trophy? Maybe. Serial killers took trophies, clothing, personal items, a body part. Maybe a trophy?

The other two boys were shorter, neither of them over five feet. Younger maybe, maybe not. They were both small and dark-haired, slender. Probably the kind of boys who looked pretty rather than handsome but, frankly, it was hard to tell.

One lay on his back almost opposite from the blond. One brown eye stared up at the sky, glassy and immobile, somehow unreal like the eyes of a taxidermy animal. The rest of his face was sliced in two huge gaping furrows, as if the tip of the sword had been used coming and going like a backhand slap. The third slice had taken out his neck. It was a very clean wound; they all were. The damn sword, or whatever it was, was incredibly sharp. But it was more than a good blade. No human could have been fast enough to take them all without a struggle. But most beasties that will kill a human being won't pick up a weapon to do it.

A lot of things will claw us apart, or eat us alive, but the list of preternatural beings that will cut us up with weapons is pretty small. A troll

may tear up a tree and whap you to death, but it won't use a blade. Not only had this thing used a sword, not a common weapon, but it had some skill.

The blows to the face hadn't killed the boy. Why didn't the other two run? If the blond was killed first, why didn't this one run? Nothing was fast enough that it could take out three teenage boys with a sword before any of them could run. These were not quick blows. Whoever, or whatever, had done this had taken some time with each kill. But they all acted as if they'd been hit by surprise.

The boy had fallen onto his back in the leaves, hands clutching at his throat. The leaves had been scuffed away where his feet had kicked them. I took a shallow breath. I didn't want to probe the wounds, but I was beginning to have a nasty idea.

I knelt and traced the neck wound with my fingertips. The edges of the skin were so smooth. But it was still human flesh, human skin, blood dried to a thick stickiness. I swallowed hard and closed my eyes and let my fingers search for what I thought I'd find. The edge of the wound had two lips, starting about midway. I opened my eyes and traced the double wound with my fingers. My eyes still couldn't see it. There was too much blood. Once the wound was clean, you'd see it, but not here, not like this. The neck had been sliced twice, deeply. One cut was enough to kill. Why twice? Because they were hiding something on the neck.

Fang marks, maybe? Being killed by a vampire would explain why he hadn't tried to crawl away. He'd just lain in the leaves and kicked until he died.

I stared at the last teenager. He was crumpled on his right side. Blood had pooled under him. He was so cut up that at first my eyes didn't want to make sense of what I was seeing. I wanted to look away before my brain caught up to my eyes, but I didn't.

Where the face should have been was just a ripped, gapping hole. The creature had done the same thing to this one as to the blond, but it had been more thorough. The front of the skull had been ripped away. I glanced around, searching the leaves for the piece of bone and flesh, but didn't see it. I had to look back then, at the body. I knew what I was looking at now. I liked it better when I didn't.

The back of the skull was full of blood and gore, like a gruesome cup, but the brain was gone. The blade had sliced him open across the chest and stomach. His intestines spilled out in a thick, rubbery mass. What I thought was his stomach had spilled out from the wound like a balloon half-inflated. The left leg had been chopped off at the hip joint. The ragged cloth of his jeans clung to the hole like the petals of an unopened flower. The left arm had been ripped out just below the elbow. The bone of the humerus was dark with dried blood, sticking up at an odd angle as if the entire arm had been broken at the shoulder and no longer moved. More violent. Had this one struggled a little?

My eyes flicked back to his face. I didn't want to look again, but I hadn't really examined it. There was something horribly personal about disfiguring a person's face. If it had been humanly possible to do all this, I'd have said check their nearest and dearest. As a general rule, only people who love you will cut

up your face. It implies passion that you can't get from strangers. One exception is serial killers. They're working through a pathology in which the victims can represent someone else. Someone that the killer has a personal passion for. When cutting up the faces of strangers they'd be symbolically cutting up, say, a hated father figure.

The fine bones of the boy's sinus cavities had been cracked open. The maxillary was gone, making the face look incomplete. Part of the mandible was still there, but it had been cracked apart back to the rear molars. Some trick of blood flow had left two teeth white and clean. One of the teeth had a filling in it. I stared at that ruined face. I'd been doing pretty good at thinking of it as so much meat, just dead meat. But dead meat didn't get cavities, didn't go to dentists. It was suddenly a teenager, or maybe even younger. I was only judging on height and the apparent age of the other two. Maybe this one with no face was a child, a tall child. A little boy.

The spring afternoon wavered around me. I took a deep breath to steady myself, and it was a mistake. I got a big whiff of bowels and stale death. I scrambled for the side of the hollow. Never throw up on the murder victims. Pisses off the cops.

I fell to my knees at the top of the small rise where all the cops were gathered. I hadn't exactly fallen so much as thrown myself down. I took deep, cleansing breaths of the cool air. It helped. A small breeze was blowing up here, thinning out the smell of death. It helped more.

Cops of all shapes and sizes were huddled at the top of the rise. Nobody was spending more time than they had to down among the dead. There were ambulances waiting on the distant road, but everybody else had had their piece of the bodies. They had been videotaped and trooped through with the crime scene technicians. Everybody had done their job, except me.

"Are you going to be sick, Ms. Blake?" The voice was that of Sergeant Freemont, Division of Drug and Crime Control, DD/CC—affectionately known as D2C2. Her tone was gentle but disapproving. I understood the tone. We were the only two women at the crime scene, which meant we were playing with the big boys. You had to be tougher than the men, stronger, better, or they held it against you. Or they treated you like a girl. I was betting Sergeant Freemont hadn't gotten sick. She wouldn't have allowed it.

I took another cleansing breath and let it out. I looked up at her. From my knees she looked every inch of her five-foot-eight. Her hair was straight, dark, cut just below her chin. The ends were curled under to frame her face. Her pants were a bright sunny yellow, jacket black, blouse a softer yellow. I had a good view of her polished black loafers. There was a gold wedding band on her left hand, but no engagement ring. Deep smile lines put her on the far side of forty, but she wasn't smiling now.

I swallowed once more, trying not to taste that smell on the back of my tongue. I got to my feet. "No, Sergeant Freemont, I'm not going to be sick." I was glad that it was true. I just hoped she didn't make me go back down into the hollow. I'd toss my cookies if I had to look at the bodies again.

"What did that?" she asked. I didn't turn and look where she pointed. I knew what was down there.

I shrugged. "I don't know."

Her brown eyes were neutral and unreadable, good cop eyes. She frowned. "What do you mean, you don't know? You're supposed to be the monster expert."

I let the "supposed to be" go. She hadn't called me a zombie queen to my face; in fact she'd been very polite, correct, but there was no warmth to it. She wasn't impressed, and in her quiet way, with a look or the slightest inflection, she let me know. I was going to have to pull a very big corpse out of my hat to impress Sergeant Freemont, DD/CC. So far I wasn't even close.

Larry walked up to us. His face was the color of yellow-green tissue paper. It clashed with his red hair. His eyes were red-rimmed where his eyes had teared while he threw up. If it's violent enough, sometimes you cry while you vomit.

I didn't ask Larry if he was okay; the answer was too obvious. But he was on his feet, ambulatory. If he didn't faint, he'd be fine.

"What do you want from me, Sergeant?" I asked. I'd been more than patient. For me, I'd been downright conciliatory. Dolph would be proud. Bert would have been amazed.

She crossed her arms over her stomach. "I let Sergeant Storr talk me into letting you see the crime scene. He said you were the best. According to the newspapers, you just do a little magic and figure it all out. Or maybe you can just raise the dead and ask them who killed them."

I took a deep breath and let it out. I didn't use magic to solve crimes, as a general rule; I used knowledge, but saying so would be defending myself. I didn't need to prove anything to Freemont. "Don't believe everything you read in the papers, Sergeant Freemont. As for raising the dead, it won't work with these three."

"Are you telling me you can't raise zombies, either?" She shook her head. "If you can't help us then go home, Ms. Blake."

I glanced at Larry. He gave a small shrug. He still looked shaky. I don't think he had the energy yet to tell me to behave myself. Or maybe he was as tired of Freemont as I was.

"I could raise them as zombies, Sergeant, but you have to have a mouth and a working throat to talk with."

"They could write it down," Freemont said.

It was a good suggestion. It made me think better of her. If she was a good cop, I could put up with a little hostility. As long as I never had to see another set of bodies like the ones below, I could put up with a lot of hostility.

"Maybe, but the dead often lose higher brain function faster after a traumatic death. They might not be able to write, but even if they could, they might not know what killed them."

"But they saw it," Larry said. His voice sounded hoarse, and he coughed gently behind his hand to clear it.

"None of them tried to run away, Larry. Why?"

"Why are you asking him?" Freemont said.

"He's in training," I said.

"Training? You brought a trainee in on my murder case?"

I stared up at her. "I don't tell you how to do your job. Don't tell me how to do mine."

"You haven't done a damn thing yet. Except for your assistant throwing up in the bushes."

An unhealthy flush crept up Larry's neck. Embarrassed when he was almost too nauseated to stand.

"Larry wasn't the only one upchucking in the weeds, just the only one without a badge." I shook my head. "We don't need this shit." I brushed past Freemont. "Come on, Larry."

Larry followed, obedient to the last.

"I don't want any of this leaked to the press, Ms. Blake. If the media gets hold of it, I'll know where it came from." She wasn't yelling, but her voice carried.

I turned. I wasn't yelling either, but everyone could hear me. "You have an unknown preternatural creature that uses a sword, and is faster than a vampire."

Something flickered across her face, like maybe I'd finally done something interesting. "How do you know it's faster than a vampire?"

"None of the boys tried to get away. All of them died where they stood. Either it's faster, or it has some amazing mind control."

"It's not a lycanthrope, then?"

"Even a lycanthrope isn't that fast, and they don't have the ability to cloud men's minds. If a lycanthrope came in there with a sword, the boys would have screamed and run. There would have at least been signs of a struggle."

Freemont just stood there looking. It was a very serious look, like she was weighing and measuring me. She still wasn't happy with me, but she was listening.

"I can help you, Sergeant Freemont. I can help you figure out what did this, maybe, before it does it again."

Her quiet, confident mask crumbled around the edge for a second. If I hadn't been staring at her neutral brown eyes, I'd have missed it.

"Shit," I said, loud. I walked back over to her and lowered my voice. "That's it, isn't it? These aren't the first killings."

She glanced down at the ground, then met my eyes, jaw sort of thrust forward. Her eyes weren't neutral now; they were just a little bit scared. Not for herself, but for what she'd done, or not done.

"The State Highway Patrol can handle a homicide." Her voice was the gentlest I'd heard it.

"How many?" I asked.

"Two before. A couple of teenagers, boy and a girl. Probably necking in the woods." Her voice was soft, almost tired.

"What's the M.E. say?"

"You're right," she said. "It was a blade, probably a sword. The monsters don't use weapons, Ms. Blake. I thought it was the girl's ex-boyfriend. He's got

a collection of Civil War memorabilia, including swords. It seemed pretty cut-and-dried."

I nodded. "Sounds logical."

"None of his swords matched the blows, but I thought he'd ditched the murder weapon. I didn't think . . ." She looked away from me, hands shoved so hard into her pants pockets I thought they'd split the cloth. "The first scene wasn't like this. They were killed with the first blow; it pinned them through the chest into the ground. A human being could have done that." She looked back at me as if wanting me to agree with her. I did.

"Were their bodies cut up beyond the death wound?"

She nodded. "Disfigured faces, her left hand missing. The one that had worn the ex-boyfriend's ring."

"Were their throats cut?"

She frowned, thinking, then nodded. "Hers was. Not much blood either, like it'd been done after she died."

My turn to nod. "Great."

"Great?" Larry asked.

"I think you've got a vampire on your hands, Sergeant Freemont."

They both frowned at me. "Look at the body parts that are missing. The legs of the one boy were cut off after he died. The femoral artery is in the thigh near the groin. I've seen vamps take blood from that in preference to the neck. Cut off the legs, and no fang marks."

"What about the other two?" Freemont asked.

"Maybe the smallest boy was bitten. His neck was sliced twice for no reason. Maybe it was just a little extra violence like the disfigurement of the face. I don't know. But a vamp can take blood from the wrist, the bend of the arm. All parts that are missing."

"One of their brains is missing," Freemont said.

Larry swayed gently beside me. He wiped a hand over his suddenly sweating face.

"You going to be alright?" I asked.

He nodded, not trusting his voice. Brave Larry.

"What better way to throw us off the track than to take something a vamp wouldn't be interested in?" I said.

"Okay, say it makes some sense. Why this way? This is . . ." She spread her hands wide, staring down at the carnage. She was the only one of the three of us still looking at it. "This is nuts. If it was human, I'd say we had a serial killer on our hands."

"We may have," I said softly.

Freemont stared at me. "What the hell do you mean?"

"A vampire was a person once. Just being dead doesn't cure you of any problems you had as a live human being. If you have a violent pathology before death, that won't change just because you're dead."

Freemont looked at me like I was the one who was crazy. I think it was the word "dead" that was bothering her. Once her suspects were dead, they weren't suspects anymore. I tried again. "Say Johnny is a serial killer. He becomes a

vampire. Why should being a vampire make him suddenly less violent? Why not more violent?"

"Oh, my God," Larry said.

Freemont took a deep breath in through her nose and let it out slow.

"Okay, maybe you're right. I'm not saying you are. I've seen pictures of vampire victims and they don't look like this, but if you are, what do you need from me?"

"The pictures from the first crime scene. And a look at where it happened."

"I'll send the file to your hotel," she said.

"Where was the couple killed?"

"Just a few hundred yards from here."

"Let's go take a look."

"I'll have one of the troopers take you over," she said.

"This is a damn small geographic area. I assume you searched it."

"With a fine-tooth comb. But frankly, Ms. Blake, I wasn't sure what we were looking for. The leaves and the dry weather make it almost impossible to find tracks."

"Yeah," I said. "Tracks would help." I glanced back the way I'd come. The leaves were disturbed coming up the hill. "If it is a vampire . . ."

Freemont cut me off. "What do you mean, if?"

I met her suddenly accusing eyes. "Look, Sergeant, if it is a vampire it has more mind control than I've ever seen. I've never met a vampire, even a master vampire, that could hold three humans in thrall while he killed them. Until I saw this, I'd have said it couldn't be done."

"What else could it be?" Larry asked.

I shrugged. "I think it's a vamp, but if I said I was a hundred percent sure, I'd be lying. I try not to lie to the police. There may be no tracks up the hill even if the ground was soft, because the vampire could have flown in."

"Like a bat?" Freemont asked.

"No, they don't change shape into a bat, but they can . . ." I searched for a word and there wasn't one. "They can levitate, sort of fly. I've seen it. I can't explain it, but I've seen it."

"A serial killer vampire." She shook her head, the lines near her mouth deepening. "The Feds are going to be all over this."

"No joke," I said. "Did you find the missing body parts?"

"No, I thought maybe it had eaten them."

"If it ate that much, why not more? If it ate, why no teeth marks? If it ate, why not some scattered body parts, like crumbs?"

She clenched her hands into fists. "You've made your point. It was a vampire. Even a dumb cop knows they don't eat flesh." She turned her brown eyes to me, and there was a lot of anger in them. Not at me, exactly, but I might make a good target. I stared back at her, not flinching. She looked away first. Maybe I wouldn't make a good target.

"I don't like having a civilian contractor in on a homicide investigation, but you spotted things down there that I missed. You're either very good, or you know something that you aren't telling me."

I could have just said I'm good at my job, but I didn't. Didn't want the police thinking I was holding out information when I wasn't. "I've got one advantage over a normal homicide detective, I expect it to be a monster. No one ever calls me in if it's just a stabbing, or a hit-and-run. I don't spend a lot of time trying to come up with nice, normal explanations. It means I get to ignore a lot of theories."

She nodded. "Alright, if you help me catch this thing, I don't care what you do for a living."

"Glad to hear it," I said.

"But no reporters, no media. I am in charge here. This is my investigation. I decide when we go public. Is that clear?"

"Sure."

She stared at me like she didn't believe me. "I mean it about the media, Ms. Blake."

"I don't have a problem with no media, Sergeant Freemont. I prefer it that way."

"For a person who doesn't want the media around, you get a lot of attention."

I shrugged. "I'm involved in only sensational cases, detective. Cases that make good press, good sound bites. I slay vampires, for God's sake; it makes great headlines."

"As long as we understand each other, Ms. Blake."

"No media; it's not a hard concept," I said.

She nodded. "I'll have someone walk you over to the first crime scene. I'll see you get the file at your hotel." She started to turn away.

"Sergeant Freemont?"

She turned back, but it was not a friendly look. "What is it now, Ms. Blake? You've done your job."

"You can't treat this like a human serial killer."

"I'm in charge of this investigation, Ms. Blake. I can do what I damn well please."

I stared up at her, met her hostile eyes. I wasn't feeling too friendly myself. "I am not trying to steal your thunder here. But vampires aren't just people with fangs. If the vamp could catch their minds and hold them while he slaughtered each of them in turn, he could capture your mind, anyone's mind. A vampire that talented could make you think black was white. Do you understand me?"

"It's daylight, Ms. Blake; if it's a vampire then we find it and stake it."

"You'll need a court order of execution."

"We'll get one."

"When you get it, I'll come back and finish the job."

"I think we can handle it."

"You ever stake a vampire?" I asked.

She just looked at me. "No, but I've shot a man. It can't be that much harder."

"It's not harder in the way you mean," I said. "But it's a hell of a lot more dangerous."

She shook her head. "Until the Feds get here, I'm in charge, and not you or anyone else is taking over. Is that clear, Ms. Blake?"

I nodded. "Crystal, Sergeant Freemont." I stared at the cross-shaped pin in the lapel of her suit jacket. Most plainclothesmen had a cross-shaped tie tack. Standard police issue across the country. "You do have silver ammo, right?"

"I'll take care of my men, Ms. Blake."

I raised my hands slightly. So much for girl talk. "Fine, we're leaving. You've got my beeper number. Use it if you need it, Detective Freemont."

"I won't need it."

I took a deep breath and swallowed a lot of words. Picking a fight with the cop in charge of a murder investigation was not the way to get invited back to play. I walked past her without saying good-bye. If I opened my mouth, I wasn't sure what would come out. Nothing pleasant, and nothing useful.

Chapter 8

People who don't camp much think darkness falls from the sky. It doesn't. Darkness slides from the trees and fills them first, then spreads outward to the open places. It was so dark under the trees that I wished for a flashlight. When we stumbled to the road, and our waiting Jeep, it was only dusk.

Larry looked up at the coming night, and said, "We can get back and walk the graveyard for Stirling."

"First let's eat," I said.

He looked at me. "You wanting to stop for food, that's a first. I usually have to beg for drive-up."

"I forgot to eat lunch," I said.

He grinned. "That I believe." The smile faded slowly from his face. "The first time you offer me food voluntarily, and I don't think I can eat." He stared at me. There was enough light left for me to see him search my face. "Could you really eat after what we just saw?"

I looked at him. I didn't know what to say. Not so long ago, the answer would have been no. "Well, I wouldn't want to face a plate of spaghetti, or steak tartare, but yeah, I could eat."

He shook his head. "What the heck is steak tartare?"

"Raw beef, pretty much," I said.

He swallowed hard, looking just a little paler than he had a second ago. "How can you even think of stuff like that so soon after . . ." He let the words trail off. We'd both seen it; no words were needed.

I shrugged. "I've been going to murder scenes for nearly three years, Larry. You learn to survive. Which means you learn to eat after seeing cut-up bodies." I didn't add that I'd seen worse. I'd seen human bodies reduced to a roomful of blood and gobbets of unrecognizable flesh. Not enough left to fill a gallon-size baggie. I hadn't gone out for Big Macs after that one.

"Are you up to at least trying to eat?"

He was looking at me sort of suspiciously. "Where did you have in mind?"

I untied the Nikes and stepped carefully on the gravel road. Didn't want to snag the hose. I unzipped the coverall and stepped out of it. Larry did the same, but he tried to keep his shoes on. He managed to work his feet through, but it required some hopping on one leg.

I folded my coverall carefully so the blood wouldn't touch the Jeep's immaculate interior. I tossed the Nikes into the back floorboard and got the high heels out.

Larry was trying to brush wrinkles from his suit pants, but some things only a dry cleaner could fix.

"How would you like to go to Bloody Bones?" I asked.

He looked up at me, hands still patting at the wrinkles. He frowned.

"Where?"

"It's the restaurant that Magnus Bouvier owns. Stirling mentioned it."

"Did he tell us where it was?" Larry said.

"No, but I asked one of the local cops for restaurants, and Bloody Bones isn't that far from here."

Larry squinted suspiciously at me. "Why do you want to go there?"

"I want to talk to Magnus Bouvier."

"Why?" he asked.

It was a good question. I wasn't sure I had a good answer. I shrugged and climbed into the Jeep. Larry had no choice but to join me, unless he didn't want to continue the conversation. When we were all settled in the Jeep, I still didn't have a really good answer.

"I don't like Stirling. I don't trust him."

"I got the impression you didn't like him," Larry said, his voice very dry.

"But why not trust him?"

"Do you trust him?" I asked.

Larry frowned and thought about it. He shook his head. "Not as far as I could throw him."

"See?" I said.

"I guess so, but you think talking to Bouvier will help?"

"I hope so. I don't like raising the dead for people I don't trust. Especially something this big."

"Okay, so we go eat dinner at Bouvier's restaurant and talk to him; then what?"

"If we don't learn anything new, we go see Stirling and walk the graveyard for him."

Larry was looking at me like he wasn't sure he trusted me. "What are you up to?"

"Don't you want to know why Stirling had to have that mountain? Why the Bouviers' mountain and not someone else's?"

Larry looked at me. "You've been hanging around the police too long. You don't trust anybody."

"The cops didn't teach me that, Larry; it's natural talent." I put the Jeep in gear and off we went.

The trees made long, thin shadows. In the valleys between mountains, the shadows formed pools of coming night. We should have driven straight to the graveyard. Just walking the cemetery wouldn't hurt anything. But if I couldn't go vampire hunting, I could question Magnus Bouvier. That part of my job nobody could chase me out of.

I didn't really want to go vampire hunting. It was almost dark. Hunting vamps after dark was a good way to get killed. Especially one that could control minds like this one could. A vampire can cloud your mind and even hurt you, if its control is good enough, and you won't mind. But once its concentration is off you, onto someone else, and that person starts screaming, you'll wake up. You'll run. But the boys hadn't run. They hadn't woken up. They'd just died.

If this thing wasn't stopped, other people would die. I could almost guarantee it. Freemont should have let me stay. They needed a vampire expert with them on this one. They needed me. Okay, they really needed police with expertise in monsters, but they didn't have that. It had only been three years since Addison v. Clark made vampires legally alive. Three years ago Washington had made the bloodsuckers living citizens with rights. Nobody had thought what that meant for the police. Before the law changed, preternatural crime was handled by bounty hunters, vampire hunters. Those private citizens with enough experience to keep them alive. Most of us had some sort of preternatural power that helped give us an edge against the monsters. Most cops didn't.

Ordinarily human beings didn't fare well against the monsters. There have always been a few of us who had a talent for taking out the beasties. We've done a good job, but suddenly the cops are expected to take over. No extra training, no extra manpower, nothing. Hell, most police departments wouldn't even spring for the silver ammunition.

It had taken this long for Washington, D.C., to realize they might have been hasty. That maybe, just maybe, the monsters were really monsters and the police needed some extra training. It would take years to train the cops, so they were going to short-circuit the process, just make cops out of all the vampire hunters and monster slayers. For myself, personally, it might work. I would've loved to have a badge to shove in Freemont's face. She couldn't have chased me off then, not if it was federal. But for most vampire hunters, it was going to be a

mess. You needed more than preternatural expertise to work a homicide case. You sure as hell needed more than vampire expertise to carry a badge.

There were no easy answers. But out there in the coming darkness were a bunch of police hunting a vampire that could do things I never thought they could do. If I had a badge, I could be with them. I wasn't an automatic safety zone, but I knew a damn sight more than a state cop who had "seen" pictures of vampire victims. Freemont had never seen the real thing. Here was hoping she survived her first encounter.

Chapter 9

Bloody Bones bar and grill lay up a red gravel road. Someone had butchered the trees back to either side, so the Jeep climbed upward towards a black blanket of sky, sprinkled with a million stars. The shine of stars was the only light in sight.

"It is really dark out here," Larry said.

"No streetlights," I said.

"Shouldn't we see the lights from the restaurant by now?"

"I don't know." I was staring at the broken trees. The trunks gleamed white and ragged. It had been done recently, as if someone had gone mad with an axe, or maybe a sword, or something big had ripped off the trunks.

I slowed down, scanning the darkness. Was I wrong? Was it trolls? Was there a Greater Ozark Mountain Troll left in these mountains? One that would use a sword? I was a big believer in a first time for everything.

I brought the Jeep almost to a stop.

"What's wrong?" Larry asked.

I hit the emergency flashers. The road was narrow, barely two cars wide, but it was going uphill. Anybody coming down wouldn't see the Jeep right away. The lights helped, but if someone was speeding . . . Hell, I was going to do it; why quibble? I put the Jeep in park and got out.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm wondering if a troll ripped the trees apart."

Larry started to get out on his side. I stopped him. "Slide over on my side if you want to get out."

"Why?"

"You're not armed." I got the Browning out. It was a solid, comforting weight, but truthfully, against something the size of one of the great mountain trolls, it wasn't too useful. Maybe with exploding bullets, but short of that a 9mm wasn't the gun for hunting something the size of a small elephant.

Larry closed his door and slid across. "You really think there's a troll out here?"

I stared off into the darkness. Nothing moved. "I don't know." I moved to a dry gully that cut the edge of the road. I stepped very carefully into it. The heels sank in the dry, sandy soil. I grabbed a handful of weeds with my left hand and levered myself up the slope. I had to grab one of the butchered trunks to keep from sliding backwards in the loose leaves and pine needles.

My hand came up against thick sap. I fought the urge to jerk away, forcing myself to keep hold of the sticky bark.

Larry scrambled up the bank, slick-soled dress shoes sliding in the dry leaves. I didn't have a free hand to offer him. He caught himself in a sort of half pushup, and used the weeds to move up beside me. "Damn dress shoes."

"At least you're not in heels," I said.

"And don't think I'm not grateful," he said. "I'd break my neck."

Nothing moved in the dark, dark night except us. There was the sound of spring peepers close by, musical, but nothing bigger. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. I pulled myself up to more solid footing and looked at the trees.

"What are we looking for?" Larry asked.

"An axe makes a wide, smooth stroke. If a troll snapped the trunks, they'll be ragged and full of jagged points of wood."

"Looks smooth to me," he said. He ran his fingertips over the naked wood. "But it doesn't look like an axe."

The wood was too smooth. An axe will come in at an angle. This was almost flat, like each tree had been felled with a single stroke, two at most. Some of the trees had been nearly a foot in diameter. No human could do that, even with an axe.

"Who could have done this?"

I searched the darkness, fighting an urge to aim the gun into the dark, but I kept it skyward. Safety first. "A vampire with a sword, maybe."

He stared off into the darkness. "You mean the one that killed the guys? Why would the vampire chop down a bunch of trees after he killed them?"

It was a good question. A great question. But like with so many questions today, I didn't have a good answer. "I don't know. Let's get back to the car."

We scrambled back the way we'd come. Neither of us fell down this time. A record.

When we were at the car I put the gun away. I probably hadn't needed it at all, but then again . . . something cut down those trees.

I used the aloe and lanolin baby wipes that I kept in the car to wipe off blood, to wipe the sap from my hand. The wipes worked nearly as well on tree blood as it did on human.

We drove on, searching for lights. We had to be close to Bloody Bones, unless the directions were way off. Here's hoping they weren't.

"Is that a torch?" Larry asked.

I stared into the darkness. There was a flicker of fire, too high off the ground to be a campfire. Two torches on long poles illuminated a wide gravel turnaround to the left of the road. The trees had been pushed back here, too, but years ago. It was an old, established clearing. The trees formed a backdrop for a

one-story building. A wooden sign hung from the eaves. It was hard to read by torchlight, but it might have read "Bloody Bones."

Dark wooden shingles covered the roof and climbed down the walls, so that the entire building looked like a natural growth that had sprung from the red clay soil. About twenty cars and trucks were parked haphazardly on the dark gravel.

The sign swung in the wind, the torchlight reflecting off the deeply carved words. "Bloody Bones" was carved in smooth, curving letters.

I walked carefully over the gravel in my high heels. Larry's dress shoes worked better on gravel than mine did. "Bloody Bones is a strange name for a bar and grill."

"Maybe they serve ribs," I said.

He made a face at me. "I could not face barbecue anything right now."

"It wouldn't be my first choice either."

The door swung inward directly into the bar. The door swung shut and we were plunged into a fire-shot twilight. Most bars are gloomy places to drink and hide. A place of refuge from the noisy shiny world outside. But as refuges went, this was a good one. There was a bar along one side of the room, and a dozen small tables scattered on the dark polished wood floor. There was a small stage to the left and a jukebox near the back wall where a small hallway probably led to bathrooms and the kitchen beyond.

Every surface was dark wood and polished 'til it shone. Candles with chimney glass over them shone from the walls. A chandelier with more chimney glass and candles hung from the low, dark wood ceiling. The wood was the darkest of mirrors, glowing in the light rather than reflecting it.

The beams that supported the ceiling were carved with fruiting vines and stray leaves that looked like oaks. Every face was turned towards us like a bad western. A lot of the faces were male; the eyes slid over me, saw Larry, and most went back to their drinks. A few stayed hopeful, but I ignored them. It was too early in the night for anybody to be drunk enough to give me grief. Besides, we were armed.

The women were grouped three deep at the bar. They were dressed for a Friday night, if you planned to spend Friday night on a street corner propositioning strangers. They stared at Larry like they wondered if he'd be good to eat. Me, they seemed to hate on sight. If I knew any of them, I'd have said they were jealous, but I'm not the kind of woman to elicit jealousy on sight. Not tall enough, not blonde enough, not Nordic enough, not exotic enough. I'm pretty, but I'm not beautiful. The women looked at me like they saw something I didn't. It made me glance behind me to see if someone had come in behind us, even though I knew no one had.

"What's going on?" Larry whispered.

That was another thing. It was quiet. I'd never been in a bar on a Friday night that you could whisper in and be heard.

"I don't know," I said softly.

The women at the bar parted like someone had asked, giving us a clear view of the bar. There was a man behind the bar. I thought what beautiful hair

she had when I first saw him. The hair fell to his waist like thick, chestnut-colored water. The candle flames gleamed in his hair the same way they shone in the polished wood of the bar.

He raised startling blue-green eyes, like deep sea water, to us. He was dark and lovely rather than handsome, androgynous as a cat. He was exotic as hell and I suddenly understood why the bar was three deep in women.

He sat an amber-filled glass down on a tiny napkin and said, "You're up, Earl." His voice was surprisingly low, like he'd sing deep bass.

A man got up from the tables, Earl probably. He was a large, lumbering man, formed of soft squares like a gentler version of Boris Karloff's monster. Not a cover boy. He reached for his drink, and his arm brushed the back of one of the women. The woman turned, angry. I expected her to tell him to go to hell, but the bartender touched her arm. She was suddenly very still, as if listening to voices I couldn't hear.

The air wavered. I was suddenly very aware that Earl smelled of soap and water. His hair was still damp from the shower. I could lick the water from his skin, feel those big hands on my body.

I shook my head and stepped back into Larry. He caught my arm. "What's wrong?"

I stared at him, clutching his arm, my fingers digging through the cloth of his suit, until I could feel his arm solid under my hand. I turned back to the bar.

Earl and the woman had gone to sit at a table. She was kissing the palm of his calloused hand.

"Jesus," I said.

"What's wrong, Anita?" Larry asked.

I took a deep breath and stood away from him. "I'm okay; it was just unexpected."

"What was?"

"Magic." I stepped up to the bar.

Those amazing eyes stared back at me, but there was no power to them. It wasn't like dealing with a vampire. I could gaze into those beautiful eyes forever, and they would still just be eyes. Sort of.

I placed my hands on the gleaming wood of the bar. More vines and leaves curved around the edge of the heavy wood. I ran my fingers over the deep set carvings. Hand-carved, all of it.

His fingertips caressed the wood like it was skin. It was a proprietarial touch, the way some men touch their girlfriends when they're into ownership. I was betting that he'd carved every inch of it.

A brunette in a dress two sizes smaller than it should have been touched his arm. "Magnus, you don't need a stranger."

Magnus Bouvier turned to the brunette. He trailed those caressing fingertips down her arm. She shivered. He raised her hand gently from his arm, pressing his lips to the back of her hand. "Pick anyone you want, darlin'. You are too beautiful to be denied tonight."

She wasn't beautiful. Her eyes were small and muddy brown, her chin too sharp, nose too large for a thin face. I was staring right at her from not a foot

away, and her face smoothed. Her eyes were suddenly large and sparkling, her thin lips full and moist. It was like seeing her through one of those soft filters they used during the sixties, except more.

I glanced at Larry. He looked like he'd been hit by a truck. A slim, lovely truck. I stared out over the bar, and every other male in the place except Earl was staring at the woman in exactly the same way, as if she'd just appeared before them like Cinderella transformed by her fairy godmother. Not a bad analogy.

I turned back to Magnus Bouvier. He was not staring at the woman. He was staring at me.

I leaned into the bar, meeting his gaze. He smiled slightly. I said, "Love charms are illegal."

The smile widened. "You're much too pretty to be the police." He reached out to touch my arm.

"Touch me and I'll have you arrested for using undue preternatural influence."

"It's a misdemeanor," he said.

"Not if you're not human, it isn't," I said.

He blinked at me. I didn't know him well enough to be sure, but I think I surprised him, like I should have believed he was human. Yeah, right.

"Let's talk at a table," he said.

"Fine with me."

"Dorrie, can you take over for a few minutes?"

A woman came behind the bar. She had the same thick chestnut hair, but it was tied back from her face in a severe ponytail, high and tight on her head. The long, shining tail of hair swung as she moved, like it was alive. Her face, free of hair and makeup, was triangular, exotic, catlike. Her eyes were the same startling seawater green as Magnus's.

The men nearest the bar watched her out of the corners of their eyes, as if afraid to look directly at her. Larry stared at her open-mouthed.

"I'll watch the bar, but that's all," she said. She turned those eyes to Larry and said, "What are you staring at?" Her voice was harsh, thick with scorn.

Larry blinked, closed his mouth, and stuttered. "N-nothing."

She glared at him like she knew he was lying. I got an inkling why the men weren't staring at her.

"Dorcas, be nice to the customers."

She glared at Magnus; he smiled, but he backed down. Magnus stepped out from behind the bar. He was wearing a soft blue dress shirt untucked over jeans so faded they were almost white. The shirt hit him at nearly mid-thigh; he'd had to roll the sleeves over his forearms. Black and silver cowboy boots completed the outfit. Everything but the boots looked borrowed. He should have looked sloppy, too casual among everyone else duded up for a Friday night, but he didn't. His utter confidence made the outfit seem perfect. A woman at one of the tables grabbed the hem of his shirt as he moved past. He pulled it out of her hands with a playful smile.

Magnus led us to a table near the empty stage. He stood, letting me choose my seat; very gentlemanly of him. I sat with my back to the wall so I could see both doors and the room. It was sort of cowboyish, but magic rode the air. Illegal magic.

Larry sat to my right. He'd watched me and scooted his chair a little back from the table so he could see the room too. It was almost frightening how seriously Larry watched what I did. It would keep him alive, but it was like being followed around by a three-year-old with a carry permit. Kind of intimidating.

Magnus smiled at us both, indulgently, like we were doing something cute or amusing. I wasn't in the mood to be amusing.

"Love charms are illegal," I said.

"You said that already," Magnus said. He flashed me a smile that I think was meant to be charming and harmless. It wasn't. There wasn't anything he could do to make himself less than exotic. He sure as hell wasn't harmless.

I stared at him until the smile wilted around the edges, and he swallowed. He spread his long-fingered hands on the tabletop, staring at them. When he looked up, the smile was gone. He looked solemn, a little nervous even. Good.

"It's not a charm," he said.

"The hell it isn't," I said.

"It isn't. A spell, but nothing as mundane as a charm."

"You're splitting hairs," I said.

Larry was staring at us intently. "Was that stuff at the bar a love charm?"

"What stuff at the bar?" Magnus's face was incredibly mild, as if he thought Larry would believe him.

Larry looked at me. "Is he kidding? The woman went from a three to a twenty-three. It had to be magic."

Magnus turned his attention to Larry for the first time, excluding me—and I felt excluded. It was like a ray of sunshine had moved away from me, and I was just a little colder, a little more in the dark.

I shook my head. "Cut the glamor crap."

Magnus turned back to me, and for a minute I felt that warmth. "Stop it."

"What?"

I stood up. "Fine; let's see how funny you think you are in jail."

Magnus encircled my wrist with his hand. His skin should have been work-roughened, but it wasn't. His skin was unnaturally soft, like living velvet. Of course, that could have been illusionary, too.

I tried to pull my hand away, but his grip tightened. I kept pulling, and he kept tightening with that certainty of someone who knew that I couldn't get away. He was wrong. It wasn't just a matter of strength, it was a matter of leverage.

I turned my wrist towards his fingers in a quick turning motion, jerking at the same time. His fingers slid over my skin trying to dig in, but it was over. My wrist felt rubbed raw where his finger had scraped along the skin. It wasn't bleeding, but it hurt anyway. It would have felt better if I rubbed it, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. I was, after all, a tough-as-nails vampire

slayer. Besides, it would have ruined some of the effect, and I liked the surprise on Magnus's face.

"Most women don't pull away once I've touched them."

"You use magic on me one more time, and I'll feed you to the cops."

He stared up at me, a thoughtful look on his face. He nodded. "You win. No more magic on you or your friend."

"Or anyone else," I said. I sat back down carefully, putting a little more distance between me and him. I angled the chair just a little to one side so the grab for my gun would be smoother. I didn't think I'd have to shoot him, but my wrist was aching where he'd squeezed. I had arm wrestled with vampires and shapeshifters. I knew preternatural strength when I felt it. He had it. He could have squeezed until my bones popped out of my skin, but he hadn't squeezed fast enough. He hadn't really wanted to hurt me. His mistake.

"Oh, my customers wouldn't like the magic going away," he said.

"You can't manipulate them like this. It is illegal, and I will turn you in for it."

"But everyone knows that Friday night is lovers' night at Bloody Bones," Magnus said.

"What's lovers' night?" Larry asked.

Magnus smiled, already regaining some of his easy charm, but that flicker of warmth was gone. He was being true to his word, as far as I could tell. Even vampires couldn't work mind control on me without my knowing it. That Magnus could make me nervous.

"I make everyone beautiful or handsome, or sexy, tonight. For a few hours you can be the lover of your own dreams, and someone else's. Though I wouldn't spend the night. The glamor doesn't last that long."

"What are you?" Larry asked.

"What looks like *Homo sapiens*, can breed with *Homo sapiens*, but isn't *Homo sapiens*?" I asked.

Larry's eyes widened. "*Homo arcanus*. He's a fairie?"

"Please keep your voice down," Magnus said. He glanced around at the near tables. No one was paying much attention to us. They were too busy gazing into each other's magically enhanced eyes.

"You can't be passing for human," I said.

"The Bouviers have told the future and made love charms for centuries around here."

"You said it wasn't a love charm," I said.

"They think it is, but you know what it is."

"Glamor," I said.

"What's glamor?" Larry asked.

"It's fairie magic. It's what allows them to cloud our minds, make things seem better or worse than they are."

Magnus nodded, smiling, as if pleased that I knew so much. "Exactly; it's really a minor magic compared to some."

I shook my head. "I've read about glamor, and it doesn't work this well unless you're high court, *Daoine Sidhe*. The seelie court of fairyland doesn't

interbreed with mortals often. At least not commoners. The unseelie court, on the other hand, does."

He stared at me with his beautiful eyes, looking, even without glamor, so gorgeous you wanted to touch him. Wanted to see if his hair was as luxuriant as it looked. He was like a really fine sculpture; you wanted to run your hands over it and feel the lines.

Magnus smiled gently. "The unseelie court is evil, cruel. What I do here is not evil. For one night these people can come here and be their own fantasies. They think it's love charms, and I let them. We all keep the secret of this small illegal act. The local police know. They even come down once in a while and join in."

"But it's not love charms."

"No, it's natural talent on my part. Using my own homegrown magic isn't illegal if everyone knows I'm doing it."

"So you pretend it's love charms, and everyone looks the other way because they're having a good time, but it's really fairie glamor, which isn't illegal with permission of the participants."

"Exactly," he said.

"Which makes it all legal."

He nodded. "Now if I was descended from the dark side of fairie, would I do anything to bring pleasure to so many?"

"If it suited your needs, yeah."

"Isn't there a ban on unseelie court moving to this country?" Larry asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"Not if my family moved here before the ban went into effect. The Bouviers have been here for nearly three hundred years."

"Not possible," I said. "Nobody but the Indians have been here that long."

"Llyn Bouvier was a French fur trapper. He was the first European to set foot on this land. He married into the local tribe, Christianized them."

"Bully for him. So how come you didn't want to sell to Raymond Stirling?"

He blinked at me. "It would disappoint me greatly to find out you are working for him."

"Sorry to disappoint you," I said.

"What are you?"

He hadn't asked who, he'd asked what. It was a very different question. It sort of stopped me for a second.

"I'm Anita Blake; this is Larry Kirkland. We're animators."

"I take it you don't draw cartoons," he said.

It made me smile. "No. We raise the dead; 'animate' from the Latin, to give life."

"Is that all you do?" He was staring at me very intently, like there was something written on the inside of my skull and he was trying to read it.

It was an uncomfortable level of scrutiny, but I've been stared at by the best. I met his eyes and answered. "I'm a licensed vampire executioner."

He shook his head gently. "I didn't ask what you did for a living. I asked what you were."

I frowned. "Maybe I don't understand the question."

"Perhaps you don't, but your friend asked what I was. You said I was a fairie. I ask you what you are, and you describe your job. It would be like me saying I'm a bartender."

"I don't know how to answer you, then," I said.

He was still staring at me. "Yes, you do. I can see a word in your eyes. One word."

When he said it, a word did come to mind. "Necromancer. I'm a necromancer."

Magnus nodded. "Does Mr. Stirling know what you are?"

"I doubt he'd understand even if I told him."

"Do you really have the ability to control all types of undead?" Magnus asked.

"Can you really make a hundred shoes in a single night?" I asked.

Magnus smiled. "Wrong kind of fairie."

"Yeah," I said.

"If you're working for Stirling, why are you here? I hope you didn't come here to try to persuade me to sell. I'd hate to have to say no to such a lovely woman."

"Can the compliments, Magnus. It won't get you anywhere."

"What would get me somewhere?"

I sighed. "I've got too many men on my plate now."

"That's the God's honest truth," Larry muttered.

I frowned at him.

"I'm not asking you out on a date. I'm asking you into my bed."

I frowned at Magnus. No, glared was a better word. "Not in this lifetime."

"Sex between supernatural beings is always amazing, Anita."

"I'm not a supernatural being."

"Now who's splitting hairs?"

I didn't know what to say to that, so I said nothing. I rarely get in trouble with silence.

Magnus smiled. "I've made you uncomfortable. I am sorry, but I'd never have forgiven myself if I hadn't asked. It's been a long time since I was with anyone who wasn't straight human. Let me buy you both drinks, to make up for my rudeness."

I shook my head. "Menus would be fine. We haven't eaten yet."

"The meals will be on the house."

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't particularly like you, and I don't take favors from people I don't like."

He sat back in his chair, a strange, almost startled expression on his face. "You are direct."

"You have no idea," Larry said.

I resisted the urge to kick Larry under the table and said, "Can we have some menus?"

He raised a hand and called, "Two menus, Dorrie."

Dorrie brought them over. "I'm part owner of this place, not your waitress, Magnus. Hurry it up."

"Don't forget that appointment I've got tonight, Dorrie." His voice was mild. She wasn't fooled.

"You aren't leaving me alone with these people. I will not . . ." She glanced at us. "I don't approve of lovers' night. You know that."

"I'll take care of everybody before I leave. You won't have to sully your morals."

She glared at all of us in turn. "You're leaving with them?"

"No," he said.

She turned on her heel and stalked back to the bar. The men who weren't paired off watched her swaying back, carefully, not staring until she couldn't see them.

"Your sister doesn't approve of abusing glamor?" I asked.

"Dorrie doesn't approve of a lot of things."

"She has morals."

"Implying I don't," he said.

I shrugged. "You said it, not me."

"She always this judgmental?" he asked Larry.

Larry nodded. "Usually."

"Let's just order our food," I said.

Larry smiled, but he looked down at the menu.

It was a laminated piece of paper printed on both sides. I ordered a cheeseburger, well done, house fries, and a large Coke. I hadn't had caffeine in several hours; I was running low.

Larry was frowning at the menu. "I don't think I could eat a hamburger right now."

"They've got salads," I said.

Magnus laid his fingertips against the back of Larry's hand. "Something swims up behind your eyes. Something . . . awful just behind your eyes."

Larry stared at him. "I don't know what you mean."

I grabbed Magnus's wrist and pulled him away from Larry. He turned his eyes to me, but there was more than just their color to make them hard to stare at. The pupil of his eyes had spiraled down like the eye of a bird. Human eyes just didn't do that.

I was suddenly very aware that I was still holding his wrist. I drew my hand away. "Stop reading us, Magnus."

"You wore gloves, or I'd be able to tell what you'd touched," he said.

"It's an ongoing police investigation. Anything you discern by psychic means must be held confidential, or you're liable just as if you stole information out of our files."

"Do you always do that?" he asked.

"What?"

"Quote the law when you're nervous."

"Sometimes," I said.

"I saw blood, that's all. My gifts are rather limited in the area of far-seeing. You should shake Dorrie's hand. Far-seeing is her strong suit."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Larry said.

He smiled. "You are not police, or you wouldn't have threatened me with the police, but you were with them earlier. Why?"

"I thought all you saw was blood," I said.

He had the grace to look embarrassed; nice to know he could be embarrassed. "A little bit more, perhaps."

"Touch clairvoyance isn't a traditional fey power."

"Our many-times-great-grandmother was the daughter of a shaman, so the story goes."

"Getting magic from both sides of the family tree," I said. "Dirty pool."

"Clairvoyance isn't magic," Larry said.

"A really good clairvoyant will make you think it is," I said. I stared at Magnus. The last clairvoyant who had touched me and seen blood had been horrified. He hadn't wanted to touch me again. He hadn't wanted me anywhere near him. Magnus didn't look horrified, and he'd offered to have sex with me. Different strokes for different folks.

"I'll take your order through to the kitchen myself, if you'll just decide what you want," he said.

Larry stared at the menu. "A salad, I guess. No dressing." He thought about it some more. "No tomatoes."

Magnus started to stand.

"Why won't you sell to Stirling?" I asked.

Magnus cocked his head to one side, smiling. "The land has been in our family for centuries. It's our land."

I looked at him and couldn't read his face. It could have been the absolute truth, or a boldfaced lie.

"So the only reason you don't want to be a millionaire is because of what . . . family tradition?"

The smile deepened. He leaned closer, long hair spilling forward. He whispered, and it was quiet enough that he needed to whisper. "Money is not everything, Anita. Though Stirling seems to think it is."

His face was very close, just barely far enough away for me not to complain. I could smell his aftershave, faint as if you'd have to get very near his skin to smell it, but it would be worth the effort.

"What do you want, Magnus, if it's not money?" I stared at him from too close. His long hair trailed over my hand.

"I told you what I wanted."

Even without the glamor he was trying to sweet-talk me, distract me. "What happened to the trees out by your road?" I didn't distract that easily.

He blinked long lashes. Something slid behind his eyes. "I happened."

"You cut down those trees?" Larry asked.

Magnus turned to him, and I was glad not to be staring at him from inches away. "Sadly, yes."

"Why?" I asked.

He straightened up, suddenly businesslike. "I got drunk and went on a little rampage." He shrugged. "Embarrassing, isn't it?"

"That's one word for it," I said.

"I'll go get your food. One naked salad coming up."

"You remember what I'm getting?" I asked.

"Meat burned to death; I remember."

"You sound like a vegetarian."

"Oh, no," he said. "I eat all sorts of things."

He walked away through the crowd before I could decide if I'd been insulted or not. Just as well. For the life of me, I couldn't think of a good comeback line.

Chapter 10

Dorcas brought our food without a word. She seemed angry—maybe not at us, but with us. Or with everything. I sympathized. Magnus went behind the bar, spreading his own special brand of magic to his customers once more. He glanced our way and smiled but didn't come back to finish our talk. Of course; we'd been finished. I was all out of questions.

I took a bite of my cheeseburger. It was almost crispy around the edges, not a smidgen of pink in the center. Perfect.

"What's wrong?" Larry asked. He was nibbling at a lettuce leaf.

I swallowed. "Why should something be wrong?"

"You're frowning," he said.

"Magnus didn't come back to the table."

"So? He answered all our questions."

"Maybe we just don't know the right questions to ask."

"You suspect him of something now?" Larry shook his head. "You have been hanging around with cops too long, Anita. You think everyone's up to something."

"They usually are." I took another bite of burger.

Larry squinched his eyes tight.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked.

"There's juice coming out of your burger. How can you eat that after what we just saw?"

"I guess this means you don't want me to put ketchup on my fries."

He looked at me with something near physical pain on his face. "How can you make jokes?"

My beeper went off. Had they found the vampire? I hit the button, and Dolph's number flashed at me. Now what?

"It's Dolph. Eat hearty. I'll phone from the Jeep and be back."

Larry stood up with me. He put a tip on the table and left his salad nearly untouched. "I'm done."

"Well, I'm not. Have Magnus pack my meal to go." I left him staring forlornly down at my half-eaten burger.

"You're not going to eat it in the car, are you?"

"Just have it packed up." I went for the Jeep and its fancy phone. Dolph answered on the third ring. "Anita?"

"Yeah, Dolph, it's me. What's up?"

"Vampire victim out near you."

"Shit, another one."

"What do you mean another one?"

That stopped me. "Freemont didn't call you after I talked to her?"

"Yeah, she said good things about you."

"That surprises me; she wasn't too friendly."

"How not friendly?"

"She wouldn't let me hunt vampires with her."

"Tell me," Dolph said.

I told him.

Dolph was quiet for a very long time after I finished. "You still there, Dolph?"

"I'm here. I wish I wasn't."

"What's going on, Dolph? Why would Freemont call and tell you what a good job I'm doing, but not ask for the squad's help on something this big?"

"I bet she hasn't called the Feds either," Dolph said.

"What's going on, Dolph?"

"I think Detective Freemont is pulling a Lone Ranger on us."

"The federal boys are going to want a piece of this. The first vampire serial killer in recorded history. Freemont can't keep it to herself."

"I know," Dolph said.

"What are we going to do?"

"The body on the ground this time sounds like a straightforward vampire kill. It's classic, bite marks, no other damage to the body. Could it be a different vamp?"

"Could be," I said.

"You sound doubtful."

"Two rogue vamps in this small a geographical area, this far from a city, doesn't seem likely."

"The body wasn't cut up."

"There is that," I said.

"How sure are you that the first killer is a vamp? Is there anything else it could be?"

I opened my mouth to say no, and closed it. Anybody who could cut down all those trees in one drunken brawl could certainly cut up people. Magnus had

his glamor. I wasn't sure it was capable of doing what I'd seen in the clearing, but . . .

"Anita?"

"I might have an alternative."

"What?"

"Who," I said. I hated giving Magnus up to the cops. He'd kept his secret so long, but . . . what if the question I should ask was, had he killed five people? I'd felt the strength in his hands. I remembered the clean trunks of the trees, cut by just one blow, two at most. I flashed on the murder scene. The blood, the naked bone. I couldn't rule Magnus out, and I couldn't afford to be wrong.

I gave him up to Dolph. "Can you keep the part about him being fairie out of it for a while?"

"Why?"

"Because if he didn't do it, then his life is ruined."

"A lot of people have fey blood in them, Anita."

"Tell that to the college student last year whose fiance beat her to death when he found out he was about to marry a fairie. He protested in court that he hadn't meant to kill her. The fey were supposed to be hard to kill, weren't they?"

"Not everyone is like that, Anita."

"Not everyone, but enough."

"I'll try, Anita, but I can't promise."

"Fair enough," I said. "Where's the new victim?"

"Monkey's Eyebrow," he said.

"What?"

"That's the name of the town."

"Jesus. Monkey's Eyebrow, Missouri. Let me guess. It's a small town."

"Big enough to have a sheriff and a murder."

"Sorry. Do you have directions?" I fished my small, spiral-bound notebook out of the pocket of the black jacket.

He gave me directions. "Sheriff St. John is holding the body for you. He called us first. Since Freemont wants to go it alone, we'll let her."

"You're not going to tell her?"

"No."

"I don't suppose Monkey's Eyebrow has a crime scene unit, Dolph. If we don't have Freemont come in with her people, we're going to need somebody. Can you guys come down yet?"

"We're still working our own murder. But since Sheriff St. John called us in for his murder, we'll be in the area as soon as we can get there. Not tonight, but tomorrow."

"Freemont's supposed to send over crime-scene photos from the first couple that was killed. I bet if I asked she might send over photos from the second scene, too. Show-and-tell tomorrow when you get here."

"Freemont may be suspicious about you asking for more pictures," Dolph said.

"I'll tell her I want them for comparison. She may be trying to hog the case for herself, but she wants it solved. She just wants to solve it herself."

"She's a glory hound," Dolph said.

"Looks that way."

"I don't know if I'll be able to keep Freemont out of the second case or not, but I'll try to give you some lead time, so you can look around without her breathing down your neck."

"Much appreciated."

"She said you had your assistant with you at the crime scene. Had to be Larry Kirkland, right?"

"Right."

"What are you doing bringing him to crime scenes?"

"He'll have a degree in preternatural biology this spring. He's an animator and a vampire slayer. I can't be everywhere, Dolph. If I think he can handle it, I thought it might be nice to have two monster experts."

"It might. Freemont said Larry lost his lunch all over the crime scene."

"He didn't throw up on the crime scene, just near it."

There was a moment of silence. "Better than throwing up on the body."

"I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

"No," Dolph said, "you aren't."

"Great. Larry and I will get out there as soon as we can. It's about a thirty-minute drive, maybe more."

"I'll tell Sheriff St. John you're on your way." He hung up.

I hung up. Dolph was training me never to say good-bye over the phone.

Chapter 11

Larry slumped in the seat as far as the seat belt would let him. His hands were clenched tight in his lap. He stared out into the dark like he was seeing something besides the passing scenery. Images of butchered teenagers dancing in his head, I bet. They weren't dancing in mine. Not yet. I might see them in my dreams, but not awake, not yet.

"How bad will this one be?" he asked. His voice sounded quiet, strained.

"I don't know. It's a vampire victim. Could be neat, just a couple of puncture wounds; could be carnage."

"Carnage like the three boys?"

"Dolph said no, said it's classic, just bite marks."

"So it won't be messy?" His voice was squeezed down to a near whisper.

"Won't know until we get there," I said.

"You couldn't just comfort me?" His voice sounded so small, so uncertain that I almost offered to turn the Jeep around. He didn't have to see another murder scene. It was my job, but it wasn't his job, not yet.

"You don't ever have to see another murder scene, Larry."

He turned his head and looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"You've had your quota of blood and guts for one day. I can turn around and drop you back at the hotel."

"If I don't come tonight, what happens next time?"

"If you aren't cut out for this kind of work, you aren't cut out for it. No shame in that."

"What about next time?" he asked.

"There won't be a next time."

"You aren't getting rid of me that easy," he said.

I hoped the darkness hid the smile on my face. I kept it small.

"Tell me about vampires, Anita. I thought a vampire couldn't drink enough blood in one night to kill somebody."

"Pretty to think so," I said.

"They told us in college that a vampire couldn't drain a human being with one bite. Are you saying that's not true?"

"They can't drink a human dry with one bite, in one night, but they can drain one with one bite."

He frowned at me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"They can pierce the flesh and drain the blood without drinking it."

"How?" he asked.

"Just put the fangs in, start the blood flow, and let the blood fall down your body onto the ground."

"But that's not taking blood for food, that's just murder," Larry said.

"And your point is?" I said.

"Hey, isn't that our turnoff?"

I caught a glimpse of the road sign. "Damn." I slowed down, but couldn't see over the crest of the hill. I didn't dare U-turn until I was sure there were no cars coming the other way. It was another half mile before we came to a gravel road. There was a row of mailboxes beside the road.

Trees grew so close to the road that even winter-bare they covered the one-lane road in shadows. There was no place to turn around. Hell, if a second car had come, one of us would have had to back up.

The road rose up and up, as if it were going to go straight into the sky. At the crest of the hill I could see nothing in front of the car. I had to simply trust that there was more road in front of us, rather than some endless precipice.

"Jesus, this is steep," Larry said.

I eased the Jeep forward and the tires touched road. My shoulders loosened just a little. There was a house just up ahead. The porch light was on, like they were expecting company. The bare light bulb was not kind. The house was unpainted wood with a rusting tin roof. Its raised porch sagged under the weight of the front seat of a car that was sitting by the screen door. I turned around in the dirt in front of the house that passed for a front yard. It looked

like we weren't the first car to do it. There were deep wheel ruts in the powder-dry dirt from years of cars turning in and out.

By the time we got down to the end of the road, the darkness was pure as velvet. I hit the Jeep's high beams, but it was like driving in a tunnel. The world existed only in the light; everything else was blackness.

"I'd give a lot for a few streetlights right now," Larry said.

"Me, too. Help me spot our road. I don't want to drive past it twice."

He leaned forward in his seat, straining against the shoulder belt. "There." He pointed as he spoke. I slowed and turned carefully onto the road. The headlights filled the tunnel of trees. This road was just bare red earth. The dirt rose in a mist around the Jeep. For once I was glad of the drought. Mud would have been a real bitch on a dirt road.

The road was wide enough that if you had nerves of steel, or were driving someone else's car, you could drive two cars abreast. A stream cut across the road, with a ditch at least fifteen feet deep. The bridge was nothing but planks laid across some beams. No rails, no nothing. As the Jeep crept over the bridge, the planks rattled and moved. They weren't nailed in. God.

Larry was staring at the drop, his face pressed against the tinted glass. "This bridge isn't much wider than the car."

"Thank's for telling me, Larry. I'd have never noticed on my own."

"Sorry."

Past the bridge, the road was still wide enough for two cars. I guess if two cars met at the bridge they took turns. There was probably some traffic law to cover it. First car on the left gets to go first, maybe.

At the crest of the hill, lights showed in the distance. Police lights strobed the darkness like multicolored lightning. They were farther away than they looked. We had two more hills to go up and down before the lights reflected off the bare trees, making them look black and unreal. The road spilled into a wide clearing. A lawn spread up from the road, surrounding a large white house. It was a real house with siding and shutters and a wraparound porch. It was two-storied and edged with neatly trimmed shrubs. The driveway was white gravel, which meant someone had shipped it in. Narcissus edged the driveway in two thick stripes.

A uniformed policeman stopped us in the foot of the sloping drive. He was tall, big through the shoulders, and had dark hair. He shined a flashlight into the car. "I'm sorry, miss, but you can't go up there right now."

I flashed my ID at him and said, "I'm Anita Blake. I'm with the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. I was told Sheriff St. John is expecting me."

He leaned into the open window and flashed his light at Larry. "Who's this?"

"Larry Kirkland. He's with me."

He stared at Larry for a few seconds. Larry smiled, doing his best to look harmless. He's almost as good at it as I am.

I had a good view of the cop's gun as he leaned into the window. It was a Colt .45. Big gun, but he had the hands for it. I caught a whiff of his aftershave; Brut. He'd leaned too far into the window to look at Larry. If I'd had a gun

hidden in my lap, I could have fed it to him. He was big, and I bet sheer size saw him through a lot, but it was careless. Guns don't care how big you are.

He nodded and pulled out of the car. "Go on up to the house. Sheriff's expecting you." He didn't sound particularly happy about that.

"You got a problem?" I asked.

He gave a smile, but it was sour. He shook his head. "It's our case. I don't think we need any help; that includes you."

"You got a name?" I asked.

"Coltrain. Deputy Zack Coltrain."

"Well, Deputy Coltrain, we'll see you up at the house."

"I guess you will, Miss Blake."

He thought I was a cop and deliberately didn't call me "officer" or "detective." I let it go. If I really had a professional title I'd have demanded it, but getting into an argument because he wouldn't call me "detective" when I wasn't one seemed counterproductive.

I drove up and parked between the police cars. I clipped my ID to my lapel. We walked up the pale curve of sidewalk, and no one stopped us. We stood outside the door in a silence that was almost eerie. I'd been to a lot of murder scenes. One thing they weren't was silent. There was no static crackle of police radios, no men milling around. Murder scenes were always thick with people: plainclothes detectives, uniforms, crime scene techs, people taking photographs, video, the ambulance waiting to take the body away. We stood on the freshly swept porch in the cool spring night with the only sounds the calls of frogs. The high-pitched, peeping sound played oddly with the swirling police lights.

"Are we waiting for something?" Larry asked.

"No," I said. I rang the glowing doorbell. The sound gave a rich *bong* deep within the house. A small dog barked furiously, somewhere deep in the house. The door opened. A woman stood framed in the light from the hall, placing most of her in shadow. The police lights strobed across her face, painting in neon Crayola flashes. She was about my height with dark hair that was either naturally curly or had a really good perm. But she'd done more with it than I did, and it framed her face neatly. Mine always looked sort of unruly. She was wearing a button-down shirt with long sleeves untucked over jeans. She looked about seventeen, but I wasn't fooled. I looked young for my age, too. Heck, so did Larry. It can't just be being short, can it?

"You aren't the state police," she said. She seemed very sure of that.

"I'm with the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team," I said. "Anita Blake. This is my colleague Larry Kirkland."

Larry smiled and nodded.

The woman moved back out of the door, and the light from the hallway fell full on her face. It added five years to her age, but they were a good five years. It took me a minute to realize she was wearing very understated makeup. "Please come in, Miss Blake. My husband, David is waiting with the body." She shook her head. "It's awful."

She peered out into the colored darkness before she closed the door. "David told him to turn off those lights. We don't want everyone for miles to know what's happened."

"What's your name?" I asked.

She blushed slightly. "I'm sorry; I'm not usually this scattered. I'm Beth St. John. My husband is the sheriff. I've been sitting with the parents." She made a small motion towards a set of double doors to the left of the main entrance.

The dog was still barking behind those doors like a small furry machine gun. A man's voice said, "Quiet Raven." The barking stopped.

We were standing in an entryway that had a ceiling that soared up to the roof, as if the architect had cut a piece out of the room above us to create the sweeping space. A crystal chandelier sparkled light down on us. The light cut a rectangle out of the darkened room to our right. There was a glimpse of a cherrywood dining room set so polished it gleamed.

The hallway cut straight back to a distant door that probably led to the kitchen. Stairs ran along the wall with the double doors. The bannister and door edges were white, the carpet was pale blue, the wallpaper white with tiny blue flowers and tinier leaves. It was open and airy, bright and welcoming, and utterly quiet. If we could have found a piece of uncarpeted floor, we would have dropped a pin and listened to it bounce.

Beth St. John led us up the blue-and-white stairway. In the center of the hallway on the right-hand side was a series of family portraits. They began with a smiling couple; smiling couple and smiling baby; smiling couple and one smiling baby, one crying baby. I walked down the hallway, watching the years pass by. The babies became children, a girl and a boy. A miniature black poodle appeared in the pictures. The girl was the oldest, but only by about a year. The parents grew older, but didn't seem to mind. The parents and the girl smiled; sometimes the boy did, sometimes he didn't. The boy smiled more on the other wall, where the camera had caught him tanned with a fish, or with hair slicked back from just coming out of the pool. The girl smiled everywhere you looked. I wondered which of them was dead.

There was a window at the end of the hallway. The white drapes framed it; no one had bothered to draw them. The window looked like a black mirror. The darkness pressed against the glass like it had weight.

Beth St. John knocked on the last door to the right, next to that pressing darkness. "David, the detectives are here." I let that slide. The sin of omission is a many-splendored thing.

I heard movement in the room, but she stepped back before the door could open. Beth St. John backed up into the middle of the hallway so there would be no chance of her seeing inside the room. Her eyes flicked from one picture to another, catching glimpses of smiling faces. She put a slender hand to her chest, as if she was having trouble breathing.

"I'm going to go make coffee. Do you want some?" Her voice was strained around the edges.

"Sure," I said.

"Sounds good," Larry said.

She gave a weak smile and marched down the hallway. She did not run, which got her a lot of brownie points in my book. I was betting it was Beth St. John's first murder scene.

The door opened. David St. John was wearing a pale blue uniform that matched the one his deputy wore, but there the resemblance ended. He was about five-foot-ten, thin without being skinny, like a marathon runner. His hair was a paler, browner version of Larry's red. You noticed his glasses before you noticed his eyes, but the eyes were worth noticing. A perfect pale green like a cat's. Except for the eyes it was a very ordinary face, but it was one of those faces you wouldn't grow tired of. He offered me his hand. I took it. He barely touched my hand, as if afraid to squeeze. A lot of men did that, but at least he offered to shake hands; most don't bother.

"I'm Sheriff St. John. You must be Anita Blake. Sergeant Storr told me you'd be coming." He glanced at Larry. "Who's this?"

"Larry Kirkland."

St. John's eyes narrowed. He stepped fully into the hallway, closing the door behind him. "Sergeant Storr didn't mention anyone else. Can I see some ID?"

I unclipped my badge ID. He looked at it and shook his head. "You're not a detective."

"No, I'm not." I was mentally cursing Dolph. I'd known it wouldn't work.

"How about him?" He jerked his chin at Larry.

"All I have on me is a driver's license," Larry said.

"Who are you?" the sheriff asked.

"I am Anita Blake. I am part of the Spook Squad. I just don't happen to have a badge. Larry is a trainee." I fished my new vampire executioner's license out of my jacket pocket. It looked like a glorified driver's license, but it was the best I had.

He peered at the license. "You're a vampire hunter? It's a little early for you to be called in. I don't know who did it yet."

"I'm attached to Sergeant Storr's squad. I come in at the start of a case instead of the end. It tends to keep the body count down that way."

He handed back the license. "I didn't think Brewster's law had gone into effect."

Brewster was the senator whose daughter got eaten. "It hasn't. I've been working with the police for a long time."

"How long?"

"Nearly three years."

He smiled. "Longer than I've been sheriff." He nodded, almost as if he'd answered a question for himself. "Sergeant Storr said if anybody could help me solve this, it was you. If the head of RPIT has that much confidence in you, I'm not going to refuse the help. We've never had a vampire kill out here, ever."

"Vampires tend to stay near cities," I said. "They can hide their victims better that way."

"Well, no one tried to hide this one." He pushed the door open and made a little arm gesture, ushering us in.

The wallpaper was all pink roses, big old-fashioned cabbage roses. There was an honest-to-God vanity, with a raised mirror and everything, that looked like it might be an antique, but everything else was white wicker and pink lace. It looked like the room for a much younger girl.

The girl lay on the narrow bed. The bedspread matched the wallpaper. The sheets twisted up underneath her body were jellybean pink. Her head lay on the edge of the pillows, as if it had slipped to one side after she was laid on them.

The pink curtains fanned against the open window. A cool breeze crawled through the room, ruffling her thick black hair. It had been curled and styled with hair gel. There was a small red stain under her face and neck where the sheets had soaked up some blood. I was betting there was a bite mark on that side of the neck. She wore makeup not nearly as well applied as Beth St. John's, but the attempt had been made. The lipstick was badly smeared. One arm hung off into space, the hand half-cupped as if reaching for something. The nails were shiny with fresh red nail polish. Her long legs were spread-eagled on the bed. There were two fang marks high on her inner thigh—not fresh, though. Her toenails were painted to match her fingers.

She was still almost wearing the black teddy she'd started the night in. The straps had been pushed down her shoulders, exposing small, well-formed breasts. The crotch had been ripped out, or was one of the ones that snapped open, because the bottom was pushed up nearly to her waist until the teddy was little more than a belt. With her legs spread wide, she was completely exposed.

That, more than anything, pissed me off. He could have at least covered her up, not left her like some whore. It was arrogant and cruel.

Larry was standing across the room at the other window. It was open too, spilling cool air into the room.

"Have you touched anything?"

St. John shook his head.

"Have you taken any photos?"

"No."

I took a deep breath, reminding myself that I was a guest here and had no official status. I could not afford to piss him off. "What have you done?"

"Called you, and the state cops."

I nodded. "How long ago did you find the body?"

He checked his watch. "An hour ago. How did you get here so fast?"

"I wasn't ten miles away," I said.

"Lucky for me," he said.

I looked at the girl's body. "Yeah."

Larry was hugging the windowsill, gripping it with his hands. "Larry, why don't you run down to the Jeep and get some gloves out of my bag?"

"Gloves?"

"I've got a box of surgical gloves in with my animating stuff. Bring the box."

He swallowed hard and nodded. Every freckle stood out on his face like ink spots. He moved very quickly to the door and shut it behind him. I had two sets of gloves in my jacket pocket, but Larry needed air.

"This his first murder?"

"Second," I said. "How old is the girl?"

"Seventeen," he said.

"Then it's murder even if she consented."

"Consented? What are you talking about?" There was the very first hint of anger in his voice.

"What do you think happened here, Sheriff?"

"A vampire climbed in her window while she was getting ready for bed and killed her."

"Where's all the blood?"

"There's more blood under her neck. You can't see the mark, but that's where he drained her."

"That's not enough blood to kill her."

"He drank the rest." He sounded a little outraged.

I shook my head. "No single vampire can consume the entire blood supply of an adult human in one sitting."

"Then there was more than one," he said.

"You mean the bites on her thighs?"

"Yeah, yeah." He paced the pink shag carpet in quick, nervous strides.

"Those marks are at least a couple of days old," I said.

"So he hypnotized her twice before, but this time he killed her."

"It's awfully early for a teenager to be going to bed."

"Her mother said she wasn't feeling well."

That I believed. Even if you want it to happen, that much blood loss can take the sparkle out of your step.

"She fixed her hair and makeup before she went to bed," I said.

"So?"

"Did you know this girl?"

"Yes, hell yes. This is a small town, Miss Blake. We all know each other. She was a good kid, never in any trouble. You never found her parked with a boy, or out drinking. She was a good girl."

"I believe she was a good girl, Sheriff St. John. Being murdered doesn't make you a bad person."

He nodded, but his eyes were sort of wild, too much white showing. I wanted to ask how many murders he'd seen, but didn't. Whether this was his first or his twenty-first, he was sheriff.

"What do you think happened here, Sheriff?" I'd asked the question once, but I was willing to try it again.

"A vampire raped and killed Ellie Quinlan, that's what happened here." He said it almost defiantly, like he didn't believe it either.

"This wasn't rape, Sheriff. Ellie Quinlan invited her killer into this room."

He paced to the far window and stood like Larry had, staring out into the darkness. He wrapped his arms around himself like he was hugging himself. "How am I going to tell her parents, her kid brother, that she let some . . . thing make love to her? That she'd been letting it feed off her? How can I tell them that?"

"Well, in three nights, two counting tonight, Ellie can rise from the dead and tell them herself."

He turned back to me, his face pale with shock. He shook his head slowly.

"They want her staked."

"What?"

"They want her staked. They don't want her to rise as a vampire."

I stared down at the still-warm body. I shook my head. "She'll rise in two more nights."

"The family doesn't want it."

"If she was a vampire, it would be murder to stake her just because her family doesn't want her to be one."

"But she's not a vampire yet," St. John said. "She's a corpse."

"The coroner will have to certify death before she can be staked. That can take a little time."

He shook his head. "I know Doc Campbell; he'll speed it along for us."

I stood there, staring down at the girl. "She didn't plan to die, Sheriff. This isn't a suicide. She's planning on coming back."

"You can't know that."

I stared at him. "I do know that, and so do you. If we stake her before she can rise from the dead, it's murder."

"Not according to the law."

"I am not going to take out the head and heart of a seventeen-year-old girl just because her parents don't like the lifestyle she's chosen."

"She's dead, Miss Blake."

"It's Ms. Blake, and I know she's dead. I know what she'll become. Probably better than you do."

"Then you understand why they want it done."

I looked at him. I did understand. There was a time when I could have done it and felt good about it. Felt like I was helping the family, freeing her soul. Now, I just wasn't sure anymore.

"Let her parents think about it for twenty-four hours. Trust me on this. They're horrified right now, and grief-stricken; are they really in a position to decide what happens to her?"

"They're her parents."

"Yeah, and two days from now would they rather have her on her feet, talking to them, or dead in a box?"

"She'll be a monster," he said.

"Maybe, probably, but I think we should hold off for just a little while until they've had some time. I think the immediate problem is the blood-sucker that did this."

"I agree, we find him and kill him."

"We can't kill him without a court order of execution," I said.

"I know the local judge. I can get you a court order."

"I bet you can."

"What's the matter with you? Don't you want to kill him?"

I looked at the girl. If he'd really wanted her to rise as a vampire, he'd have taken the body with him. He'd have hidden her until she rose to keep her safe from people like me. If he cared for her. "Yeah, I'll kill him for you."

"Alright, what can we do?"

"Well, first, the killing took place just after dark, so his daytime resting place had to be very near here. Are there any old houses, caves, some place where you could hide a coffin?"

"There's an old homestead about a mile from here, and I know there's a cave down along the stream. I used to go there when I was little. We all did."

"Here's the deal, Sheriff. If we go out into the dark after him now, he'll probably kill some of us. But if we don't try it tonight, he'll move his coffin. We might not find him again."

"We'll look for him tonight. Now."

"How long have you and your wife been married?" I asked.

"Five years; why?"

"You love her?"

"Yes, we were high school sweethearts. What kind of question is that?"

"If you go out after the vampire, you may never see her again. If you've never hunted one out there at night in its own territory, you don't know what we're up against, and nothing I can tell you will prepare you for it. But think about never seeing Beth again. Never holding her hand. Never hearing her voice. We can go out in the morning. The vampire may not move its coffin tonight, or it might move from the cave to the homestead, or vice versa. We might catch it tomorrow without risking anybody's life."

"Do you think it won't move tonight?"

I took a deep breath and wanted to lie. God knows I wanted to lie. "No, I think it'll leave the immediate area tonight. That's probably why he came just after full dark. It gives him all night to run."

"Then we go after him."

I nodded. "Okay, but we have to have some ground rules here. I'm in charge. I've done this before and I'm still alive; that makes me an expert. If you do everything I say, maybe, just maybe, we can all live until morning."

"Except for the vampire," St. John said.

"Yeah, sure." It had been a long time since I had gone up against a vampire at night in the open. My vampire kit was at home in my closet. It was illegal to carry it with me without a specific court order of execution. I had the cross I was wearing, the two handguns, the two knives, and that was it. No holy water, no extra crosses, no shotgun. Hell, no stake and mallet.

"Do you have silver bullets?"

"I can get some."

"Do it, and find me a shotgun and silver ammo for that too. Is there a Catholic or Episcopalian church around here?"

"Of course," he said.

"We need some holy water and holy wafer, the host."

"I know you can throw the holy water on the vampire, but I didn't know you could throw the host."

I had to smile. "They aren't like little holy grenades. I want the host to give to the Quinlans so they can put one at every windowsill, every doorsill."

"You think it'll come for them?"

"No, but the girl invited it in, only she can revoke the invitation, and she's dead. Until we get the bastard, better safe than sorry."

He hesitated, then nodded. "I'll go to the church. I'll see what I can do." He went for the door.

"And, Sheriff?"

He stopped and turned to me.

"I want that court order in my hands before we leave. I'm not going to be up on murder charges."

He nodded, sort of nervously, head bobbing like one of those dogs you see in the backs of cars. "You'll have it, Ms. Blake." He left, closing the door behind him.

I was left alone with the dead girl. She lay there pale and unmoving, growing colder, deader. If her parents had their way, it would be permanent. And it would be my job to make it happen. There were schoolbooks scattered beside the bed, as if she had been studying in bed before he came. I pushed one of the book covers closed with my toe, careful not to rearrange it. Calculus. She'd been studying calculus before she put on her makeup and black teddy. Shit.

Chapter 12

While we waited for the court order, I talked to the family. Not my favorite thing to do, but necessary. This hadn't been a random attack, which meant they probably knew the vampire, or had known him before he died.

The living room continued the pastel theme, blue predominating. Beth St. John had made coffee. She'd shanghaied Larry into carrying up a tray. I guess she didn't want to see the body again. Couldn't say I blamed her. I'd seen bloodier murder scenes, a lot bloodier, but each death has its own peculiar poignancy. There was something very piteous about Ellie Quinlan stretched across her pink candy sheets, and I hadn't known her. Beth St. John had. Made it hard.

The family sat huddled on the white sofa. The man was broad, not fat, but square like a linebacker. He had short black hair that was going nicely grey at the sideburns. Very distinguished. His complexion was ruddy, not tanned, but colorful just the same. He was dressed in a white dress shirt unbuttoned at the neck, but sleeves still sporting their cufflinks. His face was very tight, immobile like a mask, as if underneath something entirely different was going

on. He looked calm, composed, but the effort thrummed along his skin. Anger glittered in his dark eyes.

His arm was around his wife's shoulders. She leaned into him crying softly, eyes closed as if that would make it better. Her eye makeup had smeared in long, multicolored streaks like an oil slick down her cheeks. She had thick black hair done in some short, complicated style that looked too stiff to touch. She wore a long-sleeved, button-down blouse with a delicate flower pattern on it, pink predominating. Her slacks were a matching pink. Her feet were bare except for dark hose. A delicate gold cross and wedding rings were her only jewelry.

The boy was only about my height and slender as a willow. He hadn't hit his growth spurt yet, and it made him look younger than he was. His face had that soft, perfect skin that said he'd never had a pimple and shaving was a distant dream. If the girl was seventeen, he had to be at least fifteen, maybe sixteen. He could have passed for twelve. A perfect victim, except for his eyes and the way he held himself. Even in the midst of grief with the lines of tears drying on his face, he looked sure of himself, self-possessed. His eyes held a quick intelligence and a rage that would hold the bullies at bay.

His hair was the perfect black of his father's, but it was baby fine, probably the natural texture of Mrs. Quinlan's before she styled it to death.

A little black poodle was in his lap. It had barked like a machine gun, rat-a-tat-tat, yip-yip-yip until he'd picked it up and held it. A soft growl tickled out of its curly jaws.

"Hush, Raven," the boy said. He petted the dog as he said it, thus rewarding the growling. The dog growled again; he petted it again. I decided to ignore it. If the poodle got loose, I figured I could take it. I was armed.

"Mr. and Mrs. Quinlan, my name's Anita Blake. I need to ask you a few questions."

"Have you staked the body yet?" the man asked.

"No, Mr. Quinlan, the sheriff and I agreed to wait twenty-four hours."

"Her immortal soul is in jeopardy. We want it done now."

"If you still want it done tomorrow night, I'll do it."

"We want it done now." He was holding his wife very tight, fingers digging into her shoulder.

She opened her eyes and blinked at him. "Jeffrey, please, you're hurting me."

He swallowed hard and loosened his grip. "I'm sorry, Sally. I'm sorry." The apology seemed to take some of the anger out of him. The lines in his face softened. He shook his head. "We must save her soul. Her life is gone, but her soul remains. We must save that at least."

There had been a time when I believed that, too. Down to my toes I thought all vampires were evil. Now, I wasn't so sure. I knew too many of them who didn't seem that bad. I knew evil when I felt it, and that wasn't what they were. I didn't know what they were, but were they damned? According to the Catholic Church, yes, they were, and so was the girl upstairs. But then,

according to the Church, so was I. I'd become Episcopalian when the church declared all animators excommunicates.

"Are you Catholic, Mr. Quinlan?"

"Yes; what difference does that make?"

"I was raised Catholic. So I understand your beliefs."

"They are not beliefs, Miss . . . What is your name?"

"Blake, Anita Blake."

"They are not beliefs, Miss Blake. They are facts. Ellie's immortal soul is in danger of eternal damnation. We must help her."

"Do you understand what you're asking me to do?" I asked.

"To save her."

I shook my head. Mrs. Quinlan was looking at me. Her eyes were very intent. I was betting I could cause a little family disagreement.

"I will put a stake through her heart and chop off her head." I left the fact out that most of my executions were done with a shotgun now, at close range. It was messy and you needed a closed coffin, but it was a lot easier on me and a quicker death for the vampire.

Mrs. Quinlan started to cry again, huddling against her husband. She buried her face against him, smearing makeup on his clean white shirt.

"Are you trying to upset my wife?"

"No, sir, but I want you all to realize that two nights from now Ellie will rise as a vampire. She'll walk and talk. Eventually, she'll be able to be around you. If I stake her, all she'll be is dead."

"She is already dead. We want you to do your job," he said.

Mrs. Quinlan wouldn't look at me. Either she believed as strongly as her hubby, or she wouldn't fight him. Not even for her daughter's continued existence.

I let it go. I could stall for twenty-four hours. I doubted that Mr. Quinlan was going to change his mind. I had hopes for Mrs. Quinlan.

"Does the poodle always bark at strangers?"

They all three blinked at me like rabbits caught in headlights. The change of subject was too abrupt for their grief.

"What has that got to do with anything?" he asked.

"There is a murderous vampire out there somewhere. I'm going to catch him, but I need your help. So please just answer my questions as best you can."

"What does the dog have to do with it?"

I sighed and sipped my coffee. He had just found his daughter dead, murdered, raped, I'm sure he'd told himself. The horror of it cut him some slack, but he was beginning to use it up.

"The poodle barked its head off when I came to the door. Does it bark every time a stranger comes to the house?"

The boy saw what I was getting at. "Yeah, Raven always barks at strangers."

I ignored his parents and talked to the most reasonable person in the room. "What's your name?"

"Jeff," he said. God, Jeffrey Junior, of course.

"How many times would I have to come to the house before Raven stopped barking at me?"

He thought about that, rolling his lower lip under, really thinking about it.

Mrs. Quinlan sat up, a little apart from her husband. "Raven always barks when someone comes to the door. Even if she knows you."

"Did she bark tonight?"

The parents frowned at me. Jeff said, "Yeah. She barked like crazy until Ellie let her in her room just after dark. Ellie let her in, then a few minutes later Raven came back downstairs."

"How'd you find the body?"

"Raven started barking again and wouldn't stop. Ellie didn't let her in. Ellie always lets her in. I mean, I'm not allowed in her room, but Raven gets to go in even when Ellie wants her privacy." He made that last word sound like he usually said it with a lot of eye-rolling.

"I knocked at the door and she didn't answer. Raven was scratching at the door. It was locked. She locked her door a lot, but she wouldn't answer." A tear escaped from his wide eyes. "I went and got Dad."

"You unlocked the door, Mr. Quinlan?"

He nodded. "Yes, and she was just lying there. I couldn't bear to touch her. She's unclean now. I . . ." He was choking on tears, trying so hard not to cry that his face was turning purple.

Jeff came and put his arm around his dad, leaning against his mother, the poodle still gripped in his other arm. The dog whined softly, licked the makeup from Mrs. Quinlan's face. The woman looked up and gave a choked laugh, petting the curly fur.

I wanted to leave. I wanted to let them huddle together and grieve. Hell, the death was so fresh, they hadn't gotten to grieving yet. They were still in shock. But I couldn't leave. Sheriff St. John would be back with the warrant, and I needed as much information as I could get before we braved the darkness.

Larry was sitting in the corner in a pale blue chair. He was being so quiet you'd almost forget he was there. But his eyes were eager, noticing everything, filing it all away. When I first realized he damn near memorized everything I said and did, it was intimidating. Now I counted on it.

Beth St. John came into the room with a tray of sandwiches, coffee, and soft drinks. I didn't remember anybody asking for them, but I think Beth was needing something to do besides sit here and watch the Quinlans cry. Me, too.

She set the tray on the coffee table between the couch and the love seat. The Quinlans ignored it. I took a fresh mug of coffee. Grilling grieving families always goes down better with caffeine.

The group huddle broke up. The poodle was transferred to the wife's arms, and the two men sat on either side of her. Jeffrey and Jeff looked at me with identical eyes. It was almost eerie. Genetics at work.

"The vampire had to be in the room with Ellie when she let the dog in at full dark," I said.

"My daughter would not have let in her murderer."

"If she was eighteen, Mr. Quinlan, it wouldn't be murder."

"Being made a vampire against your will is still murder, Miss Blake."

I was getting tired of everyone calling me "Miss," but the grieving father could do it a few more times. "I believe your daughter knew the vampire. I believe she let him in willingly."

"You are crazy. Beth, go get the sheriff. I want this woman out of my house."

Beth stood up uncertainly. "David's gone to get some things, Jeffrey. I . . . Deputy Coltrain's upstairs with the body, but . . ."

"Then get him down here."

Beth looked at me, then back to him. She gripped her small hands together, almost wringing them. "Jeffrey, she's a licensed vampire hunter. She's done this a lot. Listen to her."

He stood up. "My daughter was raped and murdered by some soulless, bloodsucking animal, and I want this woman out of my house, now." If he hadn't been crying at the same time, I'd have been pissed.

Beth looked at me. She was willing to stand up to him if I needed her to. Mucho points for her. "Has anyone you know vanished or died recently?" I asked.

Quinlan squinted at me. He looked confused. The change of subject again was just too abrupt. I was hoping I could distract him from throwing me out long enough to learn something.

"What?"

"Has anyone you know gone missing or died recently?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Andy's missing," Jeff said.

Quinlan shook his head again. "That boy is no concern of ours."

"Who's Andy?" I asked.

"Ellie's boyfriend."

"He is not her boyfriend," Quinlan said.

I caught Jeff's gaze. The look said it all. Andy had been a boyfriend, and dear old dad hadn't liked him one little bit.

"Why didn't you like Andy, Mr. Quinlan?"

"He was a criminal."

I raised my eyebrows. "In what way?"

"He was arrested for drug abuse."

"He smoked some pot," Jeff said.

I was beginning to wish I could just go off and talk with Jeff. He seemed to know what was going on and wasn't trying to hide it. Trick was how to manage it.

"He was a corrupting influence on my daughter, and I put a stop to it."

"And he's missing?" I asked.

"Yes," Jeff said.

"I will answer Miss Blake's questions, Jeff. I am the man of the house."

Jesus, man of the house. Hadn't heard that in a while. "I'd like to see the rest of the house in case the vampire entered somewhere other than her room. If Jeff could show me the doors, I'd appreciate it."

"I can show you around, Miss Blake," Quinlan said.

"I'm sure your wife needs you right now, Mr. Quinlan. Jeff can show me around, but only you can comfort your wife."

Mrs. Quinlan looked up at him, then at me, as if she wasn't sure she wanted to be comforted, but I knew the image would appeal to him.

He nodded. "Perhaps you're right." He touched his wife's shoulder. "Sally needs me right now."

Sally cooperated with fresh crying, using the poodle as a sort of impromptu handkerchief. The poodle squirmed and whined. Quinlan sat down and took his wife in his arms. The dog squirmed free and trotted over to Jeff.

I stood. Larry stood. I moved toward the door and looked back at the boy. Jeff stood and the poodle trotted at his side. I opened the doors and ushered us all outside. Raven the poodle eyed me suspiciously, but she came along.

I caught a last glimpse of Beth St. John gazing at the door as if she wanted to go with us, but she sat down beside the unwanted sandwiches and the cooling coffee. She sat like a good soldier. She would not abandon her post.

I closed the door, feeling cowardly. I was glad it wasn't my job to hold the Quinlans' hands. Facing the vampire even in the dark didn't seem so bad by comparison. Of course, I was still safe inside the house. Out there in the dark with the vampire, I might feel different.

Chapter 13

We stood out in the entryway. The air felt cooler out here, easier to breathe. Had to be my imagination. The poodle was sniffing at my foot. She gave a low growl and Jeff picked her up, tucking her under one arm, in a familiar gesture like he'd done it a hundred times before.

"You don't really want to see the doors, do you?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Dad's all right. He's just . . ." He shrugged. "He's just right, and everyone else is wrong. He doesn't mean anything by it."

"I know. He's scared right now, too. That makes everyone bitchy."

Jeff grinned. I wasn't sure if it was the "scared" comment or the word "bitchy." Probably didn't hear many people saying either about his dad.

"How serious were Andy and your sister?"

He glanced at the closed doors and lowered his voice just a little. "Dad'll say not very, but they were serious. Real serious." He glanced at the door again.

"We can go somewhere else to talk," I said. "Your choice of rooms."

He looked at me. "You're really a vampire hunter?" If the circumstances had been different, he would have been enjoying himself. It's hard not to think it's cool to put stakes through people's chests.

"Yeah, and we raise zombies, too."

"Both of you?" He sounded surprised.

"I'm a full-fledged animator," Larry said.

Jeff shook his head. "We can talk in my room." He led the way up the stairs. We followed.

If I'd been a cop, questioning a juvenile without a guardian or lawyer present would have been illegal, but I wasn't a cop. And he wasn't a suspect. Just gathering information, folks. Just grilling a sixteen-year-old boy about his sister's sex life. Murder investigations are never pleasant, and some of that unpleasantness has nothing to do with the corpse.

Jeff hesitated at the head of the stairs, peering down the hallway. Deputy Coltraine was standing outside Ellie's room, back stiff, hands behind his back, alert for intruders. The door was open. Too hard to stand in the room with the body, I guess. He saw Jeff and closed the door, still standing in front of it. Nice of Coltraine to make sure Jeff didn't see the body. But standing outside the closed door was not the best idea. A vampire, if it was old enough, could have come in the room behind him and opened the door before he could have drawn his gun. The undead make no noise.

I debated on whether to tell him that. I let it go. If the vamp had meant to take out more people, it could have. He could have taken out the entire family. Instead, when the dog barked he panicked and ran. This was not an ancient bloodsucker. This was someone who was new at the job. I was betting on the boyfriend, Andy, but I'd keep an open mind. Andy might have just driven to California to find fame and fortune, but I doubted it.

Jeff opened the door near the head of the stairs and went in. His room was smaller than his sister's. Being firstborn does have its advantages. The wallpaper was tan with cowboys and Indians on it. The bed had a matching spread. It was the room of a much younger person, just like his sister's. The walls were bare, no pinups, no sports figures. There was a desk stacked high with books. A small pile of clothes lay near the closet door. Raven the poodle sniffed the clothes. Jeff shooed her away and kicked the clothes into the closet and closed the door.

"Sit down anywhere you can." He pulled the desk chair out a little, then stood near the window, not sure what to do. I doubted he had many adults up to his room for a talk. Parents didn't count. Though frankly I couldn't imagine either of the Quinlans coming in for a quiet chat.

I took the chair. I figured Jeff would feel more comfortable lounging on his bed with Larry than with me. Besides, I wasn't used to wearing skirts this short yet, and every once in a while I forgot. The chair seemed safer.

Larry sat down on the bed with his back pressed against the wall. Jeff sat down next to him, propping some of the pillows into the corner for a back rest. Raven jumped up on the bed, circled his lap twice, and lay down. Cozy.

"How hot an item were Andy and your sister?" No prelims; off with the clothes.

He glanced at both of us. Larry gave him an encouraging smile. He shifted more securely against his mound of pillows and said, "Pretty hot. I mean, they hung all over each other at school."

"Embarrassing," I said.

"Yeah. I mean, she was my sister. She's only a year older than me, and there's this guy pawing her." He shook his head. He rubbed the poodle's ears, hands moving down her small curly body. He petted her like it was habit, a comfort measure.

"Did you like Andy?"

He shrugged. "He was older and sort of cool, but no, I thought Ellie could have done better."

"How so?"

"He did smoke pot and didn't have any plans for college. Andy wasn't going anywhere. It was like the fact that he loved my sister was everything. Like they'd live on love or something stupid like that."

I agreed that that was stupid. "When your dad put a stop to it, did it stop?"

He grinned at me. "No. They just started sneaking around. I think if anything, telling Ellie she couldn't see him made it worse."

"It usually does," I said. "When did Andy disappear?"

"About two weeks ago. His car went missing, too, so everybody thought he'd run off, but he wouldn't have left Ellie behind. He was sort of creepy, but he wouldn't have left her."

"Was Ellie upset at being left behind?"

He frowned, hugging the dog against his chest. Raven licked his chin with her small pink tongue. "That was the weird part. I mean, I know she had to pretend not to care in front of Mom and Dad, but even at school or out with our friends she didn't seem to care. I was kinda glad. I mean, Andy was a loser, but it was like she didn't believe he was gone or knew something the rest of us didn't. I thought he'd just gone off to find like an out-of-town job and was going to send for her."

"Maybe he did," I said.

The frown deepened between his smooth, unblemished brows. "What do you mean?"

"I think Andy may be the vampire that did your sister."

A look of disgust crumbled his face even further. "I don't believe that. Andy loved Ellie; he wouldn't kill her."

"If he's a vampire, Jeff, he wouldn't think turning her into the undead is killing her. He'd probably think of it as bringing her over."

Jeff shook his head. Raven wiggled out of his grasp as if he was squeezing too hard. She hopped off his lap and lay down on the covers. "Andy wouldn't hurt Ellie. Doesn't it hurt to die?"

"Probably," I said.

"The bushes underneath her end window are all crushed," Larry said.

I looked at him. "Say again."

He smiled, pleased with himself. "I took a look around outside. That's what took me so long when you sent me out for gloves that you didn't need."

The bushes under the end window to the girl's room are all smashed like something heavy fell on them."

I had a moment to visualize Larry out in the dark all alone, unarmed except for his cross. The thought made my skin cold. I opened my mouth to yell at him and closed it. Never dress anyone down in public unless it's an object lesson. I said, "Any tracks?" I gave myself a dozen brownie points for not yelling.

"Do I look like Tonto? Besides, the ground is just grass and it's been so dry lately. I don't think there'd be any tracks." He frowned at me. "Can you track vampires?"

"Not normally, but if this one is as new as I think he is, then maybe." I nodded. "Yeah." I stood up. "I've got to go ask the deputy something. Thank you for your help, Jeff." I offered him my hand to shake. He took it. His handshake was a little uncertain, as if he wasn't used to it.

I went for the door and Larry followed.

"You will find him and kill him, even if it's Andy?" Jeff asked.

I turned back and looked at him. His dark eyes were still intelligent, still full of purpose, but there was also a little boy needing reassurance.

"Yeah, we'll find him."

"And kill him?"

"And kill him," I said.

"Good," he said. "Good."

I wasn't sure if "good" was the word I would have chosen, but it wasn't my sister lying dead in the other room.

"You got a cross?" I asked.

He frowned, but said, "Yeah."

"You wearing it?"

He shook his head.

"Get it and wear it until we catch him. Okay?"

"You think he'll come back?" Fear glittered at the edge of his eyes.

"No, but you never know, Jeff. Just humor me."

He got up and went to his bureau. There was a line of glittering chain on one corner of the mirror. When he picked it up, a tiny gold cross dangled from it. I watched him put it on. The dog watched it all with anxious eyes.

I smiled. "We'll see you later."

He nodded, fingering the cross, scared now underneath the shock. We left him in the tender care of Raven.

"You really think the vamp will come back to the house?" Larry asked.

"No," I said, "but just in case your little visit out into the dark gives him ideas, I want Jeff to at least have a cross on."

"Heh," he said. "I found a clue."

Deputy Coltrain was watching us, but we were running out of privacy. I kept my voice down and hoped that was enough. "Yeah, and you went out, alone, unarmed, in the dark with a vampire that had already killed once on the loose."

"You said it was a really new vampire."

"Not before you went out after the gloves."

"Maybe I figured out that it was a new one all on my own," he said. He was looking stubborn, like far from taking my warning to heart, he just might do it again.

"New vampires can still kill you, Larry."

"With a cross on?"

He had a point. Very few of the new dead could get past the pain of a cross, or play enough head games to get you to take it off voluntarily.

"Fine, Larry, but where's the vampire that made him? That one may be a couple of centuries old, and it's out in the dark, too."

He went a little pale around the edges. "I never thought of that."

"I did."

He gave a shrug and had the grace to look embarrassed. "That's why you're the boss."

"That's right," I said.

"All right, all right. I promise to be good."

"Great; now let's go ask Deputy Coltrain if he knows anyone who could track our vampire."

"Can you really track a vampire like that?"

"I don't know, but with one less than two weeks old, one that falls out a window and into some shrubs, you might be able to. They at least might be able to narrow down where we should look first."

He was grinning very broadly at me.

"Yeah, knowing it fell out the window is useful information. It might not have occurred to me to check for tracks outside the window."

If he grinned any wider, he was going to pull something.

"And if a vampire old enough to get past your cross had eaten your face, I'd have never known about the shrubs."

"Ah, Anita. I done good."

I shook my head. For all that Larry had seen of vampires, it wasn't enough. He still didn't fully appreciate what they were. He didn't have any scars yet. If he stayed in the business long enough to get his license, that would change.

God help him.

Chapter 14

The wind was cool and smelled of rain. I turned my face to the soft touch of it. The air smelled of green growing things. It smelled clean and new. I stood on the grass looking upward. Ellie Quinlan's window shone like a soft yellow beacon. Ellie had opened the windows, but her father had turned on the lights.

She had met her vampire lover in darkness. The better not to see him for the walking corpse he was.

I had the coverall back on, unzipped halfway so I could get to the Browning. I'd only brought an inner pants holster for the Firestar, so I shoved it into a pocket of the coveralls. Not handy for a quick draw, but better than not having it. An inner pants holster just doesn't work well with a skirt on.

Larry had his very own gun in a shoulder rig. He stood beside me shrugging his shoulders, trying to get the straps more comfortable. It isn't really uncomfortable if it's a good fit, but it isn't really comfortable either. It's sort of like a bra. They fit and they are necessary, but they are never completely comfortable.

He was wearing the extra coverall unzipped and flapping nearly to his hips. A flashlight flicked over us, glinting on Larry's cross. The light swept over me, glaring in my eyes. "Now that you've ruined my night vision, get that damn thing out of my eyes."

Deep masculine laughter came from behind the brilliant beam of light. Two state cops had arrived just in time to join us on the hunt. Oh, joy.

"Wallace," a man's voice said, "do what the lady says." The voice was deep and vaguely threatening. A voice to say, "lean on the hood of the car and spread 'em." And you'd do it or else.

Officer Granger walked up to us, his flashlight pointed at the ground. He wasn't as tall as Wallace, and a gut was beginning to creep over his belt, but he moved through the dark like he knew what he was doing. Like maybe he'd hunted in the dark before. Maybe not vampires but something. Maybe men.

Wallace walked over to us, flashlight swimming around us like an oversized firefly. It wasn't in my eyes, but it was still not helping my night vision.

"Turn off the flashlight . . . please," I said.

Wallace took a step closer, looming over me. He was tall, built like a football player, with long legs. A running back, maybe. He and Deputy Coltraine could arm wrestle later. Right now I just wanted him to back the fuck off me.

"Turn it off, Wallace," Granger said. He'd already clicked off his own.

"I won't be able to see a damn thing," he protested.

"Afraid of the dark?" I asked, smiling up at him.

Larry laughed. It was the wrong thing to do.

Wallace turned on him. "You think that's funny?" He stepped up to Larry until they were almost touching, using his size to intimidate. But Larry's like me; he's been small all his life. He'd been bullied by the best. He stood his ground.

"Are you?" Larry asked.

"Am I what?" Wallace asked.

"Afraid of the dark?"

Animating wasn't the only thing Larry was learning from me. Unfortunately for Larry, he was a boy. I could get away with being a pain in the ass and most people wouldn't take a swing at me. Larry wasn't so lucky.

Wallace balled his hands into Larry's coverall and lifted him to tiptoes. His flashlight fell to the grass, rolling around spotlighting our ankles.

Officer Granger stepped up close to them but didn't touch Wallace. Even in the dark you could see the tension in his shoulders and arms. Not from lifting Larry, but from wanting to hit him and resisting the urge.

"Ease down, Wallace. He didn't mean anything."

Wallace didn't say anything, he just pulled Larry closer to him, leaning over to put his face next to Larry's. A square of yellow light fell across his face. The muscle along the edge of his jaw was jutting out, throbbing like it would pop out of his face. There was a scar under the bone of his jawline. A scar that disappeared into the collar of his jacket.

Wallace nearly put his face nose to nose with Larry. "I-am-not-afraid-of-anything." Each word was squeezed out.

I stepped up close to him. He was bent down to intimidate Larry, so I could whisper in his ear. "Nice scar, Wallace."

He jumped like I'd bit him. He released Larry so suddenly that Larry stumbled. He whirled, one big hand raised to smash my face. At least he'd let go of Larry.

He swung at me. I swept his arm to one side and past me. He stumbled. I brought my knee up into his stomach hard. It took a lot not to follow through and really hurt him. He was a cop. One of the good guys. You don't beat up on them. I stepped back, out of reach, and hoped that one near miss had cooled him down. I could have hurt him badly in the initial rush, but now he'd be ready. Harder to hurt.

He was nearly a foot taller than me and outweighed me by more than a hundred pounds. If the fight turned serious, I was in trouble. I hoped I wouldn't regret my gallant gesture.

Wallace ended on all fours near the shrubs by the house. He got to his feet quicker than I wanted him to, but he stayed half bent over, hands on his knees. He looked up at me. I wasn't sure what his expression meant, but it wasn't completely hostile. It was more a considering sort of look, as if I'd surprised him. I get that look a lot.

"You all right now, Wallace?" Granger asked.

Wallace nodded. Hard to talk after a good gut shot.

Granger glanced at me. "You all right, Ms. Blake?"

"I'm fine."

He nodded. "Yes, you are."

Larry moved up beside me. He was standing too close. If Wallace came back at me, I would need more room to maneuver. I knew that Larry meant it as a show of support. After we got Larry's shooting up to speed, we'd have to work on some basic hand-to-hand techniques.

Why was I training him to shoot before I taught him to fight? Because you don't arm wrestle vampires. You shoot them. He would live through a beating from Officer Wallace. He wouldn't live through a vampire attack. Not if he couldn't shoot.

"Were you with him when he got that scar?" I asked.

Granger shook his head. "His first partner didn't make it."

"Vampire got him?"

He nodded.

Wallace stood up sort of slow. He arched his back just a bit, as if working the kinks out. "Nice shot," he said.

I shrugged. "It was my knee, not my fist."

"Still a good shot. I don't have any excuses good enough for what I just did."

"No," I said, "you don't."

He just looked down at the ground, then up. "I don't know what made me do it."

"Let's take a little walk." I started off into the dark without looking back, as if I had no doubt he'd follow me. This technique works more often than you think it would.

He followed me. He had stopped to pick up his flashlight, but bravely turned it off.

I stopped just short of the woods and stared off into the trees, letting my eyes adjust to the dark. I didn't look at anything in particular. I let my eyes just sort of see everything. I was looking for movement. Any movement. The tree limbs moved fitfully in the spring wind, but it was a general movement like ocean waves. The trees weren't what worried me.

Wallace tapped the darkened flashlight against his thigh. A soft *whap*, *whap*. I wanted to tell him to stop but didn't. If it comforted him, I could live with it.

I let the silence stretch between us. The wind picked up, filling the night with a rushing, hurrying sound. You could smell the rain on the wind.

He gripped the flashlight in both hands. I could hear his intake of breath above the wind. "What was that?"

"The wind," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty much."

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Is this the first vamp you've gone after since your partner's death?"

He looked at me. "Granger told you?"

"Yeah, but I saw your neck. I was pretty sure what had done it."

I wanted to tell him it was okay to be scared. Hell, I was scared, but he was a cop and a man, and I didn't know him well enough to know how he'd take a pep talk from me. But I had to know if he'd follow me into those woods. I had to know if I could depend on him. If he stayed this scared, I couldn't.

"What happened?" I asked. Maybe talking about it right now was the wrong thing to do, but ignoring it wasn't working very well.

He shook his head. "Headquarters says you're in charge, Ms. Blake. Fine, I'll do what I'm told. But I don't have to answer personal questions."

It was too much trouble to shrug out of the overall, and I really didn't want my arms trapped. I undid one button on my blouse and spread the cloth.

"What are you doing?"

"How good's your night vision?"

"Why?"

"Can you see the scar?"

"What are you talking about?" He sounded suspicious. Suspicious that I was crazy, maybe.

My night vision would have picked it up, but most people don't have my eyes. "Give me your hand."

"Why?"

"I am about to give you a once-in-a-lifetime offer. Just give me your damn hand."

He did, sort of hesitatingly, glancing back at the waiting men.

His hand was cold to the touch. He was one scared puppy. I traced his large, blunt fingers along my collarbone. The moment he touched the scar tissue, his hand jerked like he'd had an electric shock. I pulled my hand away, and he traced the scar again on his own.

He took his hand back, slowly, rubbing his fingers together like he was remembering the feel of my skin. "What did that?"

"Same thing that did your neck. A vampire that wasn't neat with its food."

"Jesus," he said.

"Yeah," I said. I rebuttoned my blouse. "Tell me what happened, Wallace. Please."

He looked at me for a moment longer, then nodded. "Harry, my partner, and me, we got a call that someone had found a body with its throat torn out." He made the words very bland, ordinary, but I knew he was seeing it in his head. Watching it all happen again behind his eyeballs.

"It was a construction site. Just us in the middle of the place with our flashlights. There was a sound like wind whistling, and something hit Harry. He went down with a man on top of him. He screamed, and I had my gun out. I fired into the man's back. I hit him solid three, four times. He turned on me and his face was bloody. I didn't have time to wonder why, 'cause he jumped me. I emptied my gun into him before I hit the ground."

He took a deep breath, big hands twisting back and forth on the flashlight. He was looking off into the trees, too, but not for vampires, or at least not for this one.

"He ripped my jacket and shirt like they were paper. I tried to fight him, but . . ." He shook his head. "He caught me with his eyes. He caught me with his eyes, and when he tore into my neck, I wanted him to do it, wanted it worse than I've ever wanted anything in my life."

He turned a little away from me, as if not meeting my eyes wasn't enough. "When I woke up, he was just gone. Harry was dead. The girl was dead. I was alive."

He turned to me finally, looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Why didn't he kill me, Ms. Blake?"

I looked into his earnest eyes and didn't have a good answer. "I don't know, Wallace. He wanted to make you one of them, maybe. I don't know why you and not Harry. You ever catch him?"

"The local master sent his head in a box to the station. The note apologized for his uncivilized behavior. That's what the note said, 'uncivilized behavior.'"

"It's hard to look at it as murder when you feed off humans yourself."

"Do they all do that? Feed off people?"

"I've never met one that didn't."

"Can't they eat animals?"

"Theoretically, yes. In practice it seems to lack certain nutrients." Truth was, feeding was too close to sex for most vamps. They weren't into bestiality, so they didn't feed off animals. I didn't think the sex analogy would go over well with Officer Wallace.

"Can you do this, Wallace?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can you go out into the dark and hunt vampires?"

"It's my job."

"I didn't ask if it was your job. I asked if you can go out into that darkness and hunt vampires."

"You think there's more than one?"

"Always best to assume so," I said.

He nodded. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Scared?" I asked.

"Are you?"

I looked off into the windswept night. The trees tossed and moaned in the wind. There was movement everywhere. Soon there would be rain, and what light the stars gave would be gone.

"Yeah, I'm scared."

"But you're a vampire hunter," he said. "How can you do this night after night if it scares you?"

"Doesn't it scare you to know that every time you pull over some yahoo for a traffic violation that he could be armed? You walk up on that car and never know."

"It's my job."

"And this is my job."

"But you're scared?"

"Down to my toes."

Larry called, "The sheriff's back. He's got the warrant."

Wallace and I looked at each other. "You got silver bullets?" I asked.

"Yes."

I smiled. "Then let's go. You'll be fine," I said. I believed it. Wallace would do his job. I would do my job. We would all do our jobs. And come morning, some of us would be alive and some of us wouldn't. Of course, maybe there was just the one newly dead vampire to deal with. If so, we might all see the sunrise.

But I hadn't lived this long assuming the best. Assuming the worst was always safer. And usually truer.

Chapter 15

I'd gotten used to the sawed-off shotgun that I had at home. Yeah, it is illegal, but it's easy to carry and makes mincemeat out of vampires. What more could a modern vampire hunter want? The Ithaca pump action 12 gauge was close.

"Why don't I get a shotgun?" Larry asked.

I just looked at him. He looked serious. I shook my head. "When you can handle the nine, we'll talk about shotguns."

"Great."

Oh, for the enthusiasm of youth. Larry was only four years younger than I was. Sometimes it seemed like a million.

"He's not going to shoot us in the back by accident, is he?" Deputy Coltrain asked.

I smiled, not sweetly. "He promised not to."

Coltrain looked at me like he wasn't sure I was kidding.

Sheriff St. John joined us at the edge of the woods. He had a shotgun, too. I had to trust that he knew how to use it. Wallace had the shotgun from their unit. His partner Granger had a wicked-looking rifle like something a sniper would carry. It looked like the wrong tool for tonight's job, and I had said so. Granger had just looked at me. I'd shrugged and let it go. It was his neck and his gun.

I looked around at them. They looked at me. Waiting for me to give the word.

"Everybody got their holy water?" I asked.

Larry patted his coverall pocket. Everyone else nodded, or mumbled yes.

"Remember the three rules of vampire hunting. One: Never, ever look them in the eyes. Two: Never, ever give up your cross. Three: Aim for the head and heart. Even with silver ammo, it won't be a killing blow anywhere else." I felt like a kindergarten teacher sending her kiddies off to a hostile playground. "Don't panic if you get bitten. The bite can be cleansed. As long as they don't mesmerize you with their eyes, you can still fight."

I looked at them, all silent, all taller than me, even Larry by an inch or two. They could all arm wrestle me and win. So why did I want to order them all into the house where'd they'd be safe? Heck, we could all go inside. Have a nice cup of hot cocoa. Tell the Quinlans their little girl would be fine. I mean, liquid diets are in with teens. Right?

I took a deep breath and let it out slow. "Let's do it, boys. We're wasting starlight." Either nobody got my John Wayne reference, or nobody thought it was funny. Hard to tell which.

I had to let St. John lead the way into the black trees. I didn't know the area. He did. But I didn't like him taking point. I didn't like it at all. I wanted to bring him back to his wife. His high school sweetheart. Five years married and still in love. Jesus, I didn't want to get him killed.

The trees closed around us. St. John threaded his way through them like he knew what he was doing. There was very little undergrowth this time of year. It made it easier, but there is still an art to going through thick woods, especially in the dark. You can't really see even with a flashlight. You have to sort of give yourself over to the trees the way you give yourself to water when you swim. You don't really concentrate on the water, or even on your own body. You concentrate on the rhythm of your body cutting, sliding through the cool liquid. For the forest you find a rhythm, too. You concentrate on sliding your body through the natural openings. Finding the place where the forest itself will let you through. If you fight it, it will fight you back. And, just like water, it can kill you. Anyone who doesn't believe that the forest is a deadly place has never been lost in one.

St. John knew how to move, and so did I. I was pretty pleased at that, actually. I'd been a city girl for a long time. Larry stumbled into me. I had to brace, or we'd have both gone down.

"Sorry," he said, pushing himself away from me.

"How ya doing up there, vampire hunter?" Coltrain called. He was bringing up the rear. I had to go second to back up St. John, and I wouldn't let Larry take rear. Coltrain had wanted it. Said he and the sheriff would guard our ass. Fine with me.

"Yell a little louder," Wallace said. "I don't think the vampire heard you."

"I don't need no statie telling me how to do my job."

"It knows we're here," I said.

That stopped them. They both looked at me. Granger, who was just ahead of Wallace, looked at me, too. I had everyone's attention.

"Even if the vampire is only a few weeks old, its hearing is incredibly acute. It knows we're here. It knows we're coming. It doesn't matter if we're quiet or have a brass band. It's all the same. We won't surprise it in the dark." It would probably surprise us, but I didn't add that part aloud. We were all thinking it anyway.

"We are wasting time here, Deputy," St. John said.

Coltrain didn't apologize or even look sorry. Wallace did. "I'm sorry, Sheriff. It won't happen again."

St. John nodded and turned without another word and led us farther into the woods.

Coltrain made a small humping sound but let it go. Whatever he said, I didn't think Wallace would rise to bait again. At least I hoped not. I didn't care if he was scared; we had enough problems without fighting among ourselves.

The trees rustled and swayed around us. Last year's dead leaves crunched underfoot. Someone cursed softly behind me. The wind blew in a wild gust,

streaming my hair back from my face. Up ahead the quality of darkness was different. We were approaching the clearing.

St. John stopped just short of the tree line. He glanced back at me. "How do you want to do this?"

I could taste the rain on the wind coming closer. If possible, I wanted us out of here before it came. Visibility sucked as it was.

"We kill it, and we get the hell back to the house. It's not a hard plan."

He nodded, as if I'd said something profound.

Wish I had.

A figure stepped in front of us. One minute nothing, the next there he was. Darkness and shadows, magic. He grabbed St. John as he went for his gun and threw him out into the clearing in a high looping arch.

I shot the vampire in the chest at almost point-blank range. He collapsed to his knees. I caught a glimpse of the whites of his eyes, like he couldn't believe it. I had to pump the shotgun to jack another shell in place.

Granger's rifle exploded behind me like a cannon. Someone screamed. I shot the vampire between the eyes. His head splattered into the leaves. I turned with the shotgun to my shoulder before the body hit the ground.

Larry was on the ground with a vamp on top of him. I had a glimpse of long brown hair before his cross flared to life in a brilliant flash of blue-white fire. She flung herself backwards with a scream, scrambling into the dark. Gone.

A vamp with long blonde hair held Granger in her slender arms, head pressed to his neck. I couldn't use the shotgun. They were pressed too close together. At this range I'd kill them both.

I dropped the shotgun into Larry's surprised lap. He was still lying on the ground, blinking. I drew the Browning and fired into the vampire's broad chest. She jerked but didn't let go of Granger. The vampire looked at me, the man still clasped to her chest. She hissed at me. I fired a round into her gaping mouth. It blew the back of her head out.

The vamp shuddered. I fired a second round into her head. She let go of Granger and fell to the leaves in convulsions. Granger just lay there. In the dark I couldn't see his face or neck. Dead or alive, I'd done all I could.

Larry was on his feet, shotgun awkward in his hands.

There was a scream, low and pain-filled. Wallace was on the ground with a slender-bodied vamp on top of him. Fangs sunk in his arm. The bone broke with a loud, brittle snap. He screamed again.

I had a glimpse of Coltrain standing, frozen, just beyond. There was movement behind him. I stared straight at it, waiting for the vampire to take shape from the shadows, but something gleamed. A dull silver blade flashed into sight. I stared straight at it, but I lost a second somehow. The next thing I knew the blade tip exploded from Coltrain's throat. I lost another second, blinking at shadows, and the vampire tore the blade from his throat and was gone. It scuttled through the trees like nothing human, unbelievably fast, like a nightmare seen from the corner of your eye.

Larry raised the shotgun to his shoulder, aimed in Wallace's direction. I grabbed it from him, and something smashed into my back and rode me into the leaves. A hand pressed my face into the dry, crackling leaves. A second hand ripped the back of my coverall so violently it wrenched one shoulder. There was an explosion just behind my head, and the vampire was gone. I rolled over, ears ringing.

Larry was standing over me with his arm extended, gun out. Whatever he'd shot was gone out in the dark.

My left shoulder was hurt, but not as badly as it might be if I didn't get up. I struggled to my feet. The vampires were gone.

Wallace was sitting up, cradling his arm. Coltrain lay on the ground without moving. A sound behind us. I turned, Browning pointed. Larry was turning too, but too slow. I sighted down the barrel, and it was St. John.

"Don't shoot. It's me."

Larry held his gun two-handed pointed at the ground. "Sweet Jesus," he said.

Amen. "What happened to you?"

"The fall knocked me out. I followed the sound of shots," St. John said.

A gust of wind slapped against us. It smelled so strongly of rain I almost felt it on my skin.

"Check Granger's pulse, Larry," I said.

"What?" Larry looked shell-shocked.

"See if he's alive." It was a messy job, and I'd have done it myself, but I trusted me more than Larry to keep the vampires away. He'd saved me once tonight, but I still trusted me more.

St. John walked past us. He touched Wallace, who nodded. "My arm's broke, but I'll live." St. John went to Coltrain's still form.

Larry knelt by Granger. He switched his gun to his left hand, not the best thing to do, but I understood. Hard to check for a pulse in the dark on a throat warm with blood; better to use your dominant hand.

"I've got a pulse." He looked up, his broad smile a dim whiteness in the dark.

"Coltrain's dead," St. John said. "God help me, he's dead." He raised a hand and the skin glistened with blood, black in the dim light. "He's nearly decapitated. What did this?"

"Sword," I said. I'd seen it. Watched it happen. But all I could remember was a black shape larger than a human being. Or larger than most. A shadow with a sword was all I'd seen, and I'd been looking right at it.

Something flowed across my skin, and it wasn't the wind. Power filled the spring night like water. "There's something old out here," I said.

"What are you talking about?" St. John said.

"An ancient vampire. It's here. I can feel it." I searched the darkness, but nothing moved but the trees, the wind. There was nothing to see. Nothing to fight. But it was here and it was close. Sword in hand, maybe.

Granger sat up so suddenly that Larry fell back into the leaves with a squeak. The big man's eyes turned to me. I saw his hand go for his gun, and I knew what the vampire was doing.

I pointed the Browning at his head and waited. I had to be sure.

Granger didn't hunt for his dropped rifle. He drew his sidearm and pointed it very slowly, as if he didn't want to do it. He pointed it at Larry from less than a foot away.

Wallace yelled, "Granger, what the fuck are you doing?"

I fired.

Granger jerked; the gun wavered, then his hand came back up. I fired again, and again. His hand fell slowly to the ground, gun still in it. He fell straight back into the leaves.

"Granger!" Wallace was screaming, crawling toward his partner. Shit.

I got there first and kicked the gun out of his hand. If he'd twitched, I'd have shot him again. He didn't twitch. He just lay there, dead.

Wallace tried to cradle him one-handed. "Why'd you shoot him? Why?"

"He was going to kill Larry. You saw it."

"Why?"

"The vamp that bit him. His master is out here. And he's a powerful son of a bitch. He used him."

Wallace had Granger's bloody head in his lap, his own ravaged arm pressed to Granger's chest. He was crying.

Shit.

A sound rode the rising wind. A sharp, furious barking. A woman's scream, high and clear, cut across the sound.

"Oh, God," I whispered.

"Beth." St. John was on his feet running before I could say anything.

I grabbed Wallace's shoulder, pulling on his jacket. He looked up.

"What's happening?"

"They're in the house," I said. "Can you walk?"

He nodded. I helped him to his feet.

Another scream came. It wasn't the same scream. A man this time, or a boy.

"Stay with him, Larry. Get to the house as soon as you can."

"What if they're trying to split us up?" Larry asked.

"Then it's going to work," I said. "Shoot anything that moves." I touched his arm, as if that would make him more real, keep him safe. It wouldn't, but it was all I had. I had to go for the house. Larry had signed up to be a monster slayer. The Quinlans and Beth St. John hadn't.

I holstered the Browning, kept a two-handed grip on the shotgun, and threw myself into the trees. I ran, not trying to see where I was going. Rushing through openings in the trees that I wasn't sure were there, but they were. I jumped over a log and nearly fell but caught myself and kept running. A branch slashed my face, bringing tears to my eye. The forest that had seemed passable before was now a maze of roots and branches that grabbed and tripped. I was

running blind. It was not a good way to stay alive with vampires in the dark. I spilled out onto the Quinlans' lawn on my knees, shotgun tightly gripped.

The front door was open. Light spilled in a warm rectangle. Shots sounded from inside the house. I got to my feet and ran for the light.

The poodle lay broken by the door, crumpled like someone had tried to force it into a ball.

The doors to the living room were open. A second shot sounded. I went in to the left of the door, wall at my back, shotgun ready.

Mr. and Mrs. Quinlan were huddled in the far corner with their crosses held out before them. The metal glowed with a white-hot light like burning magnesium.

The thing in front of them didn't look much like a vampire. It looked like a skeleton with muscle and flesh stretched over a bone frame. It was stretched impossibly thin and tall. A sword rode its back, gleaming and wide as a scimitar. Coltrain's killer?

St. John was firing into the brown-haired vamp from the woods. She had long brown hair parted in the middle, straight and lovely, framing a face that was blood-smearred and stretched wide over fangs.

I had a glimpse of Beth St. John on the floor behind her. She wasn't moving.

St. John kept firing into the vampire's body. She just kept coming. Blood blossomed on the front of her jean jacket. His gun clicked, empty. The vampire staggered, then fell to her knees. She fell forward on all fours, and you could see that her back was so much raw meat. She lay gasping on the floor while St. John reloaded.

I got to my feet, trying to keep an eye on the door just in case this wasn't all. I walked towards the Quinlans and the thing that stood in front of them. I needed a better angle before I used the shotgun. Didn't want to catch them in the shot pattern.

The thing turned on me. I had a glimpse of a face that was neither human nor animal, but stretched thin and alien with fangs and blind, glowing eyes. It shrank, and skin flowed over the bare flesh, covered the nearly naked bone. I'd never seen anything like it. When I aimed the shotgun, I was looking into what could have passed for a human face. Long white hair framed a fine-boned face, and it ran—if running was the word for that blur of motion. It ran like some of them flew, almost like it was doing something else altogether, but I had no better word for it. Some of them flew; this one ran. It was gone before I could pull the trigger.

I was left staring at the open door where the barrel had followed its movement. Could I have fired? Had I hesitated? I didn't think so, but I wasn't sure. It was like in the woods when Coltrain died, like I'd missed a few seconds. The vampire had to be our killer, but the only thing I'd seen clearly in the woods had been the sword.

St. John shot into the fallen vampire. He fired until his gun clicked empty again. The gun went click, click, click.

I walked over to him. The vampire's head was bloody meat and heavier, wetter things. There was no face left. "It's dead, St. John. You killed it."

He just stared at it, down the barrel of his empty gun. He was shaking. He collapsed to his knees suddenly, as if he just couldn't stand any longer. He crawled over to his wife, gun left behind him on the carpet. He cradled her in his arms, half-lifting, rocking her. She was soaked with blood. Her throat was so much raw meat on one side.

St. John was making a high, keening sound deep in his throat.

The Quinlans's crosses had stopped glowing. They stood still clinging to each other, blinking as if blinded by the light.

"Jeff—he took Jeff," Mrs. Quinlan said.

I looked at her. Her eyes were too wide. "He took Jeff."

"Who took Jeff?" I asked.

"The big one," Mr. Quinlan said. "That thing, that thing told Jeff to take his cross off, and Jeff did it." He looked at me with startled eyes. "Why did he do that? Why did he take it off?"

"The vampire caught him with his eyes," I said. "He couldn't help himself."

"If his faith had been stronger, he wouldn't have given in," Quinlan said.

"It wasn't your son's fault."

Quinlan shook his head. "He wasn't strong enough."

I turned away from him. Which put me staring at St. John. He had folded as much of his wife's body into his lap and arms as he could. He rocked her, eyes distant. He wasn't seeing this room. He'd gone somewhere deep inside. Someplace better. I hoped.

I went for the door. I didn't have to see this. Watching St. John rock his wife's body was not part of my job description. Honest.

I sat down on the stairs where I could see the door, the hallway, and the stairs as far as the landing. St. John started singing in a strange, broken voice. It took me a few minutes to figure out what he was singing. It was "You Are So Beautiful." I got up and went for the outer door. Larry and Wallace were just limping up onto the porch.

I just shook my head and kept walking. I was almost to the driveway before I couldn't hear the singing. I stood there taking deep breaths, letting them out slowly. I concentrated on my breathing, concentrated on the sound of frogs and wind. I concentrated on anything but the sound that was building in my throat. I stood there in the dark, in the open, knowing it was dangerous, and not sure I cared. I stood there until I was sure I wasn't going to start screaming. Then I turned and went back to the house.

It was the bravest thing I'd done all night.

Chapter 16

Detective Freemont sat on one end of the Quinlans' couch and I perched on the other. We were as far away from each other as we could get and share it. Only pride kept me from taking a chair. I wouldn't flinch under her cool cop eyes. So I stayed nailed to my end of the couch, but it was an effort.

Her voice was low and careful, every word enunciated, as if she thought she might yell if she rushed the words. "Why didn't you call and tell me you had a second vampire kill?"

"Sheriff St. John called the state cops. I assumed you'd be told."

"Well, I wasn't."

I stared up into her cool eyes. "You're twenty minutes away with a crime scene unit looking into a possible vampire kill. Why wouldn't they send you over to a second vampire scene?"

Freemont's eyes shifted to one side, then back to me. Her cool cop eyes had melted just a little. It was hard to read for sure, but she looked uneasy. Maybe even scared.

"You haven't told them it was a vampire kill, have you?"

Her eyes flinched.

"Shit, Freemont. I know you don't want the Feds to steal your case, but withholding information from your own people . . . Bet your superiors aren't happy with you."

"That's my business."

"Fine. Whatever plan you've got, more power to you, but why are you pissed at me?"

She took a deep, shaking breath and blew it out like a runner trying to get that extra kick. "How sure are you the vampire used a sword?"

"You saw the body," I said.

She nodded. "A vampire could have ripped the neck apart."

"I saw a blade, Freemont."

"The ME will either back you up, or not."

"Why don't you want this to be vampires?"

She smiled. "I thought I had this case all solved. Thought I'd make an arrest this morning. I didn't think it was vampires."

I stared at her. I wasn't smiling. "If it wasn't vamps, then what was it?"

"Fairies."

I stared at her for a heartbeat. "What do you mean?"

"Your boss, Sergeant Storr, called me. Told me what you'd found out about Magnus Bouvier. He's got no alibi for the time of the killings, and even you think he could have done it."

"Because he could have done it, doesn't mean he did," I said.

Freemont shrugged. "He ran when we tried to question him. Innocent people don't run."

"What do you mean, he ran? If you were there questioning him, how could he run?"

Freemont settled back into the couch, hands clasped together so tightly her fingers were mottled. "He used magic to cloud our minds, and made his escape."

"What sort of magic?"

Freemont shook her head. "What do you want me to say, Ms. Preternatural Expert? Four of us sat there in his restaurant like idiots while he just walked out. We didn't even see him get up from the table."

She looked at me, no smiles. Her eyes were back to that neutral coolness. You could stare all day at someone with eyes like that and keep all your secrets safe.

"He looked human to me, Blake. He looked like a nice, normal guy. I wouldn't have picked him out of a crowd. How did you know what he was?"

I opened my mouth, and closed it. I wasn't exactly sure how to answer the question. "He tried to use glamor on me, but I knew what was happening."

"What's glamor, and how did you know he was using a spell on you?"

"Glamor isn't exactly a spell," I said. I always hated explaining preternatural things to people who had no skill in the area. It was like having quantum physics explained to me. I could follow the concepts, but I had to take their word for it on the math. The math was beyond me, hated to admit it, but it was. But not understanding quantum physics wouldn't get me killed. Not understanding preternatural creatures might get Freemont killed.

"I'm not stupid, Blake. Explain it to me."

"I don't think you're stupid, Detective Freemont. It's just hard to explain. I was riding with two uniforms in St. Louis. They were transporting me from a crime scene, playing taxi. The driver spotted this guy just walking along. He pulled over, put him up against a car. The guy was carrying a weapon, and was wanted in another state for armed robbery. If I'd been in a room with him, I'd have noticed the gun, but just passing by in a car, no way. I wouldn't have seen it. Even his partner asked him how he spotted him. He couldn't explain so that we could do it, but he knew how to do it."

"So it's practice?" Freemont said.

I sighed. "In part, but hell, Detective, I raise the dead for a living. I have some preternatural abilities. It gives me a leg up."

"How the hell are we supposed to police creatures, Ms. Blake? If Bouvier had pulled a gun, we'd have sat there and let him shoot us. We just sort of woke up and he wasn't there anymore. I've never seen anything like it."

"There are things you can do to protect yourself from fairie glamor," I said.

"What?"

"A four-leaf clover will break glamor, but it won't keep the fey from killing you by hand. There are other plants you can wear, or carry that break glamor: Saint-John's-wort, red verbena, daisies, rowan, and ash. My choice would be an ointment made of either four-leaf clovers or Saint-John's-wort. Spread it on your eyelids, mouth, ears, and hands. It'll make you proof against glamor."

"Where do I get this stuff?"

I thought about that for a second. "Well, in St. Louis I'd know where to go. Here, try health-food stores and occult shops. Any fairie ointment will be hard to find because we don't have any fairies native to this country. Ointment from four-leaf clovers is very expensive, and rare. Try for the Saint-John's-wort."

She sighed. "Will this ointment work on any mind control, like for vamps?"

"Nope," I said. "You could drop a vamp in a whole tub of Saint-John's-wort and it wouldn't give a damn."

"What do you do against vampires, then?"

"Keep your cross, avoid eye contact, pray. They can do things that'll make Magnus look like an amateur."

She rubbed her eyes, smearing eye shadow on the ball of her thumb. She suddenly looked tired. "How do we protect the public against something like that?"

"You don't," I said.

"Yes, we do," she said. "We have to; it's our job."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I didn't try. "So you thought it was Magnus because he ran, and he doesn't have an alibi?"

"Why else would he run?"

"I don't know," I said. "But he didn't do it. I saw the thing in the woods. It wasn't Magnus. Hell, I've only heard about vampires forming from shadows. I'd never seen it before."

She looked at me. "You've never seen it before. That's not comforting."

"It wasn't meant to be. But since it wasn't Magnus, you can call off the warrant."

She shook her head. "He used magic on police officers while committing a crime. That's a class C felony."

"What was his crime?"

"Escaping."

"But he wasn't under arrest."

"I had a warrant for his arrest," she said.

"You didn't have enough for a warrant," I said.

"Helps to know the right judge."

"He didn't kill those kids, or Coltrain."

"You pointed the finger at him," she said.

"Just an alternate possibility. With five people dead, I couldn't afford to be wrong."

She stood. "Well, you got your wish. It was vampires, and I don't know why the hell Magnus Bouvier ran from us. But just using magic on a police officer is a felony."

"Even if he was innocent of the original crime you were trying to bring him in on?" I asked.

"Felonious use of magic is a serious crime, Ms. Blake. There's a warrant for his arrest. You see him, you remember that."

"I know Magnus isn't nice people, Detective Freemont. I don't know why he ran, but if you put out the word that he used magic on cops, someone'll shoot him."

"He's dangerous, Ms. Blake."

"Yeah, but so are a lot of people, Detective. You don't hunt them down and arrest them for it."

She nodded. "We've all got prejudices, Ms. Blake; makes us all wrong once in a while. At least here we know what did it."

"Yeah," I said. "We know what did it."

"Do you know when the girl's body was taken?" she asked. She got a notebook out of her coat pocket. Down to business.

I shook my head. "No. It was just gone when I went up."

"What made you think to check on the body?"

I looked at her. Her eyes were pleasant and unreadable. "They'd gone to a lot of trouble to make her one of them. I thought they might try to get her. They did."

"The father's making noises that he asked you to stake her body before you went out after the vampires. Is that true?" Her voice was soft, matter-of-fact. But she was paying attention to the answers. She didn't take as many notes as Dolph did. The notebook seemed to be more something to do with her hands than anything else. I was finally seeing Freemont doing her job. She seemed good at it. That was reassuring.

"Yeah, that's true."

"Why didn't you stake the girl when the parents requested it?"

"I had a father. A widower. His daughter and only child got bit. He wanted her staked. I did it that night, right away. Next morning he's in my office crying, wanting me to undo it. Wanting me to bring her back as a vampire." I leaned back into the couch, hugging myself. "You put a stake through a new vamp's heart, and it's dead for good."

"I thought you had to take a vampire's head to be sure."

"You do," I said. "If I had staked the Quinlan girl, I would have taken out her heart, cut off her head." I shook my head. "There isn't much left."

She drew something on her note pad. I couldn't see what. I was betting it was a doodle and not a word. "I see why you wanted to wait, but Mr. Quinlan is talking about suing you."

"Yeah, I know."

Freemont raised her eyebrows. "Just thought you'd want to know."

"Thanks."

"We haven't found the boy's body yet."

"I don't think you will," I said.

Her eyes didn't look pleasant anymore. They looked narrow and suspicious. "Why?"

"If they wanted to kill him, they could have done it here, tonight. I think they want to make him one of them."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. But usually when a vampire takes this personal an interest in a family, there's a reason for it."

"You mean a motive?"

I nodded. "You've seen the Quinlans. They're devout Catholics. The church sees vampirism as suicide. Their children will be damned for all eternity if they become vampires."

"Worse than just killing them," she said.

"To the Quinlans, I think so."

"You think the vampires will be back to get the parents?"

I thought about that for a minute. "Hell, I don't know. I mean, before vampires were legal you had some cases where a master vamp would take out entire families. Sometimes befriend them first. Sometimes just for revenge for some slight. But since they've been legal, I don't know why the vamp would do it. I mean, the vampire can take them to court. What could the Quinlans have done that was bad enough for this?"

The doors opened. Freemont turned, a frown already in place. Two men appeared in the doorway. They were both dressed in dark suits, dark ties, white shirts. Standard federal issue. One was short and white, the other tall and black. That alone should have made them look different, but there was a sameness to them, like the same cookie cutter had been used no matter how well cooked the outside was.

The shorter of the two flipped his badge at us. "I'm Special Agent Bradford, this is Agent Elwood. Which one of you is Detective Freemont?"

Freemont walked towards them with her hand out. Showing she was unarmed and friendly. Yeah, right. "I'm Detective Freemont. This is Anita Blake."

I appreciated being included in the introductions. I stood up and joined the foursome.

Agent Bradford looked at me for a long time. Long enough that it got on my nerves. "Is there something wrong, Agent Bradford?"

He shook his head. "I attended Sergeant Storr's lectures at Quantico. The way he talked about you, I thought you'd be bigger." He smiled when he said it, halfway between friendly and condescending.

A lot of scathing comebacks came to mind, but never get in a pissing contest with the Feds. You'll lose. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"We've already talked with Officer Wallace. He makes you sound taller, too."

I shrugged. "Hard to make me sound shorter."

He smiled. "We'd like to speak with Detective Freemont in private, Ms. Blake. But don't go far; we'll want a statement from you and your associate, Mr. Kirkland."

"Sure."

"I took Ms. Blake's statement personally," Freemont said. "I don't think we need her any more tonight."

Bradford looked at her. "I think we'll be the judge of that."

"If Ms. Blake had called me in when there was only one body on the ground, there wouldn't be two dead policemen, and a dead civilian," Freemont said.

I just looked at her. Somebody's ass was going to be in a sling, and Freemont didn't want it to be hers. Fine.

"Don't forget the missing boy," I said. Everyone looked at me. "You want to start pointing fingers, fine; there's enough blame to go around. If you hadn't chased me off earlier, I might have called you in, but I did call the state police. If you'd told your superiors everything I told you, they'd have connected the two cases, and you'd have been here anyway."

"I had enough men with me to cover the house and the civilians," Freemont said. "Not including me cost lives."

I nodded. "Probably. But you'd have come down here and kicked me out again. You'd have taken St. John and his people out in the dark with five vampires, one of them ancient, when all you've seen is pictures of vampire kills. They'd have slaughtered you, but maybe, just maybe, Beth St. John would be alive. Maybe Jeff Quinlan would still be here."

I stared up at her, and watched the anger drain from her eyes. We looked at each other. "It took both of us to fuck this one up, Sergeant." I turned back to the two agents. "I'll wait outside."

"Wait," Bradford said. "Storr said that sometimes the legal vampire community will help on a case like this. Who do I talk to down here?"

"Why would they hunt down one of their own?" Agent Elwood asked.

"This kind of shit is bad for business. Especially right now with Senator Brewster's daughter getting killed. Vampires don't need any more bad publicity. Most of them like being legal. They like the fact that killing them is murder."

"So who do I talk to?" Bradford asked.

I sighed. "In this area, I don't know. I'm not a hometown girl."

"How do I go about finding out who to talk to?"

"I might be able to help you there."

"How?"

I shook my head. "I know someone who might know a name. I'm not trying to give you a hard time here, but a lot of the monsters don't like dealing with cops. It just hasn't been that long ago that the police shot them on sight."

"So you're saying the vampires will talk to you and not to us?" Elwood said.

"Something like that."

"That makes no sense. You're a vampire executioner. Your job is to kill them. Why would they believe you and not us?" he asked.

I didn't know how to explain it, and wasn't sure I wanted to. "I also raise zombies, Agent Elwood. I think they sort of consider me one of the monsters."

"Even though you're their version of an electric chair."

"Even though."

"That's not logical."

I laughed then; I couldn't help it. "God, has anything that happened here tonight been logical?"

Elwood gave a very small smile. I pegged him as the newer of the two. I don't think he'd gotten over the thought that FBI agents don't smile.

"You wouldn't be withholding information from the FBI, would you, Ms. Blake?" Bradford asked.

"If I come up with a vampire in this area that will talk to you, I'll give you the name."

Bradford stared at me. "How about if you come up with any vampires in this area, you give us the names. Let us worry about whether they'll talk to us or not."

I looked at him for a heartbeat and lied. "Sure." If I expected the monsters to help me, I couldn't give them all over to the cops. Only a select few.

He looked like he didn't believe me, but couldn't quite call me a liar to my face. "When we find the vampires responsible, we'll be sure to call you in for the kill."

That was more than Freemont had been willing to do. The night was looking up. "Beep me any time."

"We'll talk to Sergeant Freemont now, Ms. Blake." I was dismissed. Fine with me. He offered his hand. I took it. We shook. Agent Elwood and I shook. Everyone smiled. I left.

Larry was waiting out in the entryway. He got up off the stairs where he'd been sitting. "What now?"

"I need to make a phone call."

"Who to?"

Two more men with "Federal Agent" tattooed on their foreheads walked up the hallway from the direction of the kitchen. I shook my head and went out the door into the cool windy night. The place was swarming with cops. I'd never seen so many federal agents in my life. But hey, the very first vampire serial killer was news. Everyone would want a piece. Watching everyone mill around on the carefully tended lawn, I suddenly wanted to go home. To just pack up and go home. It was still early. Hours and hours left of darkness. It only seemed like it had been an eternity since we left the graveyard. Hell, there'd be time to go back and look at Stirling's boneyard before dawn.

I got in the jeep that Bayard had loaned us. I'd use the nifty portable phone it came with.

Larry got in the passenger side.

"Private call."

"Come on, Anita."

"Out, Larry."

"Out in the dark with the vampires." He blinked his big blue eyes at me.

"The place is lousy with cops. I think you'll be safe. Out."

He got out, grumbling under his breath. He could grumble all he wanted to. Larry wanted to be a vampire hunter, fine; but he didn't have to be as intimately involved with the monsters as I was. I was trying to keep him as out of it as I could. Not easy, but worth the effort.

I'd lied to the nice agents. It wasn't the fact that I raised zombies that got me in good with the vampires. It was the fact that the Master of the City, of St.

Louis, had the hots for me. Was maybe in love with me, or at least thought he was.

I knew the number by heart, which was a bad sign all on its own. "Guilty Pleasures, where your darkest fantasies come true. This is Robert. How may I help you?"

Great; Robert, one of my least favorite vampires. "Hi, Robert, this is Anita. I need to speak to Jean-Claude."

He hesitated, then said, "I'll transfer you to his office phone. It's a new system, so if I disconnect you, call back."

The phone clicked before I could answer. A moment of silence, and the voice came on the line. You can criticize a lot about Jean-Claude, but he gives good phone.

"Good evening, *ma petite*." That was it, all he said, but even over the buzzing phone his voice was like fur inside my skull.

"I'm near Branson. I need to contact the Master of the City down here."

"No 'Good evening, Jean-Claude, how are you doing?'" Just down to business. How terribly rude, *ma petite*."

"Look, I don't have time for games right now. Some vampires down here are on the rampage. They've kidnapped a young boy. I want to find him before they can make him one of them."

"How young is the boy?"

"Sixteen."

In centuries past, *ma petite*, that was not considered a child."

"It isn't legal age right this minute."

"Did he go willingly?"

"No."

"You know that for a fact, or were you merely told he was kidnapped?"

"I talked to him before. He didn't go willingly."

Jean-Claude sighed. The sound slithered down my skin like cool fingers. "What do you want of me, *ma petite*?"

"I want to talk to the Master of the City down here. I need the name. I'm assuming you do know who the Master is down here?"

"Of course, but it is not that simple."

"We only have three nights to save him, and a hell of a lot less if they just want a snack."

"The Master will not talk to you without a guide to take you in."

"Send someone, then."

"Who? Robert? Willie? Neither of them is powerful enough to be your escort."

"If you mean they can't protect me, I can protect myself."

"I know you can take care of yourself, *ma petite*. You have made that abundantly clear. But you do not look as dangerous as you are. You might have to shoot one or two to teach them their place. If you got out alive, they would not help you."

"I want to get this boy back intact, Jean-Claude. Work with me here."

"*Ma petite* . . ."

I had an image of Jeff Quinlan's brown eyes. His room with its cowboy wallpaper. "Help me, Jean-Claude."

He was silent for a moment. "I am the only one powerful enough to be your escort. Do you wish me to drop everything and rush down to you?"

It was my turn to be quiet. Put like that, it didn't sound right. It sounded like a big favor. I didn't want to be indebted to him. But I'd probably live through owing him a favor. Jeff Quinlan might not.

"Fine," I said.

"You want me to come help you?"

I gritted my teeth and said, "Yes."

"I will fly down tomorrow night."

"Tonight."

"*Ma petite, ma petite*, what am I to do with you?"

"You said you'd help me."

"And I will, but these things take time."

"What things?"

"It might be helpful if you thought of Branson as a foreign country. A potentially hostile foreign country where I am working to get us safe passage. There are customs to be observed. If I barge in, it will be seen as a declaration of war."

"Isn't there any way to start tonight?" I asked. "Short of starting a war?"

"Perhaps, but if you wait one more night, *ma petite*, we can enter much more safely. "

"We can take care of ourselves. Jeff Quinlan can't."

"That is his name?"

"Yeah."

He took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh that made me shiver. I would have told him to stop that, but it would have amused him, so I didn't.

"I will fly down tonight. How do I contact you?"

I gave him the name of my hotel and then, with a sigh, my beeper number.

"I will call you when I arrive."

"How long will it take you to fly this far?"

"Anita, do you think I am going to fly myself down, as a bird would?"

I didn't like the faint amusement in his voice, but I answered truthfully. "It was a thought."

He laughed, and it raised goose-bumps on my arms. "Oh, *ma petite, ma petite*, you are precious."

Just what I wanted to hear. "So how are you getting here?"

"My private jet."

Of course, he had a private jet. "When can you be here?"

"I will be there as soon as I can, my impatient flower."

"I prefer *ma petite* to flower."

"As you like, *ma petite*."

"I want to see the Master of Branson tonight before dawn."

"You have made that abundantly clear, and I will try."

"Do more than try."

"You are feeling guilty about this boy; why?"

"I'm not feeling guilty."

"Responsible, then," he said.

I sat there, not sure what to say. He was right. "I don't suppose you read my mind just then?"

"No, *ma petite*, just your voice and your impatience."

I hated that he knew me that well. Hated it. "Yeah, I feel responsible."

"Why?"

"I was in charge."

"Did you do all you could to keep him safe?"

"I had hosts put at every entrance."

"Someone let them in, then?"

"They had a doggie door that exited through the garage, into the house wall. They didn't want to cut a hole through any of the outer doors."

"Was there a child vampire among them?"

"No."

"Then how?"

I described the thin, skeletal vampire. "It was almost a form change. He changed back in seconds. Once he changed back, he could have passed for human in dim light. I've never seen anything like it."

"I've only seen the ability once," he said.

"You know who it is, don't you?"

"I will be with you as soon as I am able, *ma petite*."

"You sound serious all of a sudden; why?"

He gave a small laugh, but this one was bitter, like swallowing broken glass. It hurt just to hear it. "You know me too well, *ma petite*."

"Just answer the question."

"Did the boy who was taken look younger than his years?"

"Yeah; why?"

Silence thick enough to slice was the only answer.

"Talk to me, Jean-Claude."

"Have there been any other young boys gone missing?"

"Not to my knowledge, but I haven't asked."

"Ask," he said.

"How young?"

"Twelve, fourteen, older if they look young enough."

"Like Jeff Quinlan," I said.

"I fear so."

"Is this vampire into more than just kidnapping?"

"What do you mean, *ma petite*?"

"Murder, not just biting them, but murder."

"What sort of murder?"

I hesitated. I didn't discuss ongoing police investigations with the monsters.

"I know you do not trust me, *ma petite*, but it is important. Tell me of these deaths, please."

He didn't say please very often. I told him. Not in great detail, but enough.

"Were they violated?"

"What do you mean, violated?" I asked.

"Violated, *ma petite*, violated. There are other words for it, but none better for children."

"Oh," I said. "I don't know if they were sexually assaulted. They were still clothed."

"There are things that can be done without removing clothing, *ma petite*. But the abuse would have happened before the killings. Systematic abuse over a period of weeks or months."

"I'll find out if they were assaulted." An idea occurred to me. "Would this vamp ever do a girl?"

"By 'do,' you mean sex?"

"Yeah."

"If pressed for company, he would take a young girl, prepubescent, but only if he could find nothing else."

I swallowed hard. We were talking about children like they were things, objects. "No, this girl looked like a woman. She didn't look young."

"Then, no, he would not willingly touch her."

"What do you mean, willingly? What other choice would there be?"

"His master could order him to do it, and he might, if he feared the master enough. Though I cannot think of many people that he would fear enough to do something he found repugnant."

"You know this vampire. Who is he? Give me a name."

"When I arrive, *ma petite*."

"Just give me the name."

"So you can give it to the police?"

"That is their job."

"No, *ma petite*. If it is who I think it is, it will not be a matter for the police."

"Why not?"

"Put simply, he is too dangerous and too exotic to be revealed to the general public. If mortals found out we could have among us such things, they might turn on us all together. You must be aware of that nasty law floating around the Senate."

"I'm aware."

"Then you must understand my caution."

"Maybe, but if more people die because of your caution, it's going to help Brewster's law get passed. You think about that."

"Oh, I am, *ma petite*. Trust that I am. Now farewell. I have much to do." He hung up.

I sat there staring at the phone. Damn him. What did he mean by exotic? What could this new vampire do that others couldn't? He could slim himself down enough to fit through a doggie door. Maybe it made Houdini jealous, but it was hardly a crime. But I remembered its face. Not human. Not even just a corpse's face. It had been something else altogether. Something different. And I

remembered those few seconds I lost, twice. Me, the great vampire hunter, helpless as any civilian for just a heartbeat. With vampires, a heartbeat was enough.

Visions of such things would get you talking of demons, which Quinlan had done briefly. The police ignored him, and I didn't back up his story. Quinlan had never met a real demon, or he wouldn't have made the mistake. Once you've been in the presence of demons, you never forget it. I'd rather fight a dozen vampires than one demonic presence. They don't give a shit about silver bullets.

Chapter 17

It was after 2:00 a.m. before we got back to the graveyard. The Feds had kept us forever, like they didn't believe we were telling them the whole truth. Fancy that. I hated being accused of concealing evidence when I wasn't. Made me want to lie to them just so they wouldn't be disappointed. I think Freemont had painted a less than charitable picture of me. That'll teach me to be generous. But it seemed petty to point fingers at each other, and say she did it, when Beth St. John's blood was still wet on the carpet.

The wind that had all but promised rain had drifted away. The thick clouds that had obscured the woods while we were playing tag with vampires were suddenly gone. The moon rode high and two days past full. Since dating Richard, I'd paid more attention to the lunar cycles. Fancy that.

The moon sailed the shining night sky, gleaming like it had been polished. The moonlight was so strong it cast faint shadows. You didn't need a flashlight, but Raymond Stirling had one. A big freaking halogen torch that filled his hand like a captive sun.

I watched him start to point it at Larry and me. I raised an arm and said, "Don't point it at us. You'll ruin our night vision." It wasn't very diplomatic, but I was tired, and it had been a long night.

He hesitated in mid-motion. I didn't have to see his face to know he didn't like it. Men like Raymond give orders better than they take them.

He clicked off the light. Good for him. He waited with Ms. Harrison, Bayard, and Beau gathered around him. He was the only one with a flashlight. I bet that his entourage wasn't worried about night vision, and would have liked to have had a light.

Larry and I were still wearing the coveralls. I was getting tired of mine. What I really wanted to do was go back to the hotel and sleep. But once Jean-Claude arrived I wouldn't be sleeping anyway; might as well work. Besides, Stirling was my only paying client. Well, yeah I do get money for killing

vampires if it's a legal kill, but it's not a lot of money. Stirling was financing this trip. He deserved his money's worth, I guess.

"We've been waiting for a very long time, Ms. Blake."

"I'm sorry that the death of a young girl inconvenienced you, Mr. Stirling. Shall we go up?"

"I am not unsympathetic to another's loss, Ms. Blake, and I resent the implication that I am." He stood there in the moonlit dark, very straight, very commanding. Ms. Harrison and Bayard moved a little closer, showing support. Beau just stood there, looking sort of amused behind Stirling's back. He was wearing a black slicker with a hood. He looked like a phantom.

I looked up at the clear, sparkling sky. Looked at Beau. He grinned broadly enough for his teeth to flash in the moonlight. I just shook my head and let it go. Maybe he'd been a Boy Scout, always prepared and all that.

"Fine, whatever you say. Let's get this over with." I didn't wait for them. I just walked past them and started up.

Larry, at my side, said, "You're being rude."

I glanced at him.

"Yeah, I am."

"He is a paying client, Anita."

"Look, I don't need you to chastise me, okay?"

"What's wrong with you?"

I stopped. "What we just left is what's wrong with me. I'd think it'd bother you a little more, too."

"It bothers me, but I don't have to take it out on everyone else."

I took a deep breath and let it out slow. He was right. Damn. "Alright, you've made your point. I'll try to be nicer."

Stirling marched up to us, entourage in tow. "Are you coming, Ms. Blake?" He walked past us, his back ramrod-straight.

Ms. Harrison stumbled, and only Bayard's grab on her elbow kept her from falling flat on her butt. She was still wearing her high heels. Maybe it was against the executive secretary code to wear tennis shoes.

Beau followed with his black slicker flapping around his long legs. It made a distinctive *slap-slap* sound that was most irritating.

Okay, maybe everything was irritating right now. I was feeling decidedly grumpy. Jeff Quinlan was out there somewhere. He was either already dead or had one bite by now. It wasn't my fault. I'd told his father to put a piece of the host in front of every entrance. I would have thought of the doggie door if I'd seen it, but I'd never gone that far into the house. Even I would have thought it was paranoid to guard the doggie entrance. But I would have done it, and Beth St. John would be alive.

I'd dropped the ball. I couldn't bring Beth St. John back, but I could save Jeff. And I would. I would. I didn't want to avenge him by killing the vampire that killed him. For once I wanted to be in time. For once I wanted to save someone and leave revenge for someone else.

Was Jeff being violated, right this minute? Was that thing I'd seen in the Quinlans' living room doing more than just biting his neck? God, I hoped not. I

was pretty sure I could bring Jeff back from a vampire bite, but combine that with rape by a monster, and I wasn't so sure. What if I found him and there wasn't much left to save? The mind is a surprisingly fragile thing sometimes.

I prayed as we walked up the hill. I prayed and felt a measure of calm return. No visions. No angels singing. But a feeling of peace flowed over me. I took a deep breath, and something hard and tight and ugly in my heart let go. I took it as a good sign that I'd get to Jeff in time. But part of me was skeptical. God doesn't always save someone. Often He just helps you live through the loss. I guess I don't entirely trust God. I never doubt Him, but His motives are too beyond me. Through a glass darkly and all that. Just once I'd like to see through the damn glass clearly.

The moon shone down on the top of the hill like silver fire. The air was almost luminescent. The rain was gone, giving its blessing somewhere else. Heaven knows we could have used the rain, but personally I was just as glad I didn't have to walk the raw dirt in a downpour. Mud would have been just too perfect.

"Well, Ms. Blake, shall we begin?" Stirling asked.

I glanced at him. "Yeah." I took a breath and swallowed the blunt things I wanted to say. Larry was right. Stirling was a pain in the ass, but he wasn't who I was mad at. He was just a convenient target.

"Mr. Kirkland and I will walk the graveyard. But you need to stay here. Other people moving around are very distracting." There; that was diplomatic.

"If you were going to make us stand here like an audience, you could have said so at the bottom of this mountain. And saved us the walk."

So much for diplomacy. "Would you have liked me telling you to stay at the bottom of the hill where you couldn't see what we were doing?"

He thought about that for a minute. "No, I suppose I wouldn't have liked it."

"Then what are you complaining about?"

"Anita," Larry said very softly under his breath.

I ignored him. "Look, Mr. Stirling, it has been a really rough night. I am just out of niceness right now. Please, just let me do my job. The faster I get this done, the sooner we go home. Okay?"

Honesty. I was hoping profound honesty would work. It was about all I had left.

He hesitated a minute, then nodded. "All right, Ms. Blake. Do your job, but know this. You have been decidedly unpleasant. It better be pretty spectacular."

I opened my mouth, and Larry touched my arm. He gripped my arm not too hard, but hard enough. I swallowed what I was going to say and walked away from all of them. Larry trailed after me. Brave Larry.

"What's the matter with you tonight?" he asked when we were out of earshot of Stirling and Co.

"I told you."

"No," he said, "it isn't just the murder tonight. Hell, I've seen you kill people and be less upset afterwards. What's wrong?"

I stopped walking and just stood there for a minute. He'd seen me kill people and be less upset. Was that true? I thought about it for a heartbeat. It was true. That was pretty damn sad.

I knew what was wrong. I'd seen too many slaughtered people in the last few months. Too much blood. Too much killing. I'd done some of the killing. Not all of it had been sanctioned by the state. I also wanted to be looking for Jeff Quinlan. I couldn't do anything until Jean-Claude arrived. I really couldn't. But I felt like my job was interfering with my police work. Was that a bad sign? Or a good one?

I took a deep breath of the cool mountain air. I let it out very slowly, concentrating on just breathing, in and out, in and out. When I felt calm again, I looked at Larry.

"I'm just a little on edge tonight, Larry. I'll be alright."

"If I said a little on edge with a surprised lilt in my voice, would you get mad?"

I smiled. "Yeah, I would."

"You've been in a blacker mood than usual since you talked to Jean-Claude. What's up?"

I stared into his smiling face and didn't want to tell him. He wasn't that much older than Jeff Quinlan, four years. He could still have passed for a high-schooler. "Fine," I said, and told him.

"A vampire pedophile; isn't that against the rules?"

"What rules?"

"That you can only be one kind of monster at a time."

"It kind of caught me off guard, too."

A strange look flashed across his face. "Sweet Jesus, Jeff Quinlan is with that thing." He looked at me, all the horror, all the pain, or as much as he could imagine, flowing across his face. "We have to do something, Anita. We have to save him." He turned as if to go back down the mountain.

I grabbed his arm. "We can't do anything until Jean-Claude arrives."

"But we can't just do nothing."

"We aren't doing nothing. We're doing our job."

"But how can we . . ."

"Because we can't do anything else right now."

Larry looked at me for a second, then nodded. "Okay; if you can be calm, so can I."

"Good man."

"Thanks. Now show me this nifty trick you've been talking about. I've never heard of anyone who could read the dead without raising them first."

Truthfully, I didn't know if Larry could do it. But telling him he might not be able to was not going to help his confidence. Magic, if that was the right word, often rises and falls on your own belief in your abilities. I've seen very powerful people completely crippled by self-doubt.

"I'm going to walk the cemetery." I tried to think of how to put it into words. How do you explain something that you don't fully understand yourself?

I have always had an affinity with the dead. Even as a small child, I always knew if the soul had fled the body. I remember my great-aunt Katerine's funeral. I'm named after her, my middle name. She was my father's favorite aunt. We went early to view the body and make sure everything was ready. I felt her soul hovering above the coffin. I looked up expecting to see it, but there was nothing for my eyes to hold onto. I've never seen a soul. I've felt them, but I've never seen one.

I know now that Aunt Katerine's soul hung around a long time. Most souls leave within three days, some leave instantly, some don't. My mother's soul was gone by the time the funeral arrived. I didn't feel her there. There was nothing but a closed coffin and a blanket of pink roses over the coffin, as if the coffin would get cold.

It was at home where I felt my mother hovering close. Not her soul, not really, but some piece of her that couldn't let go immediately. I would hear her footsteps in the hall outside my bedroom as if she was coming to kiss me good night. She moved through the house for months, and I found it comforting. When she finally left, I was ready to let her go. I never told my father. I was only eight, but even then I knew that he couldn't hear her. Maybe he heard other things. I don't know. My father and I never talked much about my mother's death. It made him cry.

I'd been able to sense ghosts long before I could raise the dead. What I was about to do was just an extension of that, or maybe a combination of both skills. I don't know. But it was like trying to explain that there was a soul hovering over Aunt Katerine's coffin. Either you knew the soul was there or you didn't. Words didn't quite cover it.

"Can you see ghosts?"

"You mean right now?"

I smiled and shook my head. "No, just in general."

"Well, I knew the Calvin house wasn't haunted, no matter how many stories people made up. But there was a little cave near town that had something in it. Something not nice."

"Was it a ghost?"

He shrugged. "I never tried to find out, but nobody else seemed able to feel it."

"Do you know when the soul leaves the body? I mean, can you tell it?"

"Sure." He said it like, "Couldn't everybody do that?"

I had to smile. "Good enough. I'm just going to do it. I don't know what you'll see, if anything. I know that Raymond is going to be disappointed because he won't see anything, unless he's a lot more talented than he looks."

"What are you going to do, Anita? They never talked about 'walking a cemetery' in college."

"It's not like a magic spell, a few words or gestures and it works. It isn't anything like that." I struggled to put into words something that we had no vocabulary for. "It's closer to psychic ability than magic. It's not physical. It's not a muscle to move, or even a thought. It's . . . I just do it. Let me get started; then if I can, I'll bring you in or try and talk to you while I do it. Okay?"

He shrugged. "I guess so. I still don't understand what the heck you're doing, but that's okay. I usually don't know what's going on."

"But you always figure it out," I said.

He grinned. "I do, don't I?"

"You bet."

I stood in nearly the dead center of the raw earth. Not so long ago I was afraid of what I was about to do. It wasn't really frightening in and of itself. I was scared of the fact that I could do it at all. It wasn't a very human thing to be able to do.

But then, lately I'd been rethinking exactly what made you human, and what made you one of the monsters. Once I'd been very sure of myself, and everyone else. I wasn't so sure anymore. Besides, I'd been practicing.

Of course, I'd been practicing in empty graveyards where there was nothing but me and the dead. Okay, night insects, but arthropods never bothered my concentration. People did.

Even with my back turned, I could feel Larry like a warm presence behind me. It bugged me. "Can you move back farther?"

"Sure; how far?"

I shook my head. "As far as you can get and still be in sight."

He raised his eyebrows. "Do you want me to go over and wait with Mr. Stirling?"

"If you can stand it."

"I can stand it. I schmooze clients better than you do."

That was the God's honest truth. "Great. When I call you over, come slowly. I've never tried to talk to someone while I do this."

"Whatever you say." He gave a laugh that was almost nervous. "I can't wait to see this."

I let that go, and turned away. I walked away from him. When I glanced back, he was walking to the others. I hoped Larry wouldn't be disappointed. I still wasn't sure if he'd be able to even sense anything. I turned my back on all of them. Seeing them huddled there would distract me, that much I was sure of.

The top of the mountain had been stripped. It was like standing on the edge of the world looking down. The moonlight bathed everything in a soft glow. It was so bright up here near the sky without any trees to hide it that the air itself glowed with diffused light. A gentle wind traced just about head-high. It smelled green and fresh, almost as if the rain had actually fallen. I closed my eyes and let the wind touch my skin, ruffle my hair. There was almost no sound but the singing of insects from below. Nothing but the wind, me, and the dead.

I couldn't tell Larry exactly how to do it, because I wasn't completely sure myself. If it was a muscle, I would move it. If it was a thought, I would think it. If it was a magic word, I would say it. It is none of those things. It is like my skin opens up. All my nerve endings naked to the wind. My skin grew cool. It's like a cool wind emanates from my body. It isn't really wind. You can't see it. You can't feel it, or no one else can. But it's there. It's real.

The cool fingers of "wind" stretched outward from me. Within a ten- to fifteen-foot radius I would be able to search the graves. As I moved, the circle would move with me, searching.

I raised my arm and waved. I didn't turn around to see if Larry saw me. I stayed tight inside my private circle. I was holding it in, trying not to start searching the dead until Larry got over here. I was hoping he'd be able to sense what was going on. Seemed logical that it would be easier to figure out if he saw it from the beginning.

I heard his footsteps on the dry earth. They seemed thunderously loud, as if I could hear every grain of dirt under his shoes.

He stopped behind me. "Jesus, what is that?"

"What?" My voice sounded distant and loud at the same time.

"Wind, a cold wind." He sounded a little scared. Good. You should always be a little afraid when you do magic. It's when you start taking it for granted that you get in trouble.

"Come closer, but don't touch me." I wasn't sure on that last, but it sounded like a good idea. Better cautious than not.

He came slowly, one hand held out like he was feeling the wind against his skin. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Anita, it's coming from you. The wind is coming from you."

"Yes," I said.

His eyes were wide. He looked like his voice sounded, a little scared.

"If I stood right next to Stirling, he wouldn't feel a thing. None of them would."

Larry shook his head. "How could they miss it?" His hand hovered just off my body, almost touching but not quite. "It's colder, or stronger, or something the closer I get to your body."

"Interesting," I said.

"What now?" he asked.

"Now, I touch the dead." I let go of it, like unclenching a hand. The fingers of "wind" stretched downward. How does it feel to go through solid earth and touch the dead beneath? Like nothing human. It was as if the invisible fingers could melt through the dirt searching for the dead. This time we didn't have to search far. The earth was disturbed, and the dead lay on top of the raw land.

I'd never tried this in anything but a well-organized cemetery. Where each grave, each body, was distinct. The wind touched Larry like a stone in a stream. The power rippled around him. He was alive, and it disturbed us. But we'd been practicing, and we could work around him.

I was standing on top of bones. Under the earth where eyes could not see. I tried to step off them, and only stepped on more. The earth was thick with bodies, like raisins in a pudding. No getting around them.

I stood on top on a raft of bones in a sea of dry, red earth. Everywhere I touched was a body—a piece of bone. There was no clear space. No breathing space. I stood there, huddled in on myself, trying to sort through what I was sensing.

The rib cage just to the left belonged with the thighbone yards away. The wind leaked out and touched piece after piece. I could have put the skeleton back together like a giant jigsaw puzzle. That was what my power would do if I tried to raise it.

I moved, stepping on the dead, and everywhere I walked I put bodies together. The pieces stayed separate, but I remembered.

Larry moved with me. He moved surprisingly smoothly through the power, like a swimmer leaving the smallest possible ripples behind.

A ghost flared to life like a pale, dancing flame. I walked towards it. It rose like a swaying snake, watching me without eyes. There was that thread of hostility that some ghosts seem to feel towards the living. A jealousy. But if I'd been tied to some forsaken piece of earth for a hundred years or more, I might be hostile, too.

"What is that?" Larry whispered.

"What do you see?" I asked.

"I think it's a ghost. I've just never seen one materialize before." He reached out as if to touch it.

I grabbed his wrist before he could ever have reached. I felt his power flare to life in a rush of wind that should have poured my hair back from my face.

The circle suddenly widened, like a camera lens spreading wide. The dead awoke under our combined power like twigs touched by fire. Our power spread over them, and they gave up their secrets. Bits of muscle withered to bone, gaping skulls, all the pieces were there. All we had to do was call them forth. Two more ghosts rose from the ground like smoke. It was a lot of active ghosts for this small and this old a cemetery. And they were all angry at being disturbed. The level of hostility was unusual.

Combining our powers hadn't doubled the circle—it had quadrupled it.

The nearest ghost stood like a white pillar of flame. It was strong, powerful. A full-blown ghost in a graveyard that hadn't seen a burial in over two hundred years.

I stared at it. Larry stared at it. As long as we didn't touch it, we were safe. Heck, we were safe even if we did touch it. Ghosts can't cause physical harm, not really. They can grab you, but if you ignore them they fall away. If you pay attention, they can be bothersome. Frightening, but if a spirit causes real harm it isn't just a ghost. Demon, evil sorcerous dead, but not a normal ghost.

Staring at the wavering shape, I wasn't at all sure this was a normal ghost. Ghosts wear out. They fade to haunts, which don't usually materialize, hot spots that can give you a jolt, then just shivery places. Ghosts do not last forever. These looked pretty damn solid. For ghosts.

"Stop!" a man's voice yelled.

Larry and I turned towards the voice. Magnus Bouvier scrambled up the side of the mountain opposite from where we had walked up. His hair fell across his face, hiding everything but his eyes from the moonlight. His eyes glowed in the dark, reflecting lights I could not see.

"Stop!" He was waving his hands. His long-sleeved shirt was untucked over jeans. He hit the circle of wind and froze. He put his hands up as if he was trying to touch it.

Two people in one night who could sense the power. Unusual, but sort of cool. If Magnus hadn't been on the run from the police, we could have sat down and had a nice talk about it.

"We told you to stay off this land, Mr. Bouvier," Stirling said.

Bouvier looked at him, turning his head slowly as if concentrating on anything besides the feel of power was hard.

"We've tried being nice about this," Stirling said. "We are not going to be nice any longer. Beau."

The pump action on a shotgun is a very distinctive sound. I turned towards the sound, gun in hand. I don't remember thinking about it. I was just looking down the barrel of a gun at Beau. He was cradling a shotgun in his arms, not aimed at anything. That saved him. I know if it had been pointed near us, I'd have shot him.

I was still seeing double. I could see the graveyard behind my eyes where there is no optic nerve. The cemetery was mine. I knew the bodies. I knew the ghosts. I knew where all the pieces lay. I stared down the gun, seeing Beau and the shotgun, but inside my head the dead still reached out for their scattered parts.

The ghosts were still real. The power had agitated them. They'd dance and sway on their own for a while. But they'd fade back into the ground. There was more than one way to raise the dead, but not permanently.

I couldn't look away from the shotgun to see what Bouvier was doing. "Anita, please don't raise the dead." His surprisingly deep voice held a note of pleading.

I fought an urge to glance at him. "Why not, Magnus?"

"Get off my land," Stirling said.

"This is not your land."

"Get off my land or you will be shot for trespassing."

Beau glanced my way. "Mr. Stirling?" He was being very careful that the shotgun stayed loose, and harmless, in his hands.

"Beau, show him we mean business."

"Mr. Stirling," he said again, with a little more urgency in his voice.

"Do what I pay you for," Stirling said.

He started to raise the shotgun to his shoulder, but slowly, watching me.

"Don't do it," I said. I let my breath out all the way until my body was still and quiet. There was nothing but the gun and what I was aiming at.

Beau lowered the shotgun.

I took a breath and said, "Put it on the ground, now."

"Ms. Blake, this is none of your business," Stirling said.

"You are not going to shoot someone for trespassing on a piece of land while I watch."

Larry had his gun out too, now. It wasn't pointed at anybody in particular, which I was grateful for. Pointed guns have a tendency to go off if you don't know what you're doing.

"On the ground, Beau, now. I won't ask a third time."

He laid the shotgun on the ground.

"I pay your salary."

"You don't pay me enough to get killed."

Stirling made an exasperated sound and moved forward as if he would pick up the gun himself.

"Don't touch it, Raymond. You'll bleed just as easy as anybody else."

He turned to me. "I cannot believe that you would hold me at gunpoint on my own property."

I lowered my gun arm just a touch; it gets shaky if you hold a shooting pose too long. "I cannot believe that you had Beau come up here armed. You knew my little show would attract Bouvier. You knew it and planned for it. You cold-blooded son of a bitch."

"Mr. Kirkland, are you going to let her talk to me like that? I am a client."

Larry shook his head. "I'm with her on this one, Mr. Stirling. You were going to ambush that man. Murder him. Why?"

"Good question," I said. "Why are you so afraid of the Bouvier family? Or is it just him that you're afraid of?"

"I am afraid of no one. Come along; we will leave you to your new friend." He marched away, and the others followed. Beau sort of hesitated.

"I'll bring the shotgun down for you," I said.

He nodded. "Figured that."

"And you better not be waiting down there with another gun."

He looked at me for a long minute. At both of us. He shook his head. "I'm going home to my wife."

"You do that, Beau," I said.

He walked away, black slicker flapping against his legs. He hesitated, then said, "I'm out of it from now on. Money doesn't spend if you're dead."

I knew a few vampires that would argue with him, but I said, "Glad to hear it."

"I just don't want to get shot," he said. He walked away down the slope, out of sight.

I stood there with the Browning pointed skyward. I turned in a slow circle, surveying the mountaintop. We were alone, the three of us. So why didn't I want to put my gun up?

Magnus took a step up the slope and stopped. He raised slender hands towards the power-charged air. He trailed fingertips down it, like it was water. I felt the ripples of his touch shiver down my skin, tremble through my magic.

No, I wasn't putting my gun up yet.

"What was that?" Larry asked. His gun was still out, pointed at the ground.

Bouvier moved his gleaming eyes to Larry. "He is not a necromancer, Anita, but he is more than he seems."

"Aren't we all," I said. "Why didn't you want me to raise the dead, Magnus?"

He stared up at me. His eyes were full of glinting lights like reflections in a pool, but the reflections were of things that were not there.

"Answer me, Magnus."

"Or what?" he asked. "You'll shoot me?"

"Maybe," I said.

The slope made him shorter than I was, so I was looking down on him. "I didn't believe anyone could raise dead this old without a human sacrifice. I thought you'd take Stirling's money, try, fail, and go home." He took a step forward, trailing his hands through the power again, as if he were testing it. As if he weren't sure he could cross into it. The touch made Larry gasp.

"With this power you can raise some of them, maybe enough of them," Magnus said.

"Enough for what?" I asked.

He stared up at me, as if he hadn't meant to speak aloud. "You mustn't raise the dead on this mountain, Anita, Larry. You must not."

"Give us a reason not to," I said.

He smiled up at me. "I don't suppose just because I asked."

I shook my head. "Not hardly."

"This would be so much easier if glamor worked on you." He took another step up the slope. "Of course, if glamor worked on you, we wouldn't be here, would we?"

If he wouldn't answer one question, I'd try another one. "Why'd you run from the police?"

He took another step closer, and I backed up. He'd done nothing overtly threatening, but there was something about him as he stood there, something alien.

There were images in his eyes that made me want to glance behind to see what was reflecting in his eyes. I could almost see trees, water . . . It was like the things you see out of the corner of your eye, except in color.

"You told the police my secret; why?"

"I had to."

"You really think I did those awful things to those boys?" He took another step, moving into the flow of power, but he didn't slip easily as Larry had. Magnus was like a mountain, huge, forcing the power to go wide around him, as if he filled more space magically than could be seen with the naked eye.

I pointed the Browning two-handed at his chest. "No, I don't."

"Then why point a gun at me?"

"Why all this fey magic shit?"

He smiled. "I performed a lot of glamor tonight. It's like a high."

"You feed off your customers," I said. "You don't just do it for business. You siphon them; that's fucking unseelie court."

He gave a graceful shrug. "I am what I am."

"How'd you know the victims were boys?" I asked.

Larry moved to my left, gun pointed carefully at the ground. I'd yelled at him for pointing guns at people too soon.

"The police said so."

"Liar."

He smiled gently. "One of them touched me. I saw it all."

"Convenient," I said.

He reached out towards me. "Don't even think it."

Larry pointed his gun at Magnus. "What's going on, Anita?"

"I'm not sure."

"I can't allow you to raise the dead here. I am sorry."

"How are you going to stop us?" I asked.

He stared at me, and I felt something push against my magic, like something large swimming just out of sight in the dark. It made me gasp.

"Freeze, right there, or I will pull this trigger."

"I haven't moved a muscle," he said softly.

"No games, Magnus; you're too damn close to being dead."

"What did he just do?" Larry asked. There was a fine tremor in his two-handed grip.

"Later," I said. "Clasp your hands on top of your head, Magnus, slowly, very slowly."

"Are you going to take me in, as they say on television?"

"Yeah," I said. "You've got a better chance of getting to the jail alive with me than with most of the cops."

"I don't think I'll go with you." Staring down two guns, and he still sounded sure of himself. He was either stupid or knew something I didn't. I didn't think he was stupid.

"Tell me when to shoot him," Larry said.

"When I shoot him, you can shoot him, too."

"Okay," Larry said.

Magnus looked from one to the other of us. "You would take my life for such a small thing?"

"In a heartbeat," I said, "Now clasp your hands slowly on top of your head."

"If I don't?"

"I don't bluff, Magnus."

"Do you have silver bullets in those guns?"

I just stared at him. I could feel Larry shift slightly beside me. You can only point a gun so long without getting tired, or antsy.

"I'll bet they're silver. Silver isn't very effective against fairies."

"Cold iron works best," I said. "I remember."

"Even normal lead bullets would be better than silver. The metal of the moon is a friend to the fey."

"Hands, now, or we find out how fairie flesh holds up to silver bullets."

He raised his hands slowly, gracefully upward. His hands were above shoulder level when he threw himself backwards, falling down the slope. I

fired, but he kept on rolling down the earth, and somehow I couldn't quite see him. It was like the air blurred around him.

Larry and I stood at the top of the slope and fired down on him, and I don't think either of us hit him.

He scrambled down the raw earth faster than he looked because he got harder to see even in the moonlight until he vanished into the underbrush left near the midpoint on that side.

"Please tell me he didn't just go poof," Larry said.

"He didn't just go poof," I said.

"What did he do, then?"

"How the hell do I know. This wasn't covered in Fairies 301." I shook my head. "Let's get out of here. I don't know what's going on, but whatever it is, I think we lost our client."

"You think we lost our hotel rooms?"

"I don't know, Larry. Let's go find out." I clicked the safety on the Browning but left it out in my hand. I'd have left the safety off, but that didn't seem wise while stumbling down a rocky mountainside even in the moonlight.

"I think you can put the gun up now, Larry." He hadn't put his safety on.

"You aren't."

"But I've got the safety on."

"Oh." He looked a little sheepish, but he clicked the safety on and holstered it. "You think they would have really killed him?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Beau would have shot at him, but see how much good it did us."

"Why does Stirling want Magnus dead?"

"I don't know."

"Why did Magnus run from the police?"

"I don't know."

"It makes me nervous when you keep answering all my questions with 'I don't know.'"

"Me, too," I said.

I glanced back once just before we lost sight of the mountaintop. The ghosts twisted and flared like candle flames, cool white flames. I knew something else I hadn't known before tonight. Some of the bodies were nearly three hundred years old. A hundred years older than Stirling had told us they were. A hundred years makes a lot of difference in a zombie raising. Why had he lied? Afraid I'd refuse, maybe. Maybe. Some of the bodies were Indian remains. Bits and pieces of jewelry, animal bone, stuff that wasn't European. The Indians in this area didn't bury their dead, at least not in simple graves. And this wasn't a mound.

Something was going on, and I didn't have the faintest idea what it was. But I'd find out. Maybe tomorrow after we got new hotel rooms, gave back the nifty jeep, rented a new car, and told Bert we no longer had a client. Maybe I'd let Larry break the news to him. What are apprentices for if they can't do some of the grunt work?

Okay, okay, I'd tell Bert myself, but I wasn't looking forward to it.

Chapter 18

Stirling and Co. were gone when we trudged down off the mountain. We drove the Jeep back to the hotel. I was frankly surprised they hadn't taken the Jeep with them and left us to walk. Stirling didn't strike me as a man who liked having guns pointed at him. But then, who does?

Larry's room was first down the hall. He hesitated with his room card in the lock. "You think the rooms are paid for tonight, or do we pack?"

"We pack," I said.

He nodded, and shoved the card in its little slot. The door handle turned, and in he went. I went to the next door and put in my own card. There was a connecting door between the rooms. We hadn't unlocked it, but it was there. Personally I liked my privacy, even from my friends. And especially from my coworkers.

The room's silence flowed around me. It was wonderful. A few minutes of quiet before I faced Bert and told him all that money had just flown the coop.

The room was a suite with an outer room and a separate bedroom. My apartment wasn't much bigger. There was a bar set into the left-hand wall. Being a teetotaler, that was a real plus for me. The walls were a soft pink with a delicate pattern of gilt-edged leaves, the carpet a deep burgundy. The full-sized couch was a purple so dark it looked nearly black. A love seat matched it. Two armchairs were done in a purple, burgundy, and white floral pattern. All exposed wood was very dark and highly polished. I had suspected I had some kind of honeymoon suite until I saw Larry's room. It was nearly a mirror of mine, but done in shades of green.

A cherrywood desk that looked like a genuine antique sat against the far wall. The connecting door was beside it but opened opposite so you wouldn't accidentally bump the desk. Monogrammed stationery graced the desk, along with a second telephone line for your modem I guess.

I don't know if I'd ever stayed in a room this expensive. I doubted seriously if Beadle, Beadle, Stirling, and Lowenstein would want to pick up the tab now.

A sound jerked me around. The Browning sort of materialized in my hand. I was staring down the barrel at Jean-Claude. He stood in the doorway leading to the bedroom. The shirt had long, full sleeves that had been gathered in three puffs down the length of the arm to end in a spill of cloth that framed his long, pale fingers. The collar was high and tied with a white cravat that spilled lace down the front of him tucked into a vest. It was black and velvety with pinpricks of silver on it. Thigh-high black boots fit his legs like a second skin.

His hair was nearly as black as the vest, making it hard to tell where the curls ended and the velvety cloth began. A silver and onyx stickpin that I'd seen before pierced the white lace at his chest.

"Well, *ma petite*, are you going to shoot me?"

I was still standing there with the gun pointed at him. He had not moved. He had been very careful to do nothing that could be taken as threatening. His blue, blue eyes stared at me. Serious, waiting.

I pointed the gun at the ceiling and let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. "How the hell did you get in here?"

He smiled then, and pushed away from the doorjamb. He walked into the room with that wonderful gliding motion of his. Part cat, part dancer, part something else. Whatever the "else" was, it wasn't human.

I put the gun away, though I wasn't sure I wanted to. It made me feel better having it in my hand. Trouble was, a gun wouldn't help me against Jean-Claude. Oh, if I was going to kill him it would, but that's not what we were doing lately. Lately we were—dating. Can you stand it? I wasn't sure I could.

"The desk clerk let me in." His voice was very mild, amused, whether with himself or with me it was hard to tell.

"Why would he do that?"

"Because I asked him to." He walked around me like a shark circling its prey.

I didn't turn with him. I stared straight ahead and let him circle me. It would only amuse him if I kept him in sight. The hairs at the back of my neck stood up. I took a step forward and felt his hand fall back. He'd been about to touch my shoulder. I didn't want him to touch me.

"You used mind tricks on the desk clerk?"

"Yes," he said. That one word was full of so much more. I turned towards him so I could see his face.

He was staring at my legs. He raised his face to mine, and somehow that one quick gaze took in my entire body. His midnight blue eyes looked even darker than usual. We weren't sure how I was able to meet his gaze. I was beginning to suspect that being a necromancer had more fringe benefits than just being good with zombies.

"Red becomes you, *ma petite*." His voice had grown softer, deeper. He moved closer to me, not touching. He knew better than that, but somehow his eyes showed where his hands wanted to be. "I like this very much."

His voice was soft and warm, and far more intimate than his words. "Your legs are wonderful." His words were growing softer. A whisper in the dark that hovered around my body like a line of warmth. His voice was always like that, touchable. He still had the best voice I'd ever heard.

"Stop it, Jean-Claude. I'm too short to have wonderful legs."

"I do not understand this modern obsession with height." He ran his hands just above my hose, so close I could almost feel it like a breath of warmth against my skin.

"Stop it," I said.

"Stop what?" His voice was utterly mild, harmless. Ri-ight.

I shook my head. Asking Jean-Claude not to be a pain in the ass was like asking rain not to be wet. Why try?

"Fine, flirt all you want, but keep in mind that you're here to save the life of a young boy. A young boy who may be being raped while we sit here and waste time."

He sighed deeply and walked towards me. Something must have shown on my face because he sat down in the other chair, not trying to come closer. "You have a habit, *ma petite*, of taking all the fun out of seducing you."

"Yippee," I said. "Now, can we get down to business?"

He smiled his lovely, perfect smile. "I had arranged to meet with the Master of Branson tonight."

"Just like that," I said.

"Isn't that what you wanted me to do?" he asked. His voice held that amused edge again.

"Yeah. I'm just not used to you giving me exactly what I ask for."

"I would give you anything you wanted, *ma petite*, if you would only let me."

"I wanted you out of my life. You don't seem to want to do that."

He sighed. "No, *ma petite*, I do not want to do that." He let it go at that. No accusations about me wanting to be with Richard instead of him. No vague threats on Richard's life. It was sort of odd.

"You're up to something," I said.

He turned, eyes wide, long fingers pressed to his heart. "*Moi?*"

"Yeah, you," I said. I shook my head and let it go. He was up to something. I knew him well enough to know the signs, but I also knew him well enough to know that he wouldn't tell me until he was good and ready. Nobody kept a secret like Jean-Claude, and nobody else had as many of them. There was no deceit in Richard. Jean-Claude lived and breathed it.

"I've got to change and pack before we can leave."

"Change your lovely red skirt, why? Because I like it?"

"Not just that," I said, "though admittedly it's a plus. I can't wear my inner pants holster with the skirt."

"I will not argue that having a second gun will help our show of force tomorrow night."

I stopped and turned. "What do you mean, tomorrow night?"

He spread his hands wide. "It is too close to dawn, *ma petite*. We cannot even drive to the master's lair before the sun rises."

"Dammit," I said softly and with feeling.

"I did my part, *ma petite*. But even I cannot stop the sun from rising."

I leaned against the back of the love seat, hands gripping the edge hard enough to hurt. I shook my head. "We're going to be too late to save him."

"*Ma petite, ma petite.*" He knelt in front of me, staring up at me. "Why does this boy bother you so very much? Why is his life so precious to you?"

I stared down into Jean-Claude's perfect face, and had no answer. "I don't know."

He laid his hands on top of my hands. "You're hurting yourself, *ma petite.*"

I moved my hands out from under his, crossing my arms over my stomach. Jean-Claude remained kneeling, a hand on either side of me. He was entirely too close to me, and I was suddenly very aware of how short the skirt was.

"I have to go pack," I said.

"Why? Don't you like your room?" Without moving, he seemed closer somehow. I could feel the line of his body against my legs like heat.

"Move," I said.

He leaned backwards, sitting on his heels, forcing me to move past him. The hem of my skirt brushed his cheek as I walked past. "You are such a pain in the ass."

"So nice of you to notice, *ma petite*. Now, why are you leaving this lovely room?"

"A client's paying for the room, and he's not a client anymore."

"Why ever not, *ma petite*?"

"I pulled a gun on him."

His eyes widened, his face a perfect mask of surprise. The mask slipped and he stared at me with ancient eyes. Eyes that had seen much but still didn't know what to make of me. "Why would you do that?"

"They were going to shoot a man for trespassing."

"Was he trespassing?"

"Technically, yeah."

Jean-Claude just looked at me. "Does he not have the right to protect his own land?"

"No, not if it means killing people. A piece of land isn't worth killing over."

"Protecting our lands has been a valid excuse for slaughter since the beginning of time, *ma petite*. Did you suddenly change the rules?"

"I wasn't going to stand there and watch them kill a man for walking on a piece of ground. Besides, I think it was a setup."

"A setup? You mean a plot to kill the man."

"Yeah."

"Were you part of this plot?"

"I may have been bait. He could feel my power over the dead. It called to him."

"Now that is interesting. What is this man's name?"

"You give me the name of the mystery vampire first."

"Xavier," he said.

"Just like that. Why wouldn't you give me the name earlier?"

"I do not want the police to have it."

"Why not?"

"I explained all that. Now, the name of the man you saved tonight."

I stared at him, and didn't want to give it to him. I didn't like how interested he was in the name. But a deal was a deal. "Bouvier, Magnus Bouvier."

"I do not know the name."

"Should you?"

He just smiled at me. It meant nothing and everything.

"You are an irritating son of a bitch."

"Ah, *ma petite*, how can I resist you when you whisper such sweet endearments to me?"

I glared at him, which made him smile wider. There was just the faintest hint of fang peeking into view.

Someone knocked on the door. Probably the manager telling me to get out. I walked to the door. I didn't bother looking through the peephole, so I was caught off guard by who was outside. It was Lionel Bayard.

Had he come to throw us out in person?

I stood there for a second, looking at him. He spoke first, clearing his throat nervously. "Ms. Blake, may I speak with you for a moment?"

He was being awfully polite for someone who had come to kick us out. "I'm listening, Mr. Bayard."

"I really don't think the hallway is the place to discuss this."

I stepped to one side, ushering him into the room. He stepped past me, hands smoothing his tie. His gaze flicked to Jean-Claude, who was standing now. Jean-Claude smiled at Bayard. Pleasant, charming.

"I didn't realize you had company, Ms. Blake. I can come back."

I closed the door. "No, Mr. Bayard, it's all right. I told Jean-Claude about our misunderstanding this evening."

"Ah, yes, uh . . ." Bayard looked from one to the other of us, as if not sure what to say.

Jean-Claude didn't so much sit in the chair as fold his body around it. The movement was almost catlike. "Anita and I have no secrets from one another, Mr . . ."

"Bayard, Lionel Bayard." He walked over and offered his hand to Jean-Claude. Jean-Claude raised an eyebrow but took the offered hand.

The handshake seemed to make Bayard feel better. A normal gesture. He didn't know what Jean-Claude was. How he could look at him and think him human was beyond me. I'd only seen one vampire that could have passed for human, and he hadn't been human at all. Bayard turned back to me, adjusting his glasses, which didn't need adjusting. That nervous little gesture again. Something was up.

"What's up, Bayard?" I asked. I'd closed the door and was leaning to one side of it, arms crossed over my stomach.

"I'm here to offer our most sincere apologies for earlier tonight."

I just stared at him. "You're apologizing to me?"

"Yes. Mr. Stirling was overzealous. Why, if you had not been there to bring us all to our senses, a great tragedy might have occurred."

I tried to keep my face blank. I wanted to frown at him, or look confused. "Stirling's not mad at me?"

"On the contrary, Ms. Blake. He's grateful to you."

I didn't believe that. "Really," I said.

"Oh, yes. In fact, I've been authorized to offer you a bonus."

"Why?"

"To make up for our behavior tonight."

"Your behavior was fine," I said.

He smiled modestly. His act was about as sincere as faux pearls, but not half so realistic.

"How much is the bonus?"

"Twenty thousand," he said.

I stayed leaning against the wall, staring at him. "No."

He blinked at me. "Excuse me?"

"I don't want the bonus."

"I'm not authorized to go higher than twenty thousand, but I could speak with Mr. Stirling. Perhaps he would go higher."

I shook my head and pushed away from the wall. "I don't want more money. I don't want the bonus at all."

"You aren't quitting on us, are you, Ms. Blake?" He was blinking so fast I thought he'd pass out. Me quitting bothered him. A lot.

"No, I'm not quitting. But you're already paying an enormous fee. You don't need to pay more."

"Mr. Stirling is just very anxious that he has not offended you."

I let that one go. Too easy. "Tell Mr. Stirling I'd have thought better of his apology if it had been delivered in person."

"Mr. Stirling is a very busy man. He would have come himself, but he had pressing business."

I wondered how often Bayard had to apologize for the big man. I wondered how often the apology was for telling a fellow flunkie to shoot someone. "Fine, you've delivered the message. Tell Mr. Stirling that it isn't the gunfight that's going to make me bail. I read the cemetery tonight. Some of the corpses are closer to three hundred than two hundred. Three hundred years, Lionel; that's an old zombie."

"Can you raise them?" He had stepped closer, hands fidgeting with his lapels. He was close to invading my space. I'd have rather had Jean-Claude next to me.

"Maybe. The question isn't can I, but will I, Lionel."

"What do you mean?"

"You lied to me, Lionel. You underestimated the age of the dead by nearly a century."

"Not deliberately, Ms. Blake, I assure you. I merely repeated what our research department told me. I did not deliberately mislead you."

"Sure."

He reached out almost like he wanted to touch me. I moved back, just enough. He seemed terribly intense. He let his hand drop. "Please, Ms. Blake, I did not lie on purpose."

"The problem, Lionel, is that I'm not sure I can raise zombies this old without a human sacrifice. Even I have my limits."

"So nice to know," Jean-Claude said softly.

I frowned at him. He smiled.

"You will try, won't you, Ms. Blake?"

"Maybe. I haven't decided yet."

He shook his head. "We will do anything to make this oversight up to you, Ms. Blake. It is entirely my fault that I did not double-check the research department's findings. Is there anything that I can do personally to make it up to you?"

"Just leave. I'll call your office tomorrow to discuss details. I may need some extra . . . paraphernalia to attempt the raising."

"Anything, anything at all, Ms. Blake."

"Fine; I'll call." I opened the door and stood by it. I thought it was enough of a hint. It was. Bayard went to the door and almost backed out, apologizing as he went.

I closed the door and stood there for a minute.

"That little man is up to something," Jean-Claude said.

I turned and looked at him. He was still curled in the chair, looking scrumptious.

"I didn't need vampiric powers to tell me that."

"Neither," he said, "did I." He rose from the chair easily. If I'd curled up in a chair like that, I'd have been stiff.

"I've got to tell Larry that he can stop packing. I don't understand why we're still hired, but we are."

"Can anyone else raise the graveyard?"

"Not without a human sacrifice, maybe not even then," I said.

"They need you, *ma petite*. From the little man's anxiety, they must need the dead raised very badly."

"Millions of dollars are at stake."

"I do not think money is all that is at stake," he said.

I shook my head. "Me either."

He came to join me by the door. "What extra paraphernalia will you need to raise a three-hundred-year-old corpse, *ma petite*?"

I shrugged. "A bigger death. I'd originally thought to use a couple of goats." I opened the door.

"What are you thinking about using now?"

"An elephant, maybe," I said.

We were out in the hall and he was staring at me.

"I'm kidding. Honest. Besides, elephants are an endangered species. I was thinking maybe a cow."

Jean-Claude stared down at me for a long space of moments, his face very serious. "Remember, *ma petite*, I can tell if you are lying."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You meant the elephant comment."

I frowned up at him. What could I say? "Okay, but just for a minute. I wouldn't really do in an elephant. I'm telling the truth."

"Yes, *ma petite*, I know."

I hadn't really meant the crack about the elephant. Not really. It was just the biggest animal I could think of on short notice. And if I was going to

attempt to raise several three-hundred-year-old corpses, I was going to need something big. I didn't think a cow would do. Hell, I didn't think a herd of cows would do it. I just hadn't thought of a good alternative yet.

But no elephants, I promise. Besides, can you imagine trying to slit the throat of an elephant? The logistics of just getting one to hold still while you killed it were mind boggling. There's a reason why most sacrifices are our size or smaller. Makes it easier to hold them down.

"We can't just leave Jeff with that monster," Larry said. He was standing in the middle of his forest green carpet. Jean-Claude was sitting in the corner of the green patterned couch. He was looking amused, like a cat that had found a very interesting mouse.

"We aren't leaving him," I said. "We just can't go looking for him tonight."

He whirled and pointed a finger at Jean-Claude. "Why, because he says so?"

Jean-Claude's smile widened. Definitely amused.

"Check the time, Larry. It'll be dawn soon. All the vampires will be asnooze in their coffins."

Larry shook his head. The look on his face reminded me of me. Stubborn, not wanting to accept it. "We have to do something, Anita."

"We can't talk to vampires during daylight hours, Larry. That's just the way it is."

"And what happens to Jeff today, while we wait for the sun to go down?" His pale skin had gone almost white. His freckles looked like brown ink spots. His pale blue eyes glittered like angry glass. I'd never seen Larry so mad. Hell, I'd never seen him angry.

I glanced at Jean-Claude; he just looked at me. I was on my own. Wasn't I always. "Xavier will have to sleep. He won't be able to harm Jeff once the sun rises."

Larry shook his head. "Will we get him back in time?"

I wanted to say "Sure," but I wouldn't lie. "I don't know. I hope so."

His soft, Howdy-Doody face was set in very stubborn lines. I looked at him and understood why so many people underestimate me. He looked so harmless. Hell, he was sort of harmless, but he was armed now, and learning how to be dangerous. And in his face for the first time I saw a grim purpose building. I'd planned on leaving him behind when I went to talk to the Master of Branson. Looking at him now, I wasn't sure he was going to let me do that. He'd had his first vampire hunt tonight. I'd managed to keep him out of the rough stuff until now. But it wasn't going to last. I'd been hoping he'd give up the idea of hunting vampires. Staring into his glittering eyes, I realized I was the one who was fooling myself. In his own way Larry was as stubborn as I was. Frightening thought, that. But for tonight he was safe.

"You couldn't just comfort me? Tell me we'll find him?" Larry asked.

I smiled. "I try not to lie to you, if I can avoid it."

"For once," Larry said, "I'd have liked to have heard the lie."

"Sorry," I said.

He took in a deep breath and let it out slow. His anger was gone just like that. Larry didn't know what it was to hold onto his rage. He didn't brood over things. One of the main differences between us. I never forgave anyone for anything. A character flaw to be sure, but hell, everyone's got to have at least one.

There was a knock on the door. Larry went for the door.

Jean-Claude was suddenly standing by me. I hadn't seen him move. Hadn't heard his leather boots slither over the carpet. Nothing. Magic. My heart was suddenly thudding in my throat.

"Stomp your feet or something when you do that."

"Do what, *ma petite*?"

I glared up at him. "That wasn't a mind trick, was it?"

"No," he said. That one word slithered across my skin like a low creeping breeze.

"Damn you," I said softly and with feeling.

He smiled. "We've been over that, *ma petite*; you are too late."

Larry had closed the door. "There's a guy out in the hall says he's with Jean-Claude."

"A guy or a vampire?" I asked.

Larry frowned. "Not a vampire, but if you mean human I wouldn't go that far."

"You expecting company?" I asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Who?"

He stalked to the door and put a hand on the doorknob. "Someone I believe you've already met." He opened the door with a flourish, stepping to one side to let me have a clear view.

Jason stood in the open door, smiling, relaxed. He was my height exactly, not something you find in a man often. Straight blond hair barely touched the top of his collar; his eyes were the innocent blue of spring skies. The last time I'd seen him he'd been trying to eat me. Werewolves will do that sometimes.

He was dressed in an oversized black sweater that hit him almost at mid-thigh. He'd had to roll the sleeves over his wrists. His pants were leather, laced up the side from waist to mid-calf, where the laces vanished into boots. The lacings were loose enough that there was a pale line of flesh all the way down.

"Hello, Anita."

"Hi, Jason. What are you doing here?"

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "I'm Jean-Claude's new pet."

He said the last word like it was alright. Richard wouldn't have said it that way.

"You didn't tell me you brought company," I said.

"We are going to be calling on the Master of the City. We must make a good show of it."

"So a werewolf, and what . . . me?"

He sighed. "Yes, *ma petite*, whether you bear my marks or not, most consider you my human servant." He raised a hand. "Please, Anita, I know you

are not my human servant in the technical sense. But you have helped me defend my territory. You have killed to protect me. That is the best definition of what a human servant does."

"So, what? I have to pretend to be your human servant on this visit?"

"Something like that," he said.

"Forget it."

"Anita, I need a show of strength here. Branson was part of Nikolaos's territory. I gave it up because the population density could support another group. But it was still my land, and now it's not. Some view that as weakness rather than practicality."

"So without any marks at all you've finally got me to play servant for you. You manipulative son of a bitch."

"You asked me down here, *ma petite*." A thread of warmth cut through his words. He stalked towards me. "I am doing you a favor, do not forget that."

"I don't think you'll let me forget," I said.

He made a harsh sound, as if he had no words for his anger. "Why do I put up with you? You insult me at every turn. There are many who would give their souls for what I offer you."

He stood in front of me, eyes like dark sapphires, skin white as marble. His skin glowed like there was a light inside him. He looked like some kind of live sculpture made of light, jewels, and stone.

He was impressive and scary, but I'd seen it before. "Cut the vampire powers shit, Jean-Claude. It's almost dawn; don't you have a coffin to crawl into somewhere?"

He laughed, but it wasn't pleasant, it was bitter like the touch of steel wool. Something to irritate rather than entice. "Our luggage has not arrived, has it, my wolf?"

"No, master," Jason said.

"Your coffin hasn't arrived?" I asked.

"Either I have chosen a very lax skycab, or . . ." He let the words trail off, face bland and pleasant.

"Or what?" Larry asked.

"*Ma petite*."

"You think the local master took your coffin," I said.

"A punishment for entering her territory without observing all the social niceties." He looked at me when he said it.

"I suppose that's my fault," I said.

He gave that infuriating shrug. "I could have said no, *ma petite*."

"Stop being so civilized about it."

"Would you be happier if I was angry?" His voice was very mild when he said it.

"Maybe," I said. It would have made me feel less guilty, but I didn't say that out loud.

"Go to the airport and find our luggage if you can, Jason. Bring it back to Anita's room."

"Wait a minute. You are not moving into my room."

"It is nearly dawn, *ma petite*. I have no choice. Tomorrow we will find other accommodations."

"You planned this."

He gave a short, bitter laugh. "Even my deviousness knows some bounds, *ma petite*. I would not willingly be without my coffin this close to dawn."

"What are you going to do without your coffin?" Larry asked. He looked anxious.

Jean-Claude smiled. "Do not fear, Lawrence, all I need is darkness, or rather lack of sunlight. The coffin itself is not absolutely necessary, simply more secure."

"I've never known a vampire that didn't sleep in a coffin," I said.

"If I am underground in a secure place, I forego my coffin. Though truthfully, once daylight finds me I am insensible and could sleep on a bed of nails and not know it."

I wasn't sure I believed him. He worked harder than most at passing for human. "You will see the truth of my words soon enough, *ma petite*."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said.

"You can sleep on the couch if you prefer, but I am telling you truly that once full daylight arrives I will be harmless, helpless if you like. I would be unable to molest you even if I wanted to."

"And what other fairy tales am I supposed to believe? I've seen you move around after dawn, hidden from light, but you worked just fine."

"After eight hours or so of sleep, if it is still daylight I can move around, true, but I doubt you will stay abed for eight hours. You have clients or something, a murder investigation, some business that will take you out and about."

"If I leave you alone, who'll see that some maid doesn't come in, pull the curtains back and French fry you?"

The smile widened. "Concern over my well-being. I am touched."

I looked at him. He looked pleasant, amused, but it was a mask. His expression when he didn't want you to know what he was thinking, but didn't want you to know that he didn't want you to know. "What are you up to?"

"For once, *ma petite*, nothing."

"Yeah, right."

"If I find the coffin, I'll need to rent a truck," Jason said.

"You can use our Jeep," Larry said.

I glared at him. "No, he can't."

"Think of it as expediency, *ma petite*. If Jason must rent a truck, then I may have to spend another day in your bed. I know you do not want that." There was amusement in his voice, and an undercurrent of something else. It might have been bitterness.

"I'll drive," Larry said.

"No, you won't," I said.

"It's almost dawn, Anita. I'll be alright."

I shook my head. "No."

"You can't treat me like a kid brother forever. I can drive the Jeep."

"I promise not to eat him," Jason said.

Larry held out his hand for the keys. "You have to trust me sometime."

I just looked at him.

"I promise to shoot anything, human or monster, that threatens me while I'm gone." He made the Boy Scout sign, three fingers to heaven. "You can bail me out of jail and explain that I was just following orders."

I sighed. "Alright, dammit." I gave him the keys.

He grinned at me. "Thanks."

I shook my head. "Just hurry back, okay?"

"Anything you say."

"Just get out of here, and be careful."

Larry left with Jason trailing behind. I stared at the door after it closed, wondering if I should have gone with them. Knowing that Larry would have gotten mad, but mad was better than dead. Hell, it was a simple errand; go to the airport and pick up a coffin. What could go wrong with less than an hour of darkness left? Shit.

"You cannot protect him, Anita."

"I can try."

Jean-Claude gave that infuriating shrug that meant anything you wanted it to mean, and nothing at all. "Shall we retire to your room, *ma petite*?"

I opened my mouth to tell him he could bunk with Larry, but didn't say it. I didn't really believe he'd munch on Larry, but I was sure he wouldn't munch on me. "Sure," I said.

He looked a little surprised, as if he'd expected an argument. But I was all out of argument tonight. He could have the bed. I'd take the couch. What could be more innocent? Biker Nuns from Hell, but besides that.

Chapter 19

I could feel dawn pressing against the windows like a cool hand when we got back to my room. It was very near. Jean-Claude smiled at me. "The first time I manage to share a hotel room with you, and there is no time." He gave an elaborate sigh. "Things never work as I plan with you, *ma petite*."

"Maybe that's a hint," I said.

"Perhaps." He glanced at the closed drapes. "I must go, *ma petite*. Until darkness." He shut the bedroom door a little hurriedly. I could feel the coming light pressing around the building. I'd noticed over the years of hunting vamps that I'd become aware of dawn, and sunset. There had been times when I'd struggled from disaster to disaster just to stay alive until that soft growing pressure of light could sweep the sky and save my cookies. For the first time I wondered what it would be like to see it as a danger instead of a blessing.

After he'd closed the door I realized my suitcase was in the bedroom. Damn. I hesitated, and finally knocked. No answer. I opened the door just a crack, then farther. He wasn't in there. Water ran in the bathroom. A line of light showed under the door. What did vampires do in bathrooms? Better not to know.

I grabbed my suitcase from the floor and carried it out before the bathroom door could open. I did not want to see him again. I did not want to see what happened to him when the sun rose.

When the sun had risen enough to pulse against the closed drapes like pale lemon liquid, I changed into a t-shirt and jeans. I had a robe with me, but if I was going to greet both Larry and Jason I wanted to be wearing some pants.

I called down for extra blankets and a pillow. No one bitched that it was a quarter past dawn, and a strange time to need bedclothes. They just brought the stuff. True class. The maid didn't even glance at the closed bedroom door.

I spread the blanket on the couch and stared at it. It was a pretty couch but didn't look terribly comfortable. Oh, well, virtue had its punishments. Of course, maybe it wasn't virtue that kept me out of the bedroom. If it had been Richard curled up in the next room, then only moral fortitude would have kept me out. With Jean-Claude . . . I had never seen him after dawn when he was dead to the world. I wasn't sure I wanted to see. I knew I didn't want to cuddle up next to him while the warmth left his body.

There was a knock on the door. I hesitated. It was probably Larry, but then again . . . I went to the door with the Browning naked in my hand. Beau had had a shotgun last night. Paranoia, or caution; hard to tell the difference sometimes.

I stood to one side of the door and said, "Yes."

"Anita, it's us."

I hit the safety and put the barrel of the Browning down the front of my jeans. It was too big a gun to wear in an inner pants holster, but for temporary holding, that worked.

I opened the door.

Larry leaned against the doorjamb, looking rumpled and tired. He had a McDonald's sack in one hand, and four cups shoved into one of those Styrofoam holders. Two of the cups held coffee, the other two sodas.

Jason had a large leather suitcase under each arm, a battered, much smaller suitcase in his right hand, and a second McDonald's bag in his left. He didn't look the least bit tired. A morning person, even after no sleep at all. It was disgusting. His eyes flicked to the gun shoved in my waistband. He noticed, but he didn't comment. Point for him.

Larry never even blinked at the gun.

"Food?" I asked.

"I didn't eat much last night. Besides, Jason was hungry, too," Larry said. He came inside, putting the drinks and food on the wet bar. None of us drank; good to use the bar for something.

Jason walked through the door sideways with the suitcases and food, but there was no effort to it. He wasn't straining one little bit to carry it all.

"Showoff," I said.

He sat the luggage on the floor. "This isn't even close to showing off," he said.

I locked the door behind them. "I suppose you can bring the coffin up single-handedly."

"No, but not because it's heavy. It's just too long. The balance isn't right."

Great. Super werewolf. Though for all I knew, all lycanthropes could lift that much weight. Maybe Richard could lift coffins with one arm. It was not a comforting thought.

Jason started laying food out on the bar. Larry had already climbed onto one of the bar stools. He was pouring sugar into one of the coffees.

"Did you just leave the coffin in the lobby?" I asked. I had to lay the Browning on the bar to sit down. I was just too short-waisted to have it down my pants.

Larry sat the unopened coffee in front of me. "It's missing."

I stared at him. "You found the suitcases but not the coffin?"

"Yep," Jason said, as he finished dividing the food into three piles. He'd pushed some of it in front of both of us, but the lion's share was in front of him.

"How can you eat this early in the morning?"

"I'm always hungry," he said. He looked at me sort of expectantly.

I let it slide. It was too easy.

"Come on, I fed you that one," he said.

"You don't seem particularly worried," I said.

He shrugged, and slid onto a bar stool. "What do you want me to say? I've seen some weird shit since I became a werewolf. If I got hysterical every time something went wrong, every time someone I knew died, I'd be in the loony bin by now."

"I thought fights for dominance in the pack, except for pack leader, weren't to the death," I said.

"People forget," he said.

"I'll have to talk to Richard when I get back in town. He hasn't been mentioning any of this."

"Nothing to mention," Jason said. "Just business as usual."

Great. "Did anybody see who took the coffin?"

Larry answered, his voice sluggish even with the caffeine and sugar. There's only so much you can do on no sleep at all. "No one saw anybody take it. In fact, the only guy left from the night shift said, 'I just turned away for a second, and it wasn't there. Just the luggage standing there by itself.'"

"Shit," I said.

"Why take the coffin?" he asked. He drank most of his coffee. His Egg McMuffin sat untouched in front of him. They'd put hotcakes in front of me with a little tub of syrup beside it.

"Your breakfast is getting cold," Jason said.

He was enjoying himself too much. I frowned at him, but I opened my coffee. I didn't want the food. "I think the master is flexing a little muscle. What do you think, Jason?" I kept my voice casual.

He smiled at me around a mouthful of food, swallowed, and said, "I think whatever Jean-Claude wants me to think."

Maybe my voice had been too casual. I should really give up on subtlety; I just wasn't good enough at it. "Did he tell you not to talk to me?"

"No, just to be careful what I said."

"He says jump, and you say how high; is that it?"

"That's it." He ate a bite of scrambled egg, his face peaceful.

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"I don't make the rules, Anita. I'm not an alpha anything."

"And it doesn't bother you?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Sometimes, but there's nothing I can do about it. Why fight it?"

"I don't understand that at all," Larry said.

"Me either."

"You don't have to understand it," he said. He couldn't have been more than twenty, but the look in his eyes wasn't young. It was the look of someone who'd seen a lot, done a lot, and not all of it nice. It was the look I was dreading to see on Larry's face someday. They were nearly the same age; what had people been doing to Jason to give him such jaded eyes?

"What do we do now?" Larry asked.

"You're the vampire experts. I'm just Jean-Claude's pet."

He said it like it didn't bother him. It would have bothered me. I shook my head. "I'm going to call the cops, then get some sleep."

"What are you going to tell them?" Jason asked.

"I'm going to tell them about Xavier."

"Did Jean-Claude say you could tell the cops?"

I looked at him. "I didn't ask for permission."

"Jean-Claude wouldn't like you bringing in the police."

I just stared at him.

He blinked at me. "Don't do it just because I said that, please."

"He knows you pretty well for someone who's only met you twice," Larry said.

"Three times," I said. "Two out of three times, he's tried to eat me."

Larry's eyes widened a little. "You're kidding."

"She just looks so tasty," Jason said.

"I've had about enough of you," I said.

"What's wrong? Jean-Claude and Richard both tease you."

"I'm dating both of them," I said. "I'm not dating you."

"Maybe you've got a thing for monsters. I can be just as scary as the next guy."

I stared at him. "No," I said, "you can't. That's why you're not alpha. That's why you're Jean-Claude's pet, because you aren't scary enough."

Something flowed through his pale blue eyes. Something angry and dangerous. Sitting there with his forkful of scrambled eggs, and a Coke in one hand, he was suddenly different. It was hard to put into words, but it raised the hair on the back of my neck.

"Ease down, wolf-boy," I said. My voice was soft, careful. I was sitting less than a foot away from him. At this distance he could jump me easy. The Browning was an inch away from my right hand, but I knew better. I might grab the gun, but I'd never get it pointed in time. I'd seen him move before, and I wasn't quick enough. Lack of sleep was making me trusting, or stupid. Same thing.

A low, trickling growl rumbled out of him. My pulse beat a little faster.

Larry's gun was suddenly pointing past my nose at the werewolf's face.

"Don't," Larry said. His voice was low and even, and very damn serious.

I eased back off the bar stool, bringing the Browning with me. Didn't really want Larry's gun to go off right next to my face.

I pointed my gun at Jason's chest, one-handed, almost casual. "Don't ever threaten me again."

Jason stared at me. His beast lurked just behind his eyes like a wave rushing towards the shore.

"You start going furry, and I won't wait to find out if you're bluffing," I said.

Larry had one knee on the bar stool, gun still pointed nice and steady. I hoped he didn't fall off the bar stool and accidentally shoot Jason. If he shot him, I wanted it to be on purpose.

Jason's shoulders relaxed. His hands unclenched, leaving the fork and the drink on the bar. He closed his eyes and sat very still for nearly a full minute. Larry and I waited, guns still pointed. Larry's eyes flicked to me. I shook my head.

Jason opened his eyes and let out a deep, sighing breath. He looked normal again, that tension drained away. He grinned. "I had to try."

I took another step back, putting my back to the wall. Out of reach, I lowered the gun. Larry hesitated, but followed my lead.

"So you tried; now what?"

He shrugged. "You're dominant to me."

"Just like that," I said.

"Would you be happier if I made you fight me?"

I shook my head.

"But I backed her up," Larry said. "She didn't do it alone."

"Doesn't matter. You're loyal to her, would risk your life for her. There's more to being dominant than just muscle, or guns."

Larry looked puzzled. "What do you mean, dominant? I feel like I'm missing part of the conversation."

"Why are you working so damn hard at not being human, Jason?" I asked.

He smiled and went back to his breakfast.

"Answer me, Jason."

He finished off his eggs and said, "No."

"What's going on?" Larry said.

"Mind games," I said.

Larry made an exasperated noise. "Someone explain to me why we had to pull a gun on someone who's supposed to be on our side."

"Jean-Claude keeps telling me Richard isn't any more human than he is. Jason's little display helps emphasize that. Doesn't it, wolf-boy?"

Jason ate the rest of his food like we weren't there.

"Answer me," I said.

He turned on the bar stool, putting his elbows behind him. "I have too many masters now, Anita. I don't need another one."

"And I've got too many monsters messing with me right now. Don't add yourself to the list, Jason."

"Is it a short list?" he asked.

"Gets shorter all the time," I said.

He smiled and slid off the bar stool. "Is anybody tired but me?"

Larry and I stared at him. The werewolf didn't look tired—more than I could say for us mere humans.

Jason wasn't going to answer my questions, and they weren't important enough to shoot him over. Stalemate.

"Fine; where are you sleeping?" I asked.

"If you trust me not to eat him, in Larry's room."

"No way," I said.

"You want me here, with you?"

"I told him he could stay in my room on the ride over," Larry said.

"That was before he pulled the werewolf crap," I said.

Larry shrugged. "You've got the Master of the City tucked into your bed. I think I can handle one werewolf."

I didn't think so. But I didn't want to discuss it in front of the werewolf.

"No, Larry."

He was instantly angry. "What do I have to do to prove myself to you?"

"Stay alive," I said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're not a shooter, Larry."

"I was willing to shoot him." Larry pointed to the smiling werewolf.

"I know."

"Because I'm not trigger-happy, you don't trust me to handle myself?"

I sighed. "Larry, please. If Jason turned furry in the middle of the day and killed you, I couldn't live with myself."

"And if he kills you?" Larry said.

"He won't."

"Why not?" Larry asked.

"Because Jean-Claude would kill him. If he hurt you, I'd kill him, but I don't know if Jean-Claude would avenge you. Jason's more frightened of Jean-Claude than he is of me. Aren't you, Jason?"

Jason had sat down on the end of the couch on my blanket. "Oh, yes."

"I don't know why," Larry said. "You're the one who kills for Jean-Claude. He never seems to kill anyone on his own."

"Larry, who would you be more afraid of, Jean-Claude or me?"

"You wouldn't hurt me," he said.

"If you had to face one of us, which would you prefer?"

Larry looked at me for a long time. The anger drained away, replaced by something tired and old in his eyes. "Him."

"For God's sake, why?" I asked.

"I've seen you kill a lot of people, Anita. A lot more than Jean-Claude. He might try to frighten me to death, but you'd just kill me."

My mouth was open, just a little. "If you really believe that I'm more dangerous than Jean-Claude, then you haven't been paying attention."

"I didn't say you were more dangerous. I said you'd kill me quicker."

"That's why I'm not as afraid of Anita as I am of Jean-Claude," Jason said.

Larry looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"All she'll do is kill me, quick, neat. Jean-Claude wouldn't kill me quick, or easy. He'd make sure it hurt."

The two men stared at each other. Each one's logic was sound as far as it went. I was with Jason. "If you really believe what you're saying, Larry, then you haven't seen enough vampires."

"How am I ever going to see enough vampires if you keep me at arm's length, Anita?"

Had I really kept him out of it that much? Had I overprotected him? Let him see my ruthlessness but not Jean-Claude's?

"And I'm going to the master's tomorrow night. You are not leaving me behind anymore."

"You're right," I said. The answer seemed to surprise both of them.

"If you really believe that I'd kill someone quicker than Jean-Claude would, I have overprotected you. You have to understand how dangerous they are, Larry. How deadly, or someday I won't be around and you'll get killed."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. My stomach was tight with fear. Fear that Larry would get killed because I'd kept him out of it. It was something I hadn't anticipated.

"Come on, Jason," Larry said.

Jason stood up.

"No. Tomorrow you can be ass-deep in vampires with me watching. Until you understand how dangerous the monsters are, I don't want you alone with them."

His eyes were angry and hurt. I'd undercut his confidence, his self-esteem. But . . . what else could I do?

Larry turned abruptly on his heel and left. He didn't argue. He didn't say goodbye. He slammed the door behind him, and I fought an urge to follow him. What could I say? I leaned my forehead against the door, and whispered, "Damn."

"Do I get the couch?" Jason asked.

I turned and leaned against the door. I still had the Browning in my hand, though I wasn't sure why anymore. I was getting tired, sloppy. "No, I get the couch."

"Where do you want me, then?"

"I don't care; just not near me."

He ran his hands down the edge of the blanket, running the cloth between his fingers. "If you're really sleeping out here, I'd just as soon have the bed."

"It's taken," I said.

"How big is the bed?"

"King-size, but what difference does it make?"

"Jean-Claude won't mind if I share with him. He'd prefer it was you, but . . ." He shrugged.

I looked at him, at his tranquil, pleasant face. "Is this the first time you've shared a bed with Jean-Claude?"

"No," he said.

It must have shown on my face, because he lowered the high neck of the sweater enough for me to see two fang marks. I pushed away from the wall and walked closer. Close enough to see that the bite was almost healed.

"Sometimes he likes a snack when he first wakes up," Jason said.

"Jesus," I said.

Jason let go of the collar, and it slid over the bite like it wasn't there. The same way you'd hide a hickey. Jason sat there looking harmless. He was exactly my height, and had the face of a knowledgeable angel.

"Richard didn't let Jean-Claude snack on him," I said.

"No," he said.

"No. That's all you have to say."

"What do you want me to say, Anita?"

I thought about that for a second. "I want you to be outraged. Angry."

"Why?"

I shook my head. "Go to bed, Jason. You're making me tired."

He went into the bedroom without another word. I didn't peek to see if he changed into a wolf and curled up on the carpet, or if he crawled into bed beside the corpse. None of my business, or at least nothing I wanted to see.

Chapter 20

I put the Browning under the pillow with the safety on. At home with the gun in the special holster I'd added to the headboard of the bed, the safety would have been off. But I'd look pretty silly if I accidentally shot myself during the night—day—trying to protect myself from werewolves.

The Firestar I put under the couch cushion, safety on. Normally it would have been in my luggage, but I was feeling just a little insecure.

The knives were in the luggage. Things weren't quite dangerous enough to wear the wrist sheaths to bed. Besides, they weren't very comfortable, not to sleep in, anyway.

I had just settled down for a long day's sleep when I realized I hadn't called Special Agent Bradford. Damn. I threw the blanket back and padded to the telephone in nothing but a t-shirt and undies. Yes, the Browning came with me. Doesn't do you a damn bit of good to have a weapon if it isn't with you.

I dialed the number and got no answer. Fancy that. Didn't everyone work twenty-four hours a day? I had his beeper number. Could the news about Xavier wait? Would even having the name help them? Agent Bradford had made it very clear that I was persona non grata. First, Freemont had blackballed me; second, the Quinlans were threatening to sue everybody unless I was kept away from the case. I'd done such a bang-up job protecting their family, they didn't want a repeat. They seemed to think I'd get their son killed. Fancy that.

I had Bradford's beeper number. He'd given strict orders that if I found out anything I was to tell him, and only him. Made me not want to tell him a bloody thing. But who was I to say the FBI didn't have a vampire file somewhere? Maybe the name would mean something to them. Maybe it would help them find Jeff. Besides, Jean-Claude hadn't told me not to give Xavier's name to the cops. I used the beeper number. I left my phone number. Now I could either go back to bed, and let his return call wake me, or I could sit in the chair for a few minutes and wait. I waited.

The phone rang in under five minutes. I like a man who returns his pages promptly. I said "Hello," in case it wasn't him. It was.

"Special Agent Bradford. This number was on my beeper." His voice was rough with sleep.

"This is Anita Blake."

A moment of silence, then, "Do you know what time it is?"

"I haven't been to bed yet, so yeah, I know what time it is."

Another silence. "What do you want, Ms. Blake?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slow. Getting mad would not be helpful. "I have a possible name for the vampire that's been slaughtering kids."

"What's the name?"

"Xavier."

"Last name?"

"Vampires don't have last names, as a general rule."

"Thank you for the name, Ms. Blake. How did you get it?"

I thought about that for a few seconds. I couldn't think of a really good answer. "It sort of fell into my lap."

"Why don't I believe that, Ms. Blake? I thought I'd made myself clear this evening. You are not to involve yourself in this case, in any way."

"Look, I didn't have to call, but I want Jeff Quinlan back alive. I thought the FBI might be able to use the name of the vampire who took him."

"I want to know how you got the name," he said.

"An informant."

"I'd like to talk to this informant," he said.

"No," I said.

"Are you withholding information from a federal investigation, Ms. Blake?"

"No, Agent Bradford, I am going out of my way to share information."

He was quiet again. "Alright, Ms. Blake, you're right. Thank you for the name. We'll run it in the computers."

"This vampire has a history of harming preadolescent boys. He's a pedophile."

"Good lord, a vampire pedophile." He finally sounded genuinely interested in what I was saying. "And he has the Quinlan boy."

"Yeah," I said.

"I would really like to talk to this source of yours," he said.

"He's a little shy around the police."

"I could insist, Ms. Blake. We've got reports that a private jet flew in last night, and a coffin got unloaded. It's registered to a J. C. Corporation. They seem to own a lot of vampire-related, St. Louis-based businesses. Do you know anything about that, Ms. Blake?"

Lying to the FBI seemed like a bad idea, but I wasn't sure what they'd do with the truth. The Feds were investigating vampire crime, and suddenly a new vamp shows up in town. The least they would do was question him. The worst . . . well, there was the vampire in Mississippi that had been accidentally transferred to a cell with a window. The sun rose, and . . . French fried vampire. An ACLU lawyer had sued the cops' asses, and won, but that didn't bring the vamp back. Admittedly the dead vamp was one of the newly dead. Jean-Claude would have escaped fairly easily, but just escaping from the law by using vampire powers would get a warrant for his arrest. Sort of like what was happening to Magnus.

Besides, a vampire had killed a cop last night. The police might not be terribly careful with any vampire right now. The police are only human, after all.

"You still there, Blake?"

"I'm here."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Where was the coffin delivered?" I asked.

"It wasn't. It just disappeared."

"So what do you want from me?"

"There was some luggage that went with it. The luggage was picked up a little while ago by two young men. The description of one of them sounds a lot like Larry Kirkland."

"Is that so?"

"That's so."

We both sat on our ends of the phone waiting for someone to say something. "I could send some agents down to your hotel room."

"There are no coffins in my hotel room, Agent Bradford."

"You sure of that, Blake?"

"My hand to God."

"Do you know who runs this J. C. Corporation?"

"No." It was the truth. Until Bradford told me about it, I'd never heard of the J. C. Corporation. It would only have been an educated guess if I'd said Jean-Claude owned it. Okay, I was fooling myself, but so what?

"Do you know where the coffin was delivered?" he asked.

"Nope."

"Would you tell me if you knew?"

"If it would help find Jeff Quinlan, you bet."

"Alright, Blake, but no more helping. Stay the fuck out of this case. When we find the vampires we'll call you in, and you can do your job. You're a vampire hunter, not a cop. Try to remember that."

"Fine," I said.

"Good. Now I'm going back to sleep. I suggest you do the same. We'll find the vampires today, Blake. And let's just say I don't believe everything Freemont said. We'll call you in for the kill."

"Thanks."

"Good night, Blake."

"Good night, Bradford."

We hung up. I sat there for a minute, just letting it all sink in. If they found Jean-Claude in my room, what would they do? I'd seen the cops pop a comatose vampire in a body bag, transport it to the station house, and wait for nightfall to question it. I'd thought it was a bad idea because the vamp would wake up pissed. It did. I ended up killing it. I've always felt bad about that particular kill. It was an out-of-state job. The local cops invited me in to advise them. Once we found the vamp, they stopped listening to my advice. Reminded me of now. That vampire had also just been brought in for questioning.

I was suddenly tired. It was like the entire night just hit me in one grinding wave. Sleep dragged at me. I had to go to sleep. I couldn't help Jeff Quinlan, or anybody else, until I'd had a few hours of sleep. Besides, maybe the Feds would find him. Stranger things had happened.

I left a wake-up call with the desk for noon, and cuddled under the blanket. The Browning was lumpy under the pillow. At least I couldn't feel the Firestar under the couch cushion. I half wished I'd packed Sigmund, my stuffed toy penguin, but somehow having Jean-Claude or Jason find me sleeping with a stuffed toy bothered me almost as much as them trying to eat me. What price machismo?

Chapter 21

Someone was banging on the door. I opened my eyes to a room filled with soft, indirect sunlight. The curtains in here weren't nearly as thick as the ones in the bedroom. Which was why I was out here and Jean-Claude was in there.

I struggled into the jeans I'd left on the floor and yelled, "I'm coming."

The banging stopped, then it sounded like they kicked the door. Was this a federal wake-up call? I went to the door with the Browning in my hand. Somehow I didn't think the FBI would be so rude. I stood to the side of the door and asked, "Who is it?"

"It's Dorcas Bouvier." She kicked the door again. "Open this damn door."

I peeked through the little peephole. It was Dorcas Bouvier, or her evil twin. She didn't have a weapon in sight. I was probably safe. I put the Browning under the t-shirt in the waistband of my pants. The t-shirt was a large and fell to mid-thigh. It hid the gun and then some.

I unlocked the door and stood to one side. Dorcas shoved the door open, leaving it swinging open behind her. I closed and locked the door, leaning against it watching her.

Dorcas stalked through the room like some sort of exotic cat. Her waist-length, chestnut hair swung like a curtain as she moved. She finally turned and glared at me with those sea-green eyes that were a mirror of her brother's. The pupil had spiraled downward to a pinpoint, leaving the irises floating and making her look almost blind.

"Where is he?"

"Where's who?" I asked.

She glared at me and went for the bedroom door. I couldn't get there in time to stop her, and I wasn't willing to shoot her yet.

When I came up behind her she was two steps into the bedroom, back rigid, staring at the bed. It was worth staring at.

Jean-Claude lay on his back with the wine-dark sheets pulled up to mid-chest. One shoulder and a pale, pale arm were stretched across the dark sheets. In the semidarkness his hair blended with the pillow to leave his face white and nearly ethereal.

Jason lay on his stomach. The only things under the sheet were one leg and, barely, his buttocks. If he was wearing clothes, I couldn't tell. He raised up on his elbows and turned to us. His yellow hair had fallen into his face, and he blinked like he'd been deeply asleep. He smiled when he saw Dorcas Bouvier.

"It isn't Magnus," she said.

"No," I said, "it isn't. You want to talk outside?"

"Don't go on my account," Jason said. He rolled onto one elbow. The silken sheet slid across his hips as he moved.

Dorcas Bouvier turned on her heel and marched out of the room. I closed the door to the sound of Jason's laughter.

Dorcas looked shaken, embarrassed even. Good to see. I was embarrassed, too, but didn't know what to do about it. Trying to explain your way out of situations like this never works. People are always willing to believe the worst of you. So I didn't try. I just stood there looking at her. She wouldn't meet my eyes.

After a nice uncomfortable silence that caused heat to wash up her face, she said, "I don't know what to say. I thought my brother was in there. I . . ." She met my eyes finally. She was already regaining her composure, her surety

of purpose. You could watch it solidify in her eyes. She was here for more than rousting her brother out of my bed.

"Why in the world would you think Magnus was here?"

"May I sit down?"

I motioned her to a seat. She sat in one of the chairs, spine very straight, perfect posture. My stepmother, Judith, would have been proud. I leaned on the arm of the couch because I couldn't sit down with the Browning down my pants. I wasn't sure how she'd take me being armed, so I didn't want to show the gun. Some people freeze up around firearms. Go figure.

"I know Magnus was with you last night."

"With me?" I said.

"I don't mean . . ." Heat crept up her face again. "I don't mean with you. I mean I know you saw him last night."

"He tell you that?"

She shook her head, making her hair slide like fur over her shoulders. It was eerily reminiscent of Magnus. "I saw you together."

I studied her face, trying to read past the embarrassment. "You weren't there last night."

"Where?" she asked.

I frowned at her. "How did you see us?"

"You admit you saw him last night, then," she said. Her eagerness came back in a rush.

"What I want to know is how you saw us together."

She took a deep breath. "That's my business."

"Magnus said his sister was better at visions than he was. Is that true?"

"What didn't he tell you?" she asked. She was angry again. Her emotions seemed to collide, spinning too fast over her face and voice.

"He didn't tell me why he ran from the police."

She looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. "I don't know why he ran. It doesn't make any sense." She looked back up at me. "I know he didn't kill those children."

"I agree," I said.

Surprise showed on her face. "I thought you told the police he did it."

I shook my head. "No, I told them he could have done it. I never said he did it."

"But . . . The detective was so sure. She said you'd told her."

I cursed softly under my breath. "Detective Freemont?"

"Yes."

"Don't believe everything she tells you, especially about me. She doesn't seem to like me very much."

"If you didn't tell them, then why are they so sure Magnus did these horrible things? He would have no reason to kill these people."

I shrugged. "Magnus isn't wanted for the killings anymore. Didn't anybody tell you that?"

She shook her head. "No. You mean he can come back home?"

I sighed. "It's not that simple. Magnus used glamor on the police to escape. That's a felony all on its own. The cops will kill him on sight, Ms. Bouvier. They don't mess around where magic is concerned. Can't say I blame them."

"I saw the two of you talking outside under the sky."

"I did see him last night."

"Did you tell the police?"

"No."

She stared at me. "Why not?"

"Magnus is probably guilty of something, or he wouldn't have run, but he deserves better treatment than he's getting."

"Yes," she said, "he does."

"What made you think he'd be in my bed?"

She looked down at her lap again. "Magnus can be very persuasive. I can't remember the last time a woman told him no. I apologize for assuming that about you." She stopped, glanced towards the bedroom, then back to me. She blushed again.

I was not going to explain how I ended up with two males in my bed. Surely it was obvious from the blanket and pillow that I'd slept out here. Surely.

"What do you want from me, Ms. Bouvier?"

"I want to find Magnus before he gets himself killed. I thought you could help me. How could you have betrayed Magnus to the police? Surely you know what it's like to be different."

I wanted to ask if it showed, if she could see "Necromancer" written across my forehead, but I didn't. If the answer was yes, I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

"If he hadn't run away, they would have simply questioned him. They didn't have enough to arrest him. Do you have any idea why he ran?"

She shook her head. "I've tried to think of something, anything, but it doesn't make any sense to me, Ms. Blake. My brother is a little amoral, but he's not a bad man."

I wasn't sure you could be a little amoral, but I let it slide. "If he turns himself in to me, I'll walk him into the police station. But short of that, I don't know what I can do."

"I've been everywhere I can think of, but he's just not there. I even checked the mound."

"The mound?" I asked.

She stared up at me. "He didn't tell you about the creature?"

I thought about lying to see if I could get information, but the look in her eyes told me I'd blown it. "He didn't mention any creature."

"Of course; if he had told you, the police would be down there with dynamite. Dynamite won't kill it, but it would screw our magical wards six ways to Sunday."

"What creature?" I asked.

"Is there anything Magnus told you that you didn't tell the police?" Dorcas asked.

I thought about that for a second. "No."

"He was right not to tell you."

"Maybe, but I'm trying to help him now."

"Do you have a guilty conscience?" she asked.

"Maybe," I said.

She looked at me. Her pupils had resurfaced, and she looked almost normal. Almost. "How can I trust you?"

"You probably can't. But I do want to help Magnus. Please talk to me, Ms. Bouvier."

"I have to have your word that you won't tell the police. I am serious, Ms. Blake. If the police interfere, they could lose the thing and people would die."

I debated but couldn't see any reason the police would need to know.

"Okay, I give you my word."

"I may not have Magnus's way with glamor, but an oath to one of the fey is a serious matter, Ms. Blake. Lying to us tends to go badly."

"Is that a threat?"

"Think of it as a warning." The air moved between us like heat rising off a road. Her eyes swirled like miniature whirlpools.

Maybe I should have shown her my gun. "Don't threaten me, Dorcas. I'm not in the mood."

The magic seemed to seep away like water running into a crack in the rocks. You knew it was still there, below the surface. But for someone who had been threatened by werewolves and vampires, she paled in comparison. Magnus seemed to have most of the talent in the family. On the scale of scariness, Magnus was up there.

"Just so we understand each other, Ms. Blake. If you tell the police and they let loose the creature, the deaths will be on your head."

"Alright, I'm impressed; now tell me about it."

"Did Magnus tell you about our ancestor, Llyn Bouvier?"

"Yeah, he was the first European in this area. He married into the local tribe. Converted them to Christianity. He was also fey."

She nodded. "He brought another fey with him."

"A wife?" I asked.

"No, he had captured one of the less intelligent fairies. He imprisoned it in a magically constructed box. It escaped and slaughtered nearly the entire tribe we're descended from. He finally managed to contain it with the help of an Indian shaman, or priest, but he never regained control over it. The best he could do was to imprison it."

"What kind of fairie did he bring over?"

"Bloody Bones isn't just the name of our bar," she said. "It's short for Rawhead and Bloody Bones."

My eyes widened. "But that's a nursery boggle; why would your ancestor want to capture one? They don't have any treasure, or wishes, to give out. Or am I wrong on that?"

"No, you're quite correct. Bloody Bones has no riches or gentle magic to grant wishes."

"Then why capture it?"

"Most children born of human and fairie blood don't have a lot of magic."

"That's what the legends say," I said, "but Magnus proves that wrong."

"Llyn Bouvier made a sort of pact for himself and his descendants. We would all have fey power, at a price."

She was dragging this out, and I was tired. "Just tell me, Ms. Bouvier. The suspense is getting irritating."

"Has it ever occurred to you that this might be embarrassing for me to admit?" she asked.

"No; if that's the case, I apologize."

"My ancestor imprisoned Bloody Bones so he could make a potion of its blood. But the potion had to be remade periodically, retaken, or his magic deserted him."

I stared at her. "How did the other fey take this little idea?"

"He was forced to flee Europe, or they would have killed him. It is forbidden among us to use each other like that."

"I can see why."

"His barbaric act gave us glamor. Power. But it was still purchased by blood, Ms. Blake. After Rawhead and Bloody Bones was imprisoned, my ancestor gave up his potion. He finally saw it as evil. Though his power faded, his children had the power of fairie in their blood. So here we are," she said.

"So you've got Rawhead and Bloody Bones hidden in some magic box somewhere?" I asked.

She smiled, and it made her face seem suddenly young and lovely. I had no way of judging her age. I couldn't see a line on her face. "When the magic failed the first time, Rawhead and Bloody Bones grew to its full size. It is bigger than a person, almost as big as a giant. It is imprisoned in a mound of earth and magic."

"You say it nearly wiped out an entire tribe way back when?"

She nodded.

I sighed. "I have to see where it's imprisoned."

"You promised . . ."

"I promised not to tell the police, but you've just told me there's a giant-sized creature capable of mass destruction imprisoned near here. I have to see that it's secure, that it's not going to break out and start slaughtering people."

"I assure you, Ms. Blake, our family has managed for centuries. We know what we're doing."

"If I can't tell the cops, I have to see for myself."

She stood up, trying to use her height to intimidate me. She wasn't even close. "And you'll bring the police, right? Do you think I'm that stupid?"

"I won't bring the cops, Ms. Bouvier, but I have to see it. If it does break out and I didn't warn the cops, then it would be my fault that no one was prepared."

"You can't prepare for Bloody Bones," she said. "It is immortal, Ms. Blake, truly immortal. It cannot die. You could cut off its head and it would not die. The police can do nothing but make things worse."

She had a point. "I still need to see for myself."

"You are a stubborn woman."

"Yeah, I can be a real pain in the ass, Ms. Bouvier. Let's not dance, just take me to see the prison, and if it's secure I'll leave you to it."

"If it's not secure enough for you?" she asked.

"We contact a witch and see what she recommends."

She frowned. "You wouldn't just go to the police?"

"If my home was robbed, I'd call the cops. If I need help with magic, I call somebody who can do magic."

"You are a strange woman, Ms. Blake. I don't understand you."

"There's a lot of that going around," I said. "Do I get to see where Rawhead and Bloody Bones is buried, or not?"

"Alright, I'll show you."

"When?"

"Without Magnus we're shorthanded at the bar, so not today. Come to the bar around three tomorrow. I'll take you from there."

"I have a coworker that I'd like to bring along," I said.

"One of those in the bedroom?"

"No."

"Why do you want to bring him?"

"Because I'm training him, and when will he ever get to see fey magic again?" She seemed to think about it for a minute, then nodded. "Alright, you may bring one other person with you, but no more."

"Trust me, Ms. Bouvier, one is plenty."

"My friends call me Dorrie," she said. She held out her hand.

"I'm Anita." I shook her hand. She had a nice, firm grip for a woman. Sexist but true. Most women don't seem to know how to give a good handshake.

She held my hand longer than she had to. When she took her hand back, I remembered Magnus's clairvoyance. Dorrie turned those wide, eerie eyes to me. She held her hand to her chest like it hurt. "I see blood, and pain, and death. It follows you like a cloud, Anita Blake."

I watched horror seep into her eyes. Horror at the brief glimpse she'd had of me, my life, my past. I didn't look away. If you're not ashamed, you don't need to look away. Sometimes I would prefer a different line of work, but it's what I do, who I am.

The look faded from her eyes, and she blinked. "I won't underestimate you, Anita."

Dorrie looked normal again, or as normal as she had when she first came in, which wasn't very. Now for the first time I looked at her and wondered if I was seeing what was really there. Was she using glamor on me now, to appear normal? To appear less powerful than she was?

"I'll return the favor, Dorrie."

She flashed me that lovely smile again that made her seem young and vulnerable. Illusion, maybe? "Until tomorrow, then."

"Until tomorrow," I said.

She left, and I locked the door behind her. So Magnus's family were the guardians of a monster. Had that had something to do with why he ran? Dorrie didn't think it was a reason. She should know. But there was a feeling in the room of power gently moving on the air currents. A faint whiff of magic traced the air like perfume, and I hadn't known it until just before she left. Maybe Dorrie was just as good with glamor as Magnus, just more subtle. Could I really trust Dorrie Bouvier? Hmmm.

Why had I asked if Larry could go along? Because I knew it would please him. It might even make up for treating him so badly in front of Jason. But standing there, sensing Dorrie Bouvier's power hanging like a ghost in the air, I wasn't sure it was a good idea. Oh, hell, I knew it wasn't, but I was going, and Larry would go, too. He had a right to go. He even had a right to endanger himself. I couldn't keep him safe forever. He was going to have to learn to take care of himself. I hated it, but I knew it was true.

I wasn't ready to cut the apron strings, but I was going to have to lengthen them a bit. I was going to give Larry the proverbial rope. Here was hoping he didn't hang himself.

Chapter 22

I slept most of the day, and when I woke up, I discovered that nobody would let me come play. Everybody was running scared of the Quinlan lawsuit, and I was persona non grata everywhere I tried to go. Agent Bradford sent me packing, and threatened to have me jailed for obstruction of justice and hampering a police investigation. That's gratitude for you. The day was a bust. The only person who would talk to me was Dolph. All he could tell me was that they hadn't found any sign of Jeff Quinlan, or his sister's body. No one had seen Magnus either. The cops were questioning people, searching for clues, while I twiddled my thumbs, but neither of us came up with anything useful.

I watched darkness fall with a sense of relief; at least now we could get on with it. Larry had gone back to his room. I hadn't asked. Maybe he wanted to give me some privacy with Jean-Claude. Scary thought, that. At least Larry was talking to me. Nice that someone was.

I opened the drapes and watched the glass turn black. I'd brushed my teeth in Larry's room today. My own bathroom was suddenly off limits. I just didn't want to see Jason naked, and I certainly didn't want to see Jean-Claude. So, I borrowed part of Larry's room for the day.

I heard the bedroom door open but didn't turn. Somehow I knew who it was. "Hello, Jean-Claude."

"Good evening, *ma petite*."

I turned. The room was almost in darkness. The only light was from the streetlights outside, and the glowing sign of the hotel. Jean-Claude stepped into that faint glow. His shirt had a collar so high it covered his neck completely. Mother-of-pearl buttons fastened the high collar so that his face was framed by the white, white fabric. There must have been a dozen buttons gleaming down the pleated front of his shirt. A black waist-high jacket that was almost too black to be seen hid the sleeves. Only the shirt's cuffs showed; wide and stiff, covering half his hand. He raised a hand to the light and the cuffs bent back underneath to give his hand a full range of motion. His tight black pants were stuffed into another pair of black boots. They came all the way up his legs, so that he was encased in leather; black on black buckled straps held the soft leather in place.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's spiffy."

"Spiffy?" There was an edge of humor to that one word.

"You just can't take a compliment," I said.

"My apologies, *ma petite*. It was a compliment. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Can we go get your coffin now?"

He stepped out of the light, so I couldn't see his face. "You make it sound so simple, *ma petite*."

"Isn't it?"

Silence then, so thick the room felt empty. I almost called out to him; instead I walked to the bar and turned on the track lighting above it. The soft white light glowed in the dark like a lighted cave. I felt better with the light. But with my back to where I thought he should be, I couldn't sense Jean-Claude. The room felt empty. I turned and there he was, sitting in one of the chairs. Even when I looked at him, there was no sense of movement. It was like a stop-action picture waiting for the switch to go on.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," I said.

He turned his head and looked at me. His eyes were solid darkness. The faint light picked up blue sparks from them. "Do what, *ma petite*?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. What's so complicated about tonight? I feel like you're not telling me everything."

He stood in one smooth motion almost like he skipped part of the process, and was just suddenly on his feet. "It is within our rules for Serephina to challenge me tonight."

"Is that the master's name, Serephina?"

He nodded.

"You don't think I'll tell the cops?"

"I will take you to her, *ma petite*. There will be no time for your impatience to make you foolish."

If I'd been stuck here all day with nothing much to do, but had had the name, would I have tried to find her on my own? Yeah, I would have.

"Fine, let's go."

He paced the room, smiling and shaking his head. "*Ma petite*, do you understand what it will mean if she challenges me tonight?"

"It means we fight them, right?"

He stopped pacing and came into the light. He slid onto one of the bar stools. "There is no fear in you, none."

I shrugged. "Being afraid doesn't help. Being prepared does. Are you afraid of her?" I looked at him, trying to read that lovely mask.

"I do not fear her power. I believe us to be near equals in that, but let us say I am wary. All things being equal, I am still in her territory with only one of my wolves, my human servant, and Monsieur Lawrence. It is not the show of force I would have chosen to confront her after two centuries.

"Why didn't you bring more people? More werewolves, anyway."

"If I had had time to negotiate more of an entourage I would have, but with the rush . . ." He looked at me. "There was no time to bargain."

"Are you in danger?"

He laughed, and it wasn't entirely pleasant. "Am I in danger, she asks. When the council asked me to divide my lands, they promised to set in place someone of power equal to or less than mine. But they did not expect me to enter her territory so unprepared."

"Who are they? What council?"

He cocked his head to one side. "Have you really come among us so long and not heard of our council?"

"Just tell me," I said.

"We have a council, *ma petite*. It has existed for a very long time. It is not so much a governing body as a court, or police, perhaps. Before your courts made us citizens with rights, we had very few rules, and only one law. Thou shalt not draw attention to yourself. That's the law that Tepes forgot."

"Tepes," I said, "Vlad Tepes? You mean Dracula?"

Jean-Claude just looked at me. His face was perfectly blank, no expression. He looked like a particularly lovely statue, if a statue's eyes could glitter like sapphires. I could not read that expressionless face, nor was I meant to.

"I don't believe you."

"About the council, our law, or Tepes?"

"The last part."

"Oh, I assure you we did kill him."

"You make it sound like you were around when it happened. He died in, what, the 1300s?"

"Was it 1476, or was it 1477?" He made a great show of trying to remember.

"You are not that old," I said.

"Are you sure, *ma petite*?" He turned that unnervingly blank face to me; even his eyes went dead and empty. It was like looking at a well-constructed doll.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

He smiled, and sighed. Life, for lack of a better word, rushed back into his face, his body. It was like watching Pinocchio spring to life.

"Shit."

"So nice to know that I can still unnerve you from time to time, *ma petite*." I let that go. He knew exactly the effect he had on me. "If Serephina is your equal, then you take care of her, and I'll shoot everybody else."

"You know it will not be that simple."

"It never is."

He stared at me, smiling.

"Do you really think she'll challenge you?"

"No, but I wanted you to know that she could."

"Is there anything else I need to know?"

He smiled wide enough to flash a little bit of fang. He looked wonderful in the light. His skin was pale but not too pale. I touched his hand. "You're warm."

He glanced up at me. "Yes, *ma petite*; what of it?"

"You've slept an entire day. You should be cold to the touch until after you've fed."

He just looked at me with his drowning eyes.

"Shit," I said. I went for the bedroom. He didn't try to stop me. He didn't even try. It made me nervous. I was half-running by the time I hit the door.

All I could see was a pale outline on the bed. I turned on the switch by the door. The overhead light was glaring, and merciless.

Jason lay on his stomach, blond hair bright against the dark pillows. He was naked except for a pair of vibrant blue bikini briefs. I walked towards the bed, staring at his back, willing him to breathe. When I was almost at the bed I could see him breathe. Something tight in my chest loosened.

I had to kneel on the edge of the bed to reach him. I touched his shoulder. He moved under my hand. I rolled him onto his side, and he didn't try to help. He was totally passive. He stared up at me with heavy-lidded eyes. Two thin crimson lines flowed down his neck. Not a lot of blood, at least not spilled onto the sheets. I had no way of knowing how much he'd lost. How much Jean-Claude had taken.

Jason smiled at me. It was a slow, lazy smile.

"Are you alright?"

His hand slid around my waist as he rolled onto his back.

"I'll take that as a yes." I tried to back off the bed, but his arm was firm around me, holding me. He pulled me down to his chest. I pulled the Browning on the way down. He could have stopped me, but he didn't try.

I shoved the gun against his ribs. My other hand was pressed to his bare chest, trying to hold my face a little above his. He raised his face towards mine.

"I will pull this trigger."

He stopped with his face inches from mine. "I'll heal."

"Is one kiss worth getting a hole punched in your side?"

"I don't know," he said. "Everyone else seems to think so." His face moved towards me slowly, giving me plenty of time to decide.

"Jason, release her, now." Jean-Claude's voice filled the room with whispers like tiny echoes.

Jason let me go. I slid off the bed, the gun still naked in my hand.

"I need my wolf tonight, Anita. Try not to shoot him until after we've seen Serephina."

"Tell him to stop hitting on me," I said.

"Oh, I shall, *ma petite*, I shall."

Jason lay back against the pillows. He raised one knee, his hands lying across his stomach. He looked relaxed, lascivious, but his eyes stayed on Jean-Claude.

"You are almost the perfect pet, Jason, but do not provoke me."

"You never said she was off limits."

"I am saying it now," Jean-Claude said.

Jason sat up on the bed. "I'll be a perfect gentleman from now on."

"Yes," Jean-Claude said, "you will." He stood there in the doorway, still lovely to look at, but dangerous. You could feel it building in the room, whispering through his voice. "Leave us for a moment, *ma petite*."

"We don't have time for this," I said.

Jean-Claude looked at me. His eyes were still a solid midnight blue; the whites had drowned. "Are you protecting him?"

"I don't want him hurt because he got out of hand with me."

"Yet you would have shot him."

I shrugged. "I never said I was consistent, just serious."

Jean-Claude laughed. The abrupt change in mood made both Jason and me jump. His laughter was rich and thick as chocolate, as if you could pull it from the air and eat it.

I glanced at Jason. He was watching Jean-Claude the way a well-trained dog will watch its master, looking for clues to what its master wanted next.

"Get dressed, my wolf, and you, *ma petite*, you must change as well."

I was wearing black jeans and a royal blue polo shirt. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"We must make a show of it tonight, *ma petite*. I would not ask if it were not important."

"I am not wearing a dress tonight."

He smiled. "Of course not. Just something a little more stylish. If your young friend does not have anything suitable, I believe he and Jason are about the same size. I'm sure we could find something."

"You'll have to talk to Larry about that."

Jean-Claude looked at me for a heartbeat. "As you like, *ma petite*. Now, if you would leave Jason to dress? I will stay in here until you have chosen more appropriate attire."

I wanted to argue. I didn't like being told what to wear, or what not to wear. But I let it go. I'd been around vampires enough to know they admired the spectacular, or the dangerous. If Jean-Claude said we needed to make a show of it, maybe he was right. It wouldn't kill me to dress up a little. It might get us all killed to refuse. I just didn't know the rules in this situation. I suspected that there weren't any.

I hadn't packed with meeting a master vampire in mind, so my choices were sort of limited. I settled for a crimson blouse with a high collar and a spill

of lace down the front. There was even a little frilly cuff at each sleeve. It looked like a cross between a Victorian blouse and a business shirt. It would have looked very conservative if it hadn't been screaming vermillion red. I hated the idea of wearing it, because I knew Jean-Claude would like it. Except for the color, it looked like something he might wear.

I put the all-purpose black jacket over the blouse. With both guns, both knives, and a cross around my neck inside the blouse, I was ready to go.

"*Ma petite*, may we come out?"

"Sure."

He opened the door and took it all in with a glance. "You look splendid, *ma petite*. I appreciate the makeup."

"I look pale in crimson without it."

"Of course; do you have other shoes?"

"I only have the Nikes and high heels. I move better in the Nikes."

"The blouse was more than I hoped for; keep your jogging shoes. They are black, at least."

Jason walked out of the bedroom. He was wearing black leather pants tight enough that I knew he wasn't wearing the underwear anymore. The top was vaguely oriental with one of those upright collars and one black button, the kind where a loop of thread comes over the button. The sleeves were full, and the collar was a soft shining blue that matched his eyes to perfection. It was embroidered in yellow so dark it looked gold, and darker blue thread. The sleeves, collar, and edge of the fabric were embroidered black on black. When Jason moved, the shirt gaped just a little, enough to show glimpses of his bare stomach. Soft black boots rode up over his knees.

"Well, I know who your tailor is," I said. I was going to be woefully underdressed.

"If you would fetch Monsieur Kirkland. When he is dressed, we can go."

"Larry may not want to change."

"Then he won't. I will not force him."

I looked at him, not quite sure I believed him, but I got Larry. He agreed to go into the bedroom and see what other goodies were in the luggage, but he didn't promise to change.

He came out still wearing dark blue jeans and Nikes. He had changed his T-shirt for a silk dress shirt that was a rich, vibrant blue. It made his eyes look even bluer than usual. A black leather jacket that was just a touch big in the shoulders hid his shoulder holster. I guess it was an improvement over the oversized flannel he'd been wearing. The collar of the shirt was spread over the jacket so that it framed his face.

"You should see some of the stuff in there," Larry said. He shook his head as if he still couldn't believe it. "I wouldn't even know how to get into some of it."

"You look nice," I said.

"Thanks."

"Can we go now?" I asked.

"Yes, *ma petite*, we can go. It will be interesting to meet Serephina after two centuries."

"I know this is old home week for you, but let's remember why we're here," I said. "Xavier has Jeff Quinlan. Who knows what he's doing to him? I want him home safe. It's the second night. We have to get to him tonight, or find someone else who can."

Jean-Claude nodded. "Then let us be off, *ma petite*. Serephina awaits us." He sounded almost eager, like he was looking forward to seeing her. For the first time I wondered if he and Serephina had been lovers. I knew Jean-Claude wasn't a virgin. I mean, get real. But knowing he had lovers and meeting one were two different things. I realized with a start that it would bother me.

He smiled at me, almost as if he knew what I was thinking. The whites of his eyes had reappeared. It made him look almost human. Almost.

Chapter 23

Jean-Claude walked across the parking lot in his boots and jacket, looking like someone should be snapping his picture, or asking for an autograph. The rest of us followed like his entourage. Which was what we were, whether I liked it or not. But to save Jeff Quinlan I could do a little bootlicking. Even I will toady a little if it's in a good enough cause.

"You driving, or do I get directions to Serephina's house now?" I asked.

"I will tell you where to turn when it is time."

"You think I'm going to run to the cops with directions to her house?"

"No," he said. That was all he said.

I frowned at him, but we all got in the Jeep. Guess who got the front seat.

We drove out onto the main road, the Strip. The traffic was bumper-to-bumper. If traffic is bad, it can take a couple of hours to drive the four miles that make up the Strip. Jean-Claude had me turn on a small road. It looked like a driveway leading to yet another theater, but it turned out to be an access road. If you knew your way around the smaller roads, you could avoid most of the congestion.

You would never know from the main drag of Branson but just out of sight, over the next hill, is the real Ozarks. Mountains, forests, houses where people who don't make their living off tourists live. On the Strip it was all neon and artifice; within fifteen minutes we were surrounded by trees, on a road that wound through the Ozark Mountains.

Darkness closed around the Jeep. The only light was a spill of stars pressed against the blackness, and the tunnel of my own headlights.

"You seem to be looking forward to seeing Serephina, even with the coffin missing," I said.

Jean-Claude turned in his seat as far as the seat belt would allow. I'd insisted everybody wear seat belts, which amused the vampire. I guess it was silly to have a dead man buckle up, but hey, I was driving.

"I believe Serephina still thinks of me as the very young vampire she knew centuries ago. If she thought me a worthy opponent, she would have confronted me or my minions directly. She would not have simply stolen the coffin. She is overconfident."

"Speaking as one of your minions," Larry called from the back seat, "are you sure you're not the one who's overconfident?"

Jean-Claude glanced back at him. "Serephina was centuries old when I met her. The limit of a vampire's powers is well established after two or three centuries. I know her limits, Lawrence."

"Stop calling me Lawrence. The name's Larry."

Jean-Claude sighed. "You have trained him well."

"He came that way," I said.

"Pity."

Jean-Claude made this sound like a hostile family reunion, or is that an oxymoron? I hoped he was right, but one thing I've learned about vampires—they keep pulling new rabbits out of their cloaks. Big, fanged, carnivorous bunnies that'll eat your eyeballs if you're not paying attention.

"What's wolf-boy in the back going to do?"

"I do what I'm told," Jason said.

"Great," I said.

We drove in silence. Jean-Claude rarely sweats small talk, and I wasn't in the mood. We could all have a nice little visit, but out there somewhere Jeff Quinlan had woken to a second night in Xavier's tender care. Sort of ruined the mood for me.

"The turn is just ahead to your right, *ma petite*." Jean-Claude's voice made me jump. I had sunk into the silence and the dark hush of the highway.

I slowed the Jeep. Didn't want to miss the turnoff. A gravel road, like a hundred other gravel roads, spilled off the main road. There was nothing to make it stand out. Nothing special.

The road was narrow with trees growing so close on either side it was like driving through a tunnel. The naked branches of trees curved around us like interlocking pieces of a wall. The headlights slid over the nearly naked trees, bouncing when the Jeep eased over a pothole. Naked wooden fingers tapped the roof of the Jeep. It was damn near claustrophobic.

"Geez," Larry said. He had pressed his face to the dark glass as far as the seat belt would allow. "If I didn't know there was a house down this road, I'd turn back."

"That is the idea," Jean-Claude said. "Many of the older ones value their privacy above almost all else."

The headlights picked up a hole that stretched across the entire road. It looked like a gully wash where rainwater had eaten the road away over decades.

Larry leaned over the back of the seat, straining against his seatbelt.
"Where'd the road go?"

"The Jeep can make it," I said.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Pretty sure," I said.

Jean-Claude had settled back into the seat. He seemed totally relaxed, almost detached, like he was listening to music I couldn't hear, thinking thoughts that I never would understand.

Jason leaned forward, putting a hand on the back of my seat. "Why wouldn't she pave the road? She's been here almost a year."

I glanced back at Jason. It was interesting to find out that he knew more about Jean-Claude's business than I did.

"This is her moat," Jean-Claude said. "Her barrier against the curious. Many find our new status hard to accept and still closet themselves away."

The wheels slid over the edge. It was like driving into a crater. Miraculously, the Jeep crawled out the other side. If we'd been in a car, we'd have had to walk.

The road climbed upward for about a hundred yards, and suddenly on the right-hand side of the road was an opening. It didn't look big enough to drive the Jeep through, not without scratching the paint job to hell. The only thing that really told you it was a clearing was the moonlight pulsing against the darkness of the trees. That much moonlight meant something was there. Grass had grown over a scattering of gravel that might once have been a driveway.

"Is this it?" I asked, just to make sure.

"I believe so," Jean-Claude said.

I eased the Jeep into the trees and listened to branches slap the sides. I hoped Stirling's company owned the Jeep, and wasn't just renting. We crawled free of the trees with a last metallic *scritch*. An acre of open land spread out before us, silver-edged with moonlight. The grass was butchered short like someone had bush-hogged it last fall, and left it naked and unfinished through the winter. There was a neglected orchard behind the house. The land rose in a gentle slope up towards the foot of a mountain. Just beyond the bush-hogged grass was forest, thick and untouched.

A house sat in the middle of the gentle rise. The house was silver-grey in the moonlight. Curling flecks of paint clung here and there, like the last sad remnants of an accident victim's clothes. A large stone porch graced the front of the house, hid the door and windows in a well of shadow.

"Turn off the lights, *ma petite*."

I looked at that dark porch and didn't want to hit the lights. The moonlight should have penetrated those shadows.

"*Ma petite*, the lights."

I hit the lights. The moonlight bathed us like a wash of visible air. The porch stayed dark and still like a cup of ink. Jean-Claude undid his seat belt and slid out. The boys followed suit. I got out last.

Large, flat stones were set in the grass, forming a curving sidewalk to the foot of the steps that led up to the porch. There was a large picture window to

one side of the peeling door. The glass was jagged. Someone had nailed plywood behind the broken window to keep out the night air.

The smaller window on the other side of the door was intact, but so covered in grime it was blind. The shadows were viscous, and seemed thick enough to touch. It reminded me of the darkness that the sword had come swinging out of. But it wasn't as thick. I could see through this darkness. There was nothing there but shadows.

"What's with the shadows?" I asked.

"A parlor trick," Jean-Claude said. "Nothing more." He glided up the steps without a backward glance. If he was worried, it didn't show. Jason glided up the steps behind him. Larry and I just walked up. It was the best we could do. The shadows were colder than they should have been, and Larry shivered beside me. But there was no sense of power to it. As Jean-Claude had said, a parlor trick.

The screen door had been ripped off its hinges. It lay on the porch, torn and forgotten. Even with the protection the porch offered, the inner door was warped and peeling, exposed to too much weather. Leaves lay in piles at the edges of the porch railings where the wind had blown them.

"Are you sure this is it?" Larry asked.

"I am sure," Jean-Claude said.

I understood the question. If it hadn't been for the shadows, I'd have said the house was deserted. "The shadows would discourage any casual passersby," I said.

"Well, I wouldn't come trick-or-treating," Larry said.

Jean-Claude glanced back at us. "Our hostess comes."

The pitted, broken door opened. I had expected a haunted-house *screech* of rusty hinges but the door opened smoothly. A woman stood in the doorway. The room behind her was dark, her body silhouetted against the room and the night. But even in the dark I knew two things: she was a vampire, and she wasn't old enough to be Serephina.

The vampire was only a few inches taller than I was. She raised an unlit candle in one hand. The hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention, as a trickle of power slid through the room. The candle flared to life, leaving stars dancing across my night vision.

The vampire had brown hair, cut so short the hair on either side of her head had been shaved. Silver stud earrings glittered up the curve of her ears. One long earring dangled from her left ear. It was a green enamel leaf on a silver chain. She wore a red leather dress that was so tight on top, it was how I'd known in the dark she was a girl. The skirt of the dress fell to her ankles, loose once you got past the hips. A leather formal; wow.

She grinned at us, flashing fangs. "I'm Ivy." Her voice had an edge of laughter to it, but unlike Jean-Claude's laugh that always felt vaguely sexual, or fattening, hers felt sharp as broken glass, meant to hurt, terrify, not titillate.

"Enter our dwelling, and be welcome." The words sounded too formal, like a rehearsed speech, or an incantation that you don't understand.

"Thank you, Ivy, for your most generous invitation," Jean-Claude said. He was suddenly holding her hand. I hadn't seen him reach for it. I hadn't seen him move. It was like I'd missed a frame of the film. From the look on Ivy's face, so had she. She looked pissed.

Jean-Claude raised her hand, very slowly, towards his lips. He never took his eyes off her. The way you bow to someone on the dojo mat, because if you look away they may spill you on your ass.

A line of wax trickled down the side of the white candle. She was holding it in her bare fist, no candle holder. Jean-Claude slowly raised her hand and laid his lips on the back of it. The wax dripped faster than it should have.

He released her hand in time for her to save herself, but she stood there and let the line of hot wax drip down her skin. Only the faintest flicker in her eyes showed that it hurt. She left the wax to harden on her hand. A faint redness spread from the line of wax. She ignored it.

No more wax dripped from the candle. Usually when a candle runs that soon, it keeps running. The wax made a little golden pool at the top of the candle, like a drop of water under tension.

I glanced from one vampire to the other and shook my head. Does the term "childish" mean anything to you? I didn't say it out loud, though. For all I knew, this was some kind of ancient vampire ritual. Though I doubted it pretty damn sincerely.

"Aren't your companions going to come inside?" Ivy stepped aside with a swish of leather skirts, holding the candle high, lighting our way.

Jean-Claude stepped to the other side of the door so we would have to walk between the two vampires to get into the house. I trusted Jean-Claude not to munch on me. I even trusted him to keep Ivy from munching on me. But I didn't like how much fun Jean-Claude was having. Made me nervous. I've never been around vampires that were having a good time when it didn't get ugly.

Jason walked between them, into the house. Larry glanced at me. I shrugged and walked inside. He followed at my heels, trusting that if I went inside it would be okay. It probably would be. Probably.

Chapter 24

The door closed behind us, and I don't think anybody closed it, not with hands anyway. Safe or not, these little displays of power were getting on my nerves.

The air in the room was utterly still, stale. It smelled musty, dry, with an undertaste of mildew. You knew even with your eyes closed that these rooms had been empty for a very long time. There was an open archway to the left

that led into a smaller room. I could see a bed, complete with bedspread and pillows, so covered in dust it looked grey. A vanity sat in one corner with its mirror reflecting the empty room.

There was no furniture left in the living room. The wooden floor was dust-coated. The hem of Ivy's dress trailed in the thick dust as she moved towards a door in the far wall. A thin line of light showed under that door. Golden and thicker than electricity. I was betting on more candles.

The door opened before Ivy reached it. A rich wave of light spilled out, brighter than it should have been because we'd been in the dark so long. A male vamp stood framed in the light. He was short, slender, with a face too young to be handsome, more pretty. He was so newly dead that his skin still held the tan he'd picked up at the beach, or lake, or some other sun-soaked place. He looked frightfully young to be dead. He had to be eighteen, anything younger and it was illegal, but he still looked delicate and half-finished. Jailbait forever.

"I'm Bruce." He seemed vaguely embarrassed. Maybe it was the clothes. He was dressed in a pale grey tux complete with tails, and a charcoal grey strip down the outside leg of the pants. His gloves were white and matched what could be seen of his shirt. His vest was a silky grey. His bow tie and cummerbund were a red that matched Ivy's dress. They looked like they were going to the prom.

Two man-sized candelabra stood on either side of the door, filling the room with moving, golden light. The room beyond was twice the size of the living room. and had probably been the kitchen once upon a time. But unlike the front rooms. there'd been some redecorating.

A Persian carpet was spread across the floor. The colors were so bright it looked like stained glass. Wall hangings covered the two longest walls. On one wall a unicorn fled from a pack of hounds. The other hanging was a battle scene so dimmed with age that parts of the figures had vanished into the cloth. Bright silken drapes covered the far end of the room, hung from the ceiling with heavy cords. A door opened to the left of the drapes.

Ivy sat the candle she'd been holding in an empty sconce on the candelabra. She moved in front of Jean-Claude. She had to tilt her head up to look him in the eyes. "You are beautiful." She ran her fingers along the edge of his jacket. "I thought they'd lied. That nobody could be that beautiful." She fingered the mother-of-pearl buttons, starting at his neck and working down. Jean-Claude moved her hand when she reached the last button before the shirt disappeared into his pants.

Ivy seemed to find that amusing. She stood on tiptoe, leaning her hands and forearms on his chest. Her mouth was tilted towards him, kissable. "Do you fuck as good as you look? They said you did. But you're sooo pretty. Nobody could be that good a lay."

Jean-Claude laid his fingers on either side of her face, cradling her jawline. He smiled at her.

Her red lips curved into a smile. She pressed against him, letting her full weight rest against his body.

Jean-Claude kept his light touch on her face as if she wasn't leaning full out against him.

Her smile began to fade, slipping from her face like the sun sinking below the earth. She slid slowly down to stand flat-footed in front of him. Her face was blank and empty in the cradle of his hands.

Bruce the vampire jerked her back by one arm. Ivy stumbled and would have fallen if he hadn't caught her. She looked around bewildered, as if she expected to be elsewhere.

Jean-Claude wasn't smiling now. "It has been a long time since I was anyone's meat that wanted me. A very long time."

Ivy stood half-collapsed in Bruce's arms. Her face was harsh with fear. She pushed away from Bruce to stand straight and alone. She tugged at the red dress as if to settle it into place. The fear was mostly gone from her face; just a certain tightness remained around the eyes.

"How did you do that?"

"Centuries of practice, little one."

Anger made her eyes dark. "You aren't supposed to be able to capture another vampire with your gaze."

"You aren't?" he asked, his voice lilting with amazement.

"Don't you laugh at me."

I had some sympathy for her frustration. Jean-Claude can be such a pain in the ass when he wants to be.

"You were told to lead us somewhere, children; do so."

Ivy stood in front of him, hands balled into fists. Her anger spilled into her eyes, and the brown irises bled onto the whites of her eyes until she looked blind. Her power breathed through the room, creeping along the skin, raising the tiny hairs on my body as if a finger had been run just above them.

My hand started for the Browning. Old habits.

"No, Anita, that is not necessary," Jean-Claude said. "This little one cannot hurt me. She shows her fangs, but unless she wishes to die on this lovely carpet she had best remember who and what I am."

"I am the Master of the City!" His voice thundered through the house, echoing in the room until the air was so thick with echoes that it was like breathing his words.

When the sound died, I was shaking. Ivy had pulled herself together. She still looked angry, but her eyes had bled back to normal.

Bruce had laid a hand on her shoulder, as if he wasn't sure she would listen to reason. She shook off his hand and motioned gracefully towards the open door.

"We are to take you downstairs. Others await you there."

Jean-Claude gave a low theatrical bow, never taking his eyes from her. "After you, my sweet. A lady should always walk before a gentleman, never behind."

She smiled, suddenly pleased with herself again. "Then your human lady can walk beside me."

"I don't think so," I said.

She turned innocent brown eyes to me. "Are you not a lady, then?" She stalked towards me with an exaggerated sway of her hips. "Did you bring us someone who is not a lady, Jean-Claude?"

I heard him sigh. "Anita is a lady. Walk beside her, *ma petite*, but carefully."

"What does it matter what these assholes think of me?"

"If you are not a lady, then you are a whore. You do not want to know what would happen to a human whore within these walls." He seemed tired as he said it, as if he'd been there, done that, and hadn't had a good time.

Ivy smiled at me, giving me a big dose of brown eyes. I met her gaze and smiled.

She frowned. "You are human. You can't meet my gaze, not like that."

"Surprise, surprise," I said.

"Shall we go?" Jean-Claude said.

Ivy frowned again, but she stepped into that open door, and down a step or two, one hand on her dress to keep the hem from tripping her feet. She turned and looked back at me. "Are you coming?"

I asked Jean-Claude, "How careful do I need to be?"

Larry and Jason came to stand beside me.

"Defend yourself if they offer violence first. But do not shed the first blood, or strike the first blow. Defend, but do not attack, *ma petite*. We are playing games tonight, unless you make it more; the stakes are not that high."

I scowled at him. "I don't like this."

He smiled. "I know, but bear with us, *ma petite*. Remember the human you wish to save, and control that wonderful temper of yours."

"Well, human?" Ivy said. She was waiting for me on the steps. She looked like an impatient child, petulant.

"I'm coming," I said. I did not run to catch up with the waiting vampire. I walked at a normal pace, though the weight of her gaze made my skin itch. I stopped at the head of the stairs and peered downward. Cool, damp air pushed against my face. The smell was thick, enclosed, and mildewed. You knew there would be no windows, and somewhere water was eating the walls. A basement. I hated basements.

I took a deep breath of the fetid air and walked down the steps. They were the widest stairs I'd ever seen in a basement. The wood felt new and raw, like they hadn't taken time to stain or sand it. There was enough room for the two of us to share a step. I didn't want to share a step. Maybe she wasn't a threat to Jean-Claude, but I had no illusions about what she could do to me. She was a baby master, not full grown yet, but the power was there bubbling under the surface, crawling along my skin. I stopped a step above her, waiting for her to go down.

Ivy smiled. She could smell my fear. "If we are both ladies, then we should walk together. Come, Anita." She held out a hand to me. "Let us go down together."

I didn't want to be that close to her. If she tried to jump me, there wouldn't be time to do much. I might get a weapon out in time, I might not. It irritated

me that I wasn't supposed to show a weapon first. And scared me. One of the things that's kept me alive is shooting first and asking questions later. Doing it the other way around was no way to stay alive.

"Is Jean-Claude's human servant afraid of me?" She stood there framed against the darkness beyond, smiling. The basement was like a great black pit behind her.

But she couldn't sense vampire marks, or she'd have known I wasn't his servant. She wasn't as hot as she thought she was. I hoped.

I ignored the outstretched hand, but walked down those two steps. My shoulder brushed her bare skin, and it felt like worms were crawling down my arm. I kept walking down the steps into the dark beyond, left hand in a death grip on the railing. I heard her high heels clattering down the steps to catch up with me. I could feel her irritation like heat rising from her skin. I heard the menfolk following us, but didn't look behind to check. We were playing chicken tonight. It was one of my best games.

We went down the steps together like horses pulling a carriage, my left hand on the railing, her hands lifting her dress. I kept up a pace that made gliding effortlessly impossible, unless she could levitate. She couldn't.

She grabbed my right arm and whirled me around to face her. I couldn't go for a gun. Because I was wearing wrist sheaths, I couldn't even go for a knife. I stood there nearly face to face with an angry vampire and couldn't reach a weapon. All that could save me was her not killing me. Trusting my life to Ivy's beneficence seemed like a bad bet.

Her anger spilled along my skin. Heat flowed down her body. I could feel her hand, hot, even through the leather jacket. I didn't try to pull away; things that can bench-press Toyotas don't let go. Her touch didn't burn, because it wasn't that kind of heat, but it was hard to convince my body that it wouldn't hurt eventually. Years of warnings, don't touch, it's hot. Heat flared along my body like I was standing next to a fire. If she hadn't been doing it unintentionally, it would have been impressive. Hell, it was still impressive. Give her a few centuries and she'd be scary as hell, as if she wasn't already.

I could still meet her eyes, drowning deep and glowing with their own light. That was going to do me a hell of a lot of good when she ripped my throat out.

"If you hurt her, Ivy, our truce is over." Jean-Claude glided down the steps to stand just above us. "You do not want the truce to be over, Ivy." He ran his fingertip along the edge of her jaw.

I felt the jolt of power jump from him, to her, to me. I gasped, but she let me go. My arm was numb at my side like it'd gone to sleep. I couldn't have held a gun. I wanted to ask what the hell he'd done, but didn't. As long as I got the use of my arm back, we could argue about it later.

Bruce pushed between us, hovering over Ivy like a worried boyfriend. Watching his face, I realized that was accurate. I was betting she'd brought him over.

Ivy pushed him away so hard that he went tumbling backwards down the stairs, lost in the thicker darkness. Everything seemed to be working on her just fine. I could barely feel my fingertips.

Heat rushed over me like a scalding wind, and swept outward into the dark. Torches flared to life in sconces along the walls with a *whoosh* and a shower of sparks. A large kerosene lamp suspended from the ceiling filled with fire. Its glass chimney exploded in a shower of glass, its flame burning naked on the wick.

"Serephina will make you clean up your mess," Jean-Claude said. He made it sound like she'd spilled her milk.

Ivy walked down the rest of the steps in a hip-swinging glide. "Serephina will not care. Broken glass and flame have so many uses." I didn't like the way she phrased that.

The basement was black. Black walls, black floors, black ceiling. It was like being in a great dark box. Chains hung from the walls, some with what looked like fur on the cuffs. Straps dangled from the ceiling like obscene decorations. There were . . . devices placed throughout the room. I recognized some of them. A rack, an iron maiden, but most of it was like looking at bondage paraphernalia. You were pretty sure what the point was, but not how it worked. There were always more holes than I could figure out what to do with, and nothing ever seemed to come with instructions.

There was a drain in the floor, and a thin trickle of water ran down it. But I was betting that the drain wasn't there just for water.

Larry moved down the steps to stand beside me. "Are those what I think they are?"

"Yeah, they're torture devices." I forced my hand to make a fist, and another one. The feeling was coming back.

"I thought they weren't going to harm us," he said.

"I think it's supposed to scare us."

"It's working," he said.

I didn't like the decor much either, but I could feel my hand. I could have held a gun if I had to.

A door that I hadn't even seen opened to the left. A secret panel. A vampire came through the door. He had to bend nearly double to make it through the door frame. He unfolded, impossibly tall and thin, cadaverous. He had not fed tonight, and was wasting no power on looking pretty. His skin was the color of old parchment and clung to the bones of his face like a thin film barely covering his skull. His eyes were sunken and dull in his head, the dead blue of fish eyes. His sickly hands were long and bony with impossibly long fingers, like white spiders sticking from the sleeves of his black coat.

He stalked into the room with the edges of his black coat sweeping behind him like a cloak. He was dressed entirely in black; only his skin and the short cut white hair on his head betrayed him. As he moved through the black room, it looked like his head and hands were floating on their own.

I shook my head to clear the image. When I looked back, he seemed a touch more normal. "He's using his powers to make himself look frightening," I said.

"Yes, *ma petite*, he is." There was something in his voice that made me turn and look at him. His face was its usual lovely mask-but in his eyes, for just a second, I saw fear.

"What's going on, Jean-Claude?"

"The rules have not changed. Do not draw a weapon. Do not strike the first blow. They cannot harm us unless we break these rules."

"Why are you suddenly scared?"

"That is not Serephina," he said. His voice was very bland when he said it.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He threw back his head and laughed. The sound reverberated through the room, echoing and outwardly joyous. But I could taste it on the back of my tongue, and it was bitter. "It means, *ma petite*, that I am a fool."

Chapter 25

Jean-Claude's laughter faded away in bits and pieces, like the sound was clinging to the walls. "Where is Serephina?" he asked.

Ivy and Bruce walked out of the room. I didn't know where they were going, but it had to be better than this. How many torture rooms could a house this size have? Don't answer that.

The tall vampire looked at us with his dead-fish eyes. There was no pull, nothing; it was like looking into the eyes of a corpse.

His voice, when it came, was almost shocking. It was rich and deep, resonant, but not with vampiric powers. It was the voice of an actor, or an opera singer. I watched it come out of the thin, lipless mouth and it still looked like a parlor trick, like the mouth should move out of sync with the words, but they didn't.

"You must pass through me before she will see you."

"You surprise me, Janos." Jean-Claude glided down the steps. I guess we were going down. Pity. "You are more powerful than Serephina. How is it you do her bidding?"

"When you have seen her, you will understand. Now come, all of you, join us. The night is young, and I want to see you all naked and bleeding before dawn."

"Who is this guy?" I asked. I could use my hand again; might as well smart off.

Jean-Claude stopped on the last step. Jason moved up, one step behind him. Larry and I stayed a little behind that. I don't think either of us was too eager to go down.

The vampire turned his dead eyes on me. "I am Janos."

"Dandy, but the rules say you can't bleed us, or anything else. Or did I miss something?"

"You miss very little, *ma petite*," Jean-Claude said.

"You will not be harmed against your will," Janos said. "You must all consent for any harm to befall you."

"Then we're safe," I said.

He smiled, the skin of his face stretching like paper. I half-expected bone to break through, but it didn't. The smile was nicely hideous.

"We shall see."

Jean-Claude took that last step, and moved farther into the room. Jason followed, and after a moment's hesitation so did I. Larry followed me like a trooper.

"This room is your idea, Janos," Jean-Claude said.

"I do nothing without my master's consent."

"She cannot be your master, Janos. She is not powerful enough."

"Yet, here I am, Jean-Claude. Here I am."

Jean-Claude walked around the dark wood of the rack, trailing a pale hand over it. "Serephina was never much for torture. She was many things, but not sadistic." Jean-Claude came to stand in front of Janos. "I think you are master here and she is your stalking horse. She is known as master so all the challenges come her way. When she dies, you will find another puppet.

"I promise you, Jean-Claude, she is my master. Think of this room as my reward for being a faithful servant." He looked around the room with a proprietary smile, like a storekeeper admiring well-stocked shelves.

"What do you plan for us in this room of yours?"

"But wait a few moments, my impatient boy, and all will be revealed."

It was odd to have someone call Jean-Claude "boy," as if he were a much younger cousin that Janos had watched grow up. Had Janos known him when he was a little vampire? Freshly dead?

A woman's voice: "Where are you taking me? You're hurting me." Ivy and Bruce dragged a young woman through the side door. Literally dragged her. She had let her legs collapse, trying to use them like a dog does when you try to take it to the vet. But she only had two legs and a vampire on each arm. She wasn't having much luck slowing them down.

She had straight blonde hair that barely touched the tops of her shoulders. Her eyes were large and blue, and the makeup she'd started the night with was smeared from crying.

Ivy seemed to be having a good time. Bruce had very wide eyes. He was afraid of Janos. Hard not to be, I guess.

The girl stared wordlessly at Janos for a second, then screamed. Ivy cuffed her absently like you'd swat a barking dog. The girl whimpered and fell silent, staring at the floor, fresh tears trailing down her cheeks.

There was only Janos and the two youngsters in the room with us. I was betting we could take them. Two more vampires came in, but they didn't drag in the next girl. She walked in, eyes glittering with anger, back very straight, hands in fists at her sides. She was short, a little heavy, but not quite fat, as if a good burst of growth would take care of the weight. Her hair was a nondescript brown, glasses framed small brown eyes, freckles dusted her face. The personality that radiated from that face was not nondescript. I liked her instantly.

"Oh, Lisa," she said, "get up." She sounded embarrassed as well as angry. The blonde girl, Lisa, just cried harder.

The two vamps that were guarding the second girl were not young. They were both tall, around six feet, dressed in black leather, one with her long yellow hair in a braid down her back, the other with black hair falling free around her face. Their bare arms were muscled and firm. They looked like female bodyguards from some bad spy movie.

The power that radiated from the two of them was not a B movie effect. It crept through the room like a current of water, thick and cool. When the line of power poured over my body it took my breath away. The power crawled into my bones and made them ache. Larry gasped behind me.

I glanced at him just to make sure he was gasping for the same reason I was. No new monsters behind us, just the power of the two new vamps.

"What are you guys doing, running a halfway house for all vampires over five hundred years?" I asked.

Everyone turned towards me. The two female vamps smiled, most unpleasantly. They looked at me like I was a piece of candy and they wondered what sort of center I had. Soft and goey, or hard with a nut in the middle? I'd had men undress me with their eyes, but I'd never had anything trying to picture what I'd look like with my skin off. Yikes.

"Do you have something to add?" Janos asked.

"You can't just drag a couple of underage girls in here and expect us to do nothing."

"On the contrary, Anita, we expect you to do many things."

I didn't like the phrasing of that. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"First, the young women aren't underage, are you, girls?"

The second girl just glared at him. Lisa shook her head, still staring at the floor.

"Tell her your ages," Janos said.

Neither of them answered. Ivy yanked hard enough to make the blonde girl cry out.

"Eighteen. I'm eighteen." She collapsed on the floor in a sobbing heap, and the vampires let go of her so she could do it.

One of the female vamps said, "Your age, now." Her voice was like quiet thunder, a warning of the coming storm.

The second girl's eyes widened behind her glasses. "I'm nineteen." There was fear now peeking out from behind her anger.

"Fine; they're over eighteen, but an unwilling human is still an unwilling human, regardless of age," I said.

"Would you play policeman here, Anita?" Janos asked. He sounded amused.

"I won't just stand here and watch you hurt them."

"You have a high opinion of yourself, Anita. Confident. I like that. Always so much more entertaining to break someone strong. The weaklings fold and cry and snivel, but the brave ones, they almost demand that you hurt them." He stalked towards me, reaching out one white spider-hand. "Do you want me to hurt you?"

I remembered Jean-Claude's warning not to use weapons, but fuck it, I was going for the Browning.

Jean-Claude was just suddenly there, holding Janos's wrist. Janos seemed impressed. Truthfully, so was I. I hadn't seen him move, and apparently neither had Janos. A nifty trick, that.

I let my hand relax away from the gun, though I was pretty sure that drawing it would make me feel better. But the purpose of tonight's exercise was not to make me feel better, it was to stay alive.

"No harm to any of us; that was the promise," Jean-Claude said.

Janos drew his wrist from Jean-Claude's grasp slowly, almost lingeringly, as if he enjoyed it. "Once Serephina's promise is given, she keeps it."

"Then why are the young women here?"

"Those two"—he motioned to Larry and me—"would truly not stand by and watch harm come to strangers?" He sounded surprised, but not unhappy about it.

"Sadly, yes," Jean-Claude said.

"And if they join the fray, you will come in to protect her?" Janos asked.

"If I must."

Janos smiled, and I could hear his skin creak with the strain of holding in his bones. "Splendid."

I saw a tremor run through Jean-Claude's back, as if he had been caught off guard. I was just plain confused.

"The two young women came willingly into our house. They knew what we were, and agreed to help us entertain guests."

I glanced at the second girl. "Is that true?"

One of her vampire guards touched her shoulder, lightly, but it was enough. "We came willingly, but we didn't know . . ." The vampire's hand squeezed. The girl's face crumbled in pain but she made no sound.

"They came of their own free will, and they are of the age of consent," Janos said.

"So what happens now?" I asked.

"Ivy, chain that one over there." He pointed as he said it to some fur-lined manacles to the left of the door. Ivy and Bruce picked up the girl, pulled her to her feet, and led her stumbling to the wall.

"Her back facing the room, please."

I stepped next to Jean-Claude and whispered, though I knew within reason they'd hear, "I don't like this."

"Nor I, *ma petite*."

"Can we stop it without breaking the truce?"

"Not unless they offer harm to us directly, no."

"What happens if I break the truce?"

"They will try to kill us, most likely."

There were five vampires in the room, three of them older than Jean-Claude. We would die. Dammit.

The blonde girl sobbed and struggled, pulling at her arms as the vampires chained her to the wall. She screamed and pulled so violently that without the fur lining she'd have bloodied her wrists.

A woman stepped into the room from the side door. She was tall, taller than Jean-Claude. Her skin was the color of coffee with two creams. Her dark hair fell in long cornrows to her waist. She was dressed in a black, patent leather body suit. It left very little to the imagination. She strode hard on her heels, a very human walk. But she wasn't human.

"Kissa," Jean-Claude said. "You are still with Serephina." He sounded surprised.

"Not all of us have your luck." Her voice was thick like honey. There was a smell like spices in the air, and I wasn't sure if it was her perfume or illusion.

Her high-boned face was empty of makeup and still she was beautiful—though I wondered what she'd look like if she weren't clouding my mind. Because surely no human could have radiated the raw sexuality that clung to Kissa like a touchable cloud.

"I am sorry you are here, Kissa."

She smiled. "Don't pity me, Jean-Claude. Serephina has promised you to me, before Janos breaks that beautiful body of yours."

Six vampires, four of them older than Jean-Claude. The odds were not going in our favor.

"Chain the other girl there." Janos motioned to a matching set of manacles to the right of the door.

The girl shook her head. "No way." She just refused to go, and she struggled better than the blonde. She threw her body on the ground and used every inch of it, not to fight, just not to go.

Two vampires several centuries old, powerful enough to make my teeth hurt, and they had to pick her up from both ends and carry her to the wall. She'd finally started to scream, one loud, ragged, rage-filled sound after another. The dark-haired vamp pinned her to the wall, and the other one chained her.

"I can't just watch this," Larry said. He was standing very close to me; maybe he didn't know the vampires would hear his whispers.

It didn't really matter. "Neither can I."

We were going to get ourselves killed; might as well take as many of them with us as we could.

Jean-Claude turned around, as if he could smell us going for our guns. "*Ma petite*, Monsieur Kirkland, do not go for your weapons. They are treading legalities. The women have come to help entertain. They will not kill them."

"You're sure of that?" I asked.

He frowned. "I am sure of nothing anymore, but I believe that they will keep their word. The women are frightened and a little bruised, but they are not harmed."

"This isn't harm?" Larry asked. He looked outraged, and I couldn't blame him.

I answered him. "Vampires have a very unique sense of what's harmful, don't they, Jean-Claude?"

He met my gaze. "I see accusation in your eyes, but remember this, *ma petite*, you asked me to bring you here. So do not blame this particular problem on me."

"Is our entertainment so boring?" Janos asked.

"We were discussing whether to kill you all now, or later," I said, my voice very matter-of-fact.

Janos gave a low chuckle. "Please do break the truce, Anita. I would love to have an excuse to get you on one of my novelties. I think you would take a long time to break. Then again, it is sometimes the braggarts who break first."

"I don't brag, Janos. I tell the truth."

"She believes what she says," Kissa said.

"Yes, she has a disturbing hint of truth to her," Janos said. "Most tasty."

The blonde, Lisa, had stopped struggling against the chains. She sagged in them, nearly incoherent with crying. The other girl, now that she was chained, stood very still, but a fine trembling had started in her arms and hands. She balled her hands into fists, but could not stop the trembling.

"The women came for a little adventure. They are certainly getting their money's worth," Janos said.

The two female vamps opened panels in the black walls. They each took out a long coil of whip. Neither of the girls could see. I was glad.

I couldn't stand and watch, I couldn't. It would kill something inside me to just stand and watch, even if it meant I died. I'd at least go down fighting, and I'd take some of them with me. Better than nothing. But before we all committed suicide, I'd try to talk. "If you're not trying to goad us into breaking the truce, then what the hell do you want?"

"Want?" Janos said. "Want? Why, many things, Anita."

I was beginning to hate the way he said my name, sort of half-amused, and intimate, like we were friends, or close enemies.

"What do you want, Janos?"

"Shouldn't you be negotiating for your people?" he asked Jean-Claude.

"Anita does well enough on her own," Jean-Claude said.

Janos gave another rictus smile. "Very well. What do we want?"

The vampires went to the girls. They held up the whips so the two girls could see them.

"What is that?" the blonde asked. "What is that?" Her voice was high and bubbly with fear.

"It's a whip," the second girl said. Firm and clipped, her voice did not betray her the way her trembling body did.

The two vampires backed away, just enough for good whipping distance, I guess.

"What the bloody hell do you want?" I asked.

"Are you familiar with the term 'whipping boy'?" Janos asked.

"It was a person used by royalty to be beaten in the place of the royal heir."

"Very good; so few young people have a sense of history."

"What does the history lesson have to do with anything?"

"The girls are whipping boys for your two young men," Janos said.

The two vampires snaked the whips along the floor, and cracked them nearly in unison, but neither whip touched the girls. The second girl screamed, a short, clipped sound, when the whip whistled into the wall next to her. The blonde just sank against the wall, sobbing, "Please, please, please," over and over in a ragged voice.

"Don't hurt them," Larry said. "Please."

"Would you take her place?" Janos asked.

I finally understood where we were heading. "You can't hurt us without our cooperation. You treacherous son of a bitch."

He smiled. "Answer me, lad. Would you take her place?"

Larry nodded.

I grabbed his arm. "No."

"Surely it is his choice," Janos said.

"Let go of my arm, Anita."

I stared at his eyes, searching to see if he understood what he was doing. "You don't know what a whip will do to human flesh. You don't know what you're offering."

"We can remedy that," Janos said. The vampires ripped the backs of the girls' blouses with a harsh, quick tearing.

The blonde screamed.

"We can't just watch," Larry said.

He was right; whether I liked it or not, he was right.

"I've seen what a whip can do," Jason said suddenly. "Don't hurt them."

I stared at him. "You don't strike me as the self-sacrificing kind."

He shrugged. "We all have our moments."

"Would it make this an easier choice if I swore that if your young man takes the girl's place we will not cripple him?"

"How about kill him?" I said. "You can die of shock from a whipping."

"No killing, no crippling. We simply want our pound of flesh, and a quart of blood."

Something must have shown on our faces, because he laughed. "Figuratively speaking, of course. You will wear scars until you die, but no greater harm."

"This is ridiculous," I said. "We aren't going to do this."

"If we pull our guns, can we take them?" Larry asked.

I looked away from his earnest eyes. He touched my arm. "Anita?"

"We can take some of them with us," I said.

"But we'll still be dead, and once we're dead who'll help the girls?"

I shook my head. "There's got to be a better way."

Larry looked at Jean-Claude. "Will he keep his word? Will they not kill me?"

"Janos's word has always been reliable, or at least it was a couple of centuries ago."

"Can we trust them?" Jason asked.

"No," I said.

"Yes," Jean-Claude said.

I glared at him.

"I know you would rather shoot it out, but you would only succeed in getting us all killed. Or perhaps some of us made into vampires."

Larry touched my shoulders. He made me look at him. "It's alright."

"It's not alright," I said.

"Fine, but it's the best we can do right now."

"Don't do this."

"I don't have a choice," he said. "Besides, I'm a big boy, remember? I can take care of myself."

I hugged him. I didn't know what else to do.

"I'll be alright," he whispered.

I just nodded. I didn't trust my voice, and I try never to lie to my friends. He would not be alright. I knew it. He knew it. We all knew it.

Jason walked away from us towards the vampires. "Oh, no, my good shapeshifter, we don't want you chained to a wall."

"But you said . . ."

"I said you could save the girls, but not like that. Let the human take his lashes. All you must agree to is satisfying the desires of my two helpers, Bettina and Pallas."

Jason stared at the two vampires. They'd turned to face us. I suddenly tried to see them from the viewpoint of a twenty-year-old male. They were chesty, slim waisted; if Pallas's face was a little too witchy-looking for my taste, and Bettina's eyes too small, that was just me. Neither of them was pretty, or even beautiful; they were handsome in the way that some tall, leggy women are. Handsome in a good way, if they had been human.

Jason frowned. "It seems I'm getting the better deal here."

"Would it make any difference if I said you had to do it here in this room, on the floor, in front of everyone?" Janos asked.

Jason thought about that for a minute. "If I say no, does the girl get whipped?"

Janos nodded.

"Then I agree," he said, but his voice was soft and uncertain. Being lascivious in private was one thing; doing it in public was different.

"Come then, shapeshifter, let the show begin." Janos made a sweeping motion with his white hands.

Jason glanced back at Jean-Claude like a kid on the first day of school wondering if the bullies were really going to hurt him. Jean-Claude gave no comfort. His face was as still and unreadable as a painting. He gave a small nod that could have meant anything from "It will be alright" to "Just do it."

I watched Jason's shoulders rise with a deep breath, and heard him blow it out like a runner before a race. Why is it that most things you might willingly do under other circumstances become distasteful when you have no choice?

"Have you ever been with one of us?" Janos asked.

Jason shook his head.

Janos put a long-fingered hand on Jason's shoulder. Jason didn't seem to enjoy that. Couldn't blame him. "There are many pleasures that await you, my young shapeshifter. Things that no human or wereanimal can give to you. Sensations that only the dead can offer."

The two female vampires had stepped to the far end of the room in a clear space on the black floor. The whips lay coiled at the feet of the two girls, as if they were a reminder of what would happen if anyone chickened out.

If Jason wanted to fuck a few vampires, that was fine with me. Besides, he wasn't mine to protect. But the sex wasn't going to last forever. I couldn't let them have Larry. I couldn't stand by and watch him be tortured. I just couldn't. But if I pulled down the room, then even if we got out of the basement—highly doubtful all on its own—we'd have every vamp in the place after our ass. There would be more; there were always more. But what had Jean-Claude said? If they broke the truce first, we could draw weapons. It had possibilities.

The one with long blonde hair had undone her braid. She shook out her hair like it was a thick curtain of yellow waves. It hid her face for a moment, and she seemed softer, more human. Maybe it was illusion. Whatever, Jason touched that thick hair, wadded his hands into it, then slid his hands around her waist. If he was going to have to do it, it looked like he was going to have fun while he did. Nice to see someone who enjoys his work.

The dark-haired vamp came in from behind, pressing her leather-clad body against him. Jason was short enough that his face was about breast level for both of them. He buried his face in the blonde's chest. She unlaced the front of her leather vest, peeling it back so he could suck her breasts.

I turned away. I was never much for voyeurism. Had an embarrassing tendency to blush. Ivy and Bruce moved along the wall to stand near the corner next to the threesome. Bruce was fascinated and embarrassed, but he kept looking. There was no embarrassment on Ivy's face. She moved along the wall, her back pressed to it, hands feeling their way along. Her red lipsticked mouth was partially open. She slid down the wall, the red dress bunching around her thighs as she went to all fours. Watching them move along the wall brought my gaze back to the entertainment.

Jason's shirt was gone. Wearing nothing but his leather pants and his black boots, he matched the two vampires. He was on his knees, his back arched so he was cradled against the brunette behind him. She smoothed her hands down

his naked chest. He turned, giving her his lips. The kiss was long and deep, and full of more probing than anybody but your doctor should be doing.

The blonde was sitting with her legs wide open in front of them, undoing Jason's pants. She'd already done something to her leather pants so that the crotch was open. She was a natural blonde. Why was I surprised?

Ivy stretched out a hand to pull at the other vampire's long yellow hair.

"Ivy," Janos said, "you were not invited."

She pulled her hand back but didn't back away. She was as close to the action as she could get and not be part of it. Bruce was still pinned to the wall, open-mouthed and a little sweaty, but he didn't seem to want to come closer.

Janos stood very calmly watching. He had a tight grin on his face, and for the first time there was some light in those dead-fish eyes. He was enjoying himself.

Jean-Claude was half-leaning, half-sitting against a metal frame that held the rough outline of a body. He was watching the show, but his face was still unreadable, a beautiful mask.

He saw me looking at him, but there was no change in his eyes. He was as closed and solitary as if he were standing in an empty room. He wasn't breathing that I could see. Did he have a heartbeat when he held himself so still? Or did everything stop?

Kissa stood by the door that we hadn't been through. She had her arms crossed over her stomach. For someone that had wanted to jump Jean-Claude's bones so badly, she didn't seem to like the show much. Or maybe she was the guard to keep Larry and me from running screaming from the room.

Larry had backed as far away from the action as he could get. He was pressed up against the wall, trying to find something to look at, but his eyes kept being drawn back to the other end of the room. It was like trying not to watch a train wreck. You didn't want to see it happen, but if it was going to happen you didn't quite want to look away either. When would you ever get the chance to see it again? A ménage à trois made up of two vampires and a werewolf couldn't be that common a sight for Larry. It wasn't even a common sight for me.

The two girls still chained to the wall couldn't see what was going on. Probably just as well.

A low moan broke from the other side of the room. It made me glance back. Jason's pants had been pulled partially down to reveal most of the smooth expanse of his buttocks. His arms were braced, leaving only his lower body touching the woman. His body rose and fell rhythmically. The blonde vampire writhed under him, another low moan escaping her throat. Her breasts spilled out of her black leather vest like an offering as she did a sort of sit-up to meet Jason's mouth.

The brunette licked a slow, pink tongue along his spine. His back convulsed with the sensation, or maybe it was another sensation. The effect looked the same.

I turned away, but the image was burned on my mind. I felt heat crawl up my neck. Damn. Larry's eyes widened and I watched the color drain from his

face, until his skin was the surprised white of paper and his eyes too big for his face.

I fought it for a minute, but I turned back to see, like Lot's wife risking it all for one last forbidden glimpse. Jason had collapsed, his face lost in the blonde's hair. Her face was turned to the room. Her skin had thinned until you could see every bone in her face. Her full lips had thinned back, making her teeth look longer. She no longer had enough lips to hide her fangs.

The brunette knelt just behind them, her knees between both their legs. She lowered her hands from her face, and one half of that handsome face rotted away. She ran her hand through her long dark hair and it came away in clumps.

She turned her face towards the rest of us. The skin sloughed off the bones on the left side of her face and fell to the floor with a thick wet plop.

I swallowed hard enough that it hurt going down and backed up to stand by Larry. He wasn't white anymore; he was green.

"My turn now," one of the vampires said. My face turned back to the scene at the end of the room, almost against my will. I couldn't stand to watch, and couldn't stand to look away.

Jason rose in a sort of push-up motion. He caught a glimpse of the blonde's face and his shoulders tensed, the line of his spine tightening. He pulled away from her slowly, coming to his knees.

The brunette ran her fingers down his naked back. Her flesh sloughed away, leaving a trail of greenish slime behind. A tremor ran through his body that had nothing to do with sex.

From across the room I could see Jason's chest rise and fall faster and faster, as if he was hyperventilating. He stayed staring straight ahead, making no move to turn and look behind him, as if it would go away if he didn't look.

The brunette wrapped her decaying arms around his shoulders, leaned her rotted face next to his, and whispered something.

Jason struggled away from them, crawling against the wall. His bare chest was covered in bits of her flesh. His eyes were impossibly wide, showing too much white. He couldn't seem to get enough air. A strand of something thick and heavy slid slowly down his neck onto his chest. He batted at it like you would swat at a spider that you found crawling along your skin. He was pressed into the black wall with his pants nearly to his thighs.

The blonde rolled off her back and crawled towards him, reaching a hand out that was nothing but bones with bits of dried flesh. She seemed to be decaying in dry ground. The brunette was wet. She lay back on the floor, and some dark fluid rushed out from her to pool beneath her body. She'd undone her own leather shirt, and her breasts were like heavy bags of fluid.

"I'm ready for you," the brunette said. Her voice was still clear and solid. No human voice should have come out of those rotting lips.

The blonde grabbed Jason's arm, and he screamed.

Jean-Claude sat there watching, motionless, unmoved.

I found myself walking towards them. It surprised even me. I kept waiting for the smell that should have accompanied the rotting flesh, but with every step the air was clean.

I stood beside Jean-Claude and said, "Is this illusion?"

He wouldn't look at me. "No, *ma petite*, it is not an illusion."

I poked him in the arm, and it was hard and firm as wood. It didn't feel like flesh at all. "Is this illusion?"

"No, *ma petite*." He looked at me at last, and his eyes were solid drowning blue. "Both forms were real." He stood, and even standing next to him I could not see him breathe.

The brunette was on all fours reaching for Jason with a hand that fell into wet pieces as it moved. Jason screamed and pressed himself into the wall as if he wanted to crawl through it. He hid his face like a child ignoring the monster under his bed, but this was no child, and he knew the monsters were real.

"Help him," I whispered, and I wasn't sure which of us I was talking to.

"I shall do what I can," Jean-Claude said. I was staring at him when I heard the next words in my head. His lips never moved. "If they break the truce first, *ma petite*, then you are free to slaughter everyone in this room."

I stared at him, but his face betrayed nothing. Only the echo of him inside my head told me I hadn't hallucinated it. There was no time to bitch about the fact that he'd invaded my head. Later; we could argue later.

"Janos." That one word reverberated through the room until it echoed up the soles of my feet like a deep bass drum.

Janos turned to look at Jean-Claude, his skeletal face set in a pleased expression. "You rang?"

"I challenge you." The three words were bland; they fell like off-key notes jangling along my nerves. If the tone bothered Janos, you couldn't tell it.

"You cannot prevail against me," Janos said.

"That remains to be seen, does it not?" Jean-Claude asked.

Janos smiled until the skin nearly snapped. "If by some miracle you best me, what do you want?"

"Safe passage for all my people." I cleared my throat. "And the two girls."

"And if I win," Janos said, "what do I get?"

"What do you want?"

"You know what we want."

"Say it," Jean-Claude said.

"You give up your safe passage. We get you, to do with as we like."

Jean-Claude gave a small nod. "So be it." He pointed at the rotting vampires. "Get them away from my wolf."

Janos smiled. "They will not hurt him, but if you fail . . . I'll make a gift of him to my two beauties."

A low sound like a swallowed scream crawled from Jason's throat. The brunette's hand started the crawl down his stomach to his privates. He screamed and pushed her away, but unless he resorted to violence he was trapped. And if we broke the truce first we were dead, but if they broke the truce . . . Jean-Claude and Janos had moved back to the center of the room. They stood a few yards apart. Jean-Claude stood with his feet spaced as if he was bracing for a fight. Janos stood with his feet together, easy, unconcerned.

"You will lose everything, Jean-Claude; what are you up to?"

Jean-Claude just shook his head. "Challenge has been offered and accepted; what are you waiting on, Janos? Are you afraid of me at long last?"

"Afraid of you? Never, Jean-Claude. Not a hundred years ago, not a moment ago."

"Enough talk, Janos." His voice had gone low and soft, yet it carried through the entire room, and crawled up the black walls to rain down in drops of sound that were dark and anger-filled.

Janos laughed, but the sound had none of the touchable qualities of Jean-Claude's voice. "Let us dance." Silence fell so abruptly on the room I thought I'd gone deaf. Then I realized I could still hear my own heartbeat, the blood rushing in my own head. Waves of something rose between the two master vampires like heat rising off summer pavement. What poured along my skin wasn't heat, it was . . . power.

A whirling, rushing storm of power. I'd felt Jean-Claude go up against other vampires, and I'd never felt anything like this. My hair streamed in a wind that was coming from the two.

Jean-Claude's face was thinning down, his white skin glowing like polished alabaster. His eyes were blue flames that bled sapphire fire down every vein under his skin. His bones glowed gold. His humanity was folding away, and it wouldn't be enough. He would lose.

Unless they broke the truce first.

Kissa stood by the door, still guarding it. Her dark face was impassive. She was no help to me. The two rotted things still crawled over Jason. Only Ivy and Bruce were still standing. Bruce looked scared, Ivy looked excited. She watched the two master vamps with half-parted lips, her lower lip drawn under with concentration or excitement.

I'd been able to meet her eyes, and that had bothered her—a lot.

I crossed the room behind Jean-Claude. When I passed him, the current of power lashed out and curled around me like an arm. I kept walking and it slipped away, but my skin shivered where it had touched me. The shit was going to hit the fan unless I could stop it.

Kissa watched me move past her with narrowed eyes. I ignored her. One master vampire at a time. I walked past Bruce and stopped in front of Ivy. She stared past me at the two masters, ignoring me.

I opened my mouth. As I spoke, the silence split apart and sound came back to me ears with a nearly painful clap like a tiny sonic boom.

"I challenge you."

Ivy blinked at me as if I'd just appeared. "What did you say?"

"I challenge you," I said. I kept my face blank and tried very hard not to think about what I was doing.

Ivy laughed. "You are mad. I am a master vampire. You cannot challenge me."

"But I can meet your eyes," I said. I let a small smile play along my lips. I tried to keep my mind blank, no thought to betray me, no fear to leak out, but of course once I thought of fear it was there curling in my stomach.

She laughed, high and tinkling like broken glass. It nearly cut skin just to hear it. What the hell was I doing?

The wind rushed against my back, nearly flinging me into her. I glanced back in time to see Jean-Claude stagger and a splash of blood spill from his hand. Janos hadn't broken a sweat yet.

Whatever I was doing, I'd better do it fast.

"After Jean-Claude loses, I'm going to ask Janos to make him fuck me. Your master is going to be everybody's meat, and so will you."

My eyes flicked to the rotted things clawing at Jason. Incentive enough. I turned back to Ivy and met her brown eyes. "You won't do shit. You can't even outstare one puny human being."

She glared at me. Her anger was instantaneous, like fire springing out of a match. I watched the brown of her irises spread across her eyes from a space of less than ten inches. Her eyes were shining pools of dark light. My pulse threatened to choke me, and a little voice in my head was screaming, "Run away, run away." I stood there and stared her down.

She was a master vampire but a young one. A hundred years from now she'd have eaten me for breakfast, but right now, tonight, maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't.

She hissed at me, flashing her fangs.

"Oh, that's impressive," I said. "Like a dog showing its teeth."

"This dog could tear your throat out." Her voice had gone low and evil crawling along my spine, until I spent most of my effort not to shiver.

I didn't trust my voice not to shake, so I spoke low, and soft, and very clear. "Try it; see how far you get."

She darted forward, but I saw her move, felt her come for me, I threw myself backwards away from her, but she grabbed my arm and lifted me off my feet with her elbow braced so that she could hold me aloft. Her strength was incredible. She could have crushed my arm and I couldn't have done a damn thing about it.

Kissa was suddenly there. "Put her down, now!"

Ivy put me down. She threw me across the room. Air rushed past me, the world blurring so quickly it was like being blind. The air stopped rushing, and down I came.

Chapter 26

Falling does not cover the speed and abruptness of being thrown from less than ten feet high. I smacked into the wall and tried to slam my arms and hands against it to take some of the momentum before my head smacked into it. I slid down the wall, though slid implies something slow, and there was nothing slow

about it. I collapsed at the base of the wall in a crumbled, breathless heap, blinking at bright jarring images that didn't quite make pictures yet.

The first image that came clear was a rotted face with a patch of long, dark hair dangling from its scalp. The vamp's tongue rolled behind broken teeth; something black and thicker than blood spilled with a plop out of her mouth.

I pushed to my knees and found skeletal arms wrapped around my shoulders. The blonde's dried, fang-filled mouth whispered in my ear. "Come to play." Something hard and stiff poked my ear. It was her tongue. I scrambled away, but claws caught in my jacket. Hands that should have been weak as dried sticks were like steel bands.

"They broke the truce, *ma petite*. I cannot hold him long."

I had a moment to glance up and find Jean-Claude on his knees with both hands extended towards Janos. Janos still stood, but he did nothing else. I had a few moments, nothing more.

I stopped trying to get free of the two vampires. They swarmed over me, and in the mess of arms and legs and body fluids, I drew the Browning. I fired it point-blank into the rotted one's chest. She staggered, but didn't go down. Fangs sank into my back, and I screamed.

A gun exploded from across the room, but there was no time to look. Jason was suddenly there, pulling the blonde off me. I fired into the rotting skull of the brunette. She finally collapsed onto the floor in a puddle of liquid and jerking limbs.

I turned back to Jean-Claude and found him nearly prone on the floor, a pool of blood in front of him. He had one arm still held outward towards Janos.

Janos made a small, flicking motion, and blood flew in an arc from Jean-Claude's body. He collapsed to the floor, and power rushed outward, blowing back my hair. The world suddenly stank of rotting corpses.

I gagged and pulled the trigger on that long black body.

Janos turned. It seemed like slow motion, as if I had all the time in the world to aim and fire again, but somehow he was facing me when I pulled the trigger the second time. The bullet took him squarely in the chest. He staggered, but didn't go down.

I sighted on that round, skeletal head. His white hand came up and slashed the air. And impossibly, I felt like some invisible claw had slashed my arm. I fired, but my aim was a little off. The bullet grazed the side of his face.

He slashed at me again, and I saw blood start to drip down my hands. Scare tactics. It didn't hurt that much, not nearly as much as it would hurt if he got his hands on me for real.

A second gun sounded, and Janos staggered as a bullet took him in the shoulder. Larry was behind him, gun out.

My vision faded, as if fog was rolling in behind my eyes. I lowered my aim to the larger target of his upper body and pulled the trigger again. I heard Larry's bullet go high and wide into the wall behind me.

A startled, "Hey!" let me know Jason was still back there.

I saw Janos go for the door, like watching slow motion through a fog so thick I could barely see. I fired twice more and knew I hit him at least once.

When he was out of the room I fell forward onto all fours, and waited for my vision to clear. Hoped it would clear.

Through my ruined vision I saw Jean-Claude still lying motionless in a pool of his own blood. The question that came into my head was, Is he dead? A stupid question about a vampire, but it was still the first thing I thought of.

I glanced behind me and found Jason scattering bits of the two female vampires around the floor. He was tearing at them with his bare hands, cracking their bones and throwing them far away from each other, as if by sheer destruction he could wash away what they'd done to him.

Bruce lay on his back by the wall. Blood had soaked into his tuxedo. I couldn't tell for sure, but he looked dead. Ivy and Kissa were nowhere to be seen.

Larry was still standing across the room, gun extended, as if he didn't realize that Janos was gone. He was frowning. Everybody was up, everybody was moving except Jean-Claude. Shit.

I crawled towards him, not trusting myself to stand with my vision so spotty. It seemed to take a long time to reach him, as if more than my eyesight wasn't working quite right.

My vision was mostly clear by the time I got to him. I knelt in a thick pool of his blood and stared down at him. How do you tell if a vampire is dead? Sometimes he didn't have a pulse, or a heartbeat, or didn't breathe. Shit, again.

I holstered the Browning. There was nothing here right now to shoot, and I needed my hands. I bled on my shirt and looked at my hands for the first time. It looked like fingernails had scraped down both of them, a little deeper than normal, but they'd heal. Probably wouldn't even be a scar.

I touched Jean-Claude's shoulder and the flesh was soft, very human. I rolled him over onto his back. His hand flopped against the floor with a bonelessness that only the dead have. Some trick of the night had made his face beautiful again. The most human I'd ever seen it, except for the fact that no one was that pretty.

I checked for the big pulse in his neck. I held my fingers against his cooling skin, and felt nothing. Something like tears welled against my eyes, and my throat was tight. But I wouldn't cry, not yet. I wasn't even sure I wanted to.

When is dead, dead for a vampire? Is there such a thing as CPR for the undead? Hell, he breathed some of the time. He had a heart, and it beat most of the time. Not beating couldn't be a good thing.

I positioned his head, pinched his nose closed, and blew a breath into his mouth. His chest rose with it. I tried two more breaths, but he didn't breathe on his own. I unbuttoned his shirt and found the spot above his breastbone, and pressed, one, two, three, four, all the way to fifteen compressions. Two breaths.

Jason staggered over to me, then collapsed to his knees. "Is he gone?"

"I don't know." I pumped with everything I had in me, hard enough to break ribs on a human being, but he wasn't human. He lay there, his body moving only when I moved it, as loose and boneless as only the dead can be. His lips were half-parted, his closed eyes edged with the black lace of his thick eyelashes. His curling black hair still framed his pale face.

I'd pictured Jean-Claude dead. I'd even thought about killing him myself once or twice, but now that his death was a fact I didn't know how to feel. It didn't seem fair somehow. I'd brought him here. I'd asked him to come, and he came. And now he was dead, well and truly dead. And it was partially my fault, partially my doing. If I killed Jean-Claude, I wanted to actually pull the trigger and watch his eyes as he died. Not like this.

I stared down at him. I thought about no more Jean-Claude. This beautiful body rotting at last in the grave it so richly deserved. I shook my head. I couldn't let that happen, not if I could save him. I only knew one thing that all dead respected, craved. Blood. I tried to breathe life into him one more time, with one difference. I smeared my blood on his mouth first. My lips touched his, and I tasted the sweet, metallic taste of my own blood.

Nothing.

Larry knelt beside us. "Where did Janos go?"

He hadn't been able to see through the fog, but I didn't have time to explain. "Watch the door; shoot anything that comes through."

"Can I let the girls go?"

"Sure." I'd forgotten about the girls. I'd forgotten about Jeff Quinlan. I'd have traded them all for Jean-Claude to blink his eyes at me. Not if the choice had been offered to me as an either-or, but just now they were strangers. He wasn't.

"More blood, maybe," Jason said softly.

I looked at him. "You offering?"

"Neither of us can feed him back to full strength without dying, but I'll help," he said.

"You fed him once tonight already. Can you donate twice?"

"I'm a werewolf. I heal quick. Besides, my blood has more kick to it than a human's, more power."

I really looked at him then. He was covered in slime. A big black smear covered most of one cheek. His blue eyes didn't look wolfish; they looked haunted, hurt. There are things that harm a lot more than physically.

I took a deep breath and slid one of my knives out of its sheath. I sliced my left wrist. The pain was sharp and immediate. I placed the wound against Jean-Claude's lips. Blood welled into his mouth. Blood filled his mouth like wine pouring into a cup. It seeped out the corner of his mouth and slid down his cheek. I stroked his throat to make him swallow the blood.

How he'd laugh to know I'd finally opened a vein for him. More blood spilled from his unresponsive lips. Dammit.

I breathed into his mouth and got a taste of my own blood. I made his chest rise, breathing in my own blood. I thought one word at him: Live, live, live.

A shudder ran through the body. The throat convulsed, swallowed. I pulled back from him. He caught my wrist as I moved it back from his chin. His grip hurt. I could feel that unnatural strength that could break bone. His eyes were still closed; only the grip on my wrist let me know we were making progress.

I put a hand on his chest. He wasn't breathing on his own yet. No heartbeat. Was that bad? Good? Indifferent? Hell, I didn't know.

"Jean-Claude, can you hear me? It's Anita."

He raised up in a small motion and pressed my bleeding wrist to his mouth. He bit me, and I gasped. He used both hands to press my wrist to his mouth and sucked me. In the middle of sex it might have felt good; now it just hurt.

"Damn," I said.

"What's wrong?" Larry asked.

"It hurts," I said.

"I thought it was supposed to feel good," the blonde girl said.

I shook my head. "Not unless you're under hypnotic control."

"How long will this take?" Larry asked.

"As long as it takes," I said. "Watch the door."

"Which one?"

"Oh, hell, just shoot anything that comes through it." I was feeling lightheaded. How much had he drunk?

"Jason, I'm getting a little woozy here." I tried to pull my wrist free, but his hands were like iron forged to my skin. "I can't get him off."

Jason pulled at the pale hands, but couldn't budge them. "I could tear the fingers off one at a time and get you loose, but . . ."

"Yeah, Jean-Claude would be pissed." Dizziness was coming in waves, nausea starting to build in the pit of my stomach. I had to get him off me.

"Let go of me, Jean-Claude. Let go of me, dammit!"

His eyes were still closed, his face blank. He fed like a baby with single-minded determination, but this baby was draining my life away. I could feel it going down my arm. My heart was beginning to pound in my ears as if I'd been running, pumping the blood faster. Feeding him faster. Killing me faster.

Spots were dancing in front of my eyes. The darkness beginning to eat the light. I drew the Browning.

"What are you doing?" Jason asked.

"He's going to kill me."

"He doesn't know what he's doing."

"I'll still be dead."

"Something's moving around at the head of the stairs," Larry called.

Great. "Jean-Claude, let go of me, now!"

I pressed the barrel of the gun to the flawless skin of his forehead. Darkness was eating my vision in great moving bites. Nausea burned up my throat.

I leaned over him and whispered, "Please, Jean-Claude, let me go. It's your *ma petite*, let me go." I sat back up.

"Vampires coming," Larry said. "Hurry up."

I stared down at that beautiful face locked on my arm, eating me alive, and squeezed. His eyes flew open. I moved my whole finger to keep from squeezing down.

He lay his head back onto the floor, still holding my wrist but no longer feeding. His mouth was crimson with my blood. The gun was still pointed at him.

"Ah, *ma petite*, haven't we done this before?"

"The gun," I said, "but not this." I drew my wrist from his reluctant hands and sat back with the Browning cradled in my lap. Nausea and darkness flew inside my head like clouds driven by the wind.

I saw Larry crouched by the foot of the stairs, gun out. But it was like looking down a tunnel, distant and not as important as it should have been.

Jason lay down on the bloody floor. I blinked at him. "The neck hurts less," he said, just as if I'd asked. Jean-Claude crawled on top of him. Jason turned his head to one side without being asked. Jean-Claude pressed his bloodstained mouth over the big pulse in Jason's neck. I saw the muscles in his mouth and jaw as he sank fangs into the tender skin.

Even if I'd known the neck hurt less, I wouldn't have offered it. It looked too much like sex. The wrist at least let me pretend we weren't doing something intimate.

"Anita!"

I turned back to the stairs. Larry was crouched there, alone, with his gun. The two girls had moved back away from the door. The blonde was having hysterics again. Couldn't really blame her.

I shook my head, lifted the Browning in a teacup grip, and pointed it at the door. I needed the extra arm to steady me. There was a faint tremor to my arms that wasn't going to help my aim much.

Power breathed through the room, prickling along my skin. You could almost smell it like perfumed sheets in the dark. I wondered if Jean-Claude and I had given off that kind of power when he'd fed off me. I hadn't noticed it.

Something white appeared in the doorway. It took me a second to figure out what it was. A white handkerchief tied to a stick.

"What the fuck is that?" I asked.

"A flag of truce, *ma petite*."

I didn't look away from the stairs to that thick, honey-dipped voice. Jean-Claude sounded better, or worse, than ever, each word like fur rubbing along my tired body. His voice was thick enough to wrap around all the aches and pains. He could make them go away. I just knew it.

I swallowed and lowered the gun towards the floor. "Stay the fuck out of my head."

"My apologies, *ma petite*. I can taste you in my mouth, feel your frantic heartbeat like a treasured memory. I will curb my enthusiasm, but with effort, Anita, with great effort." He sounded like I had let him have just a little sex, and he wanted more.

I glanced at him. He was sitting beside Jason's half-naked body. Jason was staring at the ceiling, eyes heavy-lidded like he was half-asleep. Blood trickled from two new puncture wounds in his neck. He didn't look like he'd felt much pain. In fact, it looked like it had felt good. I'd taken the edge off Jean-Claude's need, and Jason had gotten a smoother ride. Bully for him.

"May we talk?" A voice from the hallway, a man's. I couldn't place it. Hell, I was having trouble focusing on anything, let alone who the disembodied voices belonged to.

"Anita, what do you want me to do?" Larry asked.

"It's a flag of truce," I said. My words felt slurred, though they sounded clear enough. I felt almost drunk, or drugged. It was a bad drunk, a dangerous downer.

Magnus stepped into the doorway. For a second I thought I was seeing things. It was so damned unexpected. He was dressed all in white from his tux to his shoes. The cloth seemed to shine against his dark skin. His long hair was tied back with a loose white ribbon. He had the handkerchief-coated stick gripped in one hand. He walked down the steps in a graceful, almost dancelike movement. It wasn't a vampire's glide, but it was close.

Larry kept his gun trained on him. "Stay where you are," Larry said. He sounded a little scared, but like he meant it. The gun was pointed nice and steady.

"We've discussed the fact that silver bullets don't work on the fey."

"Who says this gun has silver bullets?" Larry said.

It was a good lie. I was proud of him. I was certainly too gone to have thought of it.

"Anita?" Magnus looked past Larry like he wasn't there, but he didn't come down those last few steps.

"I'd do what he says, Magnus. Now what do you want?"

Magnus smiled and spread his arms away from his body. To show he was unarmed, I guess. But I knew, and Larry knew, that weapons weren't what made him dangerous. "I mean you no harm. We know that Ivy broke the truce first. Serephina offers her most sincere apologies. She asks that you come directly to her audience chamber. No more tests. We have all been unforgivably rude to a visiting master."

"Do we believe him?" I asked of no one in particular.

"He speaks the truth," Jean-Claude said.

Great. "Let him pass, Larry."

"You sure that's a good idea?"

"No, but do it anyway."

Larry pointed his gun at the floor, but he didn't look happy. Magnus walked down the stairs, smiling, mostly at Larry. He walked past him and made a show of giving him his back. It was almost enough to make me wish Larry would shoot him.

He stopped a few feet in front of the rest of us. We were all still on the floor, sitting, or in Jason's case, lying. Magnus looked down at us, amused, or bemused.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I asked.

Jean-Claude glanced at me. "You seem to know each other."

"This is Magnus Bouvier," I said. "What are you doing here, with them?"

He loosened the tie at his collar and spread the stiff cloth. I was pretty sure what he was trying to show me, but I couldn't see from the floor. I wasn't at all

sure I could stand without falling over. "If you want me to take a peek, you're going to have to come down here."

"With pleasure." He knelt in front of me less than two feet away. He had two healing bite marks on his neck.

"Shit, Magnus. Why?"

He looked at me, eyes flicking to my bloody wrist. "I might ask you the same thing."

"I donated blood to save his life. What's your excuse?"

He smiled. "Nothing half as nice as that." Magnus undid the ribbon and let his hair fall like a curtain around his shoulders. He looked at me with his turquoise blue eyes, and crawled on all fours towards Jean-Claude. He moved like he had muscles in places that people didn't. It was like watching a great cat move. People just didn't move like that.

He knelt in front of Jean-Claude, so close they were almost touching. He swept his hair to one side and offered his neck.

"No," Jean-Claude said.

"What's going on?" Larry asked.

It was a good question. I didn't have a good answer. I didn't even have a bad one.

Magnus slipped off his white jacket and let it slide to the floor. He undid the cuff to his right wrist and pushed the cloth back. He offered his bare wrist to Jean-Claude. The skin was smooth and unbroken. Jean-Claude took his hand and raised the skin to his lips.

I almost looked away, but in the end I didn't. Looking away is like lying to yourself. You pretend it isn't happening, but it is.

Jean-Claude brushed his lips across the skin, then released Magnus's hand. "The offer is generous, but I would be drunk indeed if I added your blood to theirs."

"Drunk?" I asked. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Ah, *ma petite*, you do have a way with words."

"Shut up."

"Losing a quantity of blood makes you grumpy," he said.

"Fuck off."

He laughed, and the sound was sweet. It had a taste just outside description, like some forbidden candy that was not just fattening but poisonous. But what a way to go.

Magnus stayed kneeling, staring at the laughing vampire. "You won't taste me?"

Jean-Claude shook his head, as if he didn't trust himself to speak. His eyes glittered with suppressed laughter.

"The blood has been offered." Magnus crawled back towards me. His hair had spilled forward on one side so one eye was lost, glittering like a jewel through his hair. Eyes just weren't supposed to be that color. He crawled up to me until our faces were inches apart. "A pint of blood, a pound of flesh." He whispered it, leaning in towards me as if for a kiss.

I leaned back, away from him, and overbalanced. I ended up on my back on the floor. It was not an improvement. Magnus crawled over me, still on all fours, hovering. I pressed the Browning into his chest.

"Back off, or bite it."

Magnus crawled backwards, but not very far. I sat up, keeping the gun on him one-handed. The barrel wavered a lot more than normal. "What was that all about?"

Jean-Claude said, "Janos spoke of taking blood and flesh from us this night. As an apology, Serephina offers us blood, and flesh."

I stared at Magnus, still on all fours, still looking feral and dangerous. I lowered the gun. "No, thanks."

Magnus sat back on the floor, smoothing his hands through his hair, brushing it back from his face. "You have refused Serephina's peace offerings. Do you refuse her apology as well?"

"Take us to Serephina, and you will have done what was asked of you," Jean-Claude said.

Magnus looked at me. "What of you, Anita? Are you content that I take you to Serephina? Do you accept her apology?"

I shook my head. "Why should I?"

"Anita is not a master," Jean-Claude said. "It is my vengeance, my pardon, you should be asking."

"I am doing what I was told," he said. "She challenged Ivy to a test of wills. Ivy lost."

"I didn't throw her across the room," I said.

Jean-Claude frowned. "She resorted to brute force, *ma petite*. She could not win by force of will or vampire wiles against a human being." He looked suddenly very serious. "She lost . . . to you."

"So?"

"So, *ma petite*, you declared yourself a master, and proved that claim."

I shook my head. "That's ridiculous; I'm not a vampire."

"I did not declare you a master vampire, *ma petite*. I said you were a master."

"A master what? Human being?"

It was his turn to shake his head. "I do not know, *ma petite*." He turned to Magnus. "What does Serephina say?"

"Serephina says to bring her."

Jean-Claude nodded and stood like he was pulled by strings. He looked fresh and new, if a little bloodstained. How dare he look so good when I felt like shit?

He looked down at Jason and me. His strange good humor had returned. He smiled down at me, and even with blood staining his mouth he was beautiful. His eyes glittered with some amusing secret. He was full of himself in a way I'd never seen before.

"I do not know if my companions are able to walk. They're feeling a little drained." He chuckled at his own joke, putting a hand in front of his eyes, as if it was too funny even for him.

"You are drunk," I said.

He nodded. "I believe I am."

"You can't be drunk on blood."

"I've drunk deep of two mortals, but neither of you are human."

I didn't want to hear this. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Necromancer with a chaser of werewolf; a drink to make any vampire giddy." He giggled. Jean-Claude never giggled.

I ignored him, if you can ignore an intoxicated vampire. "Jason, can you stand?"

"I think so." His voice was thick, heavy but not sleepy, more the languor after sex. Maybe I was glad my bite had hurt.

"Larry?"

Larry walked over to us, glancing at Magnus, gun naked in his hand. He didn't look happy. "Can we trust him?"

"We're going to," I said. "Help me stand up, and let's get out of here before fangface busts a gut."

Jean-Claude was doubled over with laughter. He seemed to think "fangface" was outrageously funny. Ye gods.

Larry helped me stand, and after a second of dizziness I was okay. He offered a hand to Jason without being asked. Jason swayed on his feet, but stayed standing.

"Can you walk?"

"If you can, I can," he said.

A man after my own heart. I took a step, another, and was on my way across the room. Jason and Larry followed. Jean-Claude staggered to his feet, still laughing softly.

Magnus was standing at the foot of the stairs, waiting for us. He had the jacket slung over one arm. He'd even found the ribbon to tie back his hair.

Jason walked wide around the torn bodies of his two would-be lovers and picked his shirt off the floor. The shirt covered the mess on his chest, but the goo was still on his face, and his hair was stiff and nearly as dark as his pants.

Even the back of Jean-Claude's clothes and hair were thick with congealing blood. I had my own share of blood and goop. Good thing I wore mostly black tonight; didn't show dirt as badly. The crimson blouse was looking a little worse for wear.

Larry was the only one without any blood or gore on him. Here was hoping he could keep up the good work.

The two girls had hidden under the stairs while we discussed things. I was betting it was the brown-haired girl's idea to hide. Lisa seemed too scared to think, let alone do anything smart. Not that I could blame her, but hysteria gets you nowhere but dead.

The brown-haired girl walked over to Larry. The blonde came along for the ride, her hands dug so tightly into the other one's torn blouse it would have taken surgery to remove them.

"We just want to go home now. Can we do that?" Her voice was a little breathy, but for the most part solid. I stared into her brown eyes and nodded.

Larry looked at me.

"Magnus," I said.

He raised his eyebrows, still waiting by the stairs like a tour guide, or a butler ready to escort us up. "You called?"

"I want the girls to leave now, safe."

He glanced at them. "I don't see why not. Serephina had us collect them mostly for your benefit, Anita. They've served their purpose."

I didn't like the way he said that last. "Safe, Magnus, no more harm. Are we clear on what that means?"

He smiled. "They walk out the door, and go home. Is that clear enough for you?"

"Why so cooperative all of a sudden?"

"Would letting them go be apology enough?" Magnus asked.

"Yeah, if they go free, unharmed. I'll accept her apology."

He nodded. "Then consider it done."

"Don't you have to check with your master first?"

"My master whispers sweetly to me, Anita, and I obey." He smiled while he said it, but there was a tightness around his eyes, an involuntary flexing of his hands.

"You don't like being her lap dog."

"Perhaps, but there's not much I can do about it." He started up the stairs. "Shall we go up?"

Jean-Claude paused at the bottom of the stairs. "Do you need some help, *ma petite*? I have taken quite a bit of your blood. You do not recover as quickly as my wolf."

Truthfully, the stairs looked longer going up than they had coming down. But I shook my head. "I can make it."

"Of that, *ma petite*, I have no doubt." He stepped close to me, but did not whisper; instead I felt him in my mind. "You are weak, *ma petite*. Let me help you."

"Stop doing that, dammit."

He smiled and sighed. "As you like, *ma petite*." He walked up the steps like he could have flown, barely touching them. Larry and the girls went up next; none of them seemed tired. I slogged up after them. Jason brought up the rear. He looked hollow-eyed. It may have felt good, but donating that much blood is still rough, even on the temporarily furry. If Jean-Claude had offered to carry him up the stairs, would he have agreed?

Jason caught me looking, but he didn't smile; he just stared back. Maybe he'd have said no, too. Weren't we all just being uncooperative tonight?

Chapter 27

The silken drapes had been drawn aside. A throne sat in the far right-hand corner. There was no other word for it; "chair" just didn't cover that golden, bejeweled thing. Cushions were scattered on the floor around it, heaped like they should be covered with harem girls, or at least small pampered dogs. Nothing sat on them. It was like an empty stage waiting for the actors to appear.

A small wall-hanging on the back wall had been pushed aside to reveal a door. The door had been wedged open with a triangular piece of wood. The spring air poured through the open door, chasing back the smell of decay. I started to say "Come on, girls," but the wind changed. It blew harder, colder, and I knew it wasn't wind at all. My skin prickled, the fine muscles along my arms and shoulders twitching with it.

"What is that?" Larry asked.

"Ghosts," I said.

"Ghosts? What the hell are ghosts doing here?"

"Serephina can call ghosts," Jean-Claude said. "It is a unique ability among us."

Kissa appeared in the doorway. Her right arm hung loose at her side. Blood dripped down her arm in a slow, heavy line.

"Your handiwork?" I asked.

Larry nodded. "I shot her, but it didn't seem to slow her down much."

"You hurt her."

Larry widened his eyes. "Great." He didn't sound great when he said it. Wounded master vampires get cranky as hell.

"Serephina bids you come outside," Kissa said.

Magnus dropped to the cushions, boneless as a cat. He looked like he'd curled up there before.

"You aren't coming?" I asked.

"I've seen the show," he said.

Jean-Claude walked towards the door. Jason had moved up beside him, but back a couple of steps like a good dog.

The two girls were holding onto Larry's jacket. He had been the one who unchained them. They'd seen him shoot the bad guys. He was a hero. And like all good heroes, he'd get himself killed protecting them.

Jean-Claude was suddenly at my side. "What is wrong, *ma petite*?"

"Can the girls go out the front?"

"Why?"

"Because whatever's out there is big and bad, and I want them out of it."

"What's wrong?" Jason asked. He stood a little to one side. He was flexing his hands, closed, open, closed, open. He'd seemed a lot more relaxed thirty minutes ago, but then, weren't we all?

Jean-Claude turned to Kissa. "Was this one right?" He motioned to Magnus. "Are the girls free to go?"

"They may go; so says our master."

He turned to the girls. "Go," he said.

They looked at each other, then at Larry. "Alone?" the blonde said.

The brown-haired one shook her head. "Come on, Lisa, they're letting us go. Come on." She looked at Larry. "Thank you."

"Just go home," he said. "Be safe."

She nodded and started for the far door with Lisa clinging to her. They left the door to the room open, and we watched them walk out the front. Nothing swooped down upon them. No screams cut the night. What do you know?

"Are you ready now, *ma petite*? We must pay our respects." He took a step forward, looking at me. Jason already stood at his side, nervous hands and all.

I nodded and fell into step behind Jean-Claude. Larry stayed at my side like a second shadow. I could feel his fear like a trembling against my skin.

I understood why he was scared. Janos had beaten Jean-Claude. Janos was afraid of Serephina, which meant she could take Jean-Claude without raising a sweat. If she could take the vampire that was on our side, she wouldn't find us much of a challenge. If I was smart, I'd shoot her as soon as I saw her. Of course, we were here to ask for her help. It sort of cut my options.

The cool wind played in our hair like it had little hands. It was almost alive. I'd never felt any wind that could make me want to brush it off, like an overly amorous date. But I wasn't afraid. I should have been. Not of the ghosts, but of whatever had called them up. But I felt distant and faintly unreal. Blood loss will do that to you.

We walked out the door and down two small stone steps. Rows of small, gnarled fruit trees decorated the back of the house. There was a wall of darkness just beyond the orchard. It was a thick wall of shadows, so black that I couldn't see through it. The naked tree branches were framed against the blackness.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Some of us can weave shadows and darkness around us," Jean-Claude said.

"I know. I saw it when Coltrain was killed, but this is a freaking wall."

"It is impressive," he said. His voice was very bland, matter-of-fact. I glanced at him, but even in the bright moonlight I couldn't read his face.

A sparkle of white light showed behind the blackness. Beams of cold, pale light pierced the darkness. The light ate away at the dark like paper burns, the blackness crumbling, vanishing as the light consumed it. When the last of the darkness had shredded away, a pale figure stood among the trees.

Even from this distance you wouldn't have mistaken her for human, but then she wasn't trying to pass. A pale, white luminescence swirled above her head, a glowing cloud, yards across like colorless neon. Vague figures darted out from it, then swirled back.

"Is that what I think it is?" Larry asked.

"Ghosts," I said.

"Shit," he said.

"My thoughts exactly."

The ghosts flowed out into the trees. They hung on the dead branches like a froth of early blossoms, if blossoms could move and writhe and glow.

The strange wind blew against my face, sending my hair streaming backwards. A long, thin line of phosphorescent figures whirled out. The ghosts came sweeping towards us, low to the ground.

"Anita!"

"Just ignore them, Larry. They can't actually hurt you as long as you keep moving and ignore them."

The first ghost was long and thin with a wide, screaming mouth that looked like a smoke ring. It hit me at mid-chest; the shock ran through me like electricity. The small muscles in my arms jerked with it. Larry gasped.

"What the hell was that?" Jason asked.

I took a step forward. "Keep walking and ignore them."

I didn't mean to, but my pace took me ahead of Jean-Claude. The next ghost swept over my face. There was a moment of smothering but I kept walking and it passed.

Jean-Claude touched my arm. I stared into his face and wasn't sure what I saw. He was definitely trying to tell me something. He stepped out in front of me, still staring at me.

I nodded, and let him lead. It didn't cost me anything.

"I don't like this," Larry said in a singsong voice.

"Me either," Jason said. He was batting at a tiny swirl of whiteness like a tame mist. The more he swatted at it, the more solid it became. A face was forming out of the mist.

I walked back to Jason and grabbed his arms. "Ignore it."

The small ghost perched on his shoulder. It had a large, bulbous nose and two half-formed eyes.

Jason's arms tensed under my hands. "Every time you notice them, you give them power to manifest themselves," I said. A ghost hit me in the back. It was like a lump of moving ice in the center of my body. It crawled out the front of my body like a cold rope being pulled through me. The sensation was unnerving as hell, but it wasn't permanent. It didn't even really hurt.

The ghost dived into Jason's chest, and he cried out. Only my grip on his arms kept him from clawing at the thing. Every muscle in Jason's body twitched like a horse being eaten alive by flies. He sagged when the ghost was through him, looking at me with horror-filled eyes. It was nice to know he could be scared. The vampires seemed to have taken some of his courage with their rotting arms. Couldn't blame him. I'd have had screaming fits, too.

Larry jumped when a ghost popped through him, but that was all. His eyes were a little wide, but he knew where the danger lay, and it wasn't the ghosts.

Jean-Claude came to stand near us. "What is wrong, my wolf?" There was an undercurrent of warning, anger. His pet was not living up to his reputation.

"We're fine," I said. I squeezed Jason's hand; his eyes were still wide, but he nodded. "We'll be fine."

Jean-Claude walked towards the distant white figure once more, his movement graceful, unhurried, as if he wasn't as scared as the rest of us. Maybe he wasn't. I pulled Jason with me. Larry had moved to my back. The three of us walked like normal human beings behind Jean-Claude. We looked like good

little soldiers except for the fact that I was holding the werewolf's hand. His hand was sweating against my skin. Couldn't afford to have a hysterical werewolf. My right hand was still free to go for a gun, or a knife. We'd hurt them once; if they didn't behave themselves, we could finish the job. Or at least go down trying.

Jean-Claude led us among the naked trees with the ghosts crawling over the bare branches like phantom snakes. He stopped a few feet away from the vampire. I almost expected him to bow, but he didn't. "Greetings, Serephina."

"Greetings, Jean-Claude." She was dressed in a simple white dress that fell in folds of shining cloth over her feet. White gloves covered her arms almost completely. Her hair was grey with streaks of white, left unadorned save for a headband of silver and pearls. It wasn't a headband, probably called a coronet or something. Her face was lined with age. Delicate makeup had been added, but not enough to hide the fact that she was old. Vampires didn't age. That was the whole point, wasn't it?

"Shall we go inside?" she asked.

"If you like," he said.

She gave a faint smile. "You may escort me inside, as you did of old."

"But it is not olden days, Serephina. We are both masters now."

"I have many masters serving me, Jean-Claude."

"I serve only myself," he said.

She stared at him for a space of heartbeats, then nodded. "You have made your point. Now be a gentleman."

Jean-Claude took a deep enough breath that I heard it sigh from his lips. He offered her his arm, and she slid one gloved hand through it, her hand resting on his wrist.

The ghosts floated downward behind her like a great flowing train. They brushed past the rest of us with a skin-prickling rush, then floated upward, hovering about ten feet off the ground.

"You may walk with us," Serephina said. "They will not molest you."

"Comforting," I said.

She smiled again. It was hard to tell in the moonlight and ghostly glow, but her eyes were pale, maybe grey, maybe blue. You didn't need to see the color to not like the look in them.

"I have looked forward to meeting you, necromancer."

"Wish I could say the same."

The smile didn't widen, and didn't fade; it didn't move at all. It was like her face was a well-constructed mask. I raised my glance to her eyes, for just a moment. They didn't try to suck me under, but there was an energy in them, a deep burning that pushed at the surface of her being like a banked fire; move a log just wrong, and the flames would come licking out and burn us all up. I couldn't judge her age; she was stopping me. I'd never met anyone that could actually stop me—trick me into believing them younger, yes, but not just glare at me and keep me from doing it.

She turned and walked through the door. Jean-Claude helped her up the steps, as if she needed it. The easy distance of the blood loss was receding,

leaving me real, and alive, and wanting to stay that way. Maybe it was Jason's hand warm in my own. The sweat on his palm. The reality of him. I was suddenly scared, and she hadn't done a damn thing to me.

The ghosts flowed into the house, some pouring through the door, some sliding through the walls. Watching them pull free of the wood, you almost expected a sound, like a plop, but it was utterly quiet. The undead make no noise.

The ghosts bounced along the ceiling like helium-filled balloons, poured down the walls in back of the throne like milky water. They were translucent near the candle flames, like bubbles.

Serephina sat down in the corner on her throne. Magnus curled in the cushions at her feet. There was a flash of anger in his eyes, there, and gone. He wasn't enjoying being Serephina's boy toy. That got him an extra point in my book.

"Come sit by me, Jean-Claude," Serephina said. She motioned to the cushions on the opposite side from Magnus. They'd have made an interesting pair.

"No," Jean-Claude said. That one word was warning enough. I drew my hand slowly from Jason's. If we really were going to fight, I'd need both hands.

Serephina laughed, and with that sound her power broke open and crashed on us poor humans.

The power rode down on me like pounding horses. My whole body vibrated with it. My mouth was too dry to swallow, and I couldn't quite get a full breath of air. She didn't have to touch me to hurt me. She could just sit on her throne and throw power at me. She could grind my bones into dust from a nice safe distance.

Something touched my arm. I jerked and turned, and it felt like slow motion. It has hard to focus on Jean-Claude's face, but once I did, the grinding power receded like the ocean pulling back from the shore.

I took a deep, shuddering breath, then another; every breath was firmer. "Illusion," I whispered. "Fucking illusion."

"Yes, *ma petite*." He turned from me and went to Larry and Jason, who were still standing spellbound.

I looked back at the throne. The ghosts had formed a glowing nimbus around her; most impressive. But not nearly as impressive as her eyes. I had one wild glimpse of eyes that seemed to go on forever, then I stared at the hem of her white dress as hard as I could.

"Can you not meet my gaze?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Can you really be that powerful a necromancer when you cannot even meet my eyes?"

I wasn't just not meeting her eyes. I was hunched over. I straightened but didn't move my eyes. "You're only about six hundred years old." I raised my eyes slowly, inch by inch up the white dress until I could see her chin. "How the hell did you get to be this powerful in that amount of time?"

"Such bravado. Meet my eyes and I will answer you."

I shook my head. "I don't want to know that badly."

She chuckled, and the sound was low and dark. It slid down my spine like something loathsome and half-alive. "Ah, Janos, Ivy, so good of you to join us."

Janos glided through the door with Ivy at his side. Janos looked more human than he had since I'd first met him. His skin was pale but fleshy. His face was still thin, and he couldn't have passed for completely human, but he looked less monstrous. He also looked healed.

"Shit."

"Is something wrong, necromancer?" Serephina asked.

"I hate to waste that many bullets."

She gave that low chuckle again. It made my skin feel tight. "Janos is very talented."

He walked past us. I could see bullet holes in his shirt. At least I'd ruined his wardrobe.

Ivy looked dandy. Had she run when the shooting started? Had she left Bruce to die?

Janos went down on one knee among the cushions. Ivy knelt with him. They stayed there, head bent, waiting for her to notice them.

Kissa moved to stand beside Magnus, bleeding, her arm held close to her side. But she glanced from the two kneeling vampires to Serephina, and back again. She looked . . . worried.

Something was up. Something unpleasant.

She left them kneeling, and said, "What business brings you to me, Jean-Claude?"

"I believe you have something that belongs to me," he said.

"Janos," she said.

Janos rose to his feet and went back out the door. He was out of sight only a moment, then came back carrying a large cloth sack like something Santa Claus would have carried. He untied the cord that held it shut and emptied the contents on the floor at Jean-Claude's feet. Splinters of wood, none of them big enough to make a decent stake, fell into a medium-sized pile. The wood was dark and polished where it wasn't white with new cuts.

"With my compliments," Janos said. He shook the last bits of wood out of the sack and knelt back on the steps.

Jean-Claude stared down at the splintered wood. "This is childish, Serephina. Something I would have expected from you centuries ago. Now . . ." He motioned at the ghosts, at everything. "How have you managed to subdue Janos? You feared him once."

"State your business, Jean-Claude, before I grow impatient and challenge you myself."

He smiled and gave a graceful bow, arms out to his sides like an actor. When he raised up, the smile was gone. His face was like a beautiful mask. "Xavier is in your territory," he said.

"Did you truly think I would feel the presence of your pet necromancer, and not sense Xavier? I know he is here. If he challenges me, I will deal with

him. Speak the rest of your business, or was that it? Did you come all this way to warn me? How touching."

"I realize you are more powerful than Xavier now," Jean-Claude said, "but he is slaughtering humans. Not just the attack on the missing boy's home, but many deaths. He has gone back to cutting up his pets. He draws attention to us all."

"Then let the council kill him."

"You are master in this territory, Serephina; it is your task to police it."

"Do not presume to tell me my duties. I was centuries old when you died. You were nothing but a catamite for any vampire that wanted you. Our beautiful Jean-Claude." She made beautiful sound like a bad thing.

"I know what I was, Serephina. Now I am Master of the City and follow the council's laws. We are not to allow humans to be slaughtered in our territories. It is bad for business."

"Let Xavier kill hundreds. There are always more," she said.

"Nice attitude," I said.

She turned her attention to me, and I wished I hadn't said anything. Her power pulsed against me, like a great beating heart.

"How dare you disapprove of me," Serephina said. I heard the rustle of her silk dress as she stood. No one else moved, and I heard her dress slither across the cushions, sliding along the floor, as she came closer. I did not want her to touch me.

I stared up the line of her body, and saw her gloved hand strike outward. I gasped. Blood dripped down my hand.

"Shit!" It was a deeper cut than Janos had managed, and it hurt more. I met her eyes, anger making me brave, or stupid. Her eyes were pure white, like captive moons shining from her face. Those eyes called to me. I wanted to fling myself into her pale arms, to feel the touch of those soft lips, the sharp sweet caress of her teeth. I wanted to feel her body cradling mine. I wanted her to hold me like my mother once had. She would take care of me forever, and never leave, never die, never desert me.

That stopped me. I stood very still. I was standing at the edge of the pillows. The hem of her dress spilled at my feet. I could have reached out a hand and touched her.

Fear pounded my heart in my head. I could taste my pulse on my tongue.

She spread her arms wide. "Come to me, child, and I will always be with you. I will hold you forever."

Her voice was everything good; warmth, food, shelter from all the things that hurt, all the disappointment. I knew in that moment that all I had to do was step into her arms and all the bad things would go away.

I stood there with my hands balled into fists. My skin ached to have her touch me, hold me. Blood still dripped down my hand from where she'd cut me. I rubbed my fingers into the cut, making the pain sharp.

I shook my head.

"Come to me, child. I will be your mother forever."

I found my voice. It sounded rusty, choked, but it came. "Everything dies, bitch. You aren't immortal, none of you are."

I felt her power waver like a pebble thrown in a pool, and I moved back a step, then another. It took everything I had left not to run from that room, and to keep running. To run and run and run. Away from her.

I didn't run. In fact, I stayed about two steps back, looking around. People had been busy. Janos stood next to Jean-Claude. They weren't trying their vampire wiles on each other, but the threat was open, and there. Kissa stood to one side, blood pooling on the pillows at her feet. There was a look on her face that I couldn't read. It was almost amazement. Ivy was standing now, staring at me, smiling, pleased that I'd nearly fallen into Serephina's arms.

I wasn't pleased. No one had ever come closer, not even Jean-Claude. I was beyond scared. My skin was cold. I had broken her hold over me, but it was temporary. She might not be able to trick me with her mind, but I'd felt her mind brush mine. If she wanted me, she could have me. It wouldn't be pretty. No illusions, no tricks, just brute fucking force and she could have me. I would never run into her arms, but she could crush my mind. That she could do.

The knowledge was almost calming. If there was nothing I could do to prevent it, might as well not worry about it. Worry about the things you can control; the rest will either work themselves out, or they'll kill you. Either way, no more worries.

"You are quite right, necromancer," Serephina said. "We are all mortal in this room. Vampires can live a long, long time. It makes us forget that we are mortal. But immortality eludes even us."

It wasn't a question, and I agreed with everything she said, so I just looked at her.

"Janos told me you had an aura of power, necromancer. He said he used it against you as he would another vampire. I did it just now when I slashed your hand. I have never known a human that could be harmed so."

"I don't know what you mean about an aura of power."

"It is what allowed you to slip my magic. No human could have withstood me, and few vampires."

"Glad I could do something to impress you."

"I never said I was impressed, necromancer."

I shrugged. "Fine, maybe you don't give a damn about humans, or keeping a low profile. I don't know about your council, or what they'll do to you for not helping us. But I do know what I'll do."

"What are you babbling about, human?"

"I am the vampire executioner for this state. Xavier and his crew took a young boy. I want him back, alive. You help me get him back alive, or I go to the courts and get a death warrant on you."

"Jean-Claude, talk to her, or I will kill her."

"She has the weight of human law behind her, Serephina."

"What is human law to us?"

"The council says that it rules us as it rules the humans. Refusing the human laws is the same as breaking with the council."

"I don't believe you."

"You can taste the truth of my words. I could never lie to you, not two hundred years ago, not now." His voice was very calm, very sure.

"When did this new law go into effect?"

"When the council saw the benefit of being mainstream. They want the money, the power, the freedom to walk the streets in safety. They don't want to hide anymore, Serephina."

"You believe what you say; that much is true," she said. She looked down at me, and the weight of that gaze even with me looking away was like a giant hand mashing me down. I stayed on my feet, but it was an effort. You should bow down to such power. Grovel before it. Worship it.

"Stop it, Serephina," I said. "Cheap mind tricks won't work, and you know it." The cold lump in my stomach wasn't so sure.

"You fear me, human. I can taste it on the back of my tongue."

Oh, goody. "Yeah, you scare me. You probably scare everybody in this room. So what?"

She drew herself up to every inch of her tall, thin frame. Her voice was suddenly soft, breathing down my skin like fur. "I will show you."

She gestured outward with one gloved hand. I tensed, waiting for another cut, but it never came. A scream cut the air and whirled me around.

Blood ran down Ivy's face. Another cut appeared on her bare arm. Two more on her face. Long, slicing wounds with every gesture that Serephina made.

Ivy shrieked. "Serephina, please!" She fell to her knees among the bright cushions, one hand outstretched towards the master vampire. "Serephina, master, please."

Serephina walked around her, one gliding movement at a time. "If you had held your temper, they would all be ours now. I knew their hearts, their minds, their deepest fears. We would have broken them all. They would have broken the truce and we could have feasted on them to our blood's content."

She was almost even with me. I wanted to move back away from her, but she might see it as a sign of weakness. Her dress brushed my leg, and I didn't care. I did not want her to touch me. I moved back, and she caught my wrist. I hadn't even seen her move.

I stared at that silk-gloved hand as if a snake had just coiled around my wrist. Hell, I'd have rather had the snake.

"Come, necromancer; help me punish this bad vampire."

"No, thanks," I said. My voice sounded shaky. It matched the fluttering in my gut. She hadn't done anything to me yet except touch me, but touch makes all powers stronger. If she tried a mind trick now, I was finished.

"Ivy would have taken great delight in your pain, necromancer."

"That's her problem, not mine." I was staring very hard at the silky cloth of Serephina's dress. I had a terrible urge to look upward, to meet her eyes. I didn't think it was her power, just my own morbid compulsion. It's hard to be tough when you're staring at someone's body and being led around by the hand like a child.

Ivy lay on the floor, half-propped on her arms. Her lovely face was a mass of deep cuts. Bone gleamed in the candlelight from one cheek. Her right arm had a cut that showed muscle twitching and bloody.

Ivy stared up at me, and behind the pain was a hatred strong enough to light a match. The anger rose from her in slapping waves.

Serephina knelt beside her, drawing me down with her. I glanced back at Jean-Claude. Janos had a white spider-hand on his chest. Larry mouthed the word "gun." I shook my head. She hadn't hurt me yet. Not yet.

The hand jerked my arm hard enough to wrench my head around to face her. We were eye to eye, suddenly, horribly. What I saw in her eyes wasn't horrible. Her eyes, which I would have sworn were some pale shade, looked solid wood brown. My mother's eyes.

I think she meant for it to be comforting, or seductive. It wasn't. My skin went cool with fear. "Stop it."

"You don't want me to stop," she said.

I tried to pull my arm out of her grasp. I might as well have tried to move the sun to a different part of the sky. "All you can offer me is death. My dead mother in your dead eyes." I stared into those brown eyes that I never thought to see this side of heaven. I yelled at my mother's eyes, because I couldn't look away. Serephina wouldn't let me, and I couldn't fight her on that, not while she touched me.

"You're a walking corpse, and everything else is just lies."

"I am not dead, Anita." There was an echo of my mother's voice in her words. She raised her other hand as if to caress my cheek.

I tried to close my eyes. Tried to look away. I couldn't. A strange paralysis was sliding over my body, like the feeling you get just on the edge of sleep when your body weighs a thousand pounds and every movement is nearly impossible.

That hand came for me in slow motion, and I knew if she touched me I would fall into her arms. I would cling to her and cry.

I remembered my mother's face the last time I'd seen her. The coffin had been dark wood covered in a blanket of pink roses. I knew Mommy was in there, but they wouldn't let me see. No one could see. Closed coffin, they said, closed coffin. Every adult in my life was having hysterics. The room was full of screams, sobbing. My father collapsed to the floor. He was useless to me. I wanted my mother. The latches on the coffin were silver. I opened them, and I heard a cry behind me. I didn't have much time. The lid was heavy, but I shoved it upward and it moved. I got a glimpse of white satin, and shadows. I raised my arms over my head with every ounce of strength and got a glimpse of something.

My Aunt Mattie grabbed me back. The lid clanged shut, and she snapped the lock back in place, dragging me away. I didn't struggle; I'd seen enough. It was like looking at one of those pictures that you know must look like something, but your eyes can't make sense of it. It took me years to make sense of it. But what I saw wasn't my mother. Couldn't be my beautiful mother. It had been a husk, something left behind. Something to hide in a dark box and let rot.

I opened my eyes, and Serephina had pale grey eyes. I pulled my wrist from her suddenly loose grasp and said, "Pain helps."

I stood and stepped away from her, and she didn't stop me. Which was good, because I was shaking all over, and it wasn't from the vampire. Memories have teeth, too.

She stayed kneeling by Ivy, and said, "Most impressive, necromancer. I will help you find this boy you seek."

Her sudden cooperation was unnerving. "Why?"

"Because since I attained my full powers, no one has ever slipped my illusions twice in one night. No one living or dead."

She grabbed Ivy by one bloody arm and pulled her into her lap to bleed on the white dress. Ivy gasped. "Remember this, young master vampire: This mortal did what you could not. She stood against me and won." She tossed her suddenly away, sending her sprawling across the floor. "You are not worthy of my sight. Get out."

Serephina stood. The fresh blood stood out in scarlet relief against her white dress and gloves. "You have impressed us. Now go, all of you." She turned and walked back to her throne. She didn't sit down. She stood with her back to us, one hand on the chair arm. Perhaps it was my imagination, but she seemed tired. Her ghosts flowed down to meet her in a swirling white mist. There weren't as many individual shapes as before, as if the phantoms had lost some of their solidity.

"Go," she said without turning around.

The back door was open, but Jean-Claude walked to the doorway that led out the front. I wasn't going to argue. I just wanted out. I didn't give a damn which door we took.

We walked coolly, calmly towards the door. I wanted to run. Larry stood next to me, and I could see the pulse in his throat jumping with the effort not to bolt. Jason reached the door a little ahead of us, but he waited and turned and motioned us through like a doorman, or a butler.

I caught a glimpse of his eyes, too wide, scared, and knew what the gesture had cost him. We went through; he followed. Jean-Claude brought up the rear. The doors slammed behind us, and we walked out. Just like that.

But for the first time I knew that I'd been let go. I hadn't fought my way out, or bluffed my way out. She could be impressed all she wanted, but she had allowed us to go. Being allowed to leave was not the same thing as winning.

I would never go back into that house voluntarily. I would never be near her willingly. Because I'd been impressive tonight, but I couldn't keep it up. Even now I knew that she could have me. This vampire had my ticket. Had a lie almost worth my immortal soul.

Damn.

Chapter 28

Jason walked past me into the hotel room. He headed straight for the bathroom. "I'm taking a shower." It was pushy, but he did smell like a decayed corpse. We'd driven back with all the windows rolled down. Most of the time if you stink, you can't smell someone else. I had some of the rotted stuff on me, but I could still smell Jason. Some smells are too unique to ever really go away.

"Wait," Larry said.

Jason turned, but not like he was happy.

"Use my shower." He held up a hand before I could say anything. "It's an hour until dawn. If we want everybody tucked in before that, it makes sense to use both bathrooms."

"I thought we'd all sleep in this room tonight," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

Jean-Claude stood by the love seat looking lovely and unhelpful. Jason just looked impatient.

"Safety in numbers," I said.

Larry shook his head. "Alright, but I can take the werewolf next door and let him shower. Or don't you trust me to even do that?" He was getting angry again.

"I trust you, Larry. You did good tonight."

I expected a smile. I didn't get it. He looked very serious. "I killed that vampire Bruce."

I nodded. "I thought we were going to have to kill everything in the room."

"So did I." He sank into one of the chairs. "I've never killed anyone before."

"It was a vampire. It's not the same thing as killing a person."

"Yeah, right. And how many corpses have you given CPR to lately?"

I glanced at Jean-Claude smiling at me. I shrugged. "Just one. Can you give us some privacy here?" I asked.

"I will hear what you are saying no matter where I stand in this room," Jean-Claude said.

"Illusion is all; just back off," I said.

Jean-Claude bowed his head slightly and took Jason to one side of the room, near the windows. I knew he'd hear everything, but at least he wouldn't be standing over us.

"You don't really believe he's dead, do you?" Larry asked.

"You saw what happened to those two vampires," I said. "They are just rotting corpses; everything else is illusion."

"You think he ever looks like that?"

I looked at Jean-Claude's back for a minute. "I'm afraid I do."

"How can you date him after seeing that?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"Corpse or not, you tried to keep him alive." He reacted to the look on my face. "Alive, undead, whatever you want to call it, you tried to preserve it. You were scared he was really dead."

I just looked at him. "So?"

"So, I killed another living being, or undead being. Hell, Anita, Bruce was so newly dead he seemed human."

"Probably why one bullet to the chest finished him."

"How am I supposed to feel about that?"

"Killing him, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"They are monsters, Larry. Some of them are prettier than others, but they are monsters. Never doubt that."

"You can honestly tell me that you think Jean-Claude is a monster." It was more statement than question.

I almost looked at the monster in question, but I didn't. I'd looked at him enough for one night. "Yeah, I do."

"Now, ask her if she thinks she's a monster." Jean-Claude leaned on the back of the love seat, his arms crossed over his chest.

Larry looked a little startled, but he said, "Anita?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes."

Jean-Claude smiled. "See, Lawrence? Anita thinks we're all monsters."

"Larry's not," I said.

"Give him time."

That was a little too close to the truth. "I asked for privacy, or did you forget?"

"I forget nothing, *ma petite*, but time grows short. My wolf is not the only one that needs a bath. Only our young friend is still fresh."

I looked at Larry. There wasn't a drop of blood on him. He was the only one who hadn't wrestled with vampires tonight. He shrugged. "Sorry; I just couldn't get anybody to bleed on me tonight."

"Don't joke, Larry," I said. "With Serephina I think you'll get another chance."

"Sadly, true, *ma petite*."

"How long can you go without a coffin?" I asked.

He smiled. "Concern over my well-being. I am touched."

"Don't give me crap. I opened a freaking vein for you tonight."

"If I have not thanked you for saving my life tonight, *ma petite*, my apologies."

I looked at him. He looked pleasant, amused, but it was a mask. His expression when he didn't want you to know what he was thinking, but didn't want you to know that he didn't want you to know. "Don't mention it."

"I will remember that you saved me, *ma petite*. You could have been free of me. Thank you."

It sounded sincere enough. "You're welcome."

"I need to get this crud off me," Jason said. He sounded just a touch frantic. I was betting he'd be trying to scrub off more than just dirt. But memories don't wash that easily. More's the pity.

"Go on, both of you. Jason can scrub up in Larry's room. It's only practical."

Larry grinned at me. "Thanks."

"I meant it when I said you did good tonight."

I finally got the smile I'd expected. "Come on, Jason, hot water and fresh towels await." Larry held the door for Jason and gave me a little salute. Geez.

Alone again with Jean-Claude. Would this night never end? "You never answered my question about the coffin," I said.

"I will be alright for another night or two."

"How did Serephina go from being your equal in power to being what we saw tonight?"

He shook his head. "I truly do not know, *ma petite*. She surprised me badly. She did not have to let us go tonight. As long as she did not harm us, we could have been her guests for the day."

"Are you surprised she let us go?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

Jean-Claude pushed away from the love seat. "Take your shower, *ma petite*. I will await the young men's return."

"I thought you could go next, wash the blood out of your hair."

He put a hand up to the back of his hair. He grimaced at the feel of it. "Distasteful, but I want a bath, *ma petite*. It takes longer than a shower, so you go first."

I looked at him for a long moment.

"If you do not hurry, I will not have time for a bath before dawn. I would hate to sleep on your clean sheets covered in blood."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Fine; just be sure you stay out of the bathroom."

"My word of honor that I will not barge in on you."

"Yeah, right." Though, strangely enough, I believed him. Jean-Claude had been trying to seduce me for a long time. A frontal assault just wasn't his style. I went to take my shower.

Chapter 29

Ronnie had dragged me into Victoria's Secret. I had pointed out that no one would see my underwear or my nightclothes except other women in the gym locker room. Ronnie had replied, "You'll see them." The logic escaped me but she had talked me into a robe.

It was burgundy, the color of wine-dark peonies. It glowed against my pale skin and matched some of the bruises blossoming on my back. Nothing like getting thrown into a wall to give you a little color. The bite mark on my back wasn't very deep. Hard for humanoid fangs to sink in from that angle. The fang marks on my wrist were deeper. They were two neat little holes, almost dainty. It didn't hurt as much as it should have. Maybe vampires did have painkillers in their saliva, or maybe it was the fangs.

I still couldn't believe that I'd let him sink fangs into me. Shit.

I pulled the robe closer around me. The material was heavy enough to be cozy on a winter evening, and had wide silky cuffs, and more silk lining the edges. It looked vaguely Victorian, a little masculine. I looked delicate in it, like a Victorian doll that hadn't gotten completely dressed yet. I put on an oversized black t-shirt under the robe. It ruined some of the effect, but it beat the heck out of wearing nothing but a robe and underwear out to greet the boys.

I retrieved the Browning from the back of the stool where it had sat during my shower. I carried it with me to the bedroom, and hesitated. I always went armed. Hell, I slept with a gun, but I didn't feel like slipping on a holster. I put the Browning away and settled for slipping the Firestar into the robe pocket. Made the cloth hang funny, but if something nasty came through the door I was ready for it.

Jean-Claude was standing at the window when I opened the bedroom door. He had opened the drapes, and was leaning against the window's edge staring out into the darkness. He turned when the door opened, though I knew he'd heard me before that.

"*Ma petite*, you look lovely."

"It's the only robe I own," I said.

"Of course," he said. His face had that amused mask on it again; this time I would have liked to know what he was thinking. His midnight blue eyes were very intense; they didn't match the nonchalant expression. Maybe I didn't want to know what he was thinking.

"Where are Larry and Jason?"

"They have come and gone," he said.

"Gone?"

"Jason had a sudden craving, and Larry drove him in the Jeep."

I just looked at him. "There is such a thing as room service."

"It is the wee hours of the morning, *ma petite*. The room service menu is somewhat limited. Jason has donated blood twice to me tonight; he needed protein." Jean-Claude smiled. "It was either take-out, or he could eat Larry. I thought you'd prefer take-out."

"Very funny. You shouldn't have sent them alone."

"We are safe from Serephina tonight, *ma petite*, and as long as they stay in town, safe from Xavier."

"How can you be so sure?" I crossed my arms over my stomach.

He leaned his back against the window and looked at me. "Your Monsieur Kirkland handled himself well tonight. I think you worry unnecessarily about him."

"One night of heroics doesn't keep you safe," I said.

"It will be dawn soon, *ma petite*; even Xavier cannot bear the light of day. All the vampires will be seeking shelter. They will have no time to chase our young men."

I stared at him, trying to read past his pleasant face. "I wish I was as sure as you seem to be."

He smiled then, and pushed away from the wall. He slid out of his jacket and let it fall to the rose-colored carpet.

"What are you doing?"

"Undressing."

I jerked a thumb at the bedroom, "Undress in there."

He began unbuttoning his shirt.

"In the other room, right now," I said.

He pulled the white shirt out of his pants, working the last few buttons as he walked towards me. The flesh of his chest and stomach had more color than the shirt. He was pumped up and human-looking on blood, part of it mine. The dried bloodstains that had soaked through the shirt marred the pale perfection of his body.

I expected him to try to kiss me, or something, but he walked past me. The back of the shirt was brownish with dried blood. He peeled it off his skin with a sound like tearing. He dropped the shirt on the carpet and walked into the bedroom.

I stood there staring after him. There had been white scars on his back. At least I thought that's what they were. Hard to tell through all the blood. He left the bedroom door open, and in a few minutes I heard water running in the bathtub.

I sat down in one of the straight-back chairs. I wasn't sure what else I was supposed to do. Water ran for a long time, then silence, then sloshing water. He was in the tub. He hadn't closed the bathroom door first. Great.

"*Ma petite*," he called.

I sat there for a minute, unwilling to move.

"*Ma petite*, I know you are there. I can hear you breathing."

I walked to the edge of the bedroom door, very careful not to look inside. I leaned my back against the wall and crossed my arms. "What do you want?"

"There seem to be no clean towels."

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Could you call down to housekeeping and have some sent up?"

"I guess so."

"Thank you, *ma petite*."

I stomped over to the phone, pissed. He'd known there were no clean towels before he got into the tub. Hell, I'd known there were no clean towels, but I'd been so busy listening to him splash around in the water I hadn't thought of it.

I was as mad at me as I was at him. He was always a tormenting son of a bitch. I was supposed to watch myself around him better than this. I was in a hotel room that looked like a freaking bridal suite with Jean-Claude all naked

and soapy in the next room. After what I'd seen with Jason, there shouldn't have been this much sexual tension in the air, but there was. Maybe it was habit, or maybe Larry was right. I just didn't believe that Jean-Claude was a rotting corpse.

I called for more towels.

They would be happy to bring some up. No one bitched about the time. No one questioned. You can always tell how much you're paying for a room by how little they complain.

A maid brought me four big, soft towels. I looked at her for a full minute, hesitating. I could have her take the towels into Jean-Claude.

She said, "Ma'am?"

I took the towels, said thanks, and closed the door. I just couldn't let a strange woman see that I had a naked vampire in my tub. I wasn't even sure the vampire part was what made it embarrassing. Good girls do not end up with naked male anything in their bathtubs at four something in the morning. Maybe I wasn't a good girl. Maybe I never had been.

I hesitated at the bedroom door. The room was dark. The only light came from the bathroom, spilling in an oblong across the carpet.

I crushed the towels to my chest, took a deep breath, and stepped into the room. I could see the bathtub from here, but mercifully not all of it. I had a glimpse of white porcelain and a mound of white bubbles. Just seeing the bubble bath made the muscles in my shoulders relax a little. Bubbles can hide a multitude of sins.

I stopped at the bathroom door.

Jean-Claude lay back against the edge of the tub. His black hair was wet and had obviously been cleaned. Strands of it clung to his bare shoulders. His arms lay propped on the edge of the bathtub, his head resting against the dark tile of the wall. One pale hand was suspended in midair as if reaching for something, but the hand was utterly limp. His eyes were closed, making black half-moons against his pale cheeks. Beads of water clung to his face and what I could see of his body. He looked almost asleep.

His knee came up through the mound of bubbles, a surprising glimpse of bare wet skin. He turned his head and opened his eyes. The midnight blue of his eyes seemed darker. Maybe it was the way the water made his hair seem heavier, blacker.

I took a shallow breath and said, "Here are the towels."

"Could you place them here, please?" He gestured with that one half-suspended hand.

"Here" was the closed top of the toilet, which was close enough to the tub for grabbing. "I'll put them on the edge of the sink."

"I'll drip water all over the floor getting them from there," he said. His voice was neutral, no vampiric tricks, almost no tone at all.

He was right, and I was being silly. He wouldn't grab me and ravish me. If that'd been the plan, he could have done that years ago.

I placed the towels on the stool, eyes studiously anywhere but the tub.

"You must have questions about tonight," he said.

I glanced at him. The water on his naked torso caught the light like quicksilver. Suds clung to his chest, just under one nipple. I had a horrible urge to brush off the bubbles. I stepped back until I was standing by the far wall.

"It's not like you to offer answers," I said.

"I am feeling generous tonight." His voice had that quality that voices get when they are edging towards sleep.

"If you weren't naked in a tub of bubble bath, would you be offering to answer questions?"

He smiled then, a quick, familiar expression. "Perhaps not, but if I must answer your ravenous curiosity, isn't it more fun this way?"

"Fun for whom?"

"Both of us, if you would only admit it."

That got a smile from me, and I didn't want to smile. I didn't want to be enjoying watching him all soapy and wet. I wanted to be afraid of him, and I was, but I also wanted him. Wanted to run my hands down his wet flesh, wanted to touch what lay under those bubbles. I didn't want intercourse. I couldn't imagine that with him, but I wanted to do a little exploring. I hated that. He was a corpse; surely what I'd seen tonight convinced me of that.

"You're frowning, *ma petite*; why?"

"I asked you if the two rotting vampires were illusion, you said no. I asked if your form was real, you said yes. Both forms are real, you said."

"That is true," he said.

"Are you a rotting corpse?"

He settled lower in the warm, soapy water, drawing his arms into it, until only his head showed above the surface of the water. "That is not one of my forms."

"That isn't an answer."

He raised a pale hand from the water, a handful of bubbles cupped like a snowball. "There are different vampiric abilities, *ma petite*; you know that."

"What's that have to do with it?"

He raised his other hand and began to play with the bubbles, trailing them from hand to hand. "Janos and his two female companions are a different type of vampire than I am. Than most of us are. They are much rarer. If you ever see me as a rotted corpse, I will be well and truly dead. They can rot and reform, and it makes them much harder to kill. The only true surety is fire."

"Volunteering an awful lot of information, aren't you?"

He lowered his hands in the water, washing the soap away. He sat up a little straighter; suds clung to his body. "Perhaps I am afraid you will think that what happened with Jason would happen with us."

"We will never test that theory," I said.

"You sound so sure of that," he said. "Your lust perfumes the air, and yet you truly believe that we will never make love. How can you want me almost as much as I want you, yet be sure we will never know each other's bodies?"

I wasn't sure I had an answer for that one. I slid down the wall and sat with my knees drawn up to my chest. The pocket with the gun in it clunked against

the wall. I moved the gun to a better position and said, "We just won't, Jean-Claude, not ever. I just can't." A part of me regretted that, but only part.

"Why, *ma petite*?"

"Sex is about trust. I'd have to trust someone implicitly to have sex with them. I don't trust you."

He stared at me with his blue, blue eyes, looking all scrumptious and wet. "You mean that, don't you?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"I do not understand you, *ma petite*. I try, but still I do not."

"You're pretty much a riddle to me, too. If that's any comfort."

"It isn't. If you were a woman who had casual lusts, we would have been in bed long ago." He sighed and sat up even straighter in the water so it hit him just above the waist. "Of course, if you were a woman of casual appetites, I don't think I would love you."

"You enjoy the chase, the challenge," I said.

"True, but it is more than that with you, if only you would believe me." He leaned forward, drawing his knees to his naked chest, rounding his shoulders to hug himself. White scars dribbled down his back from his shoulders to vanish into the water, not a lot of them, but enough.

"What made the scars on your back? Unless it was a holy item, you should have been able to heal them."

He laid his cheek on his knees so he could look at me. He looked younger, more human, vulnerable suddenly. "Not if the injury occurred before I died."

"Who whipped you?"

"I was the whipping boy for an aristocrat's son."

I stared at him. "You're telling me the truth, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Is that why Janos chose whips tonight, to remind you where you came from?"

"Yes."

"You weren't born into the aristocracy?"

"I was born in a house with a dirt floor, *ma petite*."

I looked at him. "Yeah, right."

He raised his head. "If I was going to make something up, *ma petite*, it would be more romantic, more entertaining than being a French peasant."

"So you were a servant in the castle?"

"I was their only son's constant companion. When he had clothes made, so did I. His tutor was my tutor. His riding instructor, mine. I learned swordplay and dancing and the proper way to eat at table. And when he was bad I was punished, because he was their only child, their only heir to an old family name. People speak of child abuse now." He leaned back in the tub, cuddling down into the warm water. "They complain of spanking. They have no idea what true abuse is. When I was a boy, parents thought nothing of taking a horse whip to a misbehaving child, or beating them bloody. Even the aristocrats beat their children. It was normal.

"But he was the only heir, the only child. So they paid money to my parents and took me. The lady of the manor chose me because I was fair of face. When the vampire who made me sought me out, she said my beauty called to her."

"Wait a minute."

He turned his head to give me the full weight of those dark blue eyes. I worked hard at not looking away.

"This gorgeous body and face is all vampire illusion, right? I mean, no one's this beautiful."

"I told you once that it was not my power that made you see me as you do, not most of the time at any rate."

"Serephina said you were a catamite for any vampire that would have you. What did she mean?"

"Vampires kill for food, but they bring others over for many reasons. Some for money, wealth, even title, love, but I was brought over for lust. When I was young and weak, they passed me around among them. One would grow tired of me, but there was always another."

I stared at him, horrified. "You're right. If you were going to make up a story, this wouldn't be it."

"The truth is so often disappointing, or ugly; don't you find that, *ma petite*?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Serephina was old. I thought vampires weren't supposed to age."

"Whatever age we die at is the age we remain."

"Did you know Serephina when you were young?"

"Yes."

"Did you sleep with her?"

"Yes."

"How could you let her touch you?"

"I was given to her as a gift by a master that makes even her new and improved powers seem weak. I had very little choice." He stared at me. "She knows what you want. Your greatest need, your most treasured wish, and she'll make it come true, or seem to. What did she offer you, *ma petite*? What could she offer you that nearly won you tonight?"

I looked away then; I didn't want to meet his eyes. "What did she offer you all those years ago?"

"Power."

I looked up at that. "Power?"

He nodded. "Power to escape them all."

"But you had to have the ability to be a master vampire inside you from the beginning. No one can give that to you," I said.

He smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. "I know that now, but then I thought only she could save me from an eternity of . . ." His words trailed off and he submerged, leaving only a few black locks floating on the top of the water. He sat up with a loud breath of air, blinking the water from his eyes. The

water had clumped his thick, dark eyelashes. He ran his hands through his wet hair, and it trailed over his shoulders.

"Your hair wasn't this long when we first met."

"You seem to prefer longer hair on your men."

"If you're dead, how can your hair grow?"

"That is a question for you to answer," he said. He ran his hands through his hair again, squeezing the ends out. He reached out a hand for a towel.

I scrambled to my feet. "I'll leave you to get dressed."

"Have Jason and Larry returned?" he asked.

"No."

"Then I won't be getting dressed." He stood, drawing the towel towards him. I had a glimpse of one side of his pale naked body, water streaming from it. The towel moved into view just in time. I fled.

Chapter 30

I huddled in the straight-back chair farthest from the bedroom. But I was staring at the doorway. Shit. I wanted to run from the room, but why? It wasn't Jean-Claude I didn't trust. It was me. Fuck.

I touched the gun in my robe pocket. It was smooth and hard and reassuring, but it wouldn't help me now. Violence I understood; sex gave me more problems.

I honestly didn't want to sleep with him, but part of me was hoping for another glimpse of naked flesh. A long line of naked thigh, perhaps. Or maybe . . . I put the palms of my hands over my eyes, as if I could get the image out of my head by just pressing.

"*Ma petite?*" His voice sounded closer than the bathroom.

I didn't want to look, as if, just as Grandma Blake had said, I'd be struck blind. I felt him standing in front of me. Felt the movement of air. I lowered my hands a millimeter at a time. He was kneeling in front of me, one of the thick white towels wrapped around his waist.

I lowered my hands to my lap. Beads of water still clung to his skin. He'd combed his hair, but it was wet, slicked back, leaving his face plainer, more unadorned than normal. His eyes seemed bluer without his hair to frame them.

He put a hand on each chair arm and raised himself up. His lips brushed mine in a soft, nearly chaste kiss. He moved back from me, letting go of the chair.

I could taste my heart in my throat, and it wasn't fear.

Jean-Claude touched my hands, lifted them up. He placed my hands on his bare shoulders. The skin was warm, smooth, wet. He held my wrists in his

hands, lightly, very lightly. I could have pulled away at any time. He ran my hands down his slick body.

I pulled my hands free. He said nothing, did nothing. He stayed kneeling, looking at me. Waiting. I could see the pulse in his neck jumping against the skin, and I wanted to touch it.

I slid my hands across his shoulders and lowered my face to his. He started to move into me for a kiss, but I slid my hand along his jaw and turned his head away. I touched lips to his neck and slid my mouth down his skin, until I could taste his pulse beating against my tongue. He tasted of perfumed soap, water, and clean skin.

I slid from the chair to the floor, kneeling in front of him. He was taller now, but not too tall. I licked water off his chest, and let myself do something I'd wanted to do for months. I ran my tongue over his nipple, and he shuddered against me.

I licked water off the center of his chest and ran my hands along his waist up the damp curve of his back.

He pulled the sash of my robe, and I didn't protest. I let his hands slide under the robe, around my waist, with nothing but the t-shirt between his flesh and mine. He ran his hands up my sides, his thumbs playing over my rib cage. The gun swung heavily in the loose cloth. It was annoying.

I raised my face to his. His arms slid behind my back, pressing me against the long wet line of his body. The towel was perilously loose.

His lips brushed mine; then the kiss became something more. Harder, nearly bruising, with his arms locked behind my shoulders. My hands slid down his waist, rubbed the sliding top of the towel, and found it had already slipped. My hand touched the smooth top of his buttocks. Only the pressure of our bodies kept the towel in place.

He ate at my mouth and I felt something sharp, painful. I jerked back and tasted blood.

Jean-Claude let me go. He sat back on his heels, the towel gathered in his lap. "I am sorry, *ma petite*. I got carried away."

I touched my mouth and came away with a spot of blood. "You nicked me."

He nodded. "I am truly sorry."

"I'll just bet you are," I said.

"Do not go all self-righteous on me, *ma petite*. You have finally admitted to yourself, to me, that you feel the pull of my body."

I sat on the floor by the chair with my robe in disarray. The t-shirt had ridden up to my waist. I guess it was a little too late to protest my innocence.

"Fine, lust; you happy?"

"Almost," he said, and now there was something in his eyes. Something dark and drowning, and older than it should have been.

"I can offer you my mortal body, and more, *ma petite*. It can be between us much more than any human lover could offer."

"Would I lose a little blood each time?"

"That was an accident," he said.

I stared at him, all pale and damp, kneeling on the floor with the white towel bundled into his lap, leaving nearly every inch of him bare.

"This is the first time I've cheated on Richard," I said.

"You have been dating me for weeks," he said.

I shook my head. "But I haven't been cheating. *This* is cheating."

"Then have you been cheating on me, with Richard?"

I didn't know what to say to that. "Go get dressed."

"Do you really want me to dress?" he asked.

I looked away. I was embarrassed now and uncomfortable. "Yes, please."

He stood up, the towel gripped in his hands. I looked down at the floor and didn't have to see his face to picture the smile on it.

He walked away from me, and didn't bother moving the towel around behind him. Muscles moved under his skin from calf to waist. He walked naked into the bedroom, and I enjoyed the view.

I touched my finger to my tongue. It was still bleeding. That's what I got for French kissing a vampire. Even thinking about it made me nervous.

"*Ma petite?*" he called from the other room.

"Yeah."

"Do you have a blow dryer?"

"In my suitcase. Help yourself."

Thankfully, I'd dragged my suitcase into the bedroom beside the bathroom door. One point for laziness. I was spared another glimpse of his naked body. Now that hormones were receding, I was embarrassed.

I heard the dryer and wondered if he was standing naked in front of the bathroom mirror while he dried his hair. I was very aware that all I had to do was go to the doorway and I could see for myself.

I stood up, pulled my t-shirt down, tied my robe securely in place, and sat down on the couch. My back was to the bedroom. I wouldn't be seeing anything else. I took the Firestar out of my pocket and laid it on the coffee table in front of me. The gun sat there looking very solid, very black, and somehow accusatory.

The dryer stopped, and he called to me again. "*Ma petite?*"

"What?"

"Come talk to me as the sun rises."

I glanced up at the window he had opened. The sky outside was less black, not light yet, but not pure darkness anymore. I closed the drapes and went to the bedroom. I left the gun on the table. The Browning was in the bedroom anyway.

Jean-Claude had neatly folded the bedspread and blanket at the foot of the bed. Only the wine-dark sheet covered him. He lay with his black hair soft and curling over the dark pillows. The sheet was bunched at his waist. "You can join me if you like."

I leaned against the wall and shook my head.

"I'm not offering sex, *ma petite*; dawn is too close for that. I offer you your half of the bed."

"I'll take the couch; thanks anyway."

He smiled, a slow knowing curve of lips—his old arrogance peeking back out. It was almost comforting to know nothing had really changed. "It is not me that you do not trust. It is you."

I shrugged.

He raised the sheet in front of his chest, an almost protective gesture. "It comes." Fear in his voice.

"What comes?"

"The sun."

I glanced at the closed drapes against the far wall. They were double thick, but a line of greyish light edged them. "You'll be alright like this without your coffin?"

"As long as no one opens the drapes." He looked at me for a long moment. "I love you, *ma petite*, as much as I'm able."

I didn't know what to say. Saying I lusted after him didn't seem appropriate. Saying I loved him would be a lie.

The light grew stronger, a white edge around the curtains. His body slumped back against the bed. He rolled onto his side, one hand outstretched, the other curling the sheets against his chest. He stared at the growing light, and I could taste his fear.

I knelt beside the bed. I almost took his hand but didn't. "What happens now?"

"You want the truth, then watch." I expected his eyes to flutter, his voice to grow sluggish as if he were falling asleep. It didn't happen that way. He closed his eyes all at once. Pain flashed across his face. He whispered, "It hurts." His face went slack. I'd seen people die, watched the light fade from their bodies. Felt their souls slip away. That was what I saw. He died. The light grew against the drapes, and when it was a solid white line, he died. His breath went out of him in a long rattle.

I knelt beside the bed and stared. I knew dead when I saw it, and this was it. Shit.

I put my arms on the bed and propped my chin on them. I watched him, waiting for him to breathe, to twitch, something. But there was nothing. I reached out to his one outstretched arm. My fingers hovered above his skin, then I touched him. The skin was still warm, still human, but he did not move. I checked his wrist, and there was no pulse. No blood moved in this body.

Did he know I was here? Did he feel me touching him? I stared at him for what seemed like a long time. So this answered the question. Vampires were dead. Whatever animated them was like my own power, some sort of necromancy. But I knew death when I saw it. It gave necrophilia a whole new slant.

Had I only imagined that I felt the brush of his soul leave his body? Surely vampires had no souls—that was part of the point—but I'd felt something leave. If not a soul, what? If a soul, where did it go for the daylight hours? Who watched all the vampires' souls while they lay dead?

There was a knock at the door, probably the other boys. I stood up, pulling my robe in tight. I was cold, and wasn't sure why. I went to answer the door. The cut on my tongue had almost stopped bleeding.

Chapter 31

I dreamed. In the dream, someone held me in their lap. Smooth dark arms wrapped around me. I looked up into my mother's laughing face. She was the most beautiful woman in the world. I snuggled against her body, and the clean smell of her skin was there. She'd always smelled of Hypnotique bath powder. She bent and kissed me on the lips. I had forgotten the taste of her lipstick, the way she brushed my mouth with her thumb, and laughed because she'd gotten bright red lipstick on my small mouth.

Her thumb came away with something brighter than lipstick. Blood dripped down her thumb. She'd pricked her skin with a safety pin. It was bleeding. She held her thumb out to me and said, "Kiss it, Anita, make it all better."

But there was too much blood. It ran down her hand. I stared up at her laughing face, and blood ran down it like rain. I woke sitting bolt upright on the velvet couch, gasping for breath. I could still taste her lipstick on my mouth, and the smell of Hypnotique bath powder clung to me.

Larry sat up on the love seat, rubbing at his eyes. "What's wrong? Did we get our wake-up call?"

"No, I had a bad dream."

He nodded, stretching, then frowned. "Do you smell perfume?"

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Perfume or powder or something; do you smell it?"

I swallowed and nearly choked on my own pulse. "Yeah. I smell it."

I flung back the extra blanket and threw the lumpy pillow across the room.

Larry swung his legs off the love seat. "What is wrong with you?"

I went to the window and flung the drapes open. The bedroom door was closed, and Jean-Claude was safely inside. Jason was sleeping in there. I stood in the sunlight and let the heat sink into me. I leaned against the warm glass, and only then realized that I was wearing nothing but an oversized t-shirt and my undies. Oh, well. I stayed in the sunlight for a few minutes, waiting for my pulse to calm down.

"Serephina sent me a dream. The smell is my mother's perfume."

Larry came to stand beside me. He was wearing a pair of gym shorts and a green t-shirt. His curly red hair stuck up in all directions. His blue eyes squinted when he stepped into the light. "I thought only a vampire that had a connection with you, a hold on you, could invade your dreams."

"That's what I thought," I said.

"How could I smell perfume from your dream?"

I shook my head, forehead against the glass. "I don't know."

"Has she marked you?"

"I don't know."

He touched my shoulder, squeezing. "It'll be alright."

I stepped away from him to pace the room. "It won't be alright, Larry. Serephina invaded my dreams. No one but Jean-Claude has ever done that." I stopped, because that wasn't true. Nikolaos had done it. But that was after she'd bitten me. I shook my head. Either way, it was a very bad sign.

"What are you going to do?"

"Kill her."

"Murder her, you mean."

If Larry's earnest eyes hadn't been staring at me, I'd have said, "You bet." But it's hard to contemplate murder with someone staring at you like you've kicked their favorite puppy.

"I'll try to get a warrant," I said.

"If you can't?"

"If it's her or me, Larry, then it's her. Okay?"

Larry looked at me sadly. "What I did last night was murder. I know that, but I didn't go in planning to kill someone."

"You stay in this business long enough and you will."

He shook his head. "I don't believe that."

"Believe what you want, but it's still the truth. These things are too dangerous to play fair."

"If you really believe that, then how can you date Jean-Claude? How can you let him touch you?"

I shook my head. "I never said I was consistent."

"You can't defend yourself, can you?"

"Defend which one? Killing Serephina or dating Jean-Claude?"

"Either, both. Hell, Anita, if you're one of the bad guys you can't be one of the good guys."

I opened my mouth and closed it. What could I say? "I am one of the good guys, Larry. But I'm not going to be a martyr. If that means breaking the law, so be it."

"Are you going to get a warrant?" His face was very neutral as he asked. He looked older suddenly. Even with his orangey curls sticking up, he looked solemn.

I was watching Larry grow older before my eyes. Not in age, but in experience. The expression in his eyes was older than it had been a few months ago. Seen too much, done too much. He was still trying to be Sir Galahad, but Galahad had had God on his side. All Larry had was me. It wasn't enough.

"The only way I could get a death warrant is to lie," I said.

"I know," he said.

I stared at him. "Serephina hasn't broken any laws, yet. I won't lie about that."

He smiled. "Good. When do we meet Dorcas Bouvier?"

"Three."

"Have you figured out what you can sacrifice to raise the zombies Stirling wants done?" he asked.

"Nope."

He stared at me. "What are you going to tell Stirling?"

I shook my head. "I don't know yet. I wish I knew why he's so hot and heavy to kill Bouvier."

"He wants the land," Larry said.

"Stirling and Company have been saying the Bouvier family, not Magnus Bouvier. That means he's not the only one suing them. So killing Magnus won't solve their problems."

"So why do it?" Larry asked.

"Exactly," I said.

Larry nodded. "We need to talk to Magnus again."

"Preferably without Serephina around," I said.

"Amen to that," Larry said.

"I'd love to talk to Magnus, but before we tackle Mr. Bouvier again, I'd like to find some fairie ointment."

"Some what?"

"Didn't you take any classes on fairies?"

"It was an elective," he said.

"Fairie ointment makes you proof against glamor. Just in case whatever else Magnus is hiding is nastier than Serephina."

"Nothing's nastier than that," he said.

"True, but just in case, he won't be able to work magic on us. In fact, it's not a bad precaution before we meet Dorrie. She may not be as scary as Magnus, but she shines, and I'd just as soon she didn't shine all over us."

"You think Serephina will find Jeff Quinlan?"

"If anyone can, she can. She seemed pretty confident she could take Xavier, but then Jean-Claude had been pretty confident he could take her last night. He was wrong."

He frowned. "So we're rooting for Serephina?"

It sounded wrong, put that way, but I nodded. "If it's a choice between a vampire that obeys most of the laws, and one that slaughters kids, yeah, we're on her side."

"You were talking about killing her just a little bit ago."

"I can stay out of her way until she saves Jeff, and kills Xavier."

"Why would she kill him?" Larry asked.

"He's killing people in her territory. She can say anything she wants, but that's a direct challenge to her authority. Besides, I don't think Xavier will give up Jeff without a fight."

"What do you think happened to him last night?" Larry asked.

I shook my head. "It doesn't do any good to dwell on it, Larry. We're doing all we can."

"We could tell the FBI about Serephina."

"One thing I've learned is that master vamps don't talk to the cops. Too many years of the cops killing them on sight, or trying to."

"Okay," he said, "but we've still got to come up with something big enough to kill for raising the cemetery tonight," he said.

"I'll think on it."

"You really have no idea what to do?" He sounded surprised.

"Short of a human sacrifice, Larry, I don't think I can raise several three-hundred-year-old corpses. Even I've got my limits."

He grinned. "Nice to hear you admit it."

I had to smile. "It'll be our little secret."

He put his hand out, and I slapped it. He slapped mine back, and I felt better. Larry had a way of making me smile. Friends will do that to you.

Chapter 32

Dorcas Bouvier was leaning on a car in the parking lot. Her hair gleamed in the sunlight, swirling as she moved, like heavy water. In jeans and a green tank top, she was flawless.

Larry tried not to stare at her, but it was hard work. Larry was wearing a blue T-shirt, jeans, white Nikes, and an oversized checked flannel shirt to hide his shoulder holster.

I was in jeans and a navy blue polo shirt, black Nikes, and an oversized blue dress shirt. I'd had to borrow it from Larry after my black jacket had gotten covered in vampire goop. Had to have something to hide the Browning. Makes people nervous if you go around with a naked gun. Larry and I looked like we'd dressed from the same closet.

Dorrie pushed away from the car. "Shall we go?"

"We'd like to talk to Magnus."

"So you can turn him in to the cops?"

I shook my head. "So we can find out why Stirling is so hot to kill him."

"I don't know where he is," Dorcas said.

Maybe it showed on my face, because she said, "I don't know where he is, but if I did, I wouldn't tell you. Using magic on the police is a death penalty case. I won't turn him in."

"I'm not the police."

She looked at me, eyes narrowing. "Did you come to look at Bloody Bones, or to question me about my brother?"

"How did you know to be waiting here for us?" I asked.

"I knew you'd be on time." Her pupils swirled downward to pinpoints, like the eyes of an excited parrot.

"Let's go," I said.

She led us to the back of the restaurant where it nearly touched the woods. A path began at the edge of the clearing. It was barely wide enough for a man. Even though we walked single file, the branches whipped at my shoulders. The new green leaves rubbed like velvet along my cheek. The path was deep and rutted down to naked tree roots in places, but weeds were beginning to encroach on the path, as if it wasn't used as much as it once had been.

Dorrie moved down the uneven path with an easy, swinging stride. She was obviously familiar with the path, but it was more than that. The tree limbs that caught on my shirt didn't get caught in her hair. The roots that threatened to trip me didn't slow her down.

We'd found ointment at a health food store. So the bushes moving for her and not for us was real, not illusion. Maybe glamor wasn't the only thing to worry about. Which was why the Browning was loaded with nonsilver bullets. I'd had to go out and buy some special for the occasion. Larry was loaded up too, and for the first time I wished he had two guns. I still had the Firestar with silver ammo, but Larry was out of luck if a vamp jumped us. Of course, it was broad daylight. I was more worried about fairies than vamps right this minute. There was salt in our shirt pockets, not a lot, but you didn't need much, just enough to throw on the fey or the thing being magicked. Salt disrupted fey magic. Temporarily.

A breeze came up the path. It grew into a wind in one fitful gust. The air smelled clean and fresh. You hoped the beginning of time smelled like that; like fresh bread, clean laundry, childhood memories of spring. It probably smelled like ozone and swamp water. Reality almost always smells worse than daydream.

Dorrie stopped and turned back to us. "The trees across the path are just illusion. They're not solid."

"What trees?" Larry asked. I cursed silently. It would have been nice to keep the ointment a secret.

Dorrie took two steps back towards us. She stared at my face from inches away, then made a face like she'd seen something unclean. "You're wearing ointment." She made it sound like a very bad thing.

"Magnus did try to bedazzle us twice. Nothing wrong with being cautious," I said.

"Well, our illusions won't matter to you, then." She took off at a faster pace, leaving us to stumble after her.

The path led into a clearing that was nearly a perfect circle. There was a small mound in the center with a white stone Celtic cross in the middle of a mass of vibrant blue flowers. Every inch of ground was covered with bluebells. English bluebells, thick and fleshy, bluer than the sky. The flowers never grew in this country without help. They never grew in Missouri without more water than was practical. But standing in the solid mass of blue surrounded by trees, it seemed worth it.

Dorrie stood frozen nearly knee-deep in the flowers. She was staring open-mouthed, a look of horror on her lovely face.

Magnus Bouvier knelt in the flowers on top of the mound, near the cross. His mouth was bright with fresh blood. Something moved around him, in front of him. Something more felt than seen. If it was illusion, the ointment should have taken care of it. I tried looking at it out of the corner of my eye.

Sometimes peripheral vision works better on magic than straight-on sight.

From the corner of my eye I could see the air swimming in something that was almost a shape. It was bigger than a man.

Magnus turned and saw us. He stood up abruptly, and the swimming air blinked out like it had never been. He wiped a sleeve across his mouth.

"Dorrie . . ." His voice was soft and strangled.

Dorrie clawed her way up the hill. She screamed, "Blasphemy!" and smacked him. I could hear the slap all the way across the clearing.

"Ouch," Larry said. "Why is she mad?"

She hit him again, hard enough to sit him down on his butt in the flowers. "How could you? How could you do such a vile thing?"

"What did he do?" Larry asked.

"He's been feeding off Rawhead and Bloody Bones just like his ancestor," I said.

Dorrie turned to me. She looked haggard, horrified, as if she had caught her brother molesting children. "It was forbidden to feed." She turned back to Magnus. "You knew that!"

"I wanted the power, Dorrie. What harm did it do?"

"What harm? What harm?" She grabbed a handful of his long hair and pulled him to his knees. She exposed the bite marks on his neck. "This is why that creature can call you. This is why one of the *Daoine Sidhe*, even a half-breed like you, is called by death." She let go so abruptly he fell forward on his hands and knees.

Dorrie sat down in the flowers and cried.

I waded into the flowers. They parted like water, but they didn't move. They were just never exactly where you were stepping.

"Jesus, are they moving out of the way?" Larry asked.

"Not exactly," Magnus said. He walked down the mound to stand at its base. He was wearing the white tuxedo from last night, or what was left of it. The smear of blood on his shirtsleeve was very bright against the whiteness.

We waded through the flowers that were moving and not moving, to join him in front of the mound.

He'd shoved his hair back behind his ears so his face was visible. And no, his ears weren't pointed. Where do these rumors get started?

He met my eyes without flinching. If he was ashamed of what he'd done, it didn't show. Dorrie was still weeping in the bluebells like her heart would break.

"So now you know," he said.

"You can't bleed a fairie, in the flesh or not in the flesh, without ritual magic. I've read the spell, Magnus. It's a doozy," I said.

He smiled at that, and the smile was still lovely, but the blood at the corner of his mouth ruined the effect. "I had to tie myself to the beastie. I had to give him some of my mortality in order to get his blood."

"The spell isn't meant to help you gather blood," I said. "It's to help the fairies kill each other."

"If it got some of your mortality, did you get some of its immortality?" Larry asked. It was a good question.

"Yes," Magnus said, "but that wasn't why I did it."

"You did it for power, you son of a bitch," Dorrie said. She came down the mound, sliding in the strange flowers. "You just had to do real glamor, real magic. My God, Magnus, you must have been drinking its blood for years, ever since you were a teenager. That's when your powers suddenly got so strong. We all thought it was puberty."

"Afraid not, sister dear."

She spit at him. "Our family was cursed, tied to this land forever in repentance for doing what you have done. Bloody Bones broke free last time someone tried to drink from his veins."

"It's been safely imprisoned for ten years, Dorrie."

"How do you know? How do you know that nebulous thing you called up hasn't been out scaring children?"

"As long as it doesn't hurt any of them, what's the harm?"

"Wait a minute," said Larry. "Why would it scare children?"

"I told you, it's a nursery boggle. It was supposed to eat bad children," I said. I had an idea, an awful idea. I'd seen a vampire use a sword, but was I absolutely sure of what I'd seen? No. "When the thing got out and started slaughtering the Indian tribe, did it use a weapon, or its hands?"

Dorrie looked at me. "I don't know. Does it matter?"

Larry said, "Oh, my God."

"It might matter a great deal," I said.

"You can't mean those killings," Magnus said. "Bloody Bones cannot manifest itself physically. I've seen to that."

"Are you sure, brother dear? Are you absolutely sure?" Dorrie's voice cut and sliced; she wielded scorn like a weapon.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"We'll have to have a witch look at this. I don't know enough about it," I said.

Dorrie nodded. "I understand. The sooner the better."

"Rawhead and Bloody Bones did not do those killings," Magnus said.

"For your sake, Magnus, I hope not," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Because five people have died. Five people who didn't do a damn thing to deserve it."

"It's imprisoned by a combination of Indian, Christian, and fairie power," he said. "It's not breaking free of that."

I walked around the mound slowly. The fleshy flowers still moved out of the way. I'd tried watching my feet, but it was dizzying, because the flowers

moved yet didn't, like trying to watch one of them bloom. You knew it did, but you could never watch the actual event.

I ignored the flowers and concentrated on the mound. I wasn't trying to sense the dead, so daylight was fine. There was magic here, lots of it. I'd never felt fairie magic before. There was something here that had a familiar taste to it, and it wasn't the Christianity. "Some kind of death magic went into this," I said. I walked around the mound until I could see Magnus's face. "A little human sacrifice, perhaps?"

"Not exactly," Magnus said.

"We would never condone human sacrifice," Dorrie said.

Maybe she wouldn't, but I wasn't so sure about Magnus. I didn't say it out loud. Dorrie was upset enough already.

"If it's not sacrifice, then what is it?"

"Three hills are buried with our dead. Each death is like a stake to hold old Bloody Bones down," Magnus said.

"How did you lose track of which hills belonged to you?" I asked.

"It's been over three hundred years," Magnus said. "There were no deeds back then. I wasn't a hundred percent sure the hill was the right hill myself. But when they raked up the dead, I felt it." He huddled in on himself as if the air had suddenly grown colder. "You can't raise the dead from that hillside. If you do it, then Bloody Bones will be loosed. The magic to stop it is complicated. Truthfully, I'm not sure I'm up to it myself. And I don't know any Indian shamans anymore."

"You have made a mockery of everything we stand for," Dorrie said.

"What did Serephina offer you?" I asked.

He looked at me, surprised. "What are you talking about?"

"She offers everyone their heart's desire. What was yours, Magnus?"

"Freedom and power. She said she'd find another guardian for Rawhead and Bloody Bones. She said she'd find a way for me to keep the power I'd borrowed from it without having to tend it."

"And you believed her?"

He shook his head. "I'm the only person in the family who has the power. We are the guardians forever as penance for stealing it, for letting it kill." He collapsed to his knees in the blue, blue flowers, his head bowed, hair spilling forward to hide his face. "I'll never be free."

"You don't deserve to be free," Dorrie said.

"Why did Serephina want you so badly?" I asked.

"She's afraid of death. She says drinking from something as long-lived as I am helps her keep death at bay."

"She's a vampire," Larry protested.

"But not immortal," I said.

Magnus looked up, strange aquamarine eyes glimmering out through his shining hair. Maybe it was the hair, or the eyes, or his being nearly covered in the strange moving, not moving flowers, but he didn't look very human.

"She fears death," he said. "She fears you." His voice was low and echoing.

"She nearly cleaned my clock last night. Why's she afraid of me?"

"You brought death among us last night."

"It can't be the first time," I said.

"She came to me for my long life, my immortal blood. Perhaps she will go to you next. Perhaps instead of running from death, she will embrace it."

The skin on my arms twitched, marching in gooseflesh up to my elbows.

"She tell you that last night?"

"There is a power involved, hurting her old enemy Jean-Claude, but in the end, Anita, she wonders if your power would make the difference. If she drank you up, would she be immortal? Would you be able to keep death from her with your necromancy?"

"You could leave town," Larry said. I wasn't sure which of us he was speaking to.

I shook my head. "Master vampires don't give up that easy. I'll tell Stirling that I won't be raising his dead, Magnus. No one else can do it but me, so it won't get done."

"But they won't give back the land," Magnus said in his strange voice. "If they simply blow up the mountain, the result might be the same."

"Is that true, Dorrie?"

She nodded. "It could be."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

Magnus crawled through the flowers, peering at me through the shining curtain of his hair. His eyes were swirling bands of green and blue, whirling until I was dizzy. I looked away.

"Raise a handful of the dead. Can you do that?" he asked.

"No sweat," I said. "But will everybody's lawyers agree to that?"

"I'll see that they do," he said.

"Dorrie?" I asked.

She nodded. "I'll see to it."

I stared at Magnus for a moment. "Will Serephina really rescue the boy?"

"Yes," he said.

I stared down at him. "Then I'll see you tonight."

"No, I'll be well and truly drunk again. It's not foolproof, but it helps drown her out."

"Fine; I'll raise you a handful of dead. Keep your land safe."

"You have our gratitude," Magnus said. He looked feral, frightening, beautiful crouched in the flowers. His gratitude might be worth something if Serephina didn't kill him first.

Hell, if she didn't kill me first.

Chapter 33

I called Special Agent Bradford late in the day. They hadn't found Xavier. They hadn't found Jeff. They hadn't found any vampires that I needed to kill, and why the hell was I calling him? I was not on this case, remember? I remembered. And yes, the two youngest victims had been sexually assaulted, but not the same day they were killed. I probably should have brought Magnus in, but he was the only one who understood the spells on Bloody Bones. He wouldn't be any good to us locked up. Dorrie knew a local witch she trusted. I'd thought that maybe Bloody Bones was our killer. I'd never seen a vampire hide itself so completely from me as the one that killed Coltrain. I'd added it to my list of suspects, but hadn't told the cops. Now I was glad I hadn't. The sexual assault had Xavier written all over it. Besides, explaining that a nursery boggle from Scotland was committing murders on the ethereal plane sounded far-fetched even to me.

The sky was thick with clouds that glowed like jewels. They shimmered and stretched across the sky like a gigantic gleaming blanket that some great beast had shredded with massive claws. Through the holes in the clouds, the sky peeked through black with a few diamond-chip stars bright enough to compete with the gleaming sky.

I stood on the hilltop staring up at the sky, breathing in the cool spring air. Larry stood beside me, looking up. His eyes reflected the glowing light.

"Get on with it," Stirling said.

I turned and looked at him. Him, Bayard, and Ms. Harrison. Beau had been with them, but I'd made him wait at the bottom of the mountain. I'd even told him if he so much as showed his face up top, I'd put a bullet in it. I wasn't sure Stirling believed me, but Beau had.

"Not an appreciator of nature's beauty, are you, Raymond?"

Even by moonlight I could see his scowl. "I want this over with, Ms. Blake. Now, tonight."

Strangely enough, I agreed with him. It made me nervous. I didn't like Raymond. It made me want to argue with him, regardless of whether I agreed. But I didn't argue. Point for me.

"I'll get it done tonight, Raymond; don't sweat it."

"Please stop calling me by my first name, Ms. Blake." He made the request through clenched teeth, but he had said "please."

"Fine. It'll be done tonight, Mr. Stirling. Okay?"

He nodded. "Thank you; now get on with it."

I opened my mouth to say something smart, but Larry said very softly, "Anita."

He was right, as usual. As much fun as it was to yank Stirling's chain, it was just delaying the inevitable. I was tired of Stirling, of Magnus, and of everything. It was time to do this job and go home. Well, maybe not straight home. I wouldn't leave without Jeff Quinlan, one way or another.

The goat gave a high, questioning bleat. It was staked out in the middle of the boneyard. It was a brown-and-white-spotted goat with those strange yellow eyes they sometimes have. It had floppy white ears and seemed to like having

the top of its head scratched. Larry had petted it in the Jeep on the drive over. Always a bad idea. Never get friendly with the sacrifices. Makes it hard to kill them.

I had not petted the goat. I knew better. This was Larry's first goat. He'd learn. Hard or easy, he'd learn. There were two more goats at the bottom of the hill. One of them was even smaller and cuter than this one.

"Shouldn't we have the Bouviers' lawyers present, Mr. Stirling?" Bayard said.

"The Bouviers waived having their attorney present," I said.

"Why would they do that?" Stirling asked.

"They trust me not to lie to them," I said.

Stirling looked at me for a long moment. I couldn't see his eyes clearly, but I could feel the wheels inside his head moving.

"You're going to lie for them, aren't you?" he said. His voice was cold, repressed, too angry for heat.

"I don't lie about the dead, Mr. Stirling. Sometimes about the living, but never about the dead. Besides, Bouvier didn't offer me a bribe. Why should I help him if he doesn't throw money at me?"

Larry didn't call me on that one. He was looking at Stirling, too. Wondering what he'd say, maybe.

"You've made your point, Ms. Blake. Can we get on with it now?" He sounded reasonable, ordinary suddenly. All that anger, all that mistrust, had had to go somewhere. But it wasn't in his voice.

"Fine." I knelt and opened the gym bag at my feet. It held my animating equipment. I had another one that held vampire gear. I used to just transfer whatever I wanted into the bag. I bought a second bag after I showed up once at a zombie raising with the wrong bag. It was also illegal to carry vampire slaying stuff if you didn't have a warrant of execution on you. Brewster's law might change that, but until then . . . I had two bags. The zombie was my normal burgundy one; the vampire bag was white. Even in the dark, it was easy to tell them apart. That was the plan.

Larry's zombie bag was a nearly virulent green with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles on it. I was almost afraid to ask what his vampire bag looked like.

"Let me test my understanding here," Larry said. My words fed back to me. He knelt and unzipped his bag.

"Go ahead," I said. I got out my jar of ointment. I knew animators who had special containers for the ointment. Crockery, hand-blown glass, mystical symbols carved into the sides. I used an old Mason jar that had once held Grandma Blake's green beans.

Larry fished out a peanut butter jar with the label still on it. Extra-crunchy. Yum-yum.

"We have to raise a minimum of three zombies, right?"

"Right," I said.

He stared around at the scattered bones. "A mass grave is hard to raise from, right?"

"This isn't a mass grave. It's an old cemetery that was disturbed. That's easier than a mass grave."

"Why?" he asked.

I laid the machete down beside the jar of ointment. "Because each grave had rites performed that would tie the dead individual to the grave, so that if you call it you have a better chance of getting an individual to answer."

"Answer?"

"Rise from the dead."

He nodded. He laid a wicked curved blade on the ground. It looked like a freaking scimitar.

"Where did you get that?"

He dipped his head, and I would have bet he was blushing. Just couldn't see it by moonlight.

"Guy at college."

"Where'd he get it?"

Larry looked at me, surprise plain on his face. "I don't know. Is something wrong with it?"

I shook my head. "Just a little fancy for beheading chickens and slitting a few goats open."

"It felt good in my hand." He shrugged. "Besides, it looks cool." He grinned at me.

I shook my head, but I let it go. Did I really need a machete to behead a few chickens, no, but the occasional cow, yeah.

Why, you may ask, didn't we have a cow tonight? No one would sell Bayard one. He had the brilliant idea of telling the farmers why he wanted the cow. The God-fearing folk would sell their cows to be eaten, but not for raising zombies. Prejudiced bastards.

"The youngest of the dead here are two hundred years old, right?" Larry asked.

"Right," I said.

"We're going to raise a minimum of three of these corpses in good enough condition for them to answer questions."

"That's the plan," I said.

"Can we do that?"

I smiled at him. "That's the plan."

His eyes widened. "Damn, you don't know if we can do it either, do you?" His voice had dropped to an amazed whisper.

"We raise three zombies a night every night routinely. We're just doing them back to back."

"We don't raise two-hundred-year-old zombies routinely."

"True, but the theory's the same."

"Theory?" He shook his head. "I know we're in trouble when you start talking about theories. Can we do this?"

The honest answer was no, but the thing that dictated more than anything else what you could raise and what you couldn't was confidence. Believing you

could do it. So . . . I was tempted to lie. But I didn't. Truth between Larry and me.

"I think we can do it."

"But you don't know for sure," he said.

"No."

"Geez, Anita."

"Don't get rattled on me. We can do this."

"But you aren't sure."

"I'm not sure we'll survive the plane ride home, but I'm still getting on the plane."

"Was that supposed to be comforting?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"It wasn't," he said.

"Sorry, but this is as good as it gets. You want certainty, be an accountant."

"I'm not good at math."

"Me either."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Alright, boss, how do we combine powers?"

I told him.

"Neat." He didn't look nervous anymore. He looked eager. Larry may have wanted to be a vampire executioner, but he was an animator. It wasn't a career choice, it was a gift, or a curse. No one could teach you to raise the dead unless you had the power in your blood. Genetics is a wonderful thing: brown eyes, curly hair, zombie raising.

"Whose ointment you want to use?" Larry asked.

"Mine." I'd given Larry the recipe for the ointment and told him which ingredients you couldn't mess with, like the graveyard mold, but there was room for experimentation. Every animator had their own special recipe. You never knew what Larry's ointment would smell like. For sharing powers you used the same ointment, so we were using mine.

For all I knew, we didn't have to use the same ointment, but I'd only shared my powers three times. Twice with the man who trained me as an animator. Each time we'd used the same ointment. I had acted as a focus all three times. Which meant I was in charge. Where I liked to be, right?

"Could I act as a focus?" Larry asked. "Not this time, but later?"

"If this comes up again, we'll try it," I said. Truth was, I didn't know if Larry had the power to be a focus. Manny, who taught me, couldn't do it. Very few animators could act as a focus. Those who could were mistrusted by the rest, and most wouldn't play with us. We would literally share our powers. A lot of animators wouldn't be willing to do that. There is a theory that you could permanently steal another's magic. But I don't buy it. Raising the dead isn't like a magic charm that someone can take with them, and leave you without. Animating is built into the cells of our bodies. It's part of us. You can't steal that.

I opened the ointment, and the spring air suddenly smelled like Christmas trees. I used a lot of rosemary.

The ointment was thick and waxy and always felt cool. Flecks of glowing graveyard mold looked like ground-up lightning bugs. I smeared ointment across Larry's forehead, down his cheeks. He untucked his t-shirt and raised it so I could dab it over his heart. Which is harder than it sounds with a shoulder holster on, but we'd both worn a gun apiece. I had left both knives and my backup gun in the Jeep. I touched his skin and could feel his heart pounding under my hand.

I handed Larry the Mason jar. He dipped two fingers into the thick ointment. He traced ointment over my face. His hand was very steady, face blank with concentration. Eyes utterly serious.

I unbuttoned the polo shirt and Larry slipped his fingers inside to touch my heart. His fingers rubbed the chain of my crucifix, spilling it out of my shirt. I slipped it back inside next to my skin. He handed the jar back to me, and I screwed the lid on tight. Wouldn't do to let it dry out.

I'd never heard of anyone doing exactly what we were about to attempt. Not the age part, but the scattered bodies. We only wanted three, but there weren't three intact bodies. Even doing them one at a time, it was chancy. How to raise just so much dead and no more when they were lying jumbled together? I had no names to use. No gravesite to encircle with power. How to do it?

It was a puzzlement.

But for now we just had to close the circle. One problem at a time.

"Make sure both of your hands have ointment on them," I said.

Larry rubbed his hands together like he was putting on lotion. "Aye, aye, boss; what next?"

I drew a deep silver bowl out of my bag. It gleamed in the moonlight like another piece of sky.

Larry's eyes widened.

"It doesn't have to be silver. There are no mystical symbols on it. You could use a Tupperware bowl, but the life of another living creature is going in here. Use something nice to show some respect, but understand that it doesn't have to be silver, or this shape, or anything. It's just a container. Okay?"

Larry nodded. "Why not have the other goats up here on top? It's going to be a trek to get them up here every time."

I shrugged. "First, they'd panic. Second, it seems cruel for them to watch their friends bite the dust, knowing they're next."

"My zoology prof would say you're humanizing them."

"Let him. I know they feel pain, and fear. That's enough."

Larry looked at me for a long moment. "You don't like doing it either."

"No. You want to help hold or feed the carrot?"

"Carrot?"

I dug a carrot, complete with leafy green top, out of the bag.

"Was that what you got in the grocery store while I waited in the car with the goats?"

"Yeah."

I held the carrot up in the air. The goat strained to the end of its picket line, towards the carrot. I let the goat lip the leafy top. It bleated and strained towards me. I let him get a little more leaf. His stubby little tail started wagging. Happy goat.

I handed Larry the silver bowl. "Put it on the ground under the throat. When the blood starts coming, catch as much as you can."

I had the machete behind my back in my right hand, carrot in my left. I felt like a child's dentist. No, nothing behind my back. Pay no attention to that huge needle. Except this needle was permanent.

The goat yanked most of the leaves off the carrot, and I waited while it snaked them up into its mouth. Larry knelt beside it, bowl on the ground. I offered the meat of the carrot to the goat. It got a taste of it, and I drew the carrot out, out, until the goat strained its neck out as far as it could, trying to get more of the hard orange flesh.

I laid the machete against the hairy throat, not cutting, gentle. The neck vibrated against the blade, straining for the carrot. I drew the blade across the neck.

The machete was sharp, and I had practice. There was no sound, only the shocked, widened eyes, and blood pouring from the neck.

Larry picked up the bowl, holding it under the wound. Blood splashed down his arms onto the blue t-shirt. The goat collapsed to its knees. Blood filled the bowl, dark and glinting, more black than red.

"There's bits of carrot in the blood," Larry said.

"It's alright," I said. "Carrot's inert."

The goat's head fell slowly forward until it touched the ground. The bowl sat under its throat, filling with blood. It had been nearly a perfect kill. Goats could be sort of pesky, but sometimes, like tonight, it all worked. Of course, we weren't done.

I laid the bloody knife against my left arm and sliced it open. The pain was sharp and immediate. I held the wound over the bowl, letting the thick drops mingle with the goat's blood.

"Give me your right arm," I said.

Larry didn't argue. He just held out his bare arm. I'd told him what would happen, but it was still a very trusting gesture. His face turned up to me was without any trace of fear. God.

I sliced his arm. He winced but didn't draw back. "Let it drip into the bowl."

He held his arm over the bowl. All the blood was red-black in the moonlight.

The beginnings of power trickled over my skin. My power, Larry's power, the power of a ritual sacrifice. Larry looked up at me with wide eyes.

I knelt beside him and laid the machete across the mouth of the bowl. I held out my left hand to him. He gave me his right. We clasped hands and pressed the wounds in our forearms together, letting the blood mingle. Larry held one side of the blood-filled bowl and I held the other. Blood trickled down our arms to drip off our elbows into the bowl, onto the bloody naked steel.

We stood still clasped together, still holding the bowl. I withdrew my hand from his slowly, then took the bowl from him. He followed my every movement like he always did. He'd be able to close his eyes and mimic me.

I walked to the edge of the circle I had in my mind and plunged my hand into the bowl. The blood was still amazingly warm, almost hot. I grasped the handle of the machete with my bloody hand and began using the blade to sprinkle blood as I walked.

I could feel Larry standing in the center of the circle that I walked like there was a rope stretched between us. As I walked, that rope stretched tighter and tighter like a rubber band being twisted. The power grew with each step, each drop of blood. The earth was hungry for it. I'd never raised the dead on ground that had seen death rituals before. Magnus should have mentioned that. Maybe he hadn't known. Charitable of me.

It didn't matter now. There was magic here for blood and death. Something that was eager for me to close the circle. Eager for me to raise the dead. Hungry.

I stood nearly where I'd begun. I was a sprinkle of blood away from closing the circle. The line of power between Larry and me was so tight it hurt. The potential power was frightening, and exhilarating. We'd awakened something old and long dormant. It made me hesitate. Made me not want to finish the circle. Stubbornness, and fear. I didn't completely understand what I was feeling. It was someone else's magic, someone's spell. We'd triggered it, but I didn't know what it would do. We could raise our dead, but it would be like walking a tightrope between the other spell and . . . something.

I felt old Bloody Bones in its barrow miles away. I felt it watching me, urging me to take that last step. I shook my head as if the fey creature could see me. I just didn't understand the spell well enough to risk it.

"What's wrong?" Larry asked. His voice sounded strangled. We were choking on unused power, and damned if I knew what to do with it.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. Ivy stood at the edge of the mountain. She was wearing hiking boots with thick white socks folded over them, baggy black shorts, and a skin-tight neon pink top, with a checked flannel shirt over it. The chain of her dangling earring gleamed in the moonlight. She'd dressed herself tonight.

All I had to do was drop that last bit of blood, and the circle would close. And I could hold this circle against her, against them all. Nothing would cross it that I didn't want to cross it. Well, within reason. Demons and angels could probably cross it, but vampires couldn't.

I felt a surge of triumph from the thing trapped in its mound. It wanted me to close the circle. I tossed the bowl and machete behind me towards the center of the circle, away from the outer edge so no blood would fall on it. Ivy started towards me in a faster-than-light display, a blur of speed. I went for my gun, felt it slide from the holster, and she smashed into me. The impact knocked the Browning out of my hand. I hit the ground with nothing in my hands but air.

Chapter 34

Ivy reared backwards, fangs flashing. Larry screamed, "Anita!" I heard the gun go off, felt the bullet hit her body. It hit her in the shoulder, twisted her body, but she turned back to me with a smile. She dug fingers into my shoulders and rolled us over, putting me on top, with one of her hands leeching to the back of my neck. She squeezed until I gasped.

"I'll snap her spine unless you throw that toy away," she said.

"She'll kill me anyway. Don't do it."

"Anita . . ."

"Now, or I'll kill her while you watch."

"Shoot her!" But there wasn't a clear shot. He'd have to walk around me and fire point-blank. Ivy could kill me twice over before he got to us.

Ivy forced my neck lower. I braced my right arm on the ground. She'd have to break something to get me down to her. If she broke my neck, it'd be over; a broken arm would just hurt.

I heard something hit the ground, a dull, heavy thump. Larry's gun. Damn.

She pressed harder on the back of my neck. I dug the palm of my hand into the ground hard enough to leave an imprint.

"I can break that arm and bring you to me. Your choice: easy, or hard."

"Hard," I said between gritted teeth.

She grabbed for my arm, and I had an idea. I collapsed forward on top of her. It caught her off guard. I had a handful of seconds to pull the chain around my neck out of my shirt.

Her hand slid through my hair like a lover's, pressing my face against her cheek, not hard, almost gentle. "Three nights from now you'll like me, Anita. You'll worship me."

"I doubt that." The chain slid forward, the crucifix pooled against her throat. There was a blinding flash of white, white light. A rush of heat that singed my hair.

Ivy screamed and clawed at the cross, scrambling from underneath me.

I stayed on all fours with the cross dangling in front of me. The blue-white flames died away because it wasn't touching vampiric flesh anymore, but it glowed like a captive star, and she backed away from it.

I didn't know where my gun was, but the machete gleamed against the dark earth. I wrapped my hand around it and got to my feet. Larry was behind me with his own cross out, held in front of him to the length of its chain. The white light with its core of blue was almost painfully bright.

Ivy screamed, shielding her eyes. All she had to do was walk away. But she was frozen, immobile in the face of the crosses, and two true believers.

"Gun," I said to Larry.

"Can't find it."

Both guns were matte black so they wouldn't reflect light at night and make us a target; now it made them invisible.

We advanced on the vampire. She threw both arms up before her face and screamed, "Nooo!" She'd backed up nearly to the edge of the circle. If she ran, we wouldn't chase her, but she didn't run. Maybe she couldn't.

I shoved the machete up under her ribs. Blood poured down the blade onto my hands. I drove the blade upward into her heart. I gave it that last little wrench to slice it up.

Her arms fell away from her face slowly. Her eyes were wide, surprised. She stared down at the blade in her stomach, as if she didn't understand what it was doing there. The flesh of her neck was black where the cross had burned her.

She fell to her knees and I went with her, keeping my grip on the machete. She didn't die. I hadn't really expected her to. I jerked the blade out of her, doing more damage. She made a low gurgling sound, but stayed on her knees. Her hands touched the blood flowing out of her chest and stomach. She stared at the gleaming darkness as if she'd never seen blood before. The blood flow was already slowing; unless I killed her soon, the wound would close.

I stood over her and brought the machete back in a two-handed grip. I put everything I had into that downswing. The blade bit into her neck, down to the spine, catching on the bone.

Ivy stared up at me with blood streaming down her neck. I swung back for another chop, and she watched me do it, too hurt to run now. I had to struggle to get the blade out of the spine, and still she blinked up at me. If I didn't finish her, she'd heal even this.

I brought the blade down one last time and felt the last edge of bone give. The blade came out the other side, and her head slid off her shoulders in a spray of blood like a black fountain. That black blood poured over the circle and closed it.

Power filled the circle until we were drowning in it. Larry fell to his knees. The light from the crosses faded like dying stars. The vampire was dead, and the crosses couldn't help us now.

"What's happening?"

I could feel the power like water on every side, choking close. I was breathing it in, soaking it up through my skin.

I screamed wordlessly and fell to the ground. I fell through layers of power, and the moment I hit the ground I could feel the power below me, stretching downward, outward.

I was lying on top of bones. They twitched like something moving in its sleep. I crawled to my knees, hands digging into the earth. I touched a long, thin arm bone, and it moved. I scrambled to my feet, slow, too slow through the pressing air, and watched.

Bones slid through the earth like water, coming together. The earth heaved and rocked underfoot like giant moles were crawling.

Larry was on his feet now, too. "What's happening?"

"Something bad," I said.

I'd never seen the dead coalesce. They always came to the surface of the grave all in one piece. I'd never realized it was like putting together a macabre jigsaw puzzle. A skeleton formed at my feet, and flesh began to crawl over it, flow like clay, molding itself back to the bones.

"Anita?"

I turned to Larry. He was pointing at a skeleton at the far edge of the circle. Half the bones were on the outside of the circle. Flesh crawled over this side of the bones and pushed against the blood circle. The earth gave one last heave, and the magic poured out over the ground. I heard it pop inside my head like a release of pressure. The air spread out, not so drowning-thick. It poured over the hillside like invisible flame, and everywhere it touched the dead formed bodies.

"Stop it, Anita. Stop it."

"I can't." The killing magic in the ground had stolen the reins. All I could do was watch and feel the power spreading outward. Enough power to ride forever. Enough power to raise a thousand dead.

I knew when Rawhead and Bloody Bones burst its prison. I felt the power sag as the thing escaped. Then the power lashed back into this bit of ground and drove us to our knees. The dead struggled from the earth like swimmers dragging themselves to shore. When nearly twenty dead stood waiting with empty eyes, the power flowed outward. I felt it seeking more dead, something else to raise. This I could stop. The fairie was gone, out of the loop; he had what he wanted.

I called the power back. I drew it into me, back through the ground, like pulling a snake by its tail out of a hole. I flung it into the zombies. Flung it into them and said, "Live."

The wrinkled flesh filled out. The dead eyes gleamed. The tattered clothing, mended itself. Dirt fell away from a long gingham dress. A woman with midnight hair, dark skin, and Magnus's startled eyes looked at me. They all looked at me. Twenty dead, all over two hundred years old, and they could have passed for human.

"My God," Larry whispered.

Even I was impressed.

"Very impressive, Ms. Blake." Stirling's voice was wrenching, as if he shouldn't have been there. He was a different part of reality from the near-perfect zombies. The fairie was out, but I'd do my job, for what good it would do any of us.

"Which of you is a Bouvier?"

There was a murmur of voices, most of them speaking French. Nearly all of them were Bouviers. The woman introduced herself as Anias Bouvier. She looked very alive.

"Looks like you'll have to move your hotel," I said.

"Oh, I don't think so," Stirling said.

I turned and looked at him.

He had a big shiny silver gun out. A nickel-plated .45. He held it like it was a movie, kind of out in front of him, waist-high. A .45 is a big gun; you

don't hit much from a waist shot. Or that's the theory. With it pointed at us, I wasn't eager to try the theory.

Bayard was pointing a .22 automatic vaguely in our direction. It didn't look like he'd held a gun before. Maybe he forgot and left the safety on.

Ms. Harrison had a nickel-plated .38 pointed very steadily at me. She stood with her legs apart, balanced on her ridiculous high heels. She held the gun in a two-handed grip like she knew what she was doing.

I flashed on her face. Her eyes in her thick makeup were a little wide, but she was rock steady. Steadier than Bayard and a better stance than Stirling. I hoped Stirling paid her well.

"What's going on, Stirling?" I asked. My voice was even, but there was an edge of power to it. I was still riding the power, enough power to put the zombies back in the ground. Enough power to do a lot of things.

He smiled visibly in the bright reflected light. "You've released the creature; now we shall kill you."

"Why the hell do you care if Bloody Bones is out?" I saw the guns and still didn't know why.

"It came into my dreams, Ms. Blake. It promised me all the Bouvier land. All of it."

"The fey breaking out won't get you the land," I said.

"It will with Bouvier dead. The deed that got us this hillside will be found to include all the land, once there's no one to fight it."

"Even with Magnus dead, you won't get the land," I said, but my voice didn't sound so sure.

"You mean his sister?" Stirling said. "She'll die just as easily as Magnus."

My stomach was tight. "Her children?"

"Rawhead and Bloody Bones loves children best of all," he said.

"You son of a bitch." It was Larry. He took a step forward, and Ms. Harrison's gun swung to him. I grabbed his arm with my free hand. I still had the machete in my hand. Larry stopped, and the gun stayed on him. I wasn't sure that was an improvement.

Tension sang down Larry's arm. I'd seen him angry, but never like this. The power responded to that anger. The zombies all turned to us in a rustle of cloth. Their glittering eyes, so alive, were waiting for us.

"Move in front of us," I whispered. The zombies began walking towards us. The closest ones moved in front of us immediately. I lost sight of the gun-toting trio. Here was hoping they'd lost sight of us.

"Kill them," Stirling said, loud, almost a yell.

I started to drop to the ground, still holding Larry's arm. He resisted. Gunfire exploded around us and he kissed dirt, flat.

With the side of his face pressed to the ground, he said, "What now?"

Bullets were hitting the zombies. The bodies jerked and twitched. Some of the very alive faces stared down, alarmed as holes appeared in their bodies. But there was no pain. The panic was reflex.

Someone was yelling; it wasn't us. "Stop it, stop it. We can't do this. We can't just kill them."

It was Bayard.

"It is late for an attack of conscience," Ms. Harrison said. It may have been the first time I'd heard her voice. She sounded efficient.

"Lionel, you are either with me, or against me."

"Shit," I muttered. I wormed forward, trying to see what was happening. I pushed aside a billowing skirt just in time to see Stirling shoot Lionel in the stomach. The .45 gave out a booming sound and nearly jerked itself out of Stirling's hand, but he held on. From less than ten inches away, you could shoot nearly anything with a .45.

Bayard collapsed to his knees, looking up at Stirling. He was trying to say something, but no sound came out.

Stirling took the gun from Bayard's hand and put it in his own jacket pocket. He turned his back on Bayard and walked out onto the hard, dry soil.

Ms. Harrison hesitated, but she followed her boss.

Bayard fell onto his side with a dark flood draining out of him. His glasses reflected the moonlight, making him look blind.

Stirling and Ms. Harrison were coming in after us. Stirling pushed among the dead as if they were trees and he was wading through. The dead didn't move for him. They stood there like stubborn, fleshy barriers. I hadn't told them to move, so they wouldn't.

Ms. Harrison had stopped trying to force her way through. Moonlight glinted on her shiny gun as she used a zombie's shoulder to sight on us.

"Kill her," I whispered.

The zombie she was using as a sighting post turned towards her. She made an exasperated sound, and the dead closed on her.

Larry looked at me. "What did you tell them?"

Ms. Harrison was screaming now. High, frightened shrieks. She fired her gun again and again. It clicked empty. Slow, eager hands and mouths latched onto her body.

"Stop them," Larry said. He grabbed my arm. "Stop them."

I could feel the hands tearing bits of flesh from Ms. Harrison. Teeth sank into her shoulder, tore that tender neck, and I knew when blood flowed into that mouth.

Larry was along for the ride. "Oh, God, stop it!" He was on his knees pulling at me, begging.

Stirling hadn't fired a shot. Where was he?

"Stop," I whispered.

The dead froze like automatons, stopped in mid-action. Ms. Harrison slid to the ground in a moaning heap.

Stirling came in from one side, the big gun pointed very steadily at us, out in a two-handed grip like it was supposed to be held. He'd made his way behind us while the zombies worked over Ms. Harrison. He was standing nearly on top of us. It took a lot of nerve to come that close to the zombies.

Larry's fingers dug into my arm. "Don't, Anita; please don't." Even staring down the barrel of a gun, Larry stuck to his morals. Admirable.

"If you say a word, Ms. Blake, I will kill you."

I just stared up at him. I was so close to him I could have reached out and touched his pants leg. The .45 was pointed very solidly at my head. If he pulled the trigger, I was gone.

"Careless of you not to have the zombies attack both of us."

I agreed with him, but all I could do was stare up at him. I still had the machete in one hand. I tried not to tighten my grip on it. Not to draw attention to it.

I must have made some betraying motion because he said, "Take your hand away from the knife, Ms. Blake, slowly."

I didn't do it. I stared up at him and his gun.

"Now, Ms. Blake, or . . ." He thumbed back the hammer on the gun. Not necessary but always dramatic.

I let go of the machete.

"Hand away from it, Ms. Blake."

I moved my hand away. I didn't move away from him and the gun. I wanted to, but I made myself be still. A few inches wouldn't make the gun less deadly, but it might make a big difference if I tried to jump him. Not my first choice, but if we ran out of other options . . . I wouldn't go down without a fight.

"Can you lay these zombies to rest, Mr. Kirkland?"

Larry hesitated. "I don't know."

Good boy. If he'd said no, Stirling might have killed him. If he'd said yes, he'd have killed me.

Larry let go of my arm and moved just a little away from me. Stirling's eyes flicked to him, back to me, but the gun barrel never wavered. Damn.

Larry was on his knees, still moving away from me, forcing Stirling to keep an eye on both of us. The .45 moved an inch from the center of my forehead, towards Larry. I took a breath and held it. Not yet, not yet . . . If I tried something too soon, I'd be dead.

Larry lunged for something on the ground. The .45 swung towards him.

I did two things at once. I slipped my left hand behind Stirling's leg and pulled, and I grabbed his groin with my right and shoved with all I was worth. I was doing the wrong thing to cause a lot of pain, but it tipped him over. He fell flat on his back with the gun swinging back towards me.

I'd hoped he'd drop the gun, or be slower. He didn't, and he wasn't. So I only had a split-second to decide whether to try to pull his privates out of his body, and cause as much pain as possible, or go for the gun. I went for the gun, not trying to grab it, but sweeping my hands into his arms. If I could control his arms, I could control the gun.

The gun went off. I didn't look. No time. Larry was either hit, or he wasn't. If he wasn't, I had to get that gun. Stirling's arms were on the ground, my hands keeping them there, but I had no leverage. He raised his arms off the ground, and I couldn't stop him. I shoved my feet into the ground and forced his arms over his head, but it had become a wrestling match now, and he outweighed me by sixty pounds.

"Drop the gun." Larry's voice behind me. I couldn't look. Couldn't take my attention from the gun. We both ignored him.

"I will shoot you," Larry said.

That got Stirling's attention. His eyes flicked to Larry; for just a moment his body hesitated. I kept my grip on his wrists and shoved myself forward, up his body. I dug my knee into his groin, trying to reach the ground through him. He let out a strangled cry. His hands spasmed.

I moved my hands up and touched the gun. His grip tightened. He wasn't letting go.

I came up beside Stirling's arms and braced his arms against my hip. I pulled the arm against my body, just one quick movement, and snapped his arm at the elbow. The hand went numb, and the gun fell into my hand.

I crawled away from him, the gun in one hand.

Larry was standing over us with a gun pointed at Stirling. Stirling didn't seem to care. He was rocking back and forth over the ground, trying to cradle both injuries at once.

"I had a gun. You could have just moved away from him," Larry said.

I just shook my head. I trusted Larry to shoot Stirling. I just hadn't trusted Stirling not to shoot Larry. "I had my hands on the gun. Seemed a shame to let it go," I said.

Larry pointed the gun at the ground, but kept a nice two-handed grip on it. "It's yours; you want it?"

I shook my head. "Keep it until we get to the car."

I looked up at the zombies. They were watching me with calm eyes. There was blood on the mouth of the dark-haired woman. It had been her teeth that tore into Ms. Harrison's neck.

Ms. Harrison was lying very still on the ground. Passed out, at the very least.

The power was beginning to unravel at the edges. If I was going to put everybody back in the ground, it had to be now.

"Go back into the ground. Back to your graves. Go back, all of you, go back."

The dead walked upon the earth, moving among one another like children in a game of musical chairs. Then one by one they lay down upon the earth, and it swallowed them like water. The earth moved and buckled in waves, until they were all tucked out of sight.

There were no bones protruding from the earth. The earth was smooth and soft, as if the entire top of the mountain had been dug up and smoothed over.

The power shredded, flowing back into the ground, or wherever the hell it came from. We had to get down to the Jeep and start making phone calls. There was a rampaging fey on the loose. We at least had to get cops out to the Bouviers' place.

Larry knelt beside Ms. Harrison. He touched her neck. "She's alive." His hand came away stained with blood.

I looked at Stirling. He'd stopped rolling around and was just sort of huddled on his side, his arm held at an obscene angle. The look he gave me was part pain and part hate. If he ever got a second chance, I was dead.

"Shoot him if he moves," I said.

Larry got to his feet and pointed the gun dutifully at Stirling.

I went to check on Bayard. He lay on his side, half-crumpled around the wound in his belly. A wide black circle showed where his blood had soaked into the thirsty ground. I knew dead when I saw it, but I knelt on the far side of his body so I could keep an eye on Stirling. It wasn't that I didn't trust Larry. I just didn't trust Stirling.

There was no pulse in his neck. The skin was already cooling in the soft spring air. It hadn't been an instant death. Lionel Bayard had died while we were fighting. He'd died alone, and he'd known he was dying, and that he'd been betrayed. It was a bad way to die.

I stood up and looked at Stirling. I wanted to kill him for Bayard, for Magnus, for Dorrie Bouvier, for her kids. For being a heartless son of bitch.

He'd witnessed me using zombies as a weapon. Using magic as a killing weapon was punishable by death. Self-defense was not an acceptable plea.

I stared very calmly across at Stirling and the unconscious Ms. Harrison, and realized that I could have crossed that ground and put a bullet in both of them, and slept just fine.

Sweet Jesus.

Larry glanced my way, gun still steady, but he'd taken his eyes off Stirling for a second. Not fatal, tonight, but I'd have to break him of it. "Is Bayard dead?"

"Yeah." I started back towards them, wondering what I was going to do. I didn't think Larry would let me shoot them in cold blood. Part of me was glad. Part of me wasn't.

Wind blew against my face. There was a rustling sound in the wind, like that made by trees or cloth. There were no trees on top of this mountain. I turned with the big .45 in a two-handed grip, and Janos was just there, on the edge of the mountain. Staring at his skeletal face, I think I stopped breathing. He was dressed all in black; even his hands were hidden inside black gloves. For one wild moment he looked like a floating skull. "We have the boy," he said.

Chapter 35

The crosses were still in plain sight. They glowed with a soft white radiance. No burning light, not yet. We weren't in active danger, but the cross grew warm even through my shirt.

Janos put a hand in front of his eyes, the way I would guard my eyes from the sun in the car. "Please put those away, so we may talk."

He hadn't asked us to take them off. I could live with tucking my cross in my shirt. It could come out again later. I spilled the chain back down my shirt one-handed, keeping the .45 ready. I realized then that I didn't know if the gun had silver ammo. Now was not the time to ask. Stirling would probably lie anyway.

Larry slipped his own cross out of sight. The glowing night was just a little dimmer.

"Alright, now what?" I asked.

Kissa came up behind him, Jeff Quinlan in front of her like a shield. His glasses were gone, and he looked even younger without them. She had his arm behind his back, at an angle that could be painful with just a tug.

He was wearing a cream-colored tuxedo with a cummerbund done two shades darker to match the bow tie. Kissa was in black leather. Jeff stood out against her in wonderful contrast.

I swallowed; my pulse threatened to choke me. What was going on? "You alright, Jeff?"

"I guess so."

Kissa gave a little tug.

He winced. "I'm okay." His voice was a little higher than it should have been. a little scared.

I held out my hand to him. "Come here."

"Not yet," Janos said.

I'd tried. "What do you want?"

"First drop your guns."

"If we don't?" I thought I knew the answer, but I wanted him to say it.

"Kissa will kill the boy, and you will have done all this for nothing,"

"Help me," Stirling said. "She's mad. She attacked Ms. Harrison with zombies. When we tried to defend ourselves, she nearly killed us."

That was probably what he'd say in court, too. And a jury would believe him. They'd want to believe him. I would be the big, bad zombie queen, and he would be the innocent victim.

Janos laughed, his paper-thin skin threatening to split, but never quite doing it. "Oh, no, Mr. Stirling, I watched from the darkness. I saw you murder the other man."

Fear flashed across his face. "I don't know what you mean. We hired him in good faith. He turned on us."

"My master opened your mind to Bloody Bones. She freed him to whisper in your dreams about land, money, and power. All that you desire."

"Serephina sent Ivy to kill me, or rather for me to kill her. So she'd be sure to have Bloody Bones free," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Serephina told her she had to rid herself of the disgrace of losing to you."

"By killing me."

"Yes."

"What if she'd succeeded?"

"My master had faith in you, Anita. You are death come among us. A breath of mortality."

"Why'd she want the thing freed?" I seemed to be asking that a lot tonight.

"She wishes to taste immortal blood."

"This is all sort of elaborate for a little extra kick in your food."

He gave another rictus grin. "You are what you eat, Anita. Think upon it."

I did, and my eyes widened. "She thinks by drinking immortal blood, she'll be truly immortal?"

"Very good, Anita."

"It won't work," I said.

"We shall see," he said.

"What do you get out of it?" I asked.

He cocked his skeletal head to one side, like a decaying bird. "She is my master, and she shares her bounty."

"You want immortality, too?"

"I want power," he said.

Great. "And it doesn't bother you that the thing will kill children? That it's already killed some?"

"We feed, Bloody Bones feeds, what does it matter?"

"And Bloody Bones is going to just let you feed off it?"

"Serephina has found the spell that Magnus's ancestor used. She controls the fairie."

"How?"

He shook his head and smiled. "No more delays, Anita. Drop the gun, or Kissa will taste him before your eyes."

Kissa ran a hand through Jeff's short hair, a caressing gesture. It pushed his head to one side, baring a long smooth line of neck.

"No!" Jeff tried to pull away, and Kissa yanked on his arm hard enough that he cried out.

"I will break the arm, boy," she growled.

The pain held him immobile, but his eyes were wide and terrified. He looked at me. He wouldn't plead, no begging, but his eyes did it for him.

Kissa's lips pulled back from her teeth in a flashy snarl, fangs visible.

"Don't," I said, and hated it. I tossed the .45 to the ground. Larry threw my gun down. Disarmed twice in one night. It was a record even for me.

Chapter 36

"Now what?" I asked.

"Serephina awaits us at the party. She sent suitable clothing for you. You can change in the limousine," Janos said.

"What party?" I asked.

"The one we have come to invite you to. She is delivering Jean-Claude's invitation in person."

That didn't sound good. "I think we'll pass on the party."

"I don't think so," Janos said.

Another vampire stepped out of the trees. It was the brunette that had tormented Jason. She stalked forward in a long black dress that covered her from neck to ankle. She slid her arms around Janos, nuzzling his neck, giving us a glimpse of her pale back. Only a fine webbing of black straps covered her back. The dress moved like it would slide down her body at the least movement, but somehow it stayed in place. Fashion-plate magic. Her dark hair was in a looping braid to one side of her face. She looked good for someone I'd seen ripped to rotting bits of flesh.

I couldn't keep the surprise off my face.

"I thought she was dead," Larry said.

"So did I."

"I would never have risked Pallas if I truly thought your werewolf could kill her," Janos said.

A second figure came out of the dark woods. Long white hair framed a thin, fine-boned face. His eyes glowed blood-red. I'd seen vampires with glowing eyes before, but they always glowed the color of their irises. No one who had ever been human had red irises. He wore a proverbial black tux and tails, complete with a nearly ankle-length cape.

"Xavier," I said softly.

Larry looked at me. "This is the vampire that's been killing everyone?"

I nodded.

"Then what's he doing here?"

"That's how you found Jeff so quickly. You're working with Xavier," I said. "Does Serephina know?"

Janos smiled. "She is master of all, Anita, even him." He said the last like it impressed him.

"You won't get to munch on your fairie for long if the cops trace Xavier to you."

"Xavier was following orders. He was on a recruitment drive." Janos seemed to like saying that last bit like it was an in-joke.

"Why did you want Ellie Quinlan?"

"Xavier likes a bit of young boy now and then. It is his one weakness. He turned the girl's lover, and the boy wanted her with him forever. Tonight she will rise and feed with us."

Not if I could help it. "What do you want, Janos?"

"I was sent to make your life easier," he said.

"Yeah, right."

Pallas uncurled herself from Janos. She glided over to Stirling.

Stirling stared up at her, cradling his broken arm. It had to hurt like hell, but it wasn't pain on his face now, it was fear. He stared up at the vampire; all the arrogance had slipped away. He looked like a kid who'd discovered the thing under the bed was really there.

A third vampire moved out of the trees. It was the blonde half of the pair. She looked fine, like she'd never rotted right before our eyes. I'd never known a vampire that could look so dead, and not be.

"You remember Bettina," he said.

Bettina wore a black dress that left her pale shoulders bare. A throw of black cloth went over one shoulder and down the front of the dress. A gold belt held it in place, cinching her waist tight. Her yellow braid was wound in a crown atop her head.

She walked towards us, and her face was perfect. The dry, rotting skin had been a bad dream, a nightmare. I wish. Fire, Jean-Claude had said, fire was the only surety. I thought he'd meant just Janos.

Janos reached over and grabbed Jeff from Kissa. He gripped the boy's shoulders with both black-gloved hands. His fingers were longer than they should have been, as though they had an extra joint. Against the white of Jeff's jacket, you could tell that the index finger was as long as the middle finger. Another myth that was true, at least for Janos. Those long, strange fingers dug into Jeff just a little.

Jeff's eyes were so wide it looked painful.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Kissa was dressed in the same black vinyl outfit she'd had on in the torture room, though it couldn't be the exact same one, because the first one had Larry's bullet hole in it. She stood beside him, her hands in fists. She stood very still, as only the dead can, but there was a tension to her, a wariness. She wasn't happy. Her dark skin was strangely pale. She hadn't fed yet tonight. I could always tell . . . with most vampires. There are always exceptions.

Xavier moved in a shadow of that impossible blurring speed past Stirling, to stand beside the still unconscious Ms. Harrison. Larry shook his head. "Did he just appear there, or did I see him move?"

"He moved," I said.

I expected Janos to send Kissa out to join the others, but he didn't. A figure crawled over the lip of the hill, dragging itself into sight like it hurt to move. Pale hands dug into the naked dirt, pale arms bare to the spring night. The head drooped towards the ground, short dark hair hiding the face. With one upward motion, the face raised into the moonlight. Thin, bloodless lips drew back from fangs. The face was ravaged with hunger. I knew the eyes were brown only because I'd seen them staring lifelessly at the ceiling of Ellie Quinlan's bedroom. There was no pull to her eyes, but down in the dark depths a flicker of something burned. It wasn't sanity; hunger, maybe. An animal's emotion, nothing human. Maybe after they'd let her feed for the first time, she'd have time for emotions; now everything had narrowed down to one basic need.

"Is that who I think it is?" Larry asked.

"Yeah," I said.

Jeff tried to run to her. "Ellie!"

Janos jerked him tight against his chest, one arm around his shoulders like an embrace. Jeff struggled against that arm, tried to run to his dead sister. I was with Janos on this one. The newly risen have a tendency to eat first and ask questions later. The thing that had once been Ellie Quinlan would have gladly torn out her baby brother's throat. She'd have bathed in the blood, and minutes, or days, or weeks later, she would realize what she'd done. She might even regret it.

"Go, Angela; go to Xavier," Janos said.

"A new name won't change who she was," I said.

Janos looked at me. "She is two years dead, and her name is Angela."

"Her name is Ellie," Jeff said. He'd stopped struggling, but he looked at his dead sister with fresh horror, as if just beginning to really see her.

"People will recognize her, Janos."

"We shall be careful, Anita. Our new angel will see no one that we do not wish."

"Well, isn't that cozy?" I said.

"It will be," he said, "once she has drunk her fill."

"I'm impressed that you dragged her this far without feeding her first."

"I did it." Xavier's voice was surprisingly pleasant. It was disturbing hearing that voice coming from that pale, ghostly face.

I looked at him, careful to avoid his gaze. "Impressive," I said.

"Andy brought her over, and I brought Andy over. I am her master."

Since Andy hadn't shown up, I was betting I'd killed him in the woods with Sheriff St. John. Probably not a good time to bring that up. "And who is your master?"

"Serephina, for now," Xavier said.

I glanced at Janos. "You haven't worked out which of you is top dog, have you?" I smiled.

"You waste our time, Anita. Our master awaits you eagerly. Let us finish this. Call our angel."

Xavier held out one pale hand. Ellie made a noise low in her throat, and scrambled on all fours over the raw dirt. The long black dress tangled around her legs. She tore at it impatiently. The cloth ripped like paper in her hands, the skirt shredding around her bare legs. She grabbed Xavier's hand like it was a lifeline. She bent over his wrist, and only his hand in her hair kept her from trying to feed on him.

"There is no sustenance for you from the dead, Angela," Janos said. "Feed on the living."

Pallas and Bettina knelt on either side of Stirling. Xavier fell gracefully beside Ms. Harrison, his black cape spread out around him like a pool of blood. He kept hold of Ellie's hair the whole way down, forcing her snarling face to touch the dirt. Her hands dug at his hands, mewling sounds crawling from her throat. Nothing that was human should have made sounds like that.

"Ms. Blake," Stirling said, "you're the law. You have to protect me."

"I thought you were going to see me in court, Raymond. Something about me attacking you and Ms. Harrison with zombies."

"I didn't mean it." He glanced up at the kneeling vampires, then back to me. "I won't tell. I won't tell anyone. Please."

I just looked at him. "Begging for mercy, Raymond?"

"Yes, yes, I'm begging."

"Like the mercy you showed Bayard?"

"Please."

Bettina caressed Stirling's cheek. He jerked like it had burned. "Please!"

Shit.

"We can't just watch," Larry said.

"You have another suggestion?"

"You never give anyone over to the monsters, not for any reason. It's a rule," he said.

It was my rule. I'd believed in it once, back when I'd been sure who the monsters were.

He was pulling the chain out from inside his shirt.

"Don't do this, Larry. Don't get us killed for Raymond Stirling."

His cross spilled out in the open air. It glowed like Serephina's eyes. He just looked at me.

I sighed, and brought out my own cross. "This is a bad idea."

"I know," he said. "But I can't just watch."

I stared at his earnest face, and knew it was true. He couldn't just watch. I could have. I might not have enjoyed it, but I could have let it happen. More's the pity.

"What are you doing with your little holy objects?" Janos asked.

"Stopping this," I said.

"You want them dead, Anita."

"Not like this," I said.

"Would you have me let you use your gun and waste all this blood?"

He was offering to let me shoot them. I shook my head. "I don't think that's an option anymore."

"It was never an option," Larry said.

I let that go; no need to disillusion him. I walked towards Pallas and Bettina. Larry walked towards Ellie and Xavier, cross held outward to the length of its chain, as if that made it work better. Nothing wrong with a little dramatic gesture, but I'd have to clue him in that it didn't really help. But later.

The cross's glow grew until it was like wearing a 100-watt lightbulb naked around your neck. I saw the world as a black circle outside the glow.

Xavier was on his feet facing Larry, but the others had crawled away from their prey, beaten by the light.

"Thank you, Ms. Blake," Stirling said. "Thank you." He grabbed my leg with his good hand, fawning over me. I fought an urge to shake him off.

"Thank Larry; I'd have let you die."

He didn't seem to hear me. He was nearly crying with relief, slobbering all over my Nikes.

"Back away from them, please." The voice was female and honey-thick. I blinked over the glow of the cross and saw Kissa holding a gun. A revolver that looked like a Magnum; hard to tell in the glow. Whatever it was, it'd make a big hole.

"Move away from them, now."

"I thought Serephina didn't want me dead."

"Kissa will shoot your young friend."

I stopped in mid-breath and let it out. "If you kill him, I won't cooperate with whatever you have in mind for tonight."

"You misunderstand us, Anita," Janos said. "My master does not require your cooperation. Everything she wants from you can be taken by force."

I stared at him over the shining light. He had Jeff cuddled against him; most heartwarming.

"Take off your crosses and throw them far out into the trees," Janos said. He ran a gloved hand along both sides of Jeff's face, planting a kiss on his cheek.

"Now that we know you would give up your safety for both young men, we have one more hostage than is absolutely necessary." He put his hands on either side of Jeff's neck, just holding, not hurting, not yet.

"Take off your crosses and throw them into the woods. I will not ask a third time."

I stared at him. I didn't want to give up my cross. I glanced at Larry. He was still facing off against Xavier, his cross glowing bravely. Shit.

"Kissa, shoot the man."

"No," I said. I undid the chain. "Don't shoot him."

"Don't do it, Anita," Larry said.

"I can't watch them shoot you, not if I can stop it." I let the chain pool in my hand; the cross shone with a blue-white flame like burning magnesium. It was a bad idea to throw it away. A real bad idea. I tossed it into the woods. The cross glittered like a falling star and died out of sight in the dark.

"Now your cross, Larry," Janos said.

Larry shook his head. "You'll have to shoot me."

"We'll shoot the boy," Janos said. "Or perhaps I'll feed upon him while you watch." He pinned Jeff against himself with one arm, while his other hand dug into the boy's hair, holding him immobile, neck exposed.

Larry looked at me. "What do I do, Anita?"

"You have to decide this one for yourself," I said.

"They'll really kill him, won't they?"

"Yeah, they will."

He cursed under his breath and let the cross fall against his chest. He undid the chain and threw it out into the woods with a lot of force to it, as if he could throw his anger with it.

When the light from his cross died away, we stood there in the darkness. The moonlight that had seemed so bright before was a dim substitute.

My night vision returned in stages. Kissa stepped closer, the gun still pointed at us. The first time I'd seen her, she had exuded sexuality, power; now

she was docile, quiet, as though some of her power had been drained away. She looked pale and drawn. She needed to feed.

"Why haven't they let you feed tonight?" I asked.

"Our master is not a hundred percent sure of Kissa's loyalty. It needed testing, didn't it, my dark beauty?"

Kissa didn't answer. She stared at me with large, dark eyes, but the gun never wavered.

"Feed, children, feed."

Pallas and Bettina walked over to Stirling. They stared at me over him. I stared back.

Stirling grabbed my leg. "You can't let them have me. Please, please."

Pallas knelt by him. Bettina walked around to the side I was on. She pulled Stirling's hand off my leg. The vampire's lower back brushed my legs. I took a step back, and Stirling started screaming.

Xavier and Ellie had already started to feed on the blessedly unconscious Ms. Harrison. Larry looked at me, hands out, empty, helpless.

I didn't know what to say.

"Don't touch me, don't touch me!" Stirling batted at Pallas with his good hand, and the vampire caught it easily, held it.

"At least put him under," I said.

Pallas looked up at me. "After he tried to kill you? Why show him mercy?"

"Maybe I don't want to hear him scream."

Pallas smiled. Her eyes flashed dark fire. "For you, Anita, anything."

She grabbed Stirling's chin, forcing him to meet her gaze.

"Ms. Blake, help me. Help . . ." The words died in his mouth.

I watched everything slide out of his eyes, until they were empty and waiting.

"Come to me, Raymond," Pallas said. "Come to me."

Stirling sat up, his one good arm embracing the vampire. He tried to use the broken arm, but it wouldn't bend at the elbow.

Bettina bent the broken arm backward and forward, laughing. Stirling never reacted to the pain. He snuggled against Pallas. The look on his face was one of happiness, joy. Eagerness.

Pallas sank fangs into his neck. Stirling spasmed for a second, then relaxed and began making soft noises in his throat.

Pallas moved Stirling's head to one side, sucking on the wound but leaving enough room on the other side for someone else. Bettina sank fangs into the exposed flesh.

The two vampires fed, heads so close together their hair mingled, gold and black. And Raymond Stirling made happy noises while they killed him.

Larry walked away to the edge of the clearing, hugging his arms tight across his chest.

I stayed where I was. I watched. I had wanted Stirling dead. It would be cowardly to look away. Besides, I should have to watch. I needed to remember

who the monsters were. Maybe if I forced myself not to look away, not to blink, I wouldn't forget again.

I stared at Stirling's happy, eager face, until his arm dropped away from Pallas's back, and his eyes closed. He passed out from blood loss and shock, and the vampires hugged him tight, and fed.

His eyes flew open wide, and a gurgling sound crawled out of his throat. Fear screamed out of his eyes. Pallas raised a hand and stroked Stirling's hair, a gesture you'd use on a frightened child. The fear died out of his eyes, and I watched the last light die with it. I watched Raymond Stirling die, and knew I would remember that last look of terror in my dreams for weeks to come.

Chapter 37

There was a rush of wind that raised a fine cloud of dirt. Jean-Claude appeared as if conjured from the air itself. I had never been so happy to see him. I didn't run to his arms, but I moved to stand near him. Larry followed me. Jean-Claude wasn't always the safest refuge, but right now he looked pretty damn good.

He was dressed in one of his white shirts. This one had so much lace on the front it looked fluffy. A short white jacket hit him just at the waist. More lace peeked from the sleeves of the jacket. He wore tight white pants with a black belt. The belt matched his velvet black boots.

"I did not expect you here, Jean-Claude," Janos said. I couldn't tell for sure, but he sounded surprised. Goody.

"Serephina delivered her invitation in person, Janos, but it was not enough."

"You surprise me, Jean-Claude," he said.

"I surprised Serephina, as well." He sounded terribly calm. If he was afraid standing outnumbered on the hilltop, it didn't show. I'd have loved to know how he'd surprised Serephina.

Jason walked up the far side of the hill, from the direction of the Jeep. He wore black leather pants that looked like they'd been poured on him, short black boots, and no shirt. There was what looked like a silver-studded dog collar around his neck, and a black glove on either hand, but other than that he was naked from the waist up. I hoped Jason had chosen his own outfit for tonight.

The right side of his face was bruised from chin to forehead as though something large had hit him.

"I see your pet joined the struggle," Janos said.

"He is mine in every way, Janos. They are all mine."

Just this once I let it go. If my choice was belonging to Jean-Claude or to Serephina, I knew what my vote would be.

Larry moved so close to me that I could have taken his hand. Maybe he didn't like being included in Jean-Claude's menagerie.

"You have lost that air of humbleness that I found so appealing, Jean-Claude. Have you refused Serephina's invitation altogether?"

"I will come to Serephina's party, but on my own with my people around me."

I glanced at him. Was he crazy?

He frowned. "Serephina wanted you at the party in chains."

"We can all live with this choice, Janos."

"Are you saying you would challenge us all here and now?" There was an edge of laughter in his voice.

"I will not die alone, Janos. In the end you may have me, but it will cost you dearly."

"If you will truly come of your own free will, then come," Janos said.

"Our master calls; let us answer that call." Janos, Bettina, and Pallas were just suddenly airborne. It wasn't flying, or levitation. I had no word for it. Larry whispered, "Dear God." The first time you see a vampire fly is a red-letter night.

The others scattered into the trees in that blurring motion that made them disappear almost as fast as flying. Ellie Quinlan had vanished with the rest of them. Her brother had been carried away by Janos. Until that moment I hadn't known a vampire could carry more than its own body weight while "flying." Learn something new every night.

We found our guns and walked down the mountainside. Our crosses were well and truly lost. Even Jean-Claude walked, and I knew he had other methods of transportation. Was it considered impolite to fly when others couldn't?

The Jeep was still where I'd parked it. The night was still thick. It was hours until dawn, and I just wanted to go home.

"I took the liberty of choosing clothes for you to wear tonight," Jean-Claude said. "They are in the Jeep."

"I locked the Jeep," I said.

He just smiled at me.

I sighed. "Fine." When I tried the handle it was unlocked. Clothes were folded in the passenger seat. They were black leather. I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Your clothes, *ma petite*, are on the driver's side. Those are Lawrence's clothes."

Larry peered over my shoulder. "You've got to be kidding."

I walked around the Jeep and found a clean pair of black jeans. The tightest pair I owned. A bloodred tank top that I didn't remember buying. It felt like silk. There was a black duster coat that I had never seen. When I tried it for length it hit me at mid-calf, and billowed capelike when I moved. I liked the coat. The silk blouse I could have done without.

"Not bad," I said.

"Mine is bad," Larry said. "I don't even know how to get into these pants."

"Jason, help him dress." Jason picked up the bundle of leather and carried them to the back of the Jeep. Larry followed him but didn't look happy.

"No boots?" I said.

Jean-Claude smiled. "I didn't think you would give up your jogging shoes."

"Damn straight."

"Change quickly, *ma petite*; we must arrive at Serephina's before she decides to kill the boy just for spite."

"Would Xavier let her kill his new toy?"

"If she is truly his master, he has no choice. Now, dress, *ma petite*, quickly." I walked towards the far side of the Jeep but that brought me within earshot, and nearly eyesight, of Larry. I stopped and sighed. What the hell.

I turned my back on Jean-Claude and slid out of my shoulder holster. "How did you guys get away from Serephina?" I slipped my shirt over my head. I fought the urge to look back. I knew Jean-Claude was watching; why check?

"Jason jumped her at a crucial moment. It was distraction enough for us to flee, but little else. I'm afraid the room is something of a mess."

His voice was so mild I had to see his face. I slid the red tank top on and turned. He was standing closer than I'd thought, nearly within touching distance. He stood there in his white clothes, spotless and perfect.

"Step a few paces back, please. I'd like a little privacy."

He smiled, but he did what I asked. A first.

"Had she underestimated you that badly?" I asked. I changed jeans as quickly as I could. I tried not to think of him watching. It was too embarrassing.

"I was forced to flee, *ma petite*. Janos calls her master, and he defeated me. I cannot stand against her, not in a fair fight."

I slipped the shoulder holster back on, threading the belt I'd been wearing back through it. The straps chafed a little with no sleeves but it was better than not having it. I got the Firestar from under my seat and tucked the inner pants holster down the front of my jeans. It would show, even with the duster. I finally put it at the small of my back, though it wasn't my first or even second choice of places. I got the silver knives out of the glove compartment and strapped them to my forearms. I also got out a small box. It held two extra crosses. Vampires seemed to always be taking them from me.

Jean-Claude watched it all with interest. His dark eyes followed my hands like he was memorizing the movements.

I put the duster on and walked a few steps to get the feel of everything. I drew both knives just to make sure the coat sleeves weren't too tight. I drew both guns and still didn't like the Firestar. I finally shifted the inner pants holster to one side. It dug into my side hard enough to bruise, but I could draw it in a reasonable time. That was more important than comfort tonight. I slipped an extra clip for both guns in the coat pockets. They were loaded with nonsilver bullets. It made me nervous to only have the silver bullets that were in the guns, but Rawhead and Bloody Bones was going to make his appearance sometime

tonight. Magnus might even be there. I wanted ammo for everything I'd meet tonight.

Larry came out from behind the Jeep. I bit my lip to keep from laughing. It wasn't that he looked bad, he just looked so uncomfortable. He seemed to have trouble walking in the black leather pants.

"Just walk naturally," Jason said.

"I can't," Larry said. He had a silk tank top that was the twin of mine except it was blue instead of red. He had short black boots on. The black jacket he'd borrowed from Jason last night completed the outfit.

I looked at the boots.

"Black jogging shoes perhaps, *ma petite*, but white jogging shoes with black leather? I do not think so."

"I feel ridiculous," Larry said. "How can you wear this all the time?"

"I like leather," Jason said.

"We must be off," Jean-Claude said. "Anita, if you would drive?"

"I thought you might want to fly," I said.

"It is important we arrive together," he said.

Larry and I added salt to our pockets. With the extra ammo clips in one pocket and salt in the other, my coat hung a little crooked, but hey, we weren't going to a fashion show. We all slid into the Jeep. There was a lot of protesting from the back seat. "These pants are even more uncomfortable sitting down."

"I will remember your dislike of leather in the future, Lawrence."

"My name is Larry."

I drove the Jeep down the rutted road that led out of the construction site. "Serephina wants to be immortal." I turned onto the main road and headed back towards Branson, though of course we'd be stopping at Serephina's on the way.

Jean-Claude turned in his seat to stare at me. "What are you saying, *ma petite*?"

I told him. I told him about Rawhead and Bloody Bones, and Serephina's plan. "She's mad."

"Not entirely, *ma petite*. It might not give her immortality, but it would give her undreamt-of power. The question remaining is, how did Serephina grow powerful enough to snag Janos before she fed off Magnus and Bloody Bones?"

"What do you mean?"

"Janos was in the old country. He would not have left voluntarily. He followed her. Where did she get the power to subjugate him?"

"Maybe Magnus isn't the first fairie she's fed off," I said.

"Perhaps," he said, "or perhaps she has found other food."

"What other food?"

"That, *ma petite*, is the question that I would very much like answered."

"Thinking of changing diets?" I asked.

"Power is always tempting, *ma petite*, but for tonight I was thinking of more practical matters. If we can discover her source of power, we might be able to undo it."

"How?"

He shook his head. "I do not know, but unless we can find some trick to pull out of our hats tonight, *ma petite*, we are doomed." He sounded remarkably calm about it. I wasn't calm. My pulse was thundering so fast I could feel it in my throat and wrists. Hear it like a rushing in my ears. Doomed: it had a bad ring to it. With Serephina waiting at the other end, it had a very bad ring to it indeed.

Chapter 38

We walked up the stone steps to the porch. Moonlight and soft darkness filled the porch. There were no thick, unnatural shadows, no hint of what lay inside. It was just an abandoned house, nothing special. The nervous flutter in my stomach didn't buy it either.

Kissa opened the door. Candlelight spilled behind her from the open door to the far room. No pretense tonight that the empty room was all there was. Sweat beaded on her face, golden drops in the warm light. She was still being punished. I wondered why, but it wasn't my biggest problem.

Kissa led us through that open door without a word. Serephina sat on her throne in the corner of the big room. She was dressed in a white ball gown like Cinderella, her hair piled atop her head. Diamonds like a string of fire glimmered in her hair as she nodded her greeting.

Magnus was curled at her feet in a white tux and tails. Gloves, a white top hat, and a cane were laid next to his knees. His long chestnut hair was the only color in the picture. Every master vamp I'd ever met had been into dramatic presentation. Janos and his two females stood in black behind the throne, like a living curtain of darkness. Ellie lay on her side in the cushions, looking almost alive. Even in her torn and stained black dress she looked content, like a cat that was full of cream. Her eyes sparkled, lips curled with a secret smile. Ellie, alias Angela, was enjoying being undead. So far. Kissa stalked to them, and knelt on the side away from Magnus. Her black leather blended with Janos's cloak. Serephina stroked Kissa's sweating face with a white-gloved hand.

Serephina smiled, and it was lovely until you glimpsed her eyes. They glowed with a pale phosphorescence. You could still get a hint of pupil, but it was sinking fast. Her eyes matched her dress. Now that was color-coordinating.

Jeff and Xavier were missing. I didn't like that. I opened my mouth to ask, and Jean-Claude looked at me. For just this once, the look was enough. He was the master; I was playing servant. Fine, as long as he asked the right questions.

"We have come, Serephina," Jean-Claude said. "Give us the boy, and we will leave you in peace."

She laughed. "But I will not leave you in peace, Jean-Claude." She turned her softly glowing eyes to me. It was like being looked at by twin flashlights, and just as human. "Niña, I am so happy to see you."

I stopped breathing for a second. Niña: it had been my mother's nickname for me. Something flared in her eyes, like a distant glimpse of fire; then the light banked back to a cool wavering light. She wasn't trying to capture me with her eyes. Why? Because she was that sure of me.

My skin suddenly went cold. That was it. I would have said it was arrogance, but I believed it. She offered something better than sex, more fulfilling than power. Home. Lie or not, it was a good offer.

Larry touched my hand. "You're shaking."

I swallowed hard. "Never admit how scared you are out loud, Larry; ruins the effect."

"Sorry."

I stepped away from him; no sense in huddling. I glanced at Jean-Claude, sort of silently asking if I was about to break vampire protocol.

"She has acknowledged you as she would another master. Answer as one." He didn't seem bothered by that; I was.

"What do you want, Serephina?" I asked.

She stood, gliding across the carpeted floor. It looked like whatever was under that full skirt wasn't legs. Feet just didn't move like that. Maybe she was levitating. However she managed it, she kept coming closer. I wanted desperately to back away. I didn't want her close to me.

Larry moved a step behind me. Jason moved a step up to Jean-Claude's other side. I stood my ground. It was the best I could do.

Something flickered in her eyes, like a distant glimpse of movement through a fringe of trees. Eyes didn't do that. I looked away and realized I didn't remember looking at her eyes. So how was I looking away?

I felt her move towards me. Her gloved hand came into view. I jerked back and looked up at the same time. I barely glanced at her face, but it was enough. Her eyes had fire burning down a long dark tunnel, as if the inside of her head fell away into an impossible darkness, and some small creatures had lit a fire against that darkness. I could warm my hands by that flame forever.

I screamed. Screamed and covered my eyes with my hands.

A hand touched my shoulder. I jerked away and screamed again. "*Ma petite*, I am here."

"Then do something," I said.

"I am," he said.

"I will have this one by sunrise." She motioned to me. She took a gliding step towards Jason. She caressed her gloved hand down his bare chest. He stood there and took it. I wouldn't have let her touch me on a dare.

"I will give you to Bettina and Pallas. They will teach you to enjoy rotting flesh."

Jason stared straight ahead, but his eyes widened just a little. Bettina and Pallas had moved from behind the throne to stand a few feet behind Serephina. Dramatic gestures are us.

"Or perhaps I will force you to change into wolf form until it becomes more natural than this human shell." She slid a finger under the collar on his throat. "I will chain you to my wall, and you will be my guard dog."

"Enough of this, Serephina," Jean-Claude said. "The night bleeds away. These petty torments are beneath one of your power."

"I am feeling petty tonight, Jean-Claude, and soon I will have the power to be as petty as I feel." She glanced at Larry. "He will join my flock." She stared up at Jean-Claude. I hadn't realized he was taller. "And you, my lovely catamount, will serve us all for all eternity."

Jean-Claude stared down at her, utterly arrogant. "I am Master of the City now, Serephina. We cannot torture each other. We cannot steal each other's possessions, no matter how attractive they are."

It took me a second to realize the possessions he was referring to were us.

Serephina smiled. "I will have your businesses, your money, your lands, and your people before the night is out. Did the council really think I would be content with the crumbs from your table?"

If she challenged him officially, we were all dead. Jean-Claude couldn't take her, and neither could I. Distraction, we needed a distraction. "You're wearing enough diamonds to buy your own businesses, your own house."

She turned those glowing eyes to me, and I half wished I had kept quiet. "Do you think I live in this house because I cannot afford better?"

"I don't know."

She glided back to her throne and settled onto it, smoothing her skirts. "I do not trust your human laws. I will remain the secret we have always been; let others walk in the spotlight. I will be here when such modern thinkers are no more." She suddenly slashed out with one hand.

Jean-Claude staggered. Blood flew from his face, splattering on his white shirt and jacket in bright crimson flecks. Drops of it clung to my hair and cheek.

She slashed again, and another cut exploded on the other side of his face, splashing Jason with Jean-Claude's blood.

Jean-Claude stayed on his feet. He never cried out. He didn't touch the wounds. He stood there utterly still; except for the blood there was no movement to him. His eyes were drowning pools of sapphire floating in a mask of blood.

Naked muscle twitched in his cheek. Bone glistened at jaw and cheek. It was a frighteningly deep wound. But I knew he could heal it. Horrible as it looked, it was a scare tactic. I kept telling that to the pounding of my heart. I wanted to go for a gun. To shoot the bitch. But I couldn't shoot them all. I wasn't even sure Janos could be shot.

"I don't have to kill you, Jean-Claude. Hot metal in your wounds, and they'll be permanent. Your beautiful face ravaged for all time. You can still pretend to be Master of the City, but I will rule. You will be my puppet."

"Say the word, Serephina," Jean-Claude said. "Say it and be done with these games." His voice was bland, as normal as it ever was. His voice gave nothing away, not pain, or fear, or terror.

"Challenge: is that the word you want to hear, Jean-Claude?"

"It will do." His power crawled over my skin like cool fire. The power lashed out suddenly; I felt it sweep past me like a giant fist. It slammed into Serephina, scattering the air currents. Kissa caught the edge of it and fell back from the throne, thrown nearly prone among the cushions.

Serephina threw back her head and laughed. The laughter died in mid-motion, gone like it had never been. Her face was a mask with eyes of white fire. Her skin seemed to grow paler, whiter until it was like translucent marble. Veins showed under her skin like lines of blue flame. Her power flowed through the room like rising water, deeper and deeper until when she released it we would all be drowned.

"Where are your ghosts, Serephina?" I asked.

I thought for a second she would ignore me, but that masklike face turned slowly, slowly towards me.

"Where are your ghosts?"

Even though she was looking straight at me, I couldn't tell if she heard. It was like trying to read the face of an animal; no, the face of a statue. There was no one home.

"Can't control Bloody Bones and your ghosts at the same time? Is that it? Did you have to give up one of them?"

Serephina rose to her feet, and I knew she was floating, rising on tiny currents of her own power to hover above the cushions. She floated slowly upward towards the ceiling, and it was impressive. I was babbling, trying to buy time, but time for what? What the hell could we do?

A voice echoed in my head. "Crosses, *ma petite*; do not be bashful on my account." I didn't argue or hesitate.

The cross spilled out of my shirt in a ball of light so bright it was painful. I squinted and looked away, only to find Larry's cross behind me blazing to life.

Jean-Claude cowered beside me, hunched away, arms shielding his face. Serephina shrieked and half-fell to the floor. She could stand before a cross, but she couldn't do tricks in front of one. She landed in a heap of silken skirts. The other vamps shielded their faces, hissing.

Magnus rose from the cushions. He stalked towards us. Jason stepped in front of Jean-Claude, moving to stand in front of me. He glanced at me with amber eyes; his beast stared at me over the glow of the cross, and had no fear. For a heartbeat I was glad I had silver bullets just in case.

Serephina said, "No, Magnus, not you."

Magnus hesitated, staring at Jason. A thin growl crawled out of Jason's throat. "I can take him," Magnus said.

There was a sound from the open door to the basement. Something was coming up the stairs. Something heavy. The stairs creaked in protest. A hand came out of the darkness, large enough to palm my head. The fingernails were long and dirty, almost clawlike. Ragged clothes clung to huge, square shoulders. The thing was at least ten feet tall. It had to bend sideways to come through the door, and when it stood, its head brushed the ceiling, and you couldn't pretend it was human anymore.

Its huge, oversized head had no skin. The flesh was raw and open like a wound. The veins pulsed and throbbed with blood flowing through them, but it didn't bleed. It opened a mouth full of broken yellow teeth and said, "I am here." It was shocking to hear words out of that mouth, that face. Its voice was like the sound at the bottom of a well; deep, and rough, and lost.

The room suddenly seemed small. Rawhead and Bloody Bones could have reached out one long arm and touched me. Not good. Jason had moved back a step to rejoin us. Magnus had moved back to Serephina's side. He was staring at the creature as wide-eyed as the rest of us. Had he never seen it in the flesh before?

"Come to me," Serephina said. She held out her hands to the creature, and it moved towards her, surprisingly graceful. It had a liquidness to its walk that was all wrong. Nothing that big and that ugly should move like quicksilver, but it did. In that movement I saw Magnus and Dorrie. It moved like something beautiful.

Serephina cradled its huge, dirty hand in her white-gloved hands. She pushed back the ragged sleeve, laying the thick, muscled wrist bare.

"Stop her, *ma petite*."

I glanced down at Jean-Claude, who was still cowering before the crosses' fire. "What?"

"If she drinks from it, the crosses may not work against her."

I didn't question him; there was no time. I drew the Browning and felt Larry draw his gun.

Serephina bent over the fairie's wrist, mouth wide, fangs glistening.

I pulled the trigger. The bullet smacked into the side of her head. The force rocked her, and blood dribbled down. She could be shot. Life was good. Janos threw himself in front of her, and it was like trying to hit Superman. I pulled the trigger twice, staring at his dead-eyed face from just over a yard. He smiled at me. Silver bullets just weren't going to do it.

Larry had stepped around Jean-Claude. He was firing at Pallas and Bettina. They kept coming. Kissa stayed on the floor. Ellie seemed frozen in the face of the crosses.

Bloody Bones stood there like it was waiting for orders, or didn't give a damn. It was staring at Magnus like it recognized him. It was not a friendly look.

Serephina's voice came from behind Janos's protective body. "Give me your wrist."

The fairie gave a ragged smile. "Soon I will be free to kill you." It looked at Magnus when it said it.

I didn't really want something the size of a small giant mad at me, but I didn't want Serephina to have its power either. I fired into its raw head, and I might as well have spit at it. The shot did earn me a dirty look. "I have no quarrel with you," the fairie said. "Do not make one."

Staring into its monstrous face, I agreed. But what could I do? "What'll we do?" Larry asked. He'd moved to stand nearly back to back with me. Bettina and Pallas had stopped just out of touching range, held at bay by the crosses,

not the guns. Jean-Claude had gone to his knees, face cradled away from the glare of the crosses, but he didn't crawl away. He stayed within the protective touch of that light.

Silver bullets wouldn't hurt the fey, so . . . I hit the button on the Browning and popped the clip out. I fished in my pocket for the extra clip and slid it home. I aimed at the thing's chest, where I hoped the heart was, and pulled.

Bloody Bones bellowed. Blood blossomed on its ragged clothes. I knew when it felt Serephina bite into its flesh. Power whirled through the room, raising every hair on my body. For a heartbeat I couldn't breathe; there was too much magic in the room for something as mundane as breathing.

Serephina rose slowly from behind Janos's dark form. She levitated to the ceiling, bathing in the light of the crosses, smiling. The bullet wound in her head was healed. Her eyes licked white flame around her face, and I knew we were going to die.

Xavier appeared in the door to the basement. He held a sword in his hands, but it was heavier, softer-edged than any blade I'd ever seen. He stared at Serephina and smiled.

"I have fed you," Bloody Bones said. "Free me."

Serephina threw her hands skyward, caressing the ceiling. "No," she breathed, "never. I will drink you dry and bathe in your power."

"You promised," Bloody Bones said.

She stared at him, floating; her eyes of fire were even with his raw face. "I lied," she said.

Xavier cried, "No!" He tried to come closer, but the crosses kept him just out of reach.

I threw a handful of salt on Serephina and Bloody Bones. She laughed at me. "What are you doing, Niña?"

"Never break your word to the fey," I said. "It negates all bargains."

A sword appeared in Bloody Bones' hands, just appeared like the fey had grabbed it out of mid-air. It was the one I'd seen Xavier carrying at the Quinlans' house. How many scimitars as long as my upper body could there be? He stabbed it through Serephina's chest, spitting her in midair like a butterfly. Normal steel shouldn't have touched her, but backed by the fairie's magic, it could. He pinned her to the wall, driving the hilt into her chest. He tore the sword out of her, twisting it, doing as much damage as he could.

She shrieked and slid down, leaving a bloody trail on the naked wall.

Bloody Bones turned back to the rest of us. It touched fingers to its bleeding chest. "I will forgive you this wound, because you freed me. When he is dead, there will be no more wounds." He drove the sword into Magnus. The move was so quick, it looked like stop action. He was as fast as Xavier. Shit.

Magnus fell to his knees, mouth wide with a scream he had no breath to make. Bloody Bones drew the sword upward like he had with Serephina, and it reminded me of the wounds that the boys had had.

If Bloody Bones would help us escape Serephina and company, I had no problem with that, but then what? It drew the sword outward, and Magnus was

still alive, staring up at me. He reached out to me, and I could have let him die. Bloody Bones raised the blade back for a final blow.

I pointed the Browning at it. "Don't move. Until you kill him, you're mortal, and bullets can kill you."

The fairie froze, staring at me. "What do you want, mortal?"

"You killed the boys in the woods, didn't you?"

Bloody Bones blinked at me. "They were wicked children."

"If you get out of here, will you kill more wicked children?"

Bloody Bones looked at me, blinked, then said, "It is what I do. What I am."

I fired before I could think. If it moved first, I was dead. The bullet took it between the eyes. It staggered backwards, but didn't go down.

"*Ma petite*, the crosses, or I cannot help you." Jean-Claude's voice was a harsh whisper.

I slipped the cross inside my shirt; a second later Larry followed suit. The room was suddenly darker, colder with just the candlelight. Bloody Bones raced forward, and it was just a blur. I fired into it and didn't know if I hit it or not.

The sword swung out to meet me, and Jean-Claude was suddenly there hanging onto the arm, sending it off balance. Larry moved up beside me, and we both fired into the fey's chest.

It shook Jean-Claude off, sending him skittering into a wall. Larry and I stood our ground, shoulder to shoulder. I saw the sword coming like a blur of silver, and knew I couldn't get out of the way in time.

Xavier was suddenly in front of me, the strange sword blocking Bloody Bones' blade. The steel blade stopped an inch from my face. Xavier's sword was notched where the steel had bit into it. The strange sword shoved upward through Bloody Bones' chest. The fairie bellowed, slicing at Xavier, but he was in too close for the fairie's giant sword.

Bloody Bones collapsed to its knees. Xavier twisted the sword as if hunting for the heart. He jerked the sword out in a wash of gore. The fairie collapsed on its stomach, shrieking. It tried to raise itself. I pressed the barrel of the Browning against its skull and fired as fast as I could. From point-blank range you didn't need to aim. Larry moved up beside me and fired. We emptied the clips into it, and it was still breathing. Xavier drove the sword through its back, pinning it to the floor. Its chest rose and fell, struggling for air.

I switched the Firestar and changed its clip to nonsilver. Three shots more, and as if a critical mass had been reached, the head exploded in a rush of bone and blood and thicker, wetter things.

Xavier was on its back when it blew. We stood there covered in bloody brains. Xavier drew the sword out of its back. The sword came out notched, dented from contact with bone. We stood there by the dead giant, the two of us isolated in one clear moment of understanding.

"The sword's cold iron, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. The pupils of his eyes were scarlet as a cherry, not the blood color of an albino, but truly red. Humans didn't have eyes like that.

"You're fey," I said.

"Don't be silly. The fairie can't become vampires, everyone knows that."

I stared at him, and shook my head. "You tampered with Magnus's spell. You did this to him."

"He did this to himself," Xavier said.

"Did you help Bloody Bones kill the teenagers, the children, or did you just give him the sword?"

"I fed him my victims when I grew tired of them."

I had eight shots left in the Firestar. Maybe he saw the thought move behind my eyes. "Neither lead nor silver bullets will harm me. I am proof against both."

"Where's Jeff Quinlan?"

"He's down in the basement."

"Get him."

"I don't think so." And suddenly there was sound again, movement again, besides us. He'd bespelled me, and bad things had been happening while I'd been caught.

Jason was coughing blood on the carpet. If he'd been human, I'd have said he was dying. Being a lycanthrope, he might live to see morning. One of the vampires had hurt him badly. I didn't know which one.

Jean-Claude was lying under a pile of vampires made up of Ellie, Kissa, Bettina, and Pallas. His voice came out in a thundering yell, echoing through the room. It was impressive, but not enough. "Do not do it, *ma petite*."

Janos stood near the throne with Larry. They'd tied his hands behind his back with one of the cords that held the drapes. A piece of cloth was shoved in his mouth. Janos had one pale spider hand around Larry's neck.

Serephina was propped on her throne, black blood pouring out of her. I'd never seen anyone lose so much blood so quickly. Her chest was torn open so wide I had a glimpse of a frantically beating heart.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"No, *ma petite*." Jean-Claude struggled to move and couldn't. "It is a trap."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"She wants you, necromancer," Janos said.

I let that sink in for a minute. "Why?"

"You have stolen her immortal blood from her. You will take its place."

"It wasn't immortal," I said. "We proved that."

"It was powerful, necromancer, as you are powerful. She will drink you up and live."

"What about me?"

"You will live forever, Anita, forever."

I let the "forever" part go; I knew better.

"She will take you and kill him anyway," Jean-Claude said.

He was probably right, but what could I do? "She let the girls go."

"You do not know that, *ma petite*. Have you seen them alive?" He had a point.

"Necromancer." Janos's voice jerked me back to him. Serephina lay propped on the throne beside him. Blood had drenched the white dress, turning it black, plastering it to her thin body.

"Come, necromancer," Janos said. "Come now, or the human suffers."

I started forward and Jean-Claude yelled, "No!"

Janos slashed outward with one pale spider-hand, just above Larry's body. Larry's white shirt sliced open, and blood soaked it. He couldn't scream with the gag, but if Janos hadn't held him, he'd have fallen.

"Drop all your weapons and come to us, necromancer."

"*Ma petite*, do not do this. I beg you."

"I have to do this, Jean-Claude. You know that."

"*She* knows that," he said.

I looked at him, struggling helplessly under three times his body weight in vampires. It should have been ridiculous, but it wasn't.

"She doesn't just want you for herself. She doesn't want me to have you. She will take you to spite me."

"I invited you to come play this time, remember?" I said. "It's my party."

I walked towards Janos. I tried not to look behind him, not to see what else I was moving towards.

"*Ma petite*, don't do this. You are an acknowledged master. She cannot take you by force. You must consent. Refuse."

I just shook my head and kept going.

"Your weapons first, necromancer," Janos said.

I laid both guns on the floor.

Larry was shaking his head furiously. He made little protesting noises. He struggled, failing to his knees. Janos had to release his grip on his neck to keep from strangling him.

"Now your knives," Janos said.

"I don't . . ."

"Do not try to lie to us here and now."

He had a point. I put the knives on the floor.

My heart was hammering so hard I could barely breathe. I stopped just in front of Larry. I stared into Larry's blue eyes. I pulled out the gag, somebody's silk scarf.

"Don't do it. God, Anita, don't do it. Not for me. Please!"

Fresh slashes cut his shirt; more blood flowed. He gasped, but didn't scream.

I looked up at Serephina. "You said this slashing only works with an aura of power."

"He has his own aura," Janos said.

"Let him go. Let them all go, and I'll do it."

"Do not do this for me, *ma petite*."

"I'm doing it for Larry; doesn't cost any more to throw everybody in."

Janos glanced at Serephina. She was slumped to one side, eyes half-closed. "Come to me, Anita. Let me touch your arm, and they will release them all, my word, one master to another."

"Anita, no!" Larry struggled not to get away but to come after me.

Janos slashed his hand through the air, and the sleeve of Larry's jacket flew with blood. Larry screamed.

"Stop it," I said. "Stop it." I stalked towards him. "Don't touch him again. Don't ever touch him again."

I spit the last words in his face, staring up into his dead eyes and feeling nothing. A hand brushed my arm, and I jerked, gasping. I'd let anger carry me those last few steps. What I was about to do scared me too much to think about it.

Serephina had lost a glove. It was her bare hand that encircled my wrist, not too tight, not painful in the least. I stared at her hand on my arm and couldn't talk past the beating of my own heart.

"Release him," she said.

The minute Janos let him go, Larry tried to come to me. Janos gave him a casual slap that knocked him to the floor and sent him skidding back a couple of yards.

I stayed frozen with her hand on my arm. For one awful moment I thought they'd killed him, but he moaned and tried to get back up.

I glanced past Larry, and met Jean-Claude's eyes. He'd been after me for years; now here I was letting another master vamp sink her fangs into me.

Serephina jerked me to my knees, squeezing the bones of my arm so hard I thought she'd broken it. The pain brought me up to meet her eyes. They were solid perfect brown, so dark they were nearly black. Those eyes smiled at me gently.

I smelled my mother's perfume, her hair spray, her skin. I shook my head. It was a lie. It was all a lie. I couldn't breathe. She knelt over me, and when her face came forward it was my mother's thick, black hair that fell against my cheek.

"No! It's not real."

"It can be as real as you want it to be, Niña." I stared up into those eyes, and I fell down the long black tunnel of her eyes. I fell towards that tiny flame. I reached towards it. It would warm my flesh, comfort my heart. It would be all things, all people, everything to me.

Distant and dreamlike I heard Jean-Claude scream my name, "Anita!" But it was too late. Her fire warmed me, made me feel whole. The pain was such a small price to pay.

The black tunnel collapsed behind me until there was nothing but the darkness and the flicker of Serephina's eyes.

Chapter 39

I dreamed. I was very small. Small enough that I fit all in my mother's lap, only my feet stuck off the edge of her knees. When she wrapped her arms around me I was so safe, so sure that nothing could ever hurt me as long as Mommy was here. I laid my head against her chest. I could hear the beat of her heart against my ear. A strong, sure rhythm that pounded louder and louder against my face.

The sound woke me. But I wasn't awake. The darkness was so complete it was like being blind. I lay in my mother's arms in the dark. I'd fallen asleep in bed with her and Dad. Her heart pounded against my ear, and the rhythm was wrong. Mommy had a heart murmur. The beat of her heart was a fraction of a second slow, a hesitation, then two quick thumps to catch up. The heart beating against my skin was as regular as a clock.

I tried to raise up, off her, and bumped my head against something hard and firm. My hands slid over the body that I was pinned to. I touched a satin dress with smooth jewels sewn into it. I lay there in the absolute dark and tried to roll off her. I slid into the crook of her arm. Her naked flesh slid along my bare shoulders, boneless as the dead, but her heart filled the darkness even with me struggling not to touch her.

Our bodies were molded against each other. It was not a coffin built for two. Sweat broke out on my skin in a rush. The dark was suddenly chokingly close, hot. I couldn't breathe. I tried to roll onto my back. Tried to roll off her, and I couldn't. There wasn't room.

Every small struggle made her boneless body move, jiggling the soft, loose flesh. I couldn't smell my mother's perfume anymore. I smelled old blood, and a stale, neck-ruffling smell that I'd smelled before. Vampires.

I screamed and tried to do a push-up to get some distance, and the lid moved. I stayed on my arms, shoving my back into the satin and wood. The lid slammed backwards, and I was suddenly straddling her body, my upper body raised in a half push-up.

Dim light edged the lines in her face. The careful makeup looked wrong, like a badly made-up corpse. I scrambled out of the coffin, nearly falling to the floor.

Serephina's coffin sat on the stage in the Bloody Bones bar and grill. Ellie lay curled at the base of the stage. I stepped around her, half-expecting her to grab at my ankles, but she did not move. Not even to breathe. She was the newly dead, and with the sun up she was truly dead.

Serephina wasn't breathing either, but her heart was pounding, beating, alive. Why? For my comfort? Because of my touch? Hell, I didn't know. If I got out, I'd ask Jean-Claude. If he was alive. If she had kept her word.

Janos lay in the middle of the floor, on his back, hands folded on his chest. Bettina and Pallas were snuggled up against him, one on either side. A coffin lay on the floor. I had no way of knowing what time of day it was. I would have bet that Serephina didn't have to sleep all day. I was getting out of here.

"I told her you wouldn't sleep all day."

The voice jerked me around. Magnus was behind the bar, leaning his elbows on its smooth surface. He was slicing a lime with a very sharp-looking

knife. He looked at me with his green-blue eyes. His long auburn hair spilled around his face. He straightened up suddenly, stretching his back. He was wearing one of those frilly shirts that you rent for wearing with a tux. The shirt was pale green and brought out the green in his eyes.

"You scared me," I said.

He leaped over the bar easily, landing on his feet light as a cat. He smiled, and it wasn't a friendly smile. "I didn't think you scared that easy."

I took a step back. "You recovered damn fast."

"I drank immortal blood; it helps." He stared at me with a heat in his eyes that I didn't like at all.

"What's wrong with you, Magnus?"

He swept his long hair to one side. He pulled the collar of his shirt until the first two buttons popped, spinning to the floor. There was a new bite mark on the smooth skin of his neck.

I took another step back towards the door. "So what?" I ran my hand over my neck and found my own bite marks. "So we've got a matching pair. So what?"

"She forbade me to drink. She said you'd sleep all day. That she'd keep you sleeping all day, but I thought she'd underestimated you."

I took another step towards the door.

"Don't, Anita."

"Why not?" But I was afraid I knew the answer.

"Serephina told me to keep you here until she wakes." He looked at me, and it was a sad, woebegone expression. "Just have a seat. I'll fix you something to eat."

"No, thanks."

"Don't run, Anita. Don't make me hurt you."

"Who's in the other coffin?" I asked.

The question seemed to surprise him. He let his hair fall back over his neck. The shirt gaped open over his chest. I didn't remember noticing his chest this much last time, or the way his hair swept over his shoulders. The ointment must have worn off.

"Stop it, Magnus."

"Stop what?"

"Glamor won't work on me."

"Glamor would be a more pleasant alternative," he said.

"Who's in the coffin?"

"Xavier and the boy."

I ran for the door. He was suddenly behind me, impossibly fast, but I'd seen faster. Most of them just happened to be dead. I didn't try to open the door. I turned into his body, and it surprised him. He fell into a shoulder roll almost textbook perfect. I tried to throw him three feet under the floor, everything I had.

He lay stunned for a second. I flung open the door. The spring sunlight poured in and fell on Janos and his women. Janos's face twisted away from the light. I didn't wait to see more. I ran.

Screams followed me out into the sunlight. I heard the door slam behind me, but didn't look back. I hit the gravel parking lot running with everything I had. I heard him pounding up behind me. I wasn't going to outrun him. I waited until the last second, stopped running, and kicked him. He saw it coming and dived under it, taking my other leg out from under me, sending us both to the ground. I threw a handful of gravel at his face, and he hit me in the jaw with his fist. There is a frozen moment after a really good shot to the face. A moment of shock, of paralysis where all you can do is blink. Magnus's face appeared over me. He didn't ask if I was alright; that had been the point. He picked me up and flung me over his shoulders. I got a nice view of the ground about the time I was able to move again.

I walked my hands up his back, trying to get enough leverage to swing a two-handed grip at his shoulders. I let him brace my lower body, but before I could try it, he kicked the door open and tossed me to the floor, none too gently. He leaned against the door and locked it.

"You just had to do it the hard way, didn't you?"

I got to my feet and backed away from him, which took me closer to the vampires. Not an improvement. I backed towards the bar. There had to be a back door. "I don't know any other way, Magnus."

He took a deep breath and pushed away from the door. "It's going to be a long day, then."

I put a hand on the smooth wood of the bar. "Yeah," I said. The half-sliced lime and the knife lay just a few inches away. I stared at Magnus, trying very hard not to look at the knife again. To not draw attention to it. Which isn't nearly as easy as it sounds.

His eyes flicked to the knife. He smiled and shook his head. "Don't do it, Anita."

I put my hands on the bar and pushed myself up on it. I heard him coming but I didn't look back. Never look back; something is always gaining on you. I grabbed the knife and rolled over the bar at the same time. Magnus's face appeared above the bar too fast. I wasn't ready. All I could do was look up at him with the knife gripped in my hand. If he'd been just a little slower, I'd have stabbed him in the throat, or that had been the plan.

Magnus crouched on the bar, staring down at me. His aquamarine eyes glittered. Lights and colors played in them, reflecting things that were not there. He stayed on the bar above me, swaying slightly on the balls of his feet, one hand on the bar for balance. His hair had fallen forward, trailing thick strands across his face. He was going all feral on me, like he had at the mound. But this time he wasn't trying to be one of the good guys. I expected him to leap down on me, but he didn't. Of course, he wasn't fighting me, he was just trying to keep me from leaving.

I glanced at what was under the bar. Liquor in bottles, clean glasses, a tub of ice, some clean towels, napkins. None of it looked helpful. Shit. I got slowly to my feet, back pressed to the wall, as far from Magnus as I could get. I began to inch my way towards the side of the bar towards the door. Magnus paced me, sidling on the bar, making the awkward movement graceful.

He was faster than me, stronger than me, but I was armed. The knife was good quality, made for slicing food, not people, but a good knife is a good knife. It's versatile. I had to force myself not to squeeze too tight on the handle, to relax. I'd get out of this. I would. My eyes flicked to Serephina's open coffin. I thought I saw her breathe.

Magnus jumped me. His body slammed into mine, and I drove the knife into his stomach. He grunted, and his weight rode me to the floor. I drove the knife in hilt-deep. His fist closed over my hand, and he rolled off me, taking the knife with him.

I scrambled around the edge of the bar on all fours. Magnus was there, yanking me to my feet by one arm. Blood had soaked the front of his shirt. He raised the bloody knife in front of my face. "That hurt," he said. He laid the edge of the blade against the side of my throat. It felt like my pulse was jumping out to meet the blade. He started backing up, pulling me with him.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You'll see," he said. I didn't like that he wouldn't tell me.

His feet bumped against Ellie's body. I could glimpse Serephina's coffin behind him, if I rolled my eyes. Hard to move your head when a knife's at your throat. He pulled on my arm, and I didn't go. I leaned back on my heels, just a little, aware of the knife, but I was more afraid of Serephina than any blade.

"Come on, Anita."

"Not until you tell me what we're doing." I spoke very carefully around the knife.

Ellie lay motionless, boneless, dead at our feet. Magnus's blood dropped onto her empty face. If it had been one of the others, they might have licked the blood off even in their slumber, but Ellie was well and truly dead. She was the newly risen, empty, waiting for her "personality" to rebuild, if it ever did. I'd seen vamps that never recovered. Never became close to the human being they'd once been.

"I'm going to put you in the coffin and lock it until Serephina wakes up."

"No," I said.

Magnus squeezed my arm like his fingers were searching for the bone. If he didn't break it, it would be a hell of a bruise. I didn't cry out, but it was an effort. "I can hurt you, Anita, in all sorts of ways. Just get in."

"Nothing you can do to me scares me as much as getting in that coffin again."

I meant it. Which meant unless he was really going to kill me, the knife didn't work anymore. I turned my head into the blade. He was forced to move it away from my skin before I drove it into myself.

I stared at him from about a foot away, and saw something in his eyes that I hadn't seen before. He was afraid.

"Bloody Bones died because he shared your mortality. Were you harder to kill before, Magnus? No immortality to draw from, is that it?"

"You are just too damn smart for your own good," he said softly.

I smiled. "Mortal just like the rest of us; poor baby."

He smiled, a quick baring of teeth. "I can still take more damage than you can dish out."

"If you really believed that, you wouldn't be putting me back in the coffin."

His hand moved in a blur of speed that was almost vampire-quick. He hit my arm, and it took a handful of seconds to realize he'd cut me. Blood welled from the cut and dripped down my arm. He switched his grip from my upper arm to my wrist, faster than I could take advantage of it.

I watched the blood drip down my arm towards my elbow. It wasn't much of a cut, might not even leave a scar; of course, on my left arm, who could tell? "Couldn't you have cut the right arm? I haven't got nearly as many scars on that one."

He made one quick slice downward and opened my right arm from my shoulder damn near to my elbow. "Always happy to oblige a lady."

The slice hurt and was deeper than the first one. Me and my big mouth. Blood ran down my arm in a thin crimson line. Blood on my left arm trembled on my elbow and fell with a soft plop onto Ellie's cheek. The blood slid down her skin, into her mouth. A tingle of magic went up my spine. I held my breath. I could feel it. I could feel the body at our feet.

It was broad daylight. I shouldn't have been able to raise even a zombie, let alone a vampire. It was impossible; yet I could feel the body feel the magic. I knew it was mine if I wanted it. I wanted it.

"What's wrong?" Magnus jerked my arm, bringing my eyes back to his face. I'd been staring at the vampire. Hadn't meant to, it was just so damn unexpected.

I could feel the magic just out of reach, almost there. But how to push it over the edge? How? I smiled at Magnus. "You planning to just whittle me down until I get in the coffin?"

"I could."

"The only way I'm going in that coffin is dead, Magnus, and Serephina doesn't want me dead." I stepped into him; he started to move back, but forced himself to stand his ground. Our bodies were nearly pressed against each other. Great. I ran my hand under his shirt, along his bare skin.

Magnus's eyes widened. "What are you up to?"

I smiled, and traced the trail of fresh blood upward to the wound. I trailed the edge of the wound, and he made a small sound like it had hurt. I smoothed my one free hand over his skin, smearing his blood across his flesh like finger paints.

"You saw the murder scene when you touched me and still wanted to have sex with me, remember?"

He took a breath, and it trembled when he let it out between his lips.

I drew my blood-coated hand out from under his shirt. I held it up to him, let him see it. His breath came just a little quicker. I knelt, slowly; he didn't let go, he didn't put down the knife, but he didn't stop me. I smeared the blood on Ellie's mouth. The magic flared, sparked down my skin like cool fire. It crawled up my arm and onto Magnus.

"Shit!" Magnus swung the knife at me.

I blocked his wrist with my arm and came up under him, driving up from my knees. He was balanced across my shoulders, but he still had the knife. I flung him on top of Ellie.

I stood over him, breathing hard. "Ellie, rise."

The vampire's eyes flew open wide. Magnus started to push away from her.

"Grab him," I said.

Ellie wrapped her arms around his waist and held on. He stabbed her with the knife, and she screamed. God help me, she screamed. Zombies didn't scream.

I ran for the door.

Magnus came after me, dragging Ellie behind him. He was moving faster than I'd thought he would, but not fast enough. I flung open the door, and a long bar of sunlight spilled in through the door. I was a step out the door when the screaming started. I glanced back; I couldn't help it. Ellie was on fire. Magnus tried to loosen her arms, screaming. But nothing holds on like the dead.

I ran out into the parking lot.

"Niña, don't go."

The voice stopped me at the edge of the parking lot. I looked back. Magnus had dragged himself out the door and onto the gravel. Ellie was burning white hot. Magnus's shirt and hair were burning.

I screamed, "Go back, you son of a bitch!" But the same voice that kept me pinned to the edge of the parking lot kept him coming out into the light.

The voice came again. "Come back to bed, Anita. You're tired. You must rest."

I was suddenly tired, so tired. I felt every cut, every bruise. She would make it all better. She would touch me with her cool hands and make it all better.

Magnus collapsed in the middle of the driveway, shrieking. The vampire was melting into him, burning him alive. Sweet Jesus.

He reached one hand out to me. He screamed, "Help me!" The vampire was melting into his flesh, eating it away.

I ran. I ran with Serephina's voice whispering in my ear: "Niña, Mother misses you."

Chapter 40

I flagged a car down on the highway. I was covered in dried blood, cut, scraped, bruised, and still an elderly couple picked me up. Who says there are

no more good Samaritans? They wanted to take me to the police, and I let them.

The nice policemen took one look at me and asked if I needed an ambulance. I said no, and could they page Special Agent Bradford, and tell him it was Anita Blake.

They tried to get me to go to the hospital, but there was no time. It was mid-afternoon. We had to move before dark. I asked the police to send a two-man car to make sure that no one moved the coffins. I told them there might be a hurt man in the parking lot and if he was still there to call an ambulance, but under no circumstances go inside the place.

Everybody nodded and agreed with me. Most of the cops in the area had been through Serephina's house last night and today. The cops told me Kirkland had brought the cops back to the vampire's lair after they took me. It took me a second to realize that Kirkland was Larry. Which meant Serephina had kept her word and let them go. The relief at knowing for sure that Larry was alive made me weak-kneed, and I was wobbly enough as it was.

The cops had found over a dozen bodies buried in the basement of Serephina's house. She should have buried them in the woods. For all I knew, she'd raised their ghosts. I didn't know. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that we had a warrant of execution, and the cops were listening to me today.

They sat me in an interrogation room with a cup of black coffee, thick enough to walk on, and a blanket to wrap around me. I was shivering and couldn't seem to stop.

Bradford came in and sat down across from me. He stared at me with eyes that were just a little too wide. "The locals say you found the master vampire's lair."

I laughed, and it came out wrong, almost like a sob. "I wouldn't say I found Serephina's lair. More like I woke up in it." I raised the coffee to my mouth and had to stop in mid-motion. My hands were shaking so badly I was about to slosh coffee onto the table. I took a deep breath, blew it out, and concentrated on taking a drink of coffee. Just concentrated on the simple physical movement. It helped. I got coffee, and calmer at the same time.

"You need to go to the hospital," Bradford said.

"I need Serephina dead."

"We've got warrants for all of them. All the vampires involved. How do you want to do it?"

"Burn them out. Block off everything but the front door. If Magnus is inside, he'll come out."

"Magnus Bouvier?" he asked.

"Yeah." There was something about the way he said it that I didn't like.

"The cops found what's left of him in the parking lot. It looks like something melted the lower half of his body. Would you know anything about that?" He looked at me very steadily when he asked it.

I took another careful sip of coffee, and met his eyes without blinking. What was I supposed to say? "The vampires were controlling him. He was supposed to keep me in the bar until nightfall. Maybe they punished him for

failing." What I'd done to Magnus and Ellie was enough to earn me a death sentence. I wasn't admitting that to the Feds.

"The vampires punished him?" He made it a question.

"Yeah."

He looked at me for a long time, then nodded and changed the subject. "Won't the vampires try to make a break when the fire starts?"

"Sunlight or fire," I said. "Just a choice of how well done you want your vampires to be." I finished the last of the coffee in my cup.

"Your protege, Mr. Kirkland, said you were kidnapped from the graveyard. Is that your story, too?"

"It happens to be the truth, Agent Bradford." It was the truth as far as it went. Omission is a wonderful thing.

He smiled and shook his head. "You are hiding more shit from me than you're telling me."

I stared at him until the smile wilted around the edges. "Truth is a mixed blessing, Agent Bradford, don't you think?"

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded. "Maybe, Ms. Blake, maybe."

I called the hotel, and no one answered in Larry's room. I tried my room, and got Larry there. There was a moment of stunned silence when he realized it was me.

"Anita, oh my God, oh my God. Are you alright? Where are you? I'll come get you."

"I'm at the police station in town. I'm alright, sort of. I need you to bring me some clothes to change into. The ones I have on smell like vampire. We're going after Serephina."

Another silence. "When?"

"Now, today."

"I'll be right there."

"Larry?"

"I'll bring the guns and the knives, and an extra cross."

"Thanks."

"I've never been so glad to hear anybody's voice in my entire life," he said.

"Yeah," I said. "Get here soon. Wait, Larry."

"You need something else?" he said.

"Are Jean-Claude and Jason alright?"

"Yeah. Jason's in the hospital, but he'll live. Jean-Claude's in the bedroom asleep. After Serephina bit you, she hit Jean-Claude with some kind of power, energy. I felt it, and it was awesome. She knocked him out and left. The others went with her."

Everyone was alive, or as alive as they had started out. It was more than I'd hoped for. "Great; I'll see you soon." I hung up the phone and had a horrible urge to cry, but I fought it off. I was afraid if I started to cry I wouldn't be able to stop. I couldn't have hysterics just yet.

As agent on site, Bradford was in charge. Special Agent Bradley Bradford, yes Bradley Bradford, seemed to think I knew what I was doing. Nothing like

getting almost killed to give you credentials. For once, badge or no badge, nobody was arguing with me. A refreshing change, that.

I did not hug Larry when he brought my clothes; he hugged me. I pushed away sooner than I wanted to, because I wanted to collapse into his arms in tears. To just let a pair of friendly arms hold me while I melted down. Later, later.

A huge bruise had blossomed on the side of his face from jaw to mid-temple. It looked like he'd been hit by a baseball bat. He was lucky Janos hadn't broken his jaw.

Larry had brought me blue jeans, a red polo shirt, jogging socks, my white Nikes, an extra cross from my suitcase, the silver knives, the Firestar complete with inner pants holster, and the Browning and its shoulder holster. He'd forgotten a bra, but hey, except for that it was perfect.

The wrist sheaths stung going over the cuts, but it felt wonderful to be armed again. I didn't try to hide the guns. The cops knew who I was, and I wasn't fooling any of the bad guys.

Barely two hours after I'd crawled out of Serephina's coffin, we pulled up in front of Bloody Bones. There were ambulances, and more cops than you could shake a stick at. Local cops, state cops, federal cops; it was a smorgasbord of policemen. A fire truck plus fire emergency services completed the official list. Oh, Larry and me.

With Magnus dead, Serephina and company were unguarded. Not helpless. Oh, no. Nothing this side of Hell would have gotten me inside that building voluntarily. But there were alternatives.

The gas truck pulled around to the back and busted out a window. I watched them snake the hose into the window of the back door and turn on the juice.

I stood there in the warm sunlight, a cool breeze playing on my skin, and whispered, "May you rot in Hell."

"Did you say something?" Larry asked.

I shook my head. "Nothing important."

The hose shivered to life, and the sharp, sweet smell of gasoline filled the air.

I felt her wake up. I felt her eyes open wide in the dark. I breathed in the sweet smell of gasoline, felt my hands gripping the coffin edges.

I put my hands over my eyes. "Oh, God."

Larry touched my shoulder. "What is it?"

I kept my hands pressed to my face. "Take the guns, now."

"What . . ."

"Do it!" My hands came down and I looked at him. I looked at his familiar face, and Serephina saw him, too.

She whispered, "Kill him."

I ripped the knives out of the sheaths and let them fall to the ground. I started backing up towards the cops. I needed people with guns around me, right now.

The voice in my head said, "Anita, what are you doing to your mother? You don't want to hurt me. Niña, help Mommy."

"Oh, God." I ran and nearly collided with Bradford.

"Help me, Niña. Help me!"

My hand closed on the Browning. I balled my hands into fists at my side. "Bradford, disarm me now. Please."

He stared at me, but he took the guns from their holsters. "What's wrong, Blake?"

"Cuffs, you got cuffs?"

"Yeah."

I held my hands out to him. "Use them." My voice sounded squeezed, my throat so tight I couldn't breathe.

I smelled Hypnotique perfume, tasted my mother's lipstick on my mouth. The cuffs snapped into place. I jerked away from him, stared at the handcuffs. I opened my mouth to say "Take them off," and closed it.

I could feel my mother's hair tickling my face.

"I smell perfume," Larry said.

I looked at him with wide eyes. I couldn't speak, I couldn't move. I didn't trust myself to do anything at that moment.

"Oh, my God," Larry said. "You're going to feel her burn."

I just looked at him.

"What can I do?"

"Help me." My voice was squeezed down to a whisper.

"What's happening to her?" Bradford asked.

"Serephina's trying to get Anita to help save her."

"The vampire's awake in there?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

Serephina was out of her coffin. The full skirt of her ball gown brushed the edges of the door that led to the kitchen. She couldn't go closer, because there was a spill of daylight from the window. Gasoline was pouring across the floor towards her.

"Anita, help Mommy."

"It's a lie," I said.

"What's a lie?" Bradford said.

I shook my head.

"Anita, help me, you don't want me to die. You don't want me to die, not when you can save me."

I collapsed to my knees, cuffed hands digging into the gravel of the parking lot. "Stop the gasoline."

Larry knelt beside me. "Why?"

It was a good question. Serephina had a good answer. "Jeff Quinlan is in there. He's inside."

"Shit," Larry said. He looked up at Bradford. "We can't torch the place. There's a kid inside."

"Stop the gas," Bradford said. He walked away from us, towards the truck, motioning them off.

And I felt a surge of triumph from Serephina. It was a lie. Xavier had brought Jeff over last night. There was nothing alive in that building.

I gripped Larry's arm with my cuffed hands. "Larry, it's a lie. She's lying to me. Through me. Get me in the back of a squad car, now, and torch the place."

He stared at me. "But if Jeff . . ."

"Don't argue with me, just do it!" I screamed it, burying my face between my arms, trying to ignore the voice in my head.

I could taste Hypnotique on my tongue. It was too much. Serephina was scared.

Larry called Bradford back, and they half-carried me to a marked car. I started to struggle when they tried to shove me in the back, but I did my best not to fight, and they closed the door. I was in a metal and glass cage. I gripped my fingers through the mesh in front of me, digging it into my skin until it hurt. But even pain didn't help.

The gasoline was everywhere, soaking into everything. Serephina was choking on it. "Niña, don't do this. Don't hurt your Mommy. Don't lose me again."

I started rocking back and forth, hands digging into the wire. Back and forth, back and forth. It'd be over soon. It'd be over soon.

I felt a gentle touch on my face, a memory so real it made me turn and look for someone. "My death will be as real, Anita."

Somebody lit it. The flames roared to life, and I screamed before they hit her. I slammed my cuffed hands against the glass and screamed, "Nooo!"

Heat washed over her, crumbled the cloth of her dress like a melting flower, and ate her flesh.

I pounded my hands against the glass until I couldn't feel them anymore. I had to help her. I had to go to her. I fell to my back and kicked the window. I kicked it and kicked it, feeling the shock all the way up my back. I screamed and kicked the glass, and it cracked. The glass cracked and fell outward.

She was screaming my name. "Anita! Anita!"

I was halfway out the window before somebody tried to grab me. I let them grab my arm, but pushed my legs free of the window. I had to get to her; nothing else mattered. Nothing.

I fell to the ground with someone holding my arm. I got halfway up and threw them in a shoulder roll onto the ground. I ran for the fire. I could feel the heat now, rippling along my skin. I could feel the heat inside eating us alive.

Someone tackled me, and I beat at them with my hands made into one fist.

The hands let go, and I scrambled to my feet. Shouting, and someone else holding me. He lifted me off the ground, arms wrapped around my waist, pinning my arms. I kicked backwards, and hit his knees. The arms loosened, but there were more arms. More hands. Someone lay on top of me. A hand the size of my head pressed the side of my face against the rocks. Hands pinned my hands against the rocks, his full body weight on just my wrists. Someone was sitting on my legs.

"Niña! Niña!"

I screamed with her. I screamed while I choked on the smell of burning hair and Hypnotique bath powder. I saw the needle coming in from the side, and started to cry, "No, no! Mommy! Mommy!"

The needle sank home, and darkness swallowed the world. A darkness that smelled like burning flesh, and tasted like lipstick, and blood.

Chapter 41

I spent a few days in the hospital. Bruises, cuts, some stitches, but mainly the second-degree burns on my back and arms. The burns weren't that bad; there wouldn't be any scarring. The doctors just couldn't figure out how I'd gotten burned. I didn't feel like explaining, mainly because I wasn't sure I could.

Jason had broken ribs, a punctured lung, and other internal damage. He healed perfectly and in record time. There are benefits to being a lycanthrope.

Jean-Claude healed. His face was once again that perfection that had attracted Serephina to him so long ago.

Stirling's company rebought the land from Dorcas Bouvier, and made her wealthy. With Bloody Bones dead, she can leave the land. She's free.

The Quinlans are still suing me. Bert has lawyers that promise to keep us out of court, though I'm not sure how. If I'd walked the house personally, checked every inch of it myself, maybe . . . Hell, even I might not have protected the doggie door. Maybe I do deserve to be sued. I told the Quinlans Ellie was dead. They had to take my word for it; there wasn't anything left of Ellie to prove it. When vampires burn, they burn; no dental records, no nothing. Jeff was well and truly dead, too. Both their children were lost to them. It had to be somebody's fault; why not mine?

I'd raised a vampire like a zombie, which wasn't possible. Necromancers were supposed to be able to control all types of undead. But that was legend, not real. Right?

Serephina is dead, but the nightmares live on. The nightmares are tangled with the real memories of my mother's death. They are a bitch. For the first time in my life, I'm having insomnia.

What to do with the two men in my life? How the hell do I know? In Richard's arms, breathing in the warmth of his body, is the closest I've ever found to my mother's arms. It isn't the same, because I know that though Richard would give his life for me, even that might not be enough. When I was a child, I believed it would be. There is no real safety. Innocence lost can never be regained. But sometimes with Richard I want to believe in it again.

There is nothing comforting about Jean-Claude's arms. He doesn't make me feel safe in the least. He's like some forbidden pleasure that you know

eventually you'll regret. I've decided not to wait; I'm regretting it now, but I'm still seeing him.

Somehow Jean-Claude has crossed that line that a handful of other vampires have crossed. I don't think of him as a monster anymore.

God have mercy on my soul.

The Killing Dance

by

Laurell K. Hamilton

Book 6 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Chapter 1

The most beautiful corpse I'd ever seen was sitting behind my desk. Jean-Claude's white shirt gleamed in the light from the desk lamp. A froth of lace spilled down the front, peeking from inside his black velvet jacket. I stood behind him, my back to the wall, arms crossed over my stomach, which put my right hand comfortably close to the Browning Hi-Power in its shoulder holster. I wasn't about to draw on Jean-Claude. It was the other vampire I was worried about.

The desk lamp was the only light in the room. The vampire had requested the overheads be turned out. His name was Sabin, and he stood against the far wall, huddling in the dark. He was covered head to foot in a black, hooded cape. He looked like something out of an old Vincent Price movie. I'd never seen a real vampire dress like that.

The last member of our happy little group was Dominic Dumare. He sat in one of the client chairs. He was tall, thin, but not weak. His hands were large and strong, big enough to palm my face. He was dressed in a three-piece black suit, like a chauffeur except for the diamond stickpin in his tie. A beard and thin mustache lined the strong bones of his face.

When he'd entered my office, I'd felt him like a psychic wind tripping down my spine. I'd only encountered two other people who had that taste to

them. One had been the most powerful voodoo priestess I'd ever met. The second had been the second most powerful voodoo priest I'd ever met. The woman was dead. The man worked for Animators, Inc., just like I did. But Dominic Dumare wasn't here to apply for a job.

"Ms. Blake, please be seated," Dumare said. "Sabin finds it most offensive to sit when a lady is standing."

I glanced behind him at Sabin. "I'll sit down if he sits down," I said.

Dumare looked at Jean-Claude. He gave a gentle, condescending smile.

"Do you have such poor control over your human servant?"

I didn't have to see Jean-Claude's smile to know it was there. "Oh, you are on your own with *ma petite*. She is my human servant, so declared before the council, but she answers to no one."

"You seem proud of that," Sabin said. His voice was British and very upper crust.

"She is the Executioner and has more vampire kills than any other human. She is a necromancer of such power that you have traveled halfway around the world to consult her. She is my human servant without a mark to hold her to me. She dates me without the aid of vampire glamor. Why should I not be pleased?"

Listening to him talk you'd have thought it was all his own idea. Fact was, he'd tried his best to mark me, and I'd managed to escape. We were dating because he'd blackmailed me. Date him or he'd kill my other boyfriend. Jean-Claude had managed to make it all work to his advantage. Why was I not surprised?

"Until her death you cannot mark any other human," Sabin said. "You have cut yourself off from a great deal of power."

"I am aware of what I have done," Jean-Claude said.

Sabin laughed, and it was chokingly bitter. "We all do strange things for love."

I would have given a lot to see Jean-Claude's face at that moment. All I could see was his long black hair spilling over his jacket, black on black. His shoulders stiffened, hands sliding across the blotter on my desk. Then he went very still. That awful waiting stillness that only the old vampires have, as if, if they held still long enough, they would simply disappear.

"Is that what has brought you here, Sabin? Love?" Jean-Claude's voice was neutral, empty.

Sabin's laughter rode the air like broken glass. It felt like the very sound of it hurt something deep inside me. I didn't like it.

"Enough games," I said, "let's get it done."

"Is she always this impatient?" Dumare asked.

"Yes," Jean-Claude said.

Dumare smiled, bright and empty as a lightbulb. "Did Jean-Claude tell you why we wished to see you?"

"He said Sabin caught some sort of disease from trying to go cold turkey."

The vampire across the room laughed again, flinging it like a weapon across the room. "Cold turkey, very good, Ms. Blake, very good."

The laughter ate over me like small cutting blades. I'd never experienced anything like that from just a voice. In a fight, it would have been distracting. Heck, it was distracting now. I felt liquid slide down my forehead. I raised my left hand to it. My fingers came away smeared with blood. I drew the Browning and stepped away from the wall. I aimed it at the black figure across the room. "He does that again, and I'll shoot him."

Jean-Claude rose slowly from the chair. His power flowed over me like a cool wind, raising goose bumps on my arms. He raised one pale hand, gone nearly translucent with power. Blood flowed down that gleaming skin.

Dumare stayed in his chair, but he, too, was bleeding from a cut nearly identical to mine. Dumare wiped the blood away, still smiling. "The gun will not be necessary," he said.

"You have abused my hospitality," Jean-Claude said. His voice filled the room with hissing echoes.

"There is nothing I can say to apologize," Sabin said. "But I did not mean to do it. I am using so much of my power just to maintain myself that I do not have the control I once did."

I moved slowly away from the wall, gun still pointed. I wanted to see Jean-Claude's face. I needed to see how badly he was hurt. I eased around the desk until I could see him from the corner of my eye. His face was untouched, flawless and gleaming like mother of pearl.

He raised his hand, one thin line of blood still trailing down. "This is no accident."

"Come into the light, my friend," Dumare said. "You must let them see, or they will not understand."

"I do not want to be seen."

"You are very close to using up all my good will," Jean-Claude said.

"Mine, too," I added. I was hoping I could either shoot Sabin or put the gun down soon. Even a two-handed shooting stance is not meant to be maintained indefinitely. Your hands start to waver just a bit.

Sabin glided towards the desk. The black cloak spilled around his feet like a pool of darkness. All vampires were graceful, but this was ridiculous. I realized he wasn't walking at all. He was levitating inside that dark cloak.

His power flowed over my skin like icy water. My hands were suddenly steady once more. Nothing like having several hundred years worth of vampire coming at you to sharpen your nerves.

Sabin stopped on the far side of the desk. He was expending power just to move, just to be here, as if like a shark, if he stopped moving he'd die.

Jean-Claude glided around me. His power danced over my body, raising the hair at the back of my neck, making my skin tight. He stopped almost within reach of the other vampire. "What has happened to you, Sabin?"

Sabin stood on the edge of the light. The lamp should have cast some light into the hood of his cloak, but it didn't. The inside of the hood was as smooth and black and empty as a cave. His voice came out of that nothingness. It made me jump.

"Love, Jean-Claude, love happened to me. My beloved grew a conscience. She said it was wrong to feed upon people. We were once people, after all. For love of her, I tried to drink cold blood. I tried animal blood. But it was not enough to sustain me."

I stared into that darkness. I kept pointing the gun, but I was beginning to feel silly. Sabin didn't seem at all afraid of it, which was unnerving. Maybe he didn't care. That was also unnerving. "She talked you into going vegetarian. Great," I said. "You seem powerful enough."

He laughed, and with the laughter, the shadows in his hood faded slowly, like a curtain lifting. He threw it back in one quick flourish.

I didn't scream, but I gasped and took a step back. I couldn't help myself. When I realized I'd done it, I stopped and made myself take back that step, meet his eyes. No flinching.

His hair was thick and straight and golden, falling like a shining curtain to his shoulders. But his skin . . . his skin had rotted away on half his face. It was like late-stage leprosy, but worse. The flesh was puss-filled, gangrenous, and should have stunk to high heaven. The other half of his face was still beautiful. The kind of face that medieval painters had borrowed for cherubim, a golden perfection. One crystalline blue eye rolled in its rotting socket as if in danger of spilling out onto his cheek. The other eye was secure and watched my face.

"You can put up the gun, *ma petite*. It was an accident, after all," Jean-Claude said.

I lowered the Browning, but didn't put it up. It took more effort than was pretty to say calmly, "This happened because you stopped feeding off of humans?"

"We believe so," Dumare said.

I tore my gaze away from Sabin's ravaged face and looked back at Dominic. "You think I can help cure him of this?" I couldn't keep the disbelief out of my voice.

"I heard of your reputation in Europe."

I raised my eyebrows.

"No modesty, Ms. Blake. Among those of us who notice such things, you are gaining a certain notoriety."

Notoriety, not fame. Hmmm.

"Put the gun away, *ma petite*. Sabin has done all the—what is your word—grandstanding he will do tonight. Haven't you Sabin?"

"I fear so, it all seems to go so badly now."

I holstered the gun and shook my head. "I honestly don't have the faintest idea how to help you."

"If you knew how, would you help me?" Sabin asked.

I looked at him and nodded. "Yes."

"Even though I am a vampire and you are a vampire executioner."

"Have you done anything in this country that you need killing for?"

Sabin laughed. The rotting skin stretched, and a ligament popped with a wet snap. I had to look away. "Not yet, Ms. Blake, not yet." His face sobered

quickly; the humor abruptly faded. "You school your face to show nothing, Jean-Claude, but I read the horror in your eyes."

Jean-Claude's skin had gone back to its usual milky perfection. His face was still lovely, perfect, but at least he'd stopped glowing. His midnight blue eyes were just eyes now. He was still beautiful, but it was a nearly human beauty. "Is it not worth a little horror?" he asked.

Sabin smiled, and I wished he hadn't. The muscles on the rotted side didn't work, and his mouth hung crooked. I glanced away, then made myself look back. If he could be trapped inside that face, I could look at it.

"Then you will help me?"

"I would aid you if I could, but it is Anita you have come to ask. She must give her own answer."

"Well, Ms. Blake?"

"I don't know how to help you," I repeated.

"Do you understand how dire my circumstances are, Ms. Blake? The true horror of it, do you grasp it?"

"The rot probably won't kill you, but it's progressive, I take it?"

"Oh, yes, it's progressive, virulently so."

"I would help you if I could, Sabin, but what can I do that Dumare can't? He's a necromancer, maybe as powerful as I am, maybe more. Why do you need me?"

"I realize, Ms. Blake, that you don't have something specifically for Sabin's problem," Dumare said. "As far as I can discover, he is the only vampire to ever suffer such a fate, but I thought if we came to another necromancer as powerful as myself—" he smiled modestly "—or nearly as powerful as myself, perhaps together we could work up a spell to help him."

"A spell?" I glanced at Jean-Claude.

He gave that wonderful Gallic shrug that meant everything and nothing. "I know little of necromancy, *ma petite*. You would know if such a spell were possible more than I."

"It is not only your ability as a necromancer that has brought us to you," Dumare said. "You have also acted as a focus for at least two different animators, I believe that is the American word for what you do."

I nodded. "The word's right, but where did you hear I could act as a focus?"

"Come, Ms. Blake, the ability to combine another animator's powers with your own and thus magnify both powers is a rare talent."

"Can you act as a focus?" I asked.

He tried to look humble but actually looked pleased with himself. "I must confess, yes, I can act as a focus. Think of what the two of us could accomplish together."

"We could raise a hell of a lot of zombies, but that won't cure Sabin."

"True enough." Dumare leaned forward in his chair. His lean, handsome face flushed, eager, a true convert looking for disciples.

I wasn't much of a follower.

"I would offer to teach you true necromancy, not this voodoo dabbling that you've been doing."

Jean-Claude made a soft sound halfway between a laugh and a cough.

I glared at Jean-Claude's amused face but said, "I'm doing just fine with this voodoo dabbling."

"I meant no insult, Ms. Blake. You will need a teacher of some sort soon. If not me, then you must find someone else."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Control, Ms. Blake. Raw power, no matter how impressive, is not the same as power used with great care and great control."

I shook my head. "I'll help you if I can, Mr. Dumare. I'll even participate in a spell if I check it out with a local witch I know first."

"Afraid that I will try and steal your power?"

I smiled. "No, short of killing me, the best you or anyone else can do is borrow."

"You are wise beyond your years, Ms. Blake."

"You aren't that much older than I am," I said. Something crossed over his face, the faintest flicker, and I knew.

"You're his human servant, aren't you?"

Dominic smiled, spreading his hands. "*Oui*."

I sighed. "I thought you said you weren't trying to hide anything from me."

"A human servant's job is to be the daytime eyes and ears of his master. I am of no use to my master if vampire hunters can spot me for what I am."

"I spotted you."

"But in another situation, without Sabin at my side, would you have?"

I thought about that for a moment. "Maybe." I shook my head. "I don't know."

"Thank you for your honesty, Ms. Blake."

Sabin said, "I am sure our time is up. Jean-Claude said you had a pressing engagement, Ms. Blake. Much more important than my little problem." There was a little bite to that last.

"*Ma petite* has a date with her other beau."

Sabin stared at Jean-Claude. "So you are truly allowing her to date another. I thought that at least must be rumor."

"Very little of what you hear about *ma petite* is rumor. Believe all you hear."

Sabin chuckled, coughing, as if struggling to keep the laughter from spilling out his ruined mouth. "If I believed everything I heard, I would have come with an army."

"You came with one servant because I allowed you only one servant," Jean-Claude said.

Sabin smiled. "Too true. Come Dominic, we must not take more of Ms. Blake's so valuable time."

Dominic stood obediently, towering over us both. Sabin was around my height. Of course, I wasn't sure if his legs were still there. He might have been taller once.

"I don't like you, Sabin, but I would never willingly leave another being in the shape you're in. My plans tonight are important, but if I thought we could cure you immediately, I'd change them."

The vampire looked at me. His blue, blue eyes were like staring down into clear ocean water. There was no pull to them. Either he was behaving himself or, like most vampires, he couldn't roll me with his eyes anymore.

"Thank you, Ms. Blake. I believe you are sincere." He extended a gloved hand from the voluminous cloak.

I hesitated, then took it. His hand squished ever so slightly, and it took a lot not to jerk back. I forced myself to shake his hand, to smile, to let go, and not to rub my hand on my skirt.

Dominic shook my hand as well. His was cool and dry. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Blake. I will contact you tomorrow and we will discuss things."

"I'll be expecting your call, Mr. Dumare."

"Call me, Dominic, please."

I nodded. "Dominic. We can discuss it, but I hate to take your money when I'm not sure that I can help you."

"May I call you Anita?" he asked.

I hesitated and shrugged. "Why not?"

"Don't worry about money," Sabin said, "I have plenty of that for all the good it has done me."

"How is the woman you love taking the change in your appearance?" Jean-Claude asked.

Sabin looked at him. It was not a friendly look. "She finds it repulsive, as do I. She feels immense guilt. She has not left me, nor is she with me."

"You'd lived for close to seven hundred years," I said. "Why screw things up for a woman?"

Sabin turned to me, a line of ooze creeping down his face like a black tear. "Are you asking me if it was worth it, Ms. Blake?"

I swallowed and shook my head. "It's none of my business. I'm sorry I asked."

He drew the hood over his face. He turned back to me, black, a cup of shadows where his face should have been. "She was going to leave me, Ms. Blake. I thought that I would sacrifice anything to keep her by my side, in my bed. I was wrong." He turned that blackness to Jean-Claude. "We will see you tomorrow night, Jean-Claude."

"I look forward to it."

Neither vampire offered to shake hands. Sabin glided for the door, the robe trailing behind him, empty. I wondered how much of his lower body was left and decided I didn't want to know.

Dominic shook my hand again. "Thank you, Anita. You have given us hope." He held my hand and stared into my face as if he could read something there. "And do think about my offer to teach you. There are very few of us who are true necromancers."

I took back my hand. "I'll think about it. Now I really do have to go."

He smiled, held the door for Sabin, and out they went. Jean-Claude and I stood a moment in silence. I broke it first. "Can you trust them?"

Jean-Claude sat on the edge of my desk, smiling. "Of course not."

"Then why did you agree to let them come?"

"The council has declared that no master vampires in the United States may quarrel until that nasty law that is floating around Washington is dead. One undead war, and the anti-vampire lobby would push through the law and make us illegal again."

I shook my head. "I don't think Brewster's Law has a snowball's chance. Vampires are legal in the United States. Whether I agree with it or not, I don't think that's going to change."

"How can you be so sure?"

"It's sort of hard to say a group of beings is alive and has rights, then change your mind and say killing them on sight is okay again. The ACLU would have a field day."

He smiled. "Perhaps. Regardless, the council has forced a truce on all of us until the law is decided one way or another."

"So you can let Sabin in your territory, because if he misbehaves, the council will hunt him down and kill him."

Jean-Claude nodded.

"But you'd still be dead," I said.

He spread his hands, graceful, empty. "Nothing's perfect."

I laughed. "I guess not."

"Now, aren't you going to be late for your date with Monsieur Zeeman?"

"You're being awfully civilized about this," I said.

"Tomorrow night you will be with me, *ma petite*. I would be a poor . . . sport to begrudge Richard his night."

"You're usually a poor sport."

"Now, *ma petite*, that is hardly fair. Richard is not dead, is he?"

"Only because you know that if you kill him, I'll kill you." I held a hand up before he could say it. "I'd try to kill you, and you'd try to kill me, etc." This was an old argument.

"So, Richard lives, you date us both, and I am being patient. More patient than I have ever been with anyone."

I studied his face. He was one of those men who was beautiful rather than handsome, but the face was masculine; you wouldn't mistake him for female, even with the long hair. In fact, there was something terribly masculine about Jean-Claude, no matter how much lace he wore.

He could be mine: lock, stock, and fangs. I just wasn't sure I wanted him. "I've got to go," I said.

He pushed away from my desk. He was suddenly standing close enough to touch. "Then go, *ma petite*."

I could feel his body inches from mine like a shimmering energy. I had to swallow before I could speak. "It's my office. You have to leave."

He touched my arms lightly, a brush of fingertips. "Enjoy your evening, *ma petite*." His fingers wrapped around my arms, just below the shoulders. He

didn't lean over me or draw me that last inch closer. He simply held my arms, and stared down at me.

I met his dark, dark blue eyes. There had been a time not so long ago that I couldn't have met his gaze without falling into it and being lost. Now I could meet his eyes, but in some ways, I was just as lost. I raised up on tiptoe, putting my face close to his.

"I should have killed you a long time ago."

"You have had your chances, *ma petite*. You keep saving me."

"My mistake," I said.

He laughed, and the sound slid down my body like fur against naked skin. I shuddered in his arms.

"Stop that," I said.

He kissed me lightly, a brush of lips, so I couldn't feel the fangs. "You would miss me if I were gone, *ma petite*. Admit it."

I drew away from him. His hands slid down my arms, over my hands, until I drew my fingertips across his hands. "I've got to go."

"So you said."

"Just get out, Jean-Claude, no more games."

His face sobered instantly as if a hand had wiped it clean. "No more games, *ma petite*. Go to your other lover." It was his turn to raise a hand and say, "I know you are not truly lovers. I know you are resisting both of us. Brave, *ma petite*." A flash of something, maybe anger, crossed his face and was gone like a ripple lost in dark water.

"Tomorrow night you will be with me and it will be Richard's turn to sit at home and wonder." He shook his head. "Even for you I would not have done what Sabin has done. Even for your love, there are things I would not do." He stared at me suddenly fierce, anger flaring through his eyes, his face. "But what I do is enough."

"Don't go all self-righteous on me," I said. "If you hadn't interfered, Richard and I would be engaged, maybe more, by now."

"And what? You would be living behind a white picket fence with two point whatever children. I think you lie to yourself more than to me, Anita."

It was always a bad sign when he used my real name. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, *ma petite*, that you are as likely to thrive in domestic bliss as I am." With that, he glided to the door and left. He closed the door quietly but firmly behind him.

Domestic bliss? Who me? My life was a cross between a preternatural soap opera and an action adventure movie. Sort of *As the Casket Turns* meets *Rambo*. White picket fences didn't fit. Jean-Claude was right about that.

I had the entire weekend off. It was the first time in months. I'd been looking forward to this evening all week. But truthfully, it wasn't Jean-Claude's nearly perfect face that was haunting me. I kept flashing on Sabin's face. Eternal life, eternal pain, eternal ugliness. Nice afterlife.

Chapter 2

There were three kinds of people at Catherine's dinner party: the living, the dead, and the occasionally furry. Out of the eight of us, six were human, and I wasn't sure about two of those, myself included.

I wore black pants, a black velvet jacket with white satin lapels, and an oversized white vest that doubled for a shirt. The Browning 9mm actually matched the outfit, but I kept it hidden. This was the first party Catherine had thrown since her wedding. Flashing a gun might put a damper on things.

I'd had to take off the silver cross that I always wore and put it in my pocket because there was a vampire standing in front of me and the cross had started glowing when he entered the room. If I'd known there were going to be vamps at the party, I'd have worn a collar high enough to hide the cross. They only glow when they're out in the open, generally speaking.

Robert, the vampire in question, was tall, muscular, and handsome in a model-perfect sort of way. He had been a stripper at Guilty Pleasures. Now he managed the club. From worker to management: the American dream. His hair was blond, curly, and cut quite short. He was wearing a brown silk shirt that fit him perfectly and matched the dress that his date was wearing.

Monica Vespucci's health club tan had faded around the edges, but her makeup was still perfect, her short auburn hair styled into place. She was pregnant enough for me to have noticed and happy enough about it to be irritating.

She smiled brilliantly at me. "Anita, it has been too long."

What I wanted to say was, "Not long enough." The last time I'd seen her, she had betrayed me to the local master vampire. But Catherine thought she was her friend, and it was hard to disillusion her without telling the whole story. The whole story included some unsanctioned killing, some of it done by me. Catherine's a lawyer and a stickler for law and order. I didn't want to put her in a position where she had to compromise her morals to save my ass. So Monica was her friend, which meant I had been polite all through dinner, from appetizer all the way to dessert. I'd been polite mainly because Monica had been at the other end of the table. Now, unfortunately, we were mingling in the living room and I couldn't seem to shake her.

"It doesn't seem that long," I said.

"It's been almost a year." She smiled up at Robert. They were holding hands. "We got married." She touched her glass to the top of her belly. "We got knocked up." She giggled.

I stared at them both. "You can't get knocked up by a hundred-year-old corpse." Okay, I'd been polite long enough.

Monica grinned at me. "You can if the body temperature is raised for long enough and you have sex often enough. My obstetrician thinks the hot tub did us in."

This was more than I wanted to know. "Have you had the amnio yet?"

The smile faded from her face, leaving her eyes haunted. I was sorry I'd asked. "We've got another week to wait."

"I'm sorry, Monica, Robert. I hope the test comes back clean." I did not mention Vlad syndrome, but the words hung on the air. It was rare but not as rare as it used to be. Three years of legalized vampirism and Vlad syndrome was the highest rising birth defect in the country. It could result in some really horrible disabilities, not to mention death for the baby. With that much at stake, you'd think people would be more cautious.

Robert cradled her against him, and all the light had faded from her face. She looked pale. I felt like a heel.

"The latest news was that a vampire over a hundred was sterile," I said. "They should update their information, I guess." I meant for it to be comforting, like they hadn't been careless.

Monica looked at me, and there was no gentleness in her eyes when she said, "Worried?"

I stared at her all pale and pregnant and wanted to slap her anyway. I was not sleeping with Jean-Claude. But I was not going to stand there and justify myself to Monica Vespucci—or anyone else, for that matter.

Richard Zeeman entered the room. I didn't actually see him enter. I felt it. I turned and watched him walk towards us. He was six foot one, nearly a foot taller than me. Another inch and we couldn't have kissed without a chair. But it would have been worth the effort. He wove between the other guests, saying a word here and there. His smile flashed white and perfect in his permanently tanned skin as he talked to these new friends that he'd managed to charm at dinner. Not with sex appeal or power but with sheer good will. He was the world's biggest boy scout, the original hail fellow, well met. He liked people and was a wonderful listener, two qualities that are highly underrated.

His suit was dark brown, his shirt a deep orangey gold. The tie was a brighter orange with a line of small figures down the middle of it. You had to be standing right next to him to realize the figures were Warner Brothers cartoons.

He'd tied his shoulder-length hair back from his face in a version of a french braid, so the illusion was that his brown hair was very short. It left his face clean and very visible. His cheekbones were perfect, sculpted high and graceful. His face was masculine, handsome, with a dimple to soften it. It was the kind of face that would have made me shy in high school.

He noticed me watching him and smiled. His brown eyes sparkled with the smile, filling with heat that had nothing to do with room temperature. I watched him walk the last few feet, and felt heat rise up my neck into my face. I wanted to undress him, to touch his bare skin, to see what was under that suit. I wanted that very badly. I wouldn't, because I wasn't sleeping with Richard, either. I wasn't sleeping with the vampire or the werewolf. Richard was the

werewolf. It was his only fault. Okay, maybe one other: he'd never killed anybody. That last fault might get him killed someday.

I slid my left arm around his waist, under the unbuttoned jacket. The solid warmth of him beat like a pulse against my body. If we didn't have sex soon, I was simply going to explode. What price morals?

Monica stared at me very steadily, studying my face. "That's a lovely necklace. Who got it for you?"

I smiled and shook my head. I was wearing a black velvet choker with a cameo, edged by silver filigree. Hey, it matched the outfit. Monica was pretty sure Richard hadn't given it to me, which meant, to Monica, that Jean-Claude had. Good old Monica. She never changed.

"I bought it to match the outfit," I said.

She widened her eyes in surprise. "Oh, really?" like she didn't believe me.

"Really. I'm not much into gifts, especially jewelry."

Richard hugged me. "That's the truth. She's a very hard woman to spoil."

Catherine joined us. Her copper-colored hair flowed around her face in a wavy mass. She was the only one I knew with curlier hair than mine, but its color was more spectacular. If asked, most people described her from the hair outward. Delicate makeup hid the freckles and drew attention to her pale, grey green eyes. Her dress was the color of new leaves. I'd never seen her look better.

"Marriage seems to agree with you," I said, smiling.

She smiled back. "You should try it sometime."

I shook my head. "Thanks a lot."

"I have to steal Anita away for just a moment." At least she didn't say she needed help in the kitchen. Richard would have known that was a lie. He was a much better cook than I was.

Catherine led me back to the spare bedroom where the coats were piled in a heap. There was one real fur coat draped over the pile. I was betting I knew who owned it. Monica liked being close to dead things.

As soon as the door was shut, Catherine grabbed my hands and giggled, I swear. "Richard is wonderful. My junior high science teachers never looked like that."

I smiled, and it was one of those big, dopey smiles. The silly kind that say you're in horrible lust if not love, maybe both, and it feels good even if it is stupid.

We sat down on the bed, pushing the coats to one side. "He is handsome," I said, my voice as neutral as I could make it.

"Anita, don't give me that. I've never seen you glow around anyone."

"I don't glow."

She grinned at me and nodded. "Yes, you do."

"Do not," I said, but it was hard to be sullen when I wanted to smile. "All right, I like him, a lot. Happy?"

"You've been dating him for nearly seven months. Where's the engagement ring?"

I did frown at her then. "Catherine, just because you're deliriously happily married doesn't mean everyone else has to be married, too."

She shrugged and laughed.

I stared into her shining face and shook my head. There had to be more to Bob than met the eye. He was about thirty pounds heavier than he should have been, balding, with small round glasses on a rather nondescript face. He did not have a sparkling personality, either. I'd been ready to give her the thumbs down until I saw the way he looked at Catherine. He looked at her like she was the whole world, and it was a nice, safe, wonderful world. A lot of people are pretty, and clever repartee is on every television set, but dependability, that's rare.

"I didn't bring Richard here to get your stamp of approval; I knew you'd like him."

"Then why did you keep him such a secret? I've tried to meet him a dozen times."

I shrugged. The truth was because I knew she'd get that light in her eyes. That maniacal gleam that your married friends get when you're not married and you're dating anyone. Or worse yet, not dating, and they're trying to fix you up. Catherine had the look now.

"Don't tell me you planned this entire party just so you could meet Richard?"

"Partly. How else was I ever going to?"

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Catherine said.

Bob opened the door. He still looked ordinary to me, but from the light in Catherine's face, she saw something else. He smiled at her. The smile made his whole face glow and I could see something shining and fine. Love makes us all beautiful. "Sorry to interrupt the girl talk, but there's a phone call for Anita."

"Did they say who it is?"

"Ted Forrester; says it's business."

My eyes widened. Ted Forrester was an alias for a man I knew as Edward. He was a hit man who specialized in vampires, lycanthropes, or anything else that wasn't quite human. I was a licensed vampire hunter. Occasionally, our paths crossed. We might even on some level be friends, maybe.

"Who's Ted Forrester?" Catherine asked.

"Bounty hunter," I said. Ted, Edward's alias, was a bounty hunter with papers to prove it, all nice and legal. I stood and went for the door.

"Is something wrong?" Catherine asked. Not much got past her, which was one of the reasons I avoided her when I was ass deep in alligators. She was smart enough to figure out when things were off-center but she didn't carry a gun. If you can't defend yourself, you are cannon fodder. The only thing that kept Richard from being cannon fodder was that he was a werewolf. Although refusing to kill people made him almost cannon fodder, shapeshifter or not.

"I was just hoping not to have to do any work tonight," I said.

"I thought you had the entire weekend off," she said.

"So did I."

I took the phone in the home office they'd set up. They'd divided the room down the middle. One half was decorated in country with teddy bears and miniature gingham rockers, the other half was masculine with hunting prints and a ship in a bottle on the desk. Compromise at its best.

I picked up the phone and said. "Hello?"

"It's Edward."

"How did you get this number?"

He was quiet for a second. "Child's play."

"Why did you hunt me down, Edward? What's up?"

"Interesting choice of words," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I was just offered a contract on your life, for enough money to make it worth my while."

It was my turn to be quiet. "Did you take it?"

"Would I be calling you if I had?"

"Maybe," I said.

He laughed. "True, but I'm not going to take it."

"Why not?"

"Friendship."

"Try again," I said.

"I figure I'll get to kill more people guarding you. If I take the contract, I only get to kill you."

"Comforting. Did you say guard?"

"I'll be in town tomorrow."

"You're that sure someone else will take the contract?"

"I don't even open my door for less than a hundred grand, Anita. Someone will take the hit, and it'll be someone good. Not as good as me, but good."

"Any advice until you get into town?"

"I haven't given them my answer yet. That'll delay them. Once I say no, it'll take a little time to contact another hitter. You should be safe tonight. Enjoy your weekend off."

"How did you know I had the weekend off?"

"Craig is a very talkative secretary. Very helpful."

"I'll have to speak to him about that," I said.

"You do that."

"You're sure that there won't be a hitter in town tonight?"

"Nothing in life is sure, Anita, but I wouldn't like it if a client tried to hire me and then gave the job to someone else."

"You lose many clients at your own hands?" I asked.

"No comment," he said.

"So one last night of safety," I said.

"Probably, but be careful anyway."

"Who put the hit out on me?"

"I don't know," Edward said.

"What do you mean, you don't know? You have to know so you can get paid."

"I go through intermediaries most of the time. Keeps down the chance that the next client is a cop."

"How do you find wayward clients if they piss you off?"

"I can find them, but it takes time. Anita, if you've got a really good hitter on your tail, time is something you won't have."

"Oh, that was comforting."

"It wasn't supposed to be comforting," he said, "Can you think of anyone who hates you so badly and has this kind of money?"

I thought about that for a minute. "No. Most of the people that would fit the bill are dead."

"The only good enemy is a dead enemy," Edward said.

"Yeah."

"I heard a rumor that you're dating the master of the city. Is that true?"

I hesitated. I realized I was embarrassed to admit the truth to Edward.

"Yeah, it's true."

"I had to hear you say it." I could almost hear him shake his head over the phone. "Damn, Anita, you know better than that."

"I know," I said.

"Did you dump Richard?"

"No."

"Which monster are you with tonight, bloodsucker or flesh-eater?"

"None of your damn business," I said.

"Fine. Pick the monster of your choice tonight, Anita, have a good time. Tomorrow we start trying to keep you alive." He hung up. If it had been anybody else, I'd have said he was angry about me dating a vampire. Or maybe disappointed would be a better word.

I hung up the phone and sat there for a few minutes, letting it all sink in. Someone was trying to kill me. Nothing new there, but this someone was hiring expert help. That was new. I'd never had an assassin after my butt before. I waited to feel fear wash over me, but it didn't. Oh, in a vague sort of way, I was afraid, but not like I should have been. It wasn't that I didn't believe it could happen. I did believe. It was more that so much else had happened in the last year that I couldn't get too excited yet. If the assassin jumped out and started shooting, I'd deal with it. Maybe later I'd even have an attack of nerves. But I didn't get many attacks of nerves anymore. Part of me was numbing out like a combat veteran. There was just too much to take in, so you stop taking it in. I almost wished I had been scared. Fear will keep you alive; indifference won't.

Somewhere out there, by tomorrow, someone would have my name on a to-do list. Pick up dry cleaning, buy groceries, kill Anita Blake.

Chapter 3

I stepped back into the living room and caught Richard's eye. I was sort of ready to go home. Somehow, knowing an assassin was out there, or would be soon, had put a damper on the evening.

"What's wrong?" Richard asked.

"Nothing," I said. I know, I know, I had to tell him, but how do you tell your sweetie that people are trying to kill you? Not in a room full of people. Maybe in the car.

"Yes, there is. You've got that tension between your eyebrows that means you're trying not to frown."

"No, I'm not."

He smoothed his finger between my eyes. "Yes, you are."

I glared at him. "Am not."

He smiled. "Now you are frowning." His face sobered. "What's wrong?"

I sighed. I stepped closer to him, not for romance but for privacy. Vampires had incredibly good hearing, and I didn't want Robert to know. He'd tattle to Jean-Claude. If I wanted Jean-Claude to know, I'd tell him myself.

"It was Edward on the phone."

"What does he want?" Richard was frowning now, too.

"Someone tried to hire him to kill me."

A look of total astonishment blossomed on his face, and I was glad his back was to the room. He closed his mouth, opened it, and finally said, "I would say you're kidding, but I know you're not. Why would anyone want to kill you?"

"There are plenty of people who would like to see me dead, Richard. But none of them have the kind of money that's being put out for the hit."

"How can you be so calm about this?"

"Would it solve anything if I had hysterics?"

He shook his head. "It's not that." He seemed to think for a second. "It's that you're not outraged that someone's trying to kill you. You just accept it, almost like it's normal. It isn't normal."

"Assassins aren't normal, even for me, Richard," I said.

"Just vampires, zombies, and werewolves," he said.

I smiled. "Yeah."

He hugged me tightly and whispered, "Loving you can be very scary sometimes."

I wrapped my arms around his waist, leaning my face against his chest. I closed my eyes, and for just a moment I breathed in the smell of him. It was more than his aftershave; it was the smell of his skin, his warmth. Him. For just a moment, I sank against him and let it all go. I let his arms be my shelter. I knew that a well-placed bullet would destroy it all, but for a few seconds, I felt safe. Illusion is sometimes all that keeps us sane.

I pushed away from him with a sigh. "Let's give our regrets to Catherine and get out of here."

He touched my cheek gently, looking into my eyes. "We can stay if you want."

I nestled my cheek against his hand and shook my head. "If the shit hits the fan tomorrow, I don't want to spend tonight at a party. I'd rather go back to my apartment and cuddle."

He flashed me that smile that warmed me down to my toes. "Sounds like a plan to me."

I smiled back because I couldn't not smile back. "I'll go tell Catherine."

"I'll get the coats," he said.

We did our various tasks and left early. Catherine gave me a very knowing smile. I wished she was right. Leaving early to jump Richard's bones beat the heck out of the truth. Monica watched us leave. I knew that she and Robert would report back to Jean-Claude. Fine. He knew I was dating Richard. I hadn't lied to anybody. Monica was a lawyer at Catherine's firm—frightening thought all on its own—so she had a legitimate reason to be invited. Jean-Claude hadn't arranged it, but I didn't like being spied on, no matter how it came about.

The walk to the car was nerve-racking. Every shadow was suddenly a potential hiding place. Every noise a footstep. I didn't draw my gun, but my hand ached to do it. "Dammit," I said, softly. The numbness was wearing off. I wasn't sure it was an improvement.

"What is it?" Richard asked. He was suddenly scanning the darkness, not looking at me while he talked. His nostrils flared just a little, and I realized he was scenting the wind.

"Just jumpy. I don't see anyone out here, but I'm suddenly looking too damn hard."

"I don't smell anyone close to us, but they could be downwind. The only gun I smell is yours."

"You can smell my gun?"

He nodded. "You've cleaned it recently. I can smell the oil."

I smiled and shook my head. "You are so blasted normal, sometimes I forget you turn furry once a month."

"Knowing how good you are at spotting lycanthropes, that's quite a compliment." He smiled. "Do you think assassins would fall from the trees if I held your hand right now?"

I smiled. "I think we're safe for the moment."

He curved his fingers around my hand, and a tingle went up my arm like he'd touched a nerve. He rubbed his thumb in small circles on the back of my hand and took a deep breath. "It's almost nice to know that this assassin business has unnerved you, too. I don't want you afraid, but sometimes it's hard to be your guy when I think you may be braver than I am. That sounds like macho crap, doesn't it?"

I stared up at him. "There's a lot of macho crap out there, Richard. At least you know it's crap."

"Can this male chauvinist wolf kiss you?"

"Always."

He leaned his face downward, and I rose on tiptoe to meet his mouth with mine, my free hand against his chest for balance. We could kiss without me going on tiptoe, but Richard tended to get a crick in his neck.

It was a quicker kiss than normal because I had this itching in the middle of my back, right between the shoulder blades. I knew it was my imagination, but I felt too exposed out in the open.

Richard sensed it and pulled away. He went around to the driver's side of his car and opened his door, leaning across to unlock mine. He didn't open the door for me. He knew better than that. I could open my own bloody door.

Richard's car was an old Mustang, sixty something, a Mach One. I knew all this because he had told me. It was orange with a black racing stripe. The bucket seats were black leather, but the front seat was small enough that we could hold hands when he wasn't using the gear shift.

Richard pulled out onto 270 South. Friday night traffic spilled around us in a bright sparkle of lights. Everybody out trying to enjoy the weekend. I wondered how many of them had assassins after them. I was betting I was one of the few.

"You're quiet," Richard said.

"Yeah."

"I won't ask what you're thinking about. I can guess."

I looked at him. The darkness of the car wrapped around us. Cars at night are like your own private world, hushed and dark, intimate. The lights of oncoming traffic swept over his face, highlighting it, then leaving us in darkness.

"How do you know I'm not thinking about what you'd look like without your clothes on?"

He flashed me a grin. "Tease."

I smiled. "Sorry. No sexual innuendo unless I'm willing to jump your bones."

"That's your rule, not mine," Richard said. "I'm a big boy. Give me all the sexual innuendo you want, I can take it."

"If I'm not going to sleep with you, it doesn't seem fair."

"Let me worry about that," he said.

"Why, Mr. Zeeman, are you inviting me to make sexual overtures to you?"

His smile widened, a whiteness in the dark. "Oh, please."

I leaned toward him as far as the seat belt would allow, putting a hand on the back of his seat, putting my face inches from the smooth expanse of his neck. I took a deep breath in and let it out, slowly, so close to his skin that my own breath came back to me like a warm cloud. I kissed the bend of his neck, running my lips lightly up and down the skin.

Richard made a small, contented sound.

I curled my knees into my seat, straining against the seat belt so I could kiss the big pulse in his neck, the curve of his jaw. He turned his face into me. We kissed, but my nerves weren't that good. I turned his face away. "You watch the road."

He shifted gears, his upper arm brushing against my breasts. I sighed against him, putting my hand over his, holding it on the gear shift, keeping his arm pressed against me.

We stayed frozen for a second, then he moved against me, rubbing. I scooted out from under his arm, settling back into my seat. I couldn't breathe past the pulse in my throat. I shivered, hugging myself. The feel of his body against mine made places all over my body tighten.

"What's wrong?" he said, his voice low and soft.

I shook my head. "We can't keep doing this."

"If you stopped because of me, I was enjoying myself."

"So was I. That's the problem," I said.

Richard took in a deep breath and let it out, sighing. "It's only a problem because you make it one, Anita."

"Yeah, right."

"Marry me, Anita, and all this can be yours."

"I don't want to marry you just so I can sleep with you."

"If it was only sex, I wouldn't want you to marry me," Richard said. "But it's cuddling on the couch, watching *Singing in the Rain*. It's eating Chinese and knowing to get that extra order of crab Rangoon. I can order for both of us at most of the restaurants in town."

"Are you saying I'm predictable?"

"Don't do that. Don't belittle it," he said.

I sighed. "I'm sorry, Richard. I didn't mean to. I just . . ."

I didn't know what to say because he was right. My day was more complete for having been shared with Richard. I bought him a mug that I just happened to see in a store. It had wolves on it, and said, "In God's wildness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh, unblighted, unredeemed wilderness." It was a quote from John Muir. No special occasion, just saw it, knew Richard would like it, bought it. A dozen times a day I'd hear something on the radio or in conversation, and I'd think, I must remember and tell Richard. It was Richard who took me on my first bird-watching trip since college.

I had a degree in biology, preternatural biology. Once I'd thought I'd spend my life as a field biologist like a preternatural version of Jane Goodall. I'd enjoyed the bird-watching, partly because he was with me, partly because I'd enjoyed it years ago. It was like I'd forgotten that there was life outside of a gun barrel or a grave side. I'd been neck deep in blood and death so long; then Richard came along. Richard who was also neck deep in strange stuff, but who managed to have a life.

I couldn't think of anything better than waking up beside him, reaching for his body first thing in the morning, knowing I'd be coming home to him. Listening to his collection of Rodgers and Hammerstein, watching his face while he watched Gene Kelly musicals.

I almost opened my mouth and said, let's do it, let's get married, but I didn't. I loved Richard; I could admit that to myself, but it wasn't enough. There was an assassin after me. How could I involve a mild-mannered junior high teacher in that kind of life? He was one of the monsters, but he didn't accept it. He was in a battle for leadership of the local werewolf pack. He'd beaten the current pack leader, Marcus, twice, and twice refused the kill. If you didn't kill, you didn't get to be leader. Richard clung to his morals. Clung to values that

only worked when people weren't trying to kill you. If I married him, his chance at any kind of normal life was gone. I lived in a sort of free-fire zone. Richard deserved better.

Jean-Claude lived in the same world that I did. He had no illusions about the kindness of strangers, or anyone else for that matter. The vampire wouldn't be shocked at the news of an assassin. He'd simply help me plan what to do about it. It wouldn't throw him, or not much. There were nights when I thought that Jean-Claude and I deserved each other.

Richard turned off onto Olive. We were soon going to be at my apartment, and the silence was getting a little thick. Silences don't usually bother me, but this one did. "I'm sorry, Richard. I am truly sorry."

"If I didn't know you loved me, this would be easier," he said. "If it wasn't for that damned vampire, you'd marry me."

"That damn vampire introduced us," I said.

"And he's regretting it, don't think he isn't," Richard said.

I looked at him. "How do you know that?"

He shook his head. "All you have to do is see his face when we're together. I may not like Jean-Claude, and I hate the thought of you with him, but we aren't the only two hurting here. It's a threesome, don't think it's not."

I huddled in my seat, suddenly miserable. I'd have almost welcomed a hit man appearing out of the darkness. Killing I understood. Relationships confused me. Admittedly, this relationship was more confusing than most.

Richard turned into the parking lot of my apartment building. He parked the car and turned off the engine. We sat there in the dark, the only illumination the distant glow of a street light.

"I don't know what to say, Richard." I stared out through the windshield, concentrating on the side of the building, too cowardly to look at him while I talked. "I wouldn't blame you for just saying to hell with it. I wouldn't put up with this kind of indecision from you, and I wouldn't share you with another woman." I finally looked at him. He was staring straight ahead, not looking at me.

My heart sped up. If I was truly as brave as I thought I was, I'd have let him go. But I loved him, and I wasn't that brave. The best I could do was not sleep with him. Not take the relationship that next step forward. That was hard enough. Even my self-control wasn't limitless. If we'd been planning a wedding, I could have waited. With an end in sight, my self-control would have appeared endless, but there was no end in sight. Chastity works better if you don't keep testing it quite so often.

I unbuckled the seat belt, unlocked and opened the door. Richard touched my shoulder before I could get out. "Aren't you going to invite me up?"

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding and turned back to him. "Do you want to be invited up?"

He nodded.

"I don't know why you put up with me," I said.

He smiled. He leaned into me, a light brush of lips. "Sometimes I'm not sure, myself."

We got out. Richard held his hand out to me, and I took it.

A car pulled in behind us, beside my own Jeep. It was my neighbor, Mrs. Pringle. She had a huge television box tied into her trunk.

We walked to the sidewalk and waited for her to get out. She was a tall woman, stretched almost painfully thin with age. Her snow white hair was done in a bun at the back of her head. Custard, her Pomeranian, jumped out of the car and stood yapping at us. He looked like a golden powder puff with little cat feet. He bounced forward on stiff legs. He sniffed Richard's foot and looked up at him with a small growl.

Mrs. Pringle tugged on his leash. "Custard, behave yourself."

The dog quieted, but I think it was more Richard's steady glare than Mrs. Pringle's admonishments. She smiled at us. She had the same light in her eyes that Catherine had had. She liked Richard and made no bones about it.

"Well, now, this is advantageous. I need some strong young arms to carry that monstrous television up the stairs for me."

Richard smiled at her. "Happy to oblige." He walked around to the trunk and started trying to undo the knots.

"What'd you do with Custard while you shopped?" I asked.

"I carried him with me. I've spent a great deal of money at that store before. The salesmen fairly salivate when I come through the doors, so they indulge me."

I had to smile. There was a sharp twang as the ropes broke. "I'll help Richard." I walked back to the trunk. The rope was an inch thick and flopped, broken, onto the pavement. I raised eyebrows at him and whispered, "My, my, Grandma, what strong hands you have."

"I could carry the television up alone, but it might arouse suspicions."

It was a thirty-inch wide screen. "You could really carry it up the stairs by yourself?"

"Easily," he said.

I shook my head. "But you're not going to because you are a mild-mannered science teacher, not an alpha werewolf."

"Which is why you get to help me," he said.

"Are you having trouble undoing the rope?" Mrs. Pringle asked. She'd walked back to us with Custard in tow.

"No," I said, giving Richard a look. "We've got the rope." If people found out Richard was a lycanthrope, he'd lose his job. It was illegal to discriminate, but it happened all the time. Richard taught children. He'd be branded a monster, and most people didn't let monsters near their children.

Mrs. Pringle and Custard led the way. I went up backwards, sort of steadying the box, but Richard took all the weight. He walked up the stairs like the box weighed nothing, pushing with his legs, waiting for me to go up another step. He made a face at me, soundlessly humming under his breath as if he was bored. Lycanthropes are stronger than your run-of-the-mill human being. I knew that, but it was still a little unsettling to be reminded.

We made it to the hallway, and he let me have some of the weight. The thing was heavy, but I held on, and we kept moving towards Mrs. Pringle's apartment, which was right across the hall from mine.

"I've got the door opened," she called.

We were at the door, starting to maneuver through, when Custard darted between us, underneath the box, trailing his leash. Mrs. Pringle was trapped behind the television. "Custard, come back here."

Richard lifted with his forearms, taking the weight. "Get him. I can get inside."

I let him pretend to struggle inside the apartment and went for the dog. I expected to have to chase him down the hall, but he was sniffing at my door, whining. I knelt and grabbed the end of his leash, pulling him back towards me.

Mrs. Pringle was at her door, smiling. "I see you caught the little rascal."

I handed her the leash. "I've got to get something out of my apartment. I'm sure Richard can help you set up the TV."

"Thanks a lot," he called from inside the apartment.

Mrs. Pringle laughed. "I'll give you both some iced tea, unless you have better things to do." There was a knowing look in her blue eyes that made me blush. She winked at me, I kid you not. When the door was safely closed with her and Richard on the other side, I walked toward my apartment. Three doors down, I crossed the hallway. I took the Browning out and clicked the safety off. I eased back towards my door. Maybe I was being paranoid. Maybe Custard hadn't smelled anybody in my apartment. But he'd never whined at my door like that before. Maybe Edward's phone call was making me jumpy. But better jumpy than dead. Paranoid it was.

I knelt by the door and took a breath, letting it out slowly. I took my keys out of my jacket pocket left-handed. I scrunched down as low as I could get and still have a decent shooting stance. If there was a bad guy in there, he'd probably shoot at chest level. On my knees I was a lot shorter than chest level. I pushed the key in the lock. Nothing happened. The apartment was probably empty, except for my fish wondering what the hell I was doing. I turned the knob, pushed the door inward, and a hole exploded out through the door, thundering over my head like a cannon shot. There was no sound for a second. The door swung closed with the force of the shot, and through the hole in the door I saw a man with a shotgun raised to his shoulder. I fired once through the hole. The door bounced open, still reverberating from the shotgun blast. I threw myself onto one side, gun pointed through the open door.

The shotgun fired again, showering the hallway with bits of wood. I fired twice more, hitting the man in the chest both times. He staggered, blood blossoming on his coat, and fell straight back. The shotgun fell to the carpet near his feet.

I got to my knees, back pressed to the wall near my kitchenette. All I could hear was a roaring in my ears, then dimly my own blood rushing through my head.

Richard was suddenly there in the doorway, like a target. "Get down! He may not be alone!" I wasn't sure how loud I was yelling. My ears were still ringing.

Richard crouched beside me. I think he said my name, but I didn't have time for it. I pushed upward, my back to the wall, gun in a two-handed grip. He started to stand. I said, "Stay down." He did. Point for him.

I could see that there was no one in front of my apartment. Unless there was somebody hiding in the bedroom, the hit man had been alone. I approached him, slowly, gun pointed at him. If he'd twitched, I'd have shot again, but he didn't move. The shotgun was by his feet. I'd never seen anybody use a gun with their feet, so I left it where it was.

He lay on his back, one arm thrown up over his head, one down at his side. His face was slack with death, his eyes wide and unseeing. I didn't really need to check for a pulse, but I did it anyway. Nothing. There were three holes in his chest. I'd hit him with the first shot, but it hadn't been a killing blow. That had nearly cost me my life.

Richard came up behind me. "There's no one else in the apartment, Anita."

I didn't argue with him. I didn't ask if he knew this by smell or by hearing. I didn't bloody care. I checked the bedroom and bathroom just to be thorough and came back out to find Richard staring down at the dead man.

"Who is he?" Richard asked.

It occurred to me that I could hear again. Bully for me. I still had a faint ringing in my ears, but it would pass. "I don't know."

Richard looked at me. "Was he the . . . hitter?"

"I think so." There was a hole in the door big enough to crawl through. It was still open. Mrs. Pringle's door was closed, but the doorjamb was splintered like something had taken a big bite out of it. If she'd been standing there, she'd have been dead.

I heard the distant wail of police sirens. Couldn't blame the neighbors for calling them. "I'm going to make some phone calls before the cops get here."

"Then what?" he asked.

I looked at him. He was pale, the whites of his eyes showing just a little too much. "Then we go with the nice police officers down to the station to answer questions."

"It was self-defense."

"Yeah, but he's still dead on my carpet." I walked into the bedroom, searching for the phone. I was having a little trouble remembering where I'd left it, as if it ever moved from the nightstand. Shock is always fun.

Richard leaned in the doorway. "Who are you going to call?"

"Dolph, and maybe Catherine."

"A friendly policeman I understand, but why Catherine?"

"She's a lawyer."

"Oh," he said. He glanced back at the dead man, who was bleeding all over my white carpet. "Dating you is never boring, I'll give you that."

"And it's dangerous," I said, "Don't forget dangerous." I dialed Dolph's number from memory.

"I never forget you're dangerous, Anita," Richard said. He stared at me and his eyes were amber, the color of a wolf's eyes. His beast slid behind those eyes, peering out. Probably the smell of fresh blood. I stared into those alien eyes and knew I wasn't the only dangerous thing in the room. Of course, I was armed. The dead man could vouch for that. Laughter tickled the back of my throat. I tried to swallow it, but it spilled out, and I was giggling when Dolph answered the phone. Laughing was better than crying, I guess. Though I'm not sure Dolph thought so.

Chapter 4

I sat in a straight-backed chair at a small, scarred table in an interrogation room. Oh, sorry, interview room. That's what they were calling it now. Call it what you will, it still smelled like stale sweat and old cigarettes with an overlay of disinfectant. I was sipping my third cup of coffee, and my hands were still cold.

Detective Sergeant Rudolph Storr leaned against the far wall. His arms were crossed over his chest, and he was trying to be unobtrusive, but when you're six foot eight and built like a pro wrestler, that's hard. He hadn't said a word during the interview. (Just here to observe.)

Catherine sat beside me. She'd thrown a black blazer over the green dress, brought her briefcase, and sat wearing her lawyer face.

Detective Branswell sat across from us. He was in his mid-thirties, black hair, dark complected, with eyes as black as his hair. His name was English, but he looked Mediterranean, like he'd just stepped off the olive boat. His accent was pure middle Missouri.

"Now, Ms. Blake, go over it just one more time for me. Please." He poised his pen over his notebook as if he'd write it all down again.

"We'd helped my neighbor carry up her new television."

"Mrs. Edith Pringle, yeah, she confirms all that. But why did you go to your apartment?"

"I was going to get a screwdriver to help install the television."

"You keep a lot of tools, Ms. Blake?" He wrote something on his notepad. I was betting it was a doodle.

"No, detective, but I've got a screwdriver."

"Did Mrs. Pringle ask you to go get this screwdriver?"

"No, but she'd used it when she bought her stereo system." Which was true. I was trying to keep the lies to an absolute minimum.

"So you assumed she'd need it."

"Yes."

"Then what?" He asked like he'd never heard the answer before. His black eyes were intense and empty, unreadable and eager at the same time. We were coming to the part that he didn't quite buy.

"I unlocked my door and dropped my keys. I squatted down to pick them up and the first shotgun blast roared over my head. I returned fire."

"How? The door was closed."

"I shot through the hole in the door that the shotgun had made."

"You shot a man through a hole in your door and hit him."

"It was a big hole, detective, and I wasn't sure I hit him."

"Why didn't the second shotgun blast take you out, Ms. Blake? There wasn't enough left of the door to hide behind. Where were you, Ms. Blake?"

"I told you, the blast rocked the door inward. I hit the floor, on my side. The second blast went over me."

"And you shot the man twice more in the chest," Detective Branswell said.

"Yes."

He looked at me for a long moment, studying my face. I met his eyes without flinching. It wasn't that hard. I was numb, empty, and distant. There was still a fine ringing in my ears from being so damn close to two shotgun blasts. The ringing would fade. It usually did.

"You know the man you killed?"

Catherine touched my arm. "Detective Branswell, my client has been more than helpful. She's told you several times that she did not recognize the deceased."

He flipped back through his notebook. "You're right, counselor. Ms. Blake has been helpful. The dead man was James Dugan, Jimmy the Shotgun. He's got a record longer than you are tall, Ms. Blake. He's local muscle. Someone you call when you want it cheap and quick and don't care how messy it is." He stared at me while he talked, studying my eyes.

I blinked at him.

"Do you know anyone who would want you dead, Ms. Blake?"

"Not right offhand," I said.

He closed his notebook and stood. "I'm going to recommend justifiable homicide to the DA. I doubt you'll see the inside of a courtroom."

"When do I get my gun back?" I asked.

Branswell stared at me. "When ballistics is done with it, Ms. Blake. And I'd be damn grateful that you're getting it back at all." He shook his head. "I've heard stories about you from some of the cops who answered the last call from your apartment. The one with the two killer zombies." He shook his head again. "Don't take this wrong, Ms. Blake, but have you considered moving to a new jurisdiction?"

"My landlord is probably going to suggest the same thing," I said.

"I'll just bet he is," Branswell said. "Counselor, Sergeant Storr."

"Thanks for letting me sit in on this, Branswell," Dolph said.

"You said she was one of yours. Besides, I know Gross and Brady. They were the first officers on scene for the zombies. They say good things about her. I've talked to half a dozen officers that say Ms. Blake saved their butt or

stood shoulder to shoulder with them under fire and didn't blink. It cuts you a hell of a lot of slack, Blake, but that slack isn't unlimited. Watch your back, and try not to shoot up any innocent bystanders." With that, he left.

Dolph stared down at me. "I'll drive you back to your place."

"Richard's waiting for me," I said.

"What's going on, Anita?"

"I told Branswell everything I know."

Catherine stood up. "Anita has answered all the questions she's going to answer tonight."

"He's a friend," I said.

"He's also a cop," Catherine said. She smiled. "Isn't that right, Sergeant Storr?"

Dolph stared at her for a minute. "That is certainly true, Ms. Maison-Gillette." He pushed away from the wall. He looked at me. "I'll talk to you later, Anita."

"I know," I said.

"Come on," Catherine said. "Let's get out of here before they change their minds."

"Don't you believe me?" I asked.

"I'm your lawyer. Of course I believe you."

I looked at her. She looked at me. I got up. We left. I wondered if Richard would believe me. Probably not.

Chapter 5

Richard and I walked toward his car, through the police station parking lot. He hadn't said a word to me. He'd shaken hands with Catherine and headed for the car. He got into his side. I slid into the passenger side. Richard started the engine and backed out of the parking slot.

"You're mad about something," I said.

He eased out onto the street. He always drove carefully when he was angry. "What could I possibly be mad about?" The sarcasm was thick enough to eat with a spoon.

"You think I knew there was a hit man in my apartment?"

He flashed me a look that was pure rage. "You knew, and you let me go inside and set that damned TV up. You got me out of harm's way."

"I wasn't sure, Richard."

"I bet you had your gun drawn before he fired."

I shrugged.

"Dammit, Anita, you could have been killed."

"But I wasn't."

"That's your answer to everything. If you survive, it's all right."

"It beats the alternative," I said.

"Don't make jokes," Richard said.

"Look, Richard, I didn't go out hunting this guy. He came to me."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"And you would have done what? Go through the door first? You'd have taken a chest full of buckshot and survived. How would you have explained that? You'd have been outed as a lycanthrope. You'd have lost your job, at the very least."

"We could have called the police."

"And told them what? That Custard sniffed at the door? If they had investigated, they'd have gotten shot. The guy was jumpy as hell. He shot through the door, remember? He didn't know who he was firing at."

He turned onto Olive, shaking his head. "You should have told me."

"What would it have changed, Richard? Except maybe you'd have tried to play hero, and if you survived, you'd have lost your career."

"Dammit, dammit." He smashed his hands into the steering wheel over and over. When he looked at me, his eyes had gone amber and alien. "I don't need you to protect me, Anita."

"Ditto," I said.

Silence filled the car like ice water. Nobody but the bad guy had died. I'd done the right thing. But it was hard to explain.

"It wasn't that you risked your life," Richard said, "it was that you got rid of me before you did it. You didn't even give me a chance. I have never interfered with you doing your job."

"Would you have considered this part of my job?"

"Closer to your job description than mine," he said.

I thought about that for a minute. "You're right. One of the reasons we're still dating is you don't pull macho crap on me. I apologize. I should have warned you."

He glanced at me with eyes that were still pale and wolfish. "Did I just win an argument?"

I smiled. "I admitted I was wrong. Is that the same thing."

"Exactly the same thing."

"Then give yourself a point."

He grinned at me. "Why can't I stay mad at you, Anita?"

"You're a very forgiving person, Richard. One of us has to be."

He pulled into my parking lot for the third time that night. "You can't stay at your place tonight. The door is in pieces."

"I know." If I'd been kicked out of my apartment because it was being painted, I had friends I could stay with, or a hotel, but the bad guys had proven they didn't care who got hurt. I couldn't risk anybody, not even strangers in the next room at a hotel.

"Come home with me," he said. He parked in an empty space closest to the stairs.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Richard."

"The shotgun blast wouldn't have killed me. I'd have healed, because it wasn't silver shot. How many of your other friends can say that?"

"Not many," I said quietly.

"I've got a house set back in a yard. You won't be risking innocent bystanders."

"I know you have a yard, Richard. I've spent enough Sunday afternoons there."

"Then you know I'm right." He leaned towards me and his eyes had bled back to their normal brown. "I have a guest room, Anita. It doesn't have to be more than that."

I stared at him from inches away. I could feel his body like a force just out of reach. It wasn't his otherworldly wolf powers. It was simply sheer physical attraction. It was dangerous agreeing to go to Richard's house. Maybe not to my life, but to other things.

If Jimmy the Shotgun had had a partner inside the apartment tonight, I'd be dead now. I'd been so busy concentrating on killing him that a second perp could have blown me away. Edward had told his contact no by now, and it takes a little while to find another hitter of Edward's caliber. So, instead of waiting, they hired cheap and local, taking the chance that cheap might take me out and they'd be saved several hundred grand. Or maybe they wanted me dead really quickly for some reason that I didn't understand. Either way, they wanted me dead pretty damn badly. Usually, when someone wants you dead that badly, they succeed. Not tonight or tomorrow, but unless Edward and I could find out who had put the contract out on me, the line of talent would just keep coming.

I stared into Richard's face, almost close enough to kiss. I thought about never seeing him again. About never touching him again. About never satisfying that growing hunger that perfumed the air whenever I was with him. I touched his face, lightly running my fingertips down his cheek. "Okay."

"You look so serious. What are you thinking, Anita?"

I leaned in and kissed him. "Blood, death, and sex. What else is there?"

We got out of the car. I filled my automatic fish feeder full of enough food for a week. In a week's time, if the assassin was still after me, and if I was still alive, I'd have to come back. All the bad guys had to do was stake out my fish tank, and they had me if they were patient enough. Somehow I didn't think they would be.

I packed a few things, including my stuffed toy penguin, Sigmund, every weapon I owned, a few clothes, an outfit for tomorrow's date with Jean-Claude. Yeah, probably I wouldn't be going, but I didn't want to come back to the apartment, not for anything. I left a message on Ronnie's machine. We usually worked out together on Saturday morning, but I didn't want Ronnie in the line of fire. She was a private detective, but Ronnie wasn't a shooter, not like I was. She had a certain respect for life that could get you killed.

Richard waited while I changed. Black jeans, a royal blue polo shirt, white jogging socks with a blue stripe, black Nikes, and I felt more myself. I laid the Browning's shoulder holster in my suitcase. The Browning was my main gun,

and I missed it. I'd have missed it under normal circumstances, but now my hand ached for the gun.

I guess that's what backup guns are for. The Firestar 9mm is a good gun and fits my hand well. My hands are small enough that a lot of 9mms are just too big. The Browning was about the limit of a comfortable grip. I wore the Firestar in an inter-pants holster, set for a forward cross draw, which meant you could see the gun. I wasn't sure I cared tonight.

I put on wrist sheaths and both knives. These were the last two of a foursome that I'd had custom made for my hands, with the highest silver content possible in the steel. I'd had to have two of them replaced; monsters ate them. I put the two new knives in the suitcase still in their felt-lined box. They were pretty and sharp enough to cut your skin if you ran a thumb along the edge.

While I was having the lost knives replaced, I'd ordered a new one. It was nearly a foot long, more a sword than a knife. I'd had a leather harness made that let me carry it down my spine, with the hilt under my hair. I hadn't used it before, but I'd seen it in a catalog and couldn't resist.

I had a Derringer, a sawed-off shotgun, two full-sized, pump-action shotguns, a twelve gauge, and a mini-Uzi. The Derringer, the Uzi, and the sawed-off shotgun were all gifts from Edward. Not Christmas or birthday gifts. No, we'd be out hunting vampires together, and he'd give me a new toy. I'd asked for the shotgun.

The full-sized shotguns wouldn't pack in either the suitcases or the gym bags. I put them in their individual carrying cases, with straps. The gym bags held my vampire hunting kit and my zombie paraphernalia. I put extra ammo in both bags for temporary keeping. Heck, I shoved extra ammo in the suitcase, too. You could never have too much.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. The gun was pretty obvious against the bright blue of the shirt. I finally put a black jacket over it, what they call a boyfriend's jacket, because it's sort of big through the shoulders and body. The sleeves rolled back to expose the silky lining. I liked the jacket, and with one button fastened, it hid the Firestar, though not completely. You'd still catch glimpses of it when I moved, but maybe people wouldn't run screaming.

I felt naked without the Browning, which was kind of funny, considering I had an Uzi in my suitcase. But hey, I slept with the Browning.

Richard never said a word about the two shotguns. Maybe he would have complained about the rest if he'd seen them, but he picked up one suitcase, put one gym bag over his shoulder, one shotgun carrying case on the same shoulder, and let me pick up my share.

"Can you carry both suitcases?" I asked.

"Yeah, but I'm shocked you asked. The last time I tried to carry something unasked, you nearly handed me my head in a basket."

"I want one hand free for my gun."

"Ah," he said, "of course." He took the other suitcase without another word. He really is a very wise man.

Mrs. Pringle stepped out of her door as we were leaving. She had Custard in her arms. He growled briefly at Richard, and she hushed him. "I thought I heard you out here. Are you all right, Anita?"

I glanced at the hole by her door. "I'm fine. How 'bout you?"

She hugged Custard, raising his tiny furry body near her face. "I'll be all right. Are you going to be charged?"

"It doesn't look like it."

"Good." She glanced at the suitcases. One for clothes, one for weapons. "Where are you going?"

"I think I'm a little too dangerous to be around right now."

She searched my face like she was trying to read my mind. "How bad is this mess, Anita?"

"Bad enough," I said.

She gently touched my hair, "You be very careful out there."

I smiled. "Always. You take care of yourself, too."

"Custard and I will take care of each other."

I petted Custard, rubbing his little fox ears. "I owe you a box of doggie treats, furball." He licked my hand with a tiny, pink tongue.

"When you can, give me your new phone number," she said.

"When I can, I'll come back."

She smiled, but her pale eyes stayed worried.

We left because we had to. My imagination has always been too good for my own peace of mind. I had a very clear image of Mrs. Pringle splattered against the wall, that lovely, aging face blown away. If she had opened the door at the wrong moment, I wouldn't be imagining it. Too close, too damn close.

Chapter 6

Richard's house was a one-story, half-brick ranch. It looked like a house for children, and Mommy baking cookies in the kitchen. It wasn't even set that far back off the road, but it had plenty of yard on either side and the backyard was an acre of woods. You could look out both the sides and the back and not see a neighbor, except in winter when the bare trees revealed distant glimpses across the valley. From the front picture window, you could see the corner of the next house half obscured by overgrown shrubs. No one had lived in it the entire time I'd been visiting. The place was a little isolated. Richard liked that, and whether I did or not, I needed it now.

The place looked like an invitation for an ambush, but neighbors would have been cannon fodder. Most bad guys try not to take out innocent bystanders. It's not moral outrage, just bad for business. The cops tend to put the heat on if you waste a lot of bystanders.

Richard hit the garage door opener and eased the Mustang into the garage. His four by four was already inside. I followed him in my Jeep. I idled out on the street, waiting for him to move the four by four out so I could put the Jeep in. Parking my Jeep out in front of his house seemed like making the bad guys' job a little too easy. He pulled out. I pulled in. He parked behind me in the driveway and walked into the garage. I unloaded the suitcases, and he hit the button by the interior door.

The door opened into the kitchen. The walls were lined with Hogarth prints of dogs and more modern hunting scenes. A Warner Brothers canister set; Bugs to Tweety Bird sat on the off-white cabinets. The countertops were off white. The cabinets light honey colored oak. There were dishes draining on a towel by the sink, even though Richard had a dishwasher. A glass, a bowl, a spoon; he'd washed his breakfast dishes before he left for work this morning. I'd have poured water in them and left them in the sink. Of course, I never ate breakfast.

Richard walked through into the living room, carrying one suitcase. I followed, carrying the suitcase with the weapons in it. I also had the two gym bags.

The living room had deep forest green carpet and pale yellow walls. Cartoon lithographs took up the far wall. The near wall was taken up with a wooden entertainment center that Richard had built himself. There was a large-screen TV, a miniature stereo system that made mine sound like humming through a comb, shelves of books, and closed doors that hid part of his extensive video collection and a portion of his CDs. The rest of his books were in the basement, set in shelves along every wall. There were still boxes he hadn't unpacked because he ran out of shelf space.

There was a large couch and a heavy wood coffee table. The couch was green and brown, patterned with a yellow afghan thrown across it that his grandmother had made. A small antique armoire sat against the far wall. There was no other furniture in the room.

He'd set the suitcase in the smaller bedroom. It had a twin bed, a nightstand, and a lamp. The walls, the drapes, and the coverlet were all white, like he hadn't really decided what to do with the room yet.

I laid the gym bags on the bed, put the suitcase on the floor, and stared at it all. My life sitting in little bags on the carpet. Seemed like there should have been more.

Richard came up and hugged me from behind, arms wrapping around my shoulders. "I think this is where I'm supposed to ask what's wrong, but I know the answer already. I'm sorry the bad guys invaded your house."

That was it exactly. The bad guys were not supposed to come home with you. It should have been against the rules. I knew it wasn't, it had happened before, but not like this. Not where I knew I couldn't go back. Even when this was over, I couldn't risk Mrs. Pringle and my other neighbors again.

I turned in his arms, and he loosened them so I could do it. I hugged him around the waist. "How did you know that was exactly what was bothering me?"

He smiled. "I love you, Anita."

"That's not an answer."

He kissed me on the forehead. "Yes, it is." He kissed me gently on the lips and stepped back. "I'm going to get out of this tie. Change into your jammies if you want to." He left, closing the door behind him.

I opened the door and called after him. "Can I use the phone?"

He answered from his bedroom. "Make yourself at home."

I took that for a yes, and went into the kitchen. The phone was on the wall. I got a card out of my fanny pack, which I'd been forced to carry like a purse. You couldn't fasten the jacket over the fanny pack, and the open jacket would have shown off the gun.

The card was white with a number printed in black script, nothing but the number. I dialed and got Edward's twenty-four-hour answering service. I left a message, saying to call me ASAP, and Richard's number.

Richard's answering machine sat on the counter, connected by wires to the wall-mounted phone. The message light was blinking, but it wasn't my machine, so I didn't check it.

Richard came into the kitchen. His hair fell around his shoulders in tight, foaming waves, curlier from the French braid. His hair was brown, but light of almost any kind brought out golden highlights, hints of bronze. He was wearing a flannel shirt, forest green, with the sleeves rolled above his elbows, showing the fine muscles in his forearms. I'd seen the shirt before. It was high-quality flannel, soft as a blanket to touch. He had on jeans and no socks. He padded barefoot towards me.

The phone rang. It was nearly one o'clock in the morning. Who else could it be but Edward? "I'm expecting a call," I said.

"Help yourself."

I picked it up, and it was Edward. "What happened?" he asked.

I told him.

"Somebody wants you dead quick."

"Yeah. When you said no, they went out and bought some cheap local talent."

"You get what you pay for," Edward said.

"If there'd been two of them, Edward, I wouldn't be here."

"You aren't going to like my news."

"How much worse could it get?" I asked.

"I answered a message just before yours. They upped the offer to five hundred thousand dollars, if you were dead within twenty-four hours."

"Sweet Jesus, Edward, I'm not worth that kind of money."

"They knew you blew away their hitter, Anita. They knew the hit had failed."

"How?" I asked.

"I don't know yet. I'm trying to find out who's putting up the money, but it'll take a little time. The safeguards that keep me out of it protect the client, too."

I was shaking my head back and forth. "Why twenty-four hours for the hit?"

"Something's happening that they want you out of the way for, something big."

"But what?"

"You know what it is, Anita. You may not be aware that you know, but you do. Something worth this kind of money that you could put a stop to. There can't be that many choices."

"I can't think of a single thing, Edward."

"Think harder," he said. "I'll be there as early as I can tomorrow. Watch your back. Don't drive your car."

"Why not?"

"Bombs," he said.

"Bombs," I repeated.

"For half a million dollars, Anita, they'll get someone good. A lot of professionals will do you from a nice, safe distance. A bomb, a high-powered rifle."

"You're scaring me," I said.

"Good, maybe you'll be careful."

"I'm always careful, Edward."

"I apologize. You're right, but be more careful. I didn't expect them to try a local hit."

"You're worried," I said.

He was quiet for a second. "We can keep taking out the hitters, but eventually we've got to get to the man with the money. As long as the contract's out there, somebody'll keep taking it."

"It's just too much damn money to pass up," I said.

"A lot of professionals won't take a hit with a time limit on it," he said.

"Some of the best are out of the running because of the deadline. I won't take a hit with special circumstances."

"I hear a 'but' coming up," I said.

He laughed, quietly. "For half a million dollars, people will break their rules."

"Not comforting," I said.

"Not meant to be," he said. "I'll be at Richard's tomorrow early."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I could find it, but let's not play games. Give me directions."

I did. "I would tell you to stay indoors, but you've been dating Richard for months. A good hitter will be able to find you. I don't know if you're safer inside or on the move."

"I'll pack extra firepower and be more paranoid than usual."

"Good. See you tomorrow." He hung up, and I was left holding the buzzing phone.

Richard was staring at me. "Did I hear you say twenty-four hours for the hit?"

I hung up the phone. "I'm afraid so." I hit the message button on his machine out of habit. It whirred as it rewound.

"Why, for God's sake?" Richard asked.

"I wish I knew."

"You mentioned money twice. How much?"

I told him.

He sat down in one of the kitchen chairs, looking shocked. Couldn't blame him. "Anita, don't take this wrong. To me you're worth any amount of money, but why would somebody pay half a million dollars to kill you?"

For someone who knew nothing about assassins, he'd grasped the big question quite nicely. I walked over to him. I ran my fingertips through his hair. "Edward says I must already know what the big event is, that I wouldn't be worth this kind of money, with this kind of deadline, unless I was already intimate with the situation."

He looked up at me. "But you don't know, do you?"

"Not a clue."

He laid his hands on either side of my waist, pulling me against him, wrapping his arms completely around my waist.

The message machine clicked to life and made us both jump. We laughed nervously, not just from fear. There was a heat to his eyes as he stared up at me that made me want to blush or kiss him. I hadn't decided which.

Two hang-ups, his younger brother Daniel, sorry Richard had canceled their rock climbing tomorrow.

I leaned towards Richard. His lips were the softest I'd ever kissed. The taste of him was intoxicating. How could I be thinking of giving him up?

The last message began playing: "Richard, this is Stephen. Oh, God, pick up. Please pick up. Please be there."

We froze, listening.

"They're trying to get me to do one of those movies. Raina won't let me leave. Richard, where are you? They're coming. I've got to go. Oh, God, Richard." The phone clicked dead. A mechanical voice said, "End of messages."

Richard stood up, and I let him. "I thought Raina had stopped making pornographic movies," I said.

"She promised not to make snuff films, that was all." He replayed the message. The time on it was 12:03.

"That's less than an hour ago," I said.

"I can't leave you alone here tonight. What if another killer comes?" He paced in a tight circle. "But I can't abandon Stephen."

"I'll go with you," I said.

He shook his head, walking for the bedroom. "I can survive the games that the pack plays, Anita. You're human, they'll tear you up."

"They'll tear you up, too, Richard."

He just kept walking. "I can handle myself."

"Are you at least going to call some of the pack that's on your side? Get some backup?"

He sat down on his bed, pulling on socks. He glanced up at me, then shook his head. "If I take my army, this'll turn into a war. People will get killed."

"But if you go in alone, you only endanger yourself, is that it?"

He glanced up at me. "Exactly."

I shook my head. "And what happens to Stephen if you go out there and get killed? Who rescues him?"

That stopped him for a second. He frowned, fishing his shoes out from under the bed. "They won't kill me."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because if Marcus kills me outside the challenge circle, he doesn't retain leadership of the pack. It's like cheating. The pack would turn on him."

"What if you accidentally died in a fight with someone else?"

He was suddenly very interested in tying his shoes. "I can handle myself."

"Meaning if someone else kills you in a legitimate fight, Marcus is off the hook, right?"

He stood up. "I guess."

"Raina is Marcus's mate, Richard. She's afraid you're going to kill him. This is a trap."

He shook his head stubbornly. "If I call in the wolves on my side and we go over there in a mass, they'll be slaughtered. If I go over there alone, I may be able to talk my way through it."

I leaned against the doorjamb and wanted to yell at him, but bit it back. "I'm going with you, Richard."

"You have enough problems of your own."

"Stephen risked his life to save mine once. I owe him. If you want to play politician, fine, but I want Stephen safe."

"Going out where the assassin can find you isn't a smart idea, Anita."

"We've been dating for months, Richard. If a professional assassin hits town, it won't take him long to find me here."

He glared at me, jaw tight enough that I could see the small muscle on the side. "You'll kill someone if I take you."

"Only if they need killing."

He shook his head. "No killing."

"Even to save my own life? Even to save Stephen's?"

He looked away from me, then back, anger turning his dark eyes almost black. "Of course you can defend yourself."

"Then I'm coming."

"All right, for Stephen's sake." He didn't like saying it.

"I'll get my jacket." I got the mini-Uzi out of the suitcase. It was amazingly small. I could have shot it with one hand, but for accuracy, I needed two. Though accuracy and machine guns were sort of mutually exclusive. You pointed it a little lower than you meant to hit and held on. Silver ammo, of course. I slid the strap over my right shoulder. It had a little clip that attached to my belt at the small of my back. The clip kept the Uzi from sliding all over the place, but left enough play for me to slide the gun out and fire it. The gun rode at the small of my back, which was irritating, but no matter what I told Richard,

I was scared, and I wanted at least two guns with me. The police had the Browning. I didn't have a holster big enough for the sawed-off, not to mention it was illegal. Come to think of it, wasn't the machine gun? I had a permit to own it, but they didn't hand out carry permits for fully automatic weapons, not to civilians, anyway. If I got caught with it, I might be going to court after all.

I put the jacket on and whirled around. The jacket was bulky enough that it didn't show. Amazing. The Firestar was more noticeable in its front-draw holster.

My pulse was beating hard enough that I could feel it thrumming against my skin. I was scared. Richard was going to play politics with a bunch of werewolves. Shapeshifters didn't play politics much, they just killed you. But I owed Stephen, and I didn't trust Richard to save him. I'd do whatever it took to see him safe; Richard wouldn't. Richard would hesitate. It would almost surely get him killed one day. Tonight, for the first time, I realized it might get me killed.

No way should we walk into one of Raina's little shows without more people. No way. Jean-Claude would never have tolerated Raina and Marcus's games. They'd be dead by now, and we'd all be safe. I would have trusted Jean-Claude at my back tonight. He wouldn't flinch. Of course, he'd have brought his own little army of vampires and made it a true battle. The shit could hit the fan tonight and be over before morning. Richard's way, we'd rescue Stephen, survive, escape, and Raina would still be alive. Nothing would be settled. It may have been civilized, but it was a bad way to stay alive.

Richard was waiting by the front door, keys in hand, impatient. Couldn't blame him.

"Stephen didn't say where he was. Do you know where they make the films?"

"Yeah."

I looked a question at him. "Raina took me to watch the filming a few times. She thought I'd overcome my shyness and join in."

"You didn't." It wasn't a question.

"Of course not. Let's go get Stephen." He held the door for me, and just this once I didn't tell him not to.

Chapter 7

I expected Richard to drive into the city, to some disreputable warehouse in a seedy section of town. Instead, he drove further into Jefferson County. We drove down Old Highway 21 between soft, rolling hills, silvered in the moonlight. It was early May, and the trees were already thick with leaves.

Woods hugged the sides of the road. An occasional house would break out of the trees, but for the most part, we were alone in the dark, as if the road stretched out forever and no other human had ever set foot on it.

"What's the plan?" I asked.

Richard glanced at me, then back to the road. "Plan?"

"Yeah, a plan. If Raina's there, she won't be alone, and she won't like you taking Stephen."

"Raina's the alpha female, the lupa. I'm not allowed to fight her."

"Why not?"

"An alpha male becomes Ulfric, wolf king, by killing the old leader, but the winner chooses the lupa."

"So Raina didn't have to fight for her place?"

"She didn't have to fight to be lupa, but she did have to fight to be the most dominant female in the pack."

"You once told me that the pack considers me a dominant. What's the difference between being a dominant and being an alpha female? I mean, can I be an alpha?"

"Alpha is the equivalent to being a master vampire, sort of," he said.

"So what is a dominant?"

"Anyone not pack, not lukoi, that's earned our respect. Jean-Claude is a dominant. He can't be more unless he becomes pack."

"So you're alpha, but you're not pack leader."

"We have about half a dozen alphas, male and female. I was Marcus's second in command, his Freki."

"Freki is the name of one of Odin's wolves. Why would second wolf be named after something out of mythology?"

"The pack is very old, Anita. Among ourselves, we are the lukoi. There can be two seconds, Freki and Geri."

"Why the history lesson and the new vocabulary?"

"To outsiders, we keep it simple. But I want you to know who and what we are."

"Lukoi is Greek, right?"

He smiled. "But do you know where it's from?"

"No."

"King Lykaon of Arcadia was a werewolf. He didn't try and hide it. We call ourselves the lukoi in his memory."

"If you're not Freki anymore, what are you?"

"Fenrir, challenger."

"The giant wolf that kills Odin at Ragnarok."

"I'm impressed, not many people would know that."

"Two semesters of comparative religion," I said. "Can a woman be Ulfric?"

"Yes, but it's rare."

"Why?"

"They'd have to win a knock-down drag-out physical battle. All the power in the world won't stop someone from pounding your face into the ground."

I would have liked to argue, but I didn't. He was right. Not because I was female. Small men get their asses kicked, too. Size matters if both people are equally well trained.

"Why don't the female alphas have to duke it out to win the top spot?"

"Because the Ulfric and his lupa are a mating pair, Anita. He doesn't want to get stuck with a woman he can't stand."

I looked at him. "Wait a minute. You're next in line to lead the pack. If you succeed Marcus, do you have to sleep with your lupa?"

"Technically, yes."

"Technically?" I said.

"I won't choose one. I won't sleep with someone just so the pack can feel secure."

"Glad to hear it," I said, "but does that jeopardize your standing in the pack?"

He took a deep breath, and I heard it sigh outward. "I have a lot of support among the pack, but some of them are bothered by my morals. They think I should pick a mate."

"And you won't, because . . . of me?"

He glanced at me. "That's a big part of it. It wouldn't be only one time, Anita. An alpha couple binds for life. It's like a marriage. They usually marry each other in real life, not just in the pack."

"I can see why the pack leader gets to pick his mate."

"I've picked my mate," Richard said.

"But I'm not a werewolf."

"No, but the pack considers you a dominant."

"Only because I killed a few of them," I said.

"Well, that does tend to impress them." He slowed down. There was a line of pine trees along the left-hand side of the road, too regular and too thick to be natural. He turned down a gravel driveway in the middle of them.

The driveway curved downhill, and at the bottom of a shallow valley was a farmhouse. Hills thick with trees poured out around the house. If there had ever been fields, the forest had reclaimed them.

The driveway opened into a small gravel lot that was crowded with cars, at least a dozen of them. Richard jerked the car into park and was out the door before I could unbuckle my seat belt. I had to run to catch up and was at his back just as he flung open the barn door. There was a thick wall of cloth hanging inside the door, not a curtain but more a barrier. Richard pulled it aside, and light flooded out around us. He stalked into that light, and I trailed after him.

There were lights everywhere, hanging from the rafters like large, ugly fruit. About twenty people stood around the open interior of the barn. Two cameras were trained on a set, made up of two walls and a king-size bed. Two cameramen were sort of draped on the cameras, waiting. A long table thick with take-out bags and cold pizza was set near the entrance. Over a dozen people were clustered around the food. They glanced at us as we entered. A handful of humans looked hurriedly away and began inching back. The

lycanthropes stared, their eyes almost motionless, intent. I suddenly knew what it must feel like to be a gazelle near a lion pack.

At least two-thirds of the people in the barn were shape-shifters. Probably, they weren't all werewolves. I couldn't tell what animal they might be by looking, but I knew they were all shapeshifters. Their energy burned through the air like a hint of lightning. Even with the Uzi, if things went wrong, I was in trouble. I was suddenly angry with Richard. We shouldn't have come alone like this. It was too careless for words.

A woman stepped out of the group. She had what looked like an industrial-strength makeup kit on her shoulder. Her dark hair was shaved close to her head, leaving a very pretty face open and clean, without a drop of makeup on it.

She moved uncertainly towards us as if afraid she'd get bitten. The air vibrated around her, a tiny shimmer, as though reality was just a little less firm than it should be around her. Lycanthrope. I wasn't sure what flavor, but that really didn't matter. Whatever the flavor, they were dangerous.

"Richard," she said. She stepped away from the watching crowd, small hands running up and down the strap of her bag. "What are you doing here?"

"You know why I'm here, Heidi," he said. "Where's Stephen?"

"They aren't going to hurt him," she said. "I mean, his brother's here. His own brother wouldn't let him get hurt, would he?"

"Sounds like you're trying to convince yourself, not us," I said.

Her eyes flicked to me. "You must be Anita Blake." She glanced behind at the watchers at her back. "Please, Richard, just go." The aura of energy around her was vibrating harder, almost a visible shimmer in the air. It prickled along my skin like ants.

Richard reached out towards her.

Heidi flinched but stood her ground.

Richard smoothed his hand just above her face, not quite touching her skin. As he moved his hand, the energy around her quieted, like water calming. "It's all right, Heidi. I know the situation Marcus has put you in. You want to join another pack, but he has to give permission. To get his permission, you do what he says, or you're trapped. Whatever happens, I won't hold it against you."

The anxiety seeped away. Her otherworldly energy quieted until it was barely there at all. She might have passed for human.

"Very impressive." A man stepped forward. He was at least six foot four, maybe an inch taller, his head bald as an egg, only his eyebrows showing dark above pale eyes. His black T-shirt strained over the muscles in his arms and chest, as if the shirt was the skin of an insect about to split and let loose the monster. Energy boiled off him like summer heat. He moved with the confident strut of a bully, and the power crawling over my skin said he might be able to back it up.

"He's new," I said.

"This is Sebastian," Richard said. "He joined us after Alfred died."

"He's Marcus's new enforcer," Heidi whispered. She stepped back, halfway between the two men, her back to the curtain we'd entered through.

"I challenge you, Richard. I want to be Freki."

Just like that, the trap was sprung.

"We are both alpha, Sebastian. We don't have to do anything to prove that."

"I want to be Freki, and I need to beat you to do it."

"I'm Fenrir now, Sebastian. You can be Marcus's Freki without fighting me."

"Marcus says no, says I have to go through you."

Richard took a step forward.

"Don't fight him," I said.

"I have to answer challenge."

I stared at Sebastian. Richard is not a small man, but he looked small beside Sebastian. Richard wouldn't back down to save himself. But for someone else . . . "And if you get killed, where does that leave me?" I asked.

He looked at me then, really looked at me. He turned back to Sebastian. "I want safe passage for Anita."

Sebastian grinned and shook his head. "She's dominant. No safe passage. She takes her chances like the rest of us."

"She can't accept challenge, she's human."

"When you're dead, we'll make her one of us," Sebastian said.

"Raina has forbidden us to make Anita lukoi," Heidi said.

The glare that Sebastian gave her made her cringe against the curtain door. Her eyes were round with fear.

"Is that true?" Richard asked.

"It's true," Sebastian growled. "We can kill her, but we can't make her pack." He grinned, a brief flash of teeth. "So we'll just kill her."

I drew the Firestar, using Richard's body to shield the movement from the lycanthropes. We were in trouble. Even with the Uzi, I couldn't kill them all. If Richard would kill Sebastian, we might salvage the situation, but he'd try not to kill him. The other shapeshifters watched us with patient, eager eyes. This had been the plan all along. There had to be a way out.

I had an idea. "Are all Marcus's enforcers assholes?"

Sebastian turned to me. "Was that an insult?"

"If you have to ask, then indeedy-do, it was."

"Anita," Richard said, low and careful, "what are you doing?"

"Defending myself," I said.

His eyes widened, but he didn't take his glance from the big werewolf. Richard understood. There was no time to argue about it. Sebastian took a step forward, big hands balled into fists. He tried to step around Richard to get to me. Richard moved in front of him. He put out his hand, palm outward like he had with Heidi, and that roiling energy damped down, spilling out like water from a broken cup. I'd never seen anything like it. Calming Heidi was one thing. Forcing a lycanthrope to swallow such power was something else.

Sebastian took a step back, almost a stagger. "You bastard."

"You are not strong enough to challenge me, Sebastian. Don't ever forget that," Richard said. His voice was still calm, with the barest hint of anger underneath. It was a reasonable voice, a voice for negotiating.

I stood behind Richard with the Firestar held at my side, as unobtrusive as I could make it. The fight was off, and my little show of bravado hadn't been needed. I'd underestimated Richard's power. I'd apologize later.

"Now, where is Stephen?" Richard asked.

A slender black man stalked towards us, moving like a dancer in a shimmering wash of his own energy. His hair was braided in shoulder-length cornrows with colored beads worked into them. His features were small and neat, his skin a rich solid brown. "You may be able to control us one at a time, Richard, but not all at once."

"You were kicked out of your last pack for being a troublemaker, Jamil," Richard said. "Don't make the same mistake twice."

"I won't. Marcus will win this fight because you are a fucking bleeding heart. You still don't get it, Richard. We aren't the Young Republicans." Jamil stopped about eight feet back. "We are a pack of werewolves, and we aren't human. Unless you accept that, you are going to die."

Sebastian stepped back to stand beside Jamil. The rest of the lycanthropes moved up behind the two men. Their combined energy flowed outward, filling the room like warm water with piranha in it. The power bit along my skin like tiny electric shocks. It rose in my throat until it was hard to breathe, and the hair on my head stood at attention.

"Will you be pissed if I kill some of them?" I asked. My voice sounded squeezed and harsh. I moved closer to Richard, but had to step back. His power poured over me like something alive. It was impressive, but there were twenty lycanthropes on the other side, and it wasn't that impressive.

A scream shattered the silence, and I jumped.

"Anita," Richard said.

"Yeah."

"Go get Stephen."

"That was him screaming?" I asked.

"Go get him."

I looked at the mass of lycanthropes and said, "You can handle this?"

"I can hold them."

"You can't hold us all," Jamil said.

"Yes," Richard said, "I can."

The scream sounded again, higher, more urgent. The sound came from deeper in the barn where it had been divided into rooms. There was a makeshift hallway. I started towards it, then hesitated. "Will you be pissed if I kill people?"

"Do what you have to do," he said. His voice had grown low, with an edge of growl to it.

"If she kills Raina with a gun, she still won't be your lupa," Jamil said.

I glanced at Richard's back. I hadn't known I was being considered for the job.

"Go, Anita; now." His voice was dying down to a growl. He didn't have to add, hurry. I knew that part. He might be able to stall, but he couldn't fight them all.

Heidi walked towards me, behind Richard's back. He didn't turn any attention to her, as if he didn't consider her a danger at all. She wasn't powerful, but you didn't have to be powerful or even strong to stab someone in the back, claw or knife, what did it matter? I pointed the gun at her. She passed within inches of Richard and he did nothing. My gun was the only thing guarding his back. Even now, he trusted Heidi. Right this minute, he shouldn't have trusted anyone but me. "Gabriel's with Raina," she said. She said his name like she was afraid of him.

Gabriel wasn't even a member of the pack. He was a were-leopard. He was one of Raina's favorite actors, though. He'd appeared in her porno flicks and even one snuff film. I almost asked her who she feared most, Raina or Gabriel. But it didn't matter. I was about to confront them both.

"Thanks," I said to Heidi.

She nodded.

I went for the hallway and the sound of screams.

Chapter 8

I entered the hallway and followed the sounds of voices to the second door on the left. I heard at least two different male voices, soft, murmuring. I couldn't make out the words. The screams changed to yelling. "Stop, please, stop. No!" It was a man, too. Unless they were torturing more than one person tonight, it had to be Stephen.

I took a deep breath, let it out, and reached for the door with my left hand, gun in my right. I wished I knew the layout of the room. Stephen yelled, "Please, don't!"

Enough. I opened the door, shoving it against the wall so I'd know there was no one behind it. I meant to sweep the room, but what I saw on the floor stopped me cold, like some kind of flash-frozen nightmare. Stephen lay on his back, a white robe open, revealing his nude body. Blood trailed down his chest in thin scarlet ribbons, though there were no apparent wounds. Gabriel held Stephen's arms, pinned underneath his body, behind his back as if they might already be tied. Stephen's waist-length yellow hair spilled over Gabriel's leather-clad lap. Gabriel was naked from the waist up, a silver ring through his right nipple. His curly black hair had spilled over his eyes, and when he looked up at me, he looked blind.

A second man knelt on the far side of Stephen. Curling blond hair fell to his waist. He wore an identical white robe, fastened. When he looked at the

door, his slender, nearly pretty face was a mirror of Stephen's. Had to be his brother. He was holding a steel knife. He was in midslice when I came through the door. Fresh blood welled from Stephen's skin.

Stephen screamed.

There was a naked woman curled over Stephen's body. She straddled his lower body, pinning his legs. Her long auburn hair fell like a curtain, hiding the last indignity from sight. Raina raised her head from Stephen's groin. Her full lips parted in a smile. She'd worked him to erection. Even with his protests, his body had gone on without him.

It took a heartbeat to see it all, a sort of slow-motion shorthand. I sensed movement to my right and tried to turn, but it was too late. Something furred and only half-human slammed into me. I hit the far wall hard enough to make it shudder. The Firestar went spinning, and I fell, stunned, to the floor. A wolf the size of a pony loomed over me. It opened jaws big enough to crush my face, and growled, a sound low and deep enough to stop my heart.

I could move again, but that face was an inch from my cheek; I could feel its breath on my face. A line of saliva fell from its mouth to glide down the edge of my mouth. It lowered its muzzle that last inch, lips drawn back like it was going to take a nibble. The Uzi was pinned between my back and the wall. I went for one of the knives, and knew I'd never make it.

Human arms curved around the wolf, tore it back, away from me. Raina stood holding the struggling wolf like it was no effort. Her beautiful naked body rippled with muscles that didn't show until they were used. "Draw no blood from her, I told you that." She tossed the wolf into the other wall. The wall cracked and buckled. The wolf lay still, eyes rolled back into its skull.

It gave me the time I needed. I pulled the Uzi around on its strap. When Raina turned back to me, I was pointing it at her.

She stood over me, naked, perfect, slender where she was supposed to be slender, curved where she was supposed to be curved. But since I'd seen her sculpt her body at will, I wasn't that impressed. When you could manipulate your body like she could, who needed plastic surgery?

"I could have let her kill you, Anita. You don't seem very grateful."

I sat on the floor, propped against the wall, not completely trusting that I could stand yet. But the Uzi was pointed nice and steady. "Thanks a lot," I said, "Now, back up, slowly, or I will cut you in half."

Raina laughed, a low, joyous sound. "You are so dangerous. So exciting. Don't you think so, Gabriel?"

Gabriel came to stand beside her. Both of them looking down at me was too much, so I used the wall to brace myself and stood. I could stand. Great. I was beginning to think I could even walk. Better.

"Back up," I said.

Gabriel stepped around her, bringing him almost close enough to have reached out and touched me. "She's perfect for anyone who's into pain and has a death wish." He reached out, as if to run his fingers down my cheek. I pointed the machine gun at his waist, because it would kick upward. Aim too high and you can actually miss.

"The last time you pushed me, Gabriel, all I had on me was a knife. You survived having me gut you, but even you can't heal from a submachine gun burst. At this range, I'll cut you in half."

"Would you really kill me just for trying to touch you?" He seemed amused, his strange grey eyes almost fever bright as they peered out of the tangle of his hair.

"After what I just saw, you bet." I stood away from the wall. "Back up or we'll find out how much damage you can take."

They backed up. I was almost disappointed. The Uzi with silver ammo would do exactly what I'd said it would do. I could cut them down, kill them, no muss, no fuss, just a hell of a mess. I wanted them dead. I looked at them for a heartbeat and thought about it, thought about pulling the trigger and saving us all a lot of trouble.

Raina backed up, pulling Gabriel with her. She stared at me as she moved, back towards the wall where the pony-sized wolf was staggering to its feet. Raina looked at me and I saw the knowledge on her face of how close she'd come. I think until that moment she hadn't realized I could kill her and not lose sleep. Hell, leaving her alive would cost me more sleep.

A roaring scream came from the other room. Howling vibrated through the barn. There was a moment of breathless silence, then growls, shrieks. The floor shuddered with the impact of distant bodies. Richard was fighting without me.

Raina smiled at me. "Richard needs you, Anita. Go to him. We'll take care of Stephen."

"No thanks."

"Richard could be dying while you waste time."

Fear flowed over me in a cool wash. She was right. They'd lured him here to die. I shook my head. "Richard told me to get Stephen, and that's what I'm going to do."

"I didn't think you took orders that well," she said.

"I take the ones I like."

Stephen had curled onto his side, pulling the robe over his body. His brother sat beside him, smoothing his hair and murmuring, "It's all right, Stephen. You're not hurt."

"You sliced him up, you son of a bitch."

He spread Stephen's robe, exposing his chest. Stephen tried weakly to close his robe. His brother slapped his hands lightly. He wiped his hands across the bloody chest. The skin was perfect. The cut had healed already, which meant that all the blood was Stephen's.

"Get off of him, right now, or I will blow you away."

He eased back from him, eyes wide. He believed me. That was good, because it was true.

"Come on, Stephen. We've got to go."

He raised his head and looked at me, tears sliding down his cheeks. "I can't stand." He tried to crawl to me, but collapsed on the floor.

"What did you give him?" I asked.

"Something to relax him," Raina said.

"You bitch."

She smiled. "Exactly."

"Go over and stand by them," I said to the brother.

The man turned a face to me so like Stephen's it was startling. "I wouldn't let them hurt him. He'd enjoy it if he'd just let himself go."

"He is hurt, you son of a bitch! Now get over there, right now, or I'll kill you. Do you understand me? I will kill you and be happy about it."

He got to his feet and went to stand beside Gabriel. "I made sure no one hurt him," he said softly.

The walls shuddered. There was a sound of splintering wood. Someone had been thrown through the wall of the room next to us. I had to get us out of there.

I had to get to Richard. But if I was careless, I'd never make it. Richard wasn't the only one in danger of getting his throat ripped out.

With this many lycanthropes in a room so small, they were too close. They could jump me if I went to help Stephen stand, but with a machine gun in my hand, I was betting most of them would be dead before they reached me. It was a comforting thought.

I spotted the Firestar in the far corner. I picked it up and holstered it without having to look. Practice, practice, practice. I kept the machine gun out. It just made me feel better.

I knelt by Stephen without taking my eyes off the others. It was hard not to at least glance down, but I was too damn close to them. The wolf had been unbelievably fast, and I didn't think Raina would save me a second time. I was lucky she didn't want me wounded. I got my arm around Stephen's waist, and he managed to throw his arms around my neck. I stood, and he was almost dead weight, but we both managed to stand, and with my help, Stephen kept his feet. I was glad he was about my size. Bigger would have been harder. His robe flapped open, and he took one arm from around my shoulders and tried to tie it closed, but he couldn't do it. He started to take his other arm off my shoulders.

"Leave it, Stephen, please. We've got to go now."

"I don't want people to see me." He stared at me from inches away, his face vague and unfocused from the drugs, but a single tear trailed from the corner of one cornflower blue eye. "Please," he said.

Shit. I braced him around the waist, and said, "Go ahead." I stared at Raina while he tied his robe, clumsy and slow from the drug she'd slipped him. He was making a low whimpering sound deep in his chest by the time he got it closed.

"In some ways you are as sentimental as Richard," she said. "But you could kill us, all of us, even Stephen's brother, and feel nothing."

I met her honey brown eyes and said, "I'd feel something."

"What?" she asked.

"Safer," I said.

I backed us towards the open door and had to glance behind to make sure nothing was coming up at me. When I looked back at them, Gabriel had moved forward, but Raina had a hand on his arm, stopping him. She was looking at me

like she'd never really seen me before. Like I'd surprised her. I guess it was mutual. I'd known she was twisted, but not in my wildest dreams would I have accused her of raping one of her own people.

Stephen and I stepped out into the hall, and I took a deep breath, feeling something in my chest loosen. The sounds of fighting crashed over us. I wanted to run towards the fight. Richard was alive, or they wouldn't have still been fighting. There was time. There had to be.

I called to Raina, "Don't show your face out here until after we're gone, Raina, or I'll shoot it off." There was no answer from the room. I had to get to Richard.

Stephen stumbled and nearly took us both down. He hung from my shoulders, his arms pressing into my neck, then he got his feet under him. "You with me. Stephen?"

"I'm all right. Just get me out of here." His voice sounded weak, thready, like he was losing consciousness. I could not carry him and shoot, or at least I didn't want to try. I got a firmer grip on his waist and said, "Stay with me, Stephen, and I'll get you out."

He nodded, long hair spilling around his face. "Okay." The one word was almost too soft to hear above the fighting.

I stepped out into the main room, and it was chaos. I couldn't see Richard. There was just a mass of bodies, arms, legs, a clawed form rose above the rest, a man-wolf close to seven feet tall. He reached down and drew Richard out of the mess, claws digging into his body. Richard shoved a hand that was too long to be human, and not furry enough to be wolf, under the werewolf's throat. The creature gagged, spitting blood.

A wolf almost as long as Richard was tall leapt upon his back. Richard staggered, but didn't fall. The mouth sank teeth into his shoulder. Furred claws and human hands grabbed at him from every side. Fuck it. I fired the machine gun into the wooden floor. It would have looked more impressive if I'd fired into the overhead lights, but bullets come down at the same speed they go up, and I didn't want to catch my own ricochet. Holding the machine gun one-handed was a trip. I held on and sprayed a line from me to the bed. I ended with the gun pointing at the fight. Everyone had frozen, shocked. Richard crawled out of the mess, bleeding. He got to his feet, swaying a bit, but moving on his own power. I could never have carried both him and Stephen, let alone the machine gun.

He stopped in front of the curtain, waiting for me to come to him. Stephen sagged against me, arms limp. I think he'd passed out. It was an agonizingly slow walk to Richard. If I tripped and went down, they'd be on me. They watched me move with eyes, human and wolf, but nothing I could have talked to. They watched me like they wondered what I'd taste like and would enjoy finding out.

The giant man-wolf spoke, its furry jaws thick and strange around human words. "You can't kill us all, human."

He was right. I raised the machine gun a little. "True, but who's going to be first in line?"

No one else moved as I walked. When I reached Richard, he took Stephen from me, cradling him in his arms like he was a child. Blood seeped down his face from a cut on his forehead. It covered half his face like a mask. "Stephen is never to come back here, not ever," Richard said.

The man-wolf spoke again, "You are not a killer, Richard. That is your weakness. Even if we bring Stephen back here, you will not kill us for it. You will hurt us, but not kill us."

Richard didn't say anything. It was probably true. Damn.

"I'll kill you," I said.

"Anita, you don't understand what you're saying," Richard said.

I glanced at him, then back to the waiting masses. "Killing is all they understand, Richard. If you aren't willing to kill them, Stephen isn't safe. I want him safe."

"Enough to kill for it?" Richard asked.

"Yeah," I said, "enough to kill for it."

The wolfman stared at me. "You are not one of us."

"It doesn't matter. Stephen is off limits. Tell Raina if he gets dragged back here, I'll hold her personally responsible."

"Tell me yourself." Raina stood in the hallway, naked, and totally comfortable as if she'd been wearing the finest silk. Gabriel was at her back.

"If anyone brings Stephen back here, tries to force him into the movies, I'll kill you."

"Even if I have nothing to do with it."

I smiled, like I would believe that. "Even if, no matter who does it, or why, it'll be your ass on the line."

She nodded her head, almost a bow. "So be it, Anita Blake. But know this, you have challenged me in front of my pack. I cannot let that stand unanswered. If you were another shapeshifter, we would duel, but your being human poses a problem."

"You know this, bitch. I am human, so if you expect me to drop my gun and fight you one on one, you're crazy."

"That would hardly be fair, would it?"

"I didn't think you worried much about being fair, after what I saw in the back room."

"Oh, that," she said, "Stephen will never rise in the pack. There is no more challenge to him. He is anyone's meat that is higher in the pack."

"Not anymore," I said.

"You offer him your protection?" she asked.

I'd been asked this question once before and knew it meant more than it sounded like it did, but I didn't care. I wanted Stephen safe, and I'd do what it took, killing or making myself a target. Hell, the assassin would probably finish me soon, anyway. "Yeah, he's under my protection."

"He's already under my protection, Anita," Richard said.

"Until you're willing to kill to back it up, it doesn't mean a whole lot to these people."

"You will kill to support Richard's claims of protection?" Raina asked.

"She doesn't understand what you're asking," Richard said. "It isn't a fair question unless she understands it."

"Then explain it to her, Richard, but not tonight. It grows late, and if we are to get any filming done, we must hurry. Take your little human and explain the rules to her. Explain how deep a hole she's dug herself tonight. When she understands the rules, call me. And I will think of a way to make a duel between us as fair as possible. Perhaps I could blindfold myself or tie one arm behind my back."

I started to say something, but Richard said, "Come on, Anita. We have to go now." He was right. I could kill a lot of them, but not all. I hadn't brought a spare clip for the machine gun. I hadn't thought I'd need it. Silly me.

We got out the door with me walking backwards, ready to shoot anyone who stuck a head out. No one followed us. Richard carried Stephen through the late spring night and didn't look back, as if he knew they wouldn't follow.

I opened the door, and he laid Stephen in the backseat. "Can you drive home?" he asked.

"Yeah, how bad are you hurt?"

"Not bad, but I'd like to ride back here with Stephen in case he wakes up." I couldn't argue with that. I drove. We were safe. We were all actually still alive. But if they'd rushed us, we wouldn't be. Now that we were safe, I could be mad. "Well, we survived. No thanks to your little plan," I said.

"And no one died, thanks to my little plan," Richard said.

"Only because I was better armed than usual."

"You were right," he said, "it was a trap. Happy?"

"Yeah, I'm happy," I said.

"Glad to hear it." Underneath the sarcasm he was tired. I could hear it in his voice.

"What are you supposed to explain to me, Richard?" I glanced in the rearview mirror but couldn't see his face in the dark.

"Raina backs up Marcus's orders. She's his lupa. He uses her to do things he doesn't approve of, like torture."

"So I set myself up as your lupa."

"Yes, I'm the Fenrir. Normally, I'd already have a lupa picked out. The pack is divided, Anita. I've given my protection to my followers so that if Marcus tries to hurt them, I come after him, or my followers will act to protect each other with my blessing. Without a Fenrir or a pack leader to back you up, it's a sort of mutiny to go against the pack leader's orders."

"What's the penalty for mutiny?"

"Death or mutilation."

"I thought you guys could heal anything short of a death wound."

"Not if you shove burning metal into it. Fire purifies and stops the healing process, unless you reopen the wound."

"It works that way with vampires, too," I said.

"I didn't know that," he said, but not like he really cared.

"How have you risen to next in line to lead and not killed anyone? You had to fight a lot of duels to get to the top of the heap."

"Only the fight for Ulfric has to be to the death. All I had to do was beat them all."

"Which is why you take karate and lift weights, so you'll be good enough to beat them." We'd had this discussion before when I asked if lifting weights when you could bench press a small car was redundant. He'd replied, not if everyone you're fighting can lift a car, too. He had a point.

"Yes."

"But if you won't kill, then your threat doesn't have much bite, no pun intended."

"We're not animals, Anita. Just because this is the way it's always been in the pack doesn't mean things can't change. We are still people, and that means we can control ourselves. Dammit, there has to be a better way than slaughtering each other."

I shook my head. "Don't blame it on the animals. Real wolves don't kill each other for dominance."

"Only werewolves," he said. He sounded tired.

"I admire your goals, Richard."

"But you don't agree."

"No, I don't agree."

His voice came from the darkness out of the backseat. "Stephen doesn't have any wounds. Why was he screaming?"

My shoulders hunched, and I made myself sit up straight. I turned onto Old Highway 21, and tried to think of a delicate way to tell him, but there was nothing delicate about rape. I told him what I'd seen.

The silence from the backseat lasted a very long time. I was almost to the turnoff for his house when he said, "And you think if I'd killed a few people along the way, this wouldn't have happened?"

"I think they're more afraid of Raina and Marcus than they are of you, so yeah."

"If you back my threat with killing, it undermines everything I've tried to do."

"I love you, Richard, and I admire what you're trying to do. I don't want to undermine you, but if they touch Stephen again, I'll do what I said I'd do. I'll kill them."

"They're my people, Anita. I don't want them dead."

"They're not your people, Richard. They're just a bunch of strangers that happen to share your disease. Stephen is your people. Every shapeshifter who threw their support to you and risked Marcus's anger, they're your people. They've risked everything for you, Richard."

"When Stephen joined the pack, I was the one who told Raina she couldn't have him. I've always stood by him."

"Your intentions are good, Richard, but they didn't keep him safe tonight."

"If I let you kill for me, Anita, it's the same as doing it myself."

"I didn't ask your permission, Richard."

He leaned on the back of the seat, and I realized he wasn't wearing his seat belt. I started to tell him to put it on, but didn't. It was his car, and he could

survive a trip through the windshield. "You mean if they take Stephen again, you'll kill them because you said you'd kill them, not for me."

"A threat's not worth anything if you aren't willing to back it up," I said.

"You'd kill for Stephen. Why? Because he saved your life?"

I shook my head. It was hard to explain. "Not just that. When I saw him tonight, what they were doing to him . . . He was crying, Richard. He was . . . Oh, hell, Richard, he's mine now. There are a handful of people that I'd kill for, kill to keep safe, kill to revenge. Stephen's name got added to the list tonight."

"Is my name on the list?" he asked. He rested his chin on my shoulder over the seat. He rubbed his cheek on my face and I could feel a faint beard stubble, scratchy and real.

"You know it is."

"I don't understand how you can talk about killing so casually."

"I know."

"My bid for Ulfric would be stronger if I were willing to kill, but I'm not sure it would be worth it."

"If you want to martyr yourself for high ideals, fine. I don't like it, but fine. But don't martyr the people who trust you. They're worth more than any set of ideals. You nearly got yourself killed tonight."

"You don't just believe in something when it's easy, Anita. Killing is wrong."

"Fine," I said, "but you also nearly got me killed tonight. Do you understand that? If they had rushed us, I wouldn't have made it out. I will not go down in flames because you want to play Gandhi."

"You can stay home next time."

"Dammit, that isn't what I'm saying, and you know it. You're trying to live in some Ozzie and Harriet world, Richard. Maybe life used to work like that, but it doesn't anymore. If you don't give up on this, you're going to get killed."

"If I really thought I had to become a murderer to survive, I think I'd rather not survive."

I glanced at him. His expression was peaceful, like a saint. But you only got to be a saint if you died. I looked back at the road. I could give Richard up, but if I left him, he was going to end up dead. He'd have gone in there tonight without anyone, and he wouldn't have made it out.

Tears burned at the back of my eyes. "I don't know if I'd survive it if you died on me, Richard. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

He kissed my cheek, and something warm and liquid seeped down my neck. "I love you, too."

They were only words. He was going to get killed on me. He was going to do everything short of suicide. "You're bleeding on me," I said.

He sighed and leaned back into the darkness. "I'm bleeding a lot. Too bad Jean-Claude isn't here to lick it up." He made a bitter sound low in his throat.

"Do you need a doctor?"

"Get me home, Anita. If I need a doctor, I know a wererat that makes house calls." He sounded tired, weary, as if he didn't want to talk anymore. Not about the wounds, or the pack, or his high ideals. I let the silence grow and

didn't know how to break it. A soft sound filled the quiet dark, and I realized that Richard was crying. He whispered, "I'm sorry, Stephen. I am so sorry."

I didn't say anything because I didn't have anything good to say. Just lately I had noticed that I could kill people and not blink. No attack of conscience, no nightmares, nothing. It was like some part of me had turned off. It didn't bother me that I was able to kill so easily. It did bother me that it didn't bother me. But it had its uses, like tonight. I think every last furry one of them had believed I'd do it. Sometimes, it was good to be scary.

Chapter 9

It was 4:40 in the morning when Richard carried the still unconscious Stephen into his bedroom. Blood had dried the back of Richard's shirt to his skin. "Go to bed, Anita. I'll take care of Stephen."

"I need to look at your wounds," I said.

"I'm all right."

"Richard . . ."

He looked at me, half of his face covered in dried blood, his eyes almost wild. "No, Anita, I don't want your help. I don't need it."

I took in a deep breath through my nose and let it out. "Okay, have it your way."

I expected him to apologize for snapping at me, but he didn't. He just walked into the other room and closed the door. I stood there in the living room for a minute, not sure what to do. I'd hurt his feelings, maybe even offended his sense of male honor. Fuck it. If he couldn't take the truth, fuck him. People's lives were at stake. I couldn't give Richard comforting lies when it could get people killed.

I went into the guest room, locked the door, and went to bed. I put on an oversized T-shirt with a caricature of Arthur Conan Doyle on it. I'd packed something a little sexier. Yes, I admit it. I could have saved myself the trouble. The Firestar was lumpy under the pillow. The machine gun went under the bed within reach. I laid an extra clip beside it. Never thought I'd need that much firepower, but between assassination attempts and packs of werewolves, I was beginning to feel a little insecure.

When I shoved the silver knives half under the mattress so I could get to them if I had to, I realized just how insecure I was feeling. But I left the knives out. Better insecure and paranoid than dead.

I got my stuffed toy penguin, Sigmund, out of the suitcase and cuddled under the covers. I'd had some vague idea that spending the night at Richard's house might be romantic. Shows how much I knew. We'd had three fights in one night, a record even for me. It probably wasn't a good sign for the longevity

of the relationship. That last thought made my chest tight, but what was I supposed to do? Go into the other room and apologize? Tell him he was right when he wasn't? Tell him it was okay to get himself killed and take the rest of us down with him? It wasn't okay. It wasn't even close to okay. I hugged Sigmund until he was nearly squeezed in two. I refused to cry. Question: Why was I more worried about losing Richard than about the assassins? Answer: Killing didn't bother me; losing Richard did. I fell asleep holding my penguin and wondering if Richard and I were still dating. Who would keep him alive if I wasn't around?

Something woke me. I blinked up into the dark and reached under my pillow for the Firestar. When it was secure in my hand, I listened. A knock, someone was knocking at the locked bedroom door. Soft, hesitant. Was it Richard come to apologize? That would be too convenient.

I threw back the covers, spilling Sigmund to the floor. I put him back in the suitcase, lowering the lid without closing it, and padded barefoot to the door. I stood to one side of it, and said, "Who is it?"

"It's Stephen."

I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding. I crossed to the other side of the door, gun still ready, and unlocked the door. I opened it slowly, looking, listening, trying to make sure it was just Stephen.

He stood outside the door wearing a pair of Richard's cut-off sweat pants. The shorts hung nearly to his ankles. A borrowed T-shirt covered his knees. His long yellow hair was tousled, like he'd been asleep.

"What's wrong?" I lowered the gun to my side, and he watched me do it.

"Richard went out, and I'm afraid to be alone." His eyes wouldn't quite meet mine when he said the last, flinching like he was afraid of what he'd see on my face.

"What do you mean he went out? Where to?"

"The woods. He said he'd keep watch for assassins. Does he mean Raina?" He did look up then, amazing blue eyes wide, the beginnings of panic sliding across his face.

I touched his arm, not sure it was the right thing to do. Some people don't want to be touched after a sexual molestation. It seemed to comfort Stephen. But he glanced behind him at the empty living room, rubbing his hands along his bare arms.

"Richard told me to stay in the house. He said I needed to rest." He wouldn't meet my eyes again. "I'm afraid to be alone, Anita. I . . ." He hung his head, long yellow hair spilling like a curtain to hide his face. "I can't get to sleep. I keep hearing noises."

I put a finger under his chin and lifted his face gently. "Are you asking to sleep in here with me?"

His eyes stared at me, wide and pain-filled. "Richard said I could."

"Run that by me again," I said.

"I told him I couldn't stand to be alone. He said, Anita's here, she'll protect you. Go sleep with her." He looked at me, his face awkward. Something must

have shown on my face. "You're mad now. I don't blame you. I'm sorry . . . I'll . . ." He started to turn away, and I caught his arm.

"It's okay, Stephen. I'm not mad at you. Richard and I had a . . . disagreement, that's all." I didn't want him to sleep in here with me. The bed was too small for two people, and if I was going to share it with anyone, I'd have preferred Richard, but that wasn't going to happen. Maybe not ever at the rate we were going.

"You can stay in here." I didn't add, keep your hands to yourself. His face was raw with a need that had nothing to do with sex. He needed to be held, to be told the monster under the bed wasn't really there. I couldn't help him on the last. The monsters were real. But the first, I might manage that. Cold-blooded killer that I am, maybe I could share my toy penguin with him.

"Could you get an extra pillow from Richard's room?" I asked.

He nodded and fetched it. He clutched it to his chest like he'd have rather slept with it than on it. Maybe the penguin wasn't such a bad idea.

I locked the door behind us. I could have moved into Richard's room. It was a bigger bed, but it also had a picture window with a deck and bird feeders. The guest room only had one small window. Easier to defend. Unless I wanted to go out a window, they were both traps, so we stayed in the more secure room. Besides, I'd have had to move all the weapons and it would have been dawn before I finished.

I pulled the covers back and said, "You first." If something came through the door, I wanted to be the first to greet it, but I didn't say that out loud. Stephen was jumpy enough.

He climbed into bed with his pillow, pressing it against the wall, because there really wasn't room for two full-sized pillows. He lay on his back, staring up at me, his curling yellow hair falling around his face and bare shoulders like Sleeping Beauty. You didn't see many men with hair longer than mine. He was one of those men who was pretty rather than handsome, lovely as a doll. Staring up at me with his blue eyes, he looked about twelve. The look on his face was what did it, like he was expecting me to kick him, and he'd let me because he couldn't stop me. I understood in that moment what Raina had meant about him being anyone's meat. There was nothing dominant about Stephen, and it made me wonder about his background. Abused children will sometimes have that raw look to their eyes. And they'll take abuse, because it's normal.

"What's wrong?" Stephen said.

I'd been staring. "Nothing, just thinking." Tonight was not the night to ask if his father had beat him. I thought about throwing on a pair of jeans, but it would have been uncomfortable, not to mention hot. It was late spring, the heat hadn't set in. It was only seventy degrees, but it wasn't cool enough to wear jeans, especially if you had someone else in bed with you. Besides, I wasn't sure how Stephen would take me getting dressed to lie down beside him. Maybe he'd be insulted. It was too complicated for me. I turned off the light and climbed into bed beside him. If either of us had been much bigger, we'd have never fit. Stephen had to roll onto his side as it was.

He curled against my back, spooning his body against mine, one arm flung across my waist, like I was the stuffed toy. I stiffened, but Stephen didn't seem to notice. He buried his face into my back, and let his breath out in a sigh. I lay there in the dark and couldn't sleep. Two months ago after I'd nearly ended up a vampire, I'd had trouble sleeping. Close brushes with death, I could handle. Close brushes with becoming the undead, that scared me. But I got over it. I was sleeping just fine, thank you very much, until now. I pushed the button on my watch that made it glow. It was only 5:30. I'd had about an hour's sleep. Great.

Stephen's breathing deepened, and his body relaxed against me a muscle at a time. He whimpered softly in his sleep, arm convulsing around me, then the dream passed and he lay still and warm.

I drifted off to sleep, cuddling Stephen's arm around my body. He was almost as good as a stuffed toy, though he did have a tendency to move at the odd moment.

Daylight spilled through the thin white drapes, and at first I thought the light had awakened me. I woke stiff, in the same position that I'd fallen asleep in, as if I hadn't moved at all during the night. Stephen was still curled around me, a leg over my legs along with one arm like he was trying to get as close to me as he could, even in his sleep.

I lay there for a moment with his body wrapped around me and realized I'd never awakened with a man before. I'd had a fiancé in college and I'd had sex with him, but I'd never spent the night. I'd never actually slept in the same bed with a man. It was kind of odd. I lay in the circle of warmth of Stephen's body and wished it was Richard.

I had a vague feeling that something had awakened me, but what? I eased out from the covers and Stephen's clinging body. He rolled over on his other side, sighing, making small protesting noises. I tucked the covers around him and took the Firestar out from under my pillow.

According to my watch, it was nearly 10:30. I'd had about five hours of sleep. I slipped on a pair of jeans, got my toothbrush and some clean undies and socks out of the suitcase. I folded everything in a clean polo shirt and unlocked the door. I kept the Firestar in my hand. I'd put it on the top of the toilet while I cleaned up. I'd have done the same thing at home.

Someone passed in front of the door, talking. Two voices, one of them female. I laid the clothes on the floor, unclicked the safety on the gun, and put my left hand on the doorknob.

"Was that the safety on a gun I heard?" a man's voice said from the other side of the door. I recognized the voice.

I clicked the safety back in place, put the gun down the front of my pants, and slipped the T-shirt over it. Armed, but not visibly, I opened the door. Jason stood there, grinning at me. He was about my height. His blond hair was straight and baby fine, and cut just above his shoulders. His eyes were the innocent blue of spring skies, but the look in them wasn't innocent. He peered around me at Stephen still curled up in the bed.

"Is it my turn next?" he asked.

I sighed, picked up my clothes, tucked them under my arm, and closed the door behind me. "What are you doing here, Jason?"

"You don't sound happy to see me." He was wearing a fishnet T-shirt. His jeans were faded and soft with one knee completely out. He was twenty and had been a college student before he'd joined the pack. Now he was Jean-Claude's wolf, and playing bodyguard and breakfast entree to the Master Vampire of the City seemed to be his only job.

"Isn't it a little early in the morning for fishnet?"

"Wait until you see what I'm wearing to tonight's gala opening of Jean-Claude's dance club."

"I may not be able to make it," I said.

He raised his eyebrows. "You spend one night under Richard's roof, and you break a date with Jean-Claude." He shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Look, neither of them own me, okay?"

Jason backed up, hands held up in mock surrender. "Hey, don't shoot the messenger. You know it will piss Jean-Claude off, and you know he'll think you slept with Richard."

"I didn't."

He glanced at the closed door. "I know that, and I am shocked, Anita, at your choice of bed partners."

"When you tell Jean-Claude that I slept with Stephen, you make absolutely sure he knows we just shared the bed and nothing else. If Jean-Claude gives Stephen a hard time because of your word games, I'll be angry. You don't want me angry, Jason."

He looked at me for a heartbeat or two. Something slid behind his eyes, his beast stirring to life, just a touch. Jason had a small streak of what Gabriel had a big streak of. A fascination with danger, pain, and simply being an all round pain in the ass. Jason was tolerable, not a bad guy, all in all; Gabriel was perverted; but it was still the same personality flaw done small. After what I'd seen last night, I wondered what Jason would have thought of the entertainment. I was almost sure he'd have disapproved, but not a hundred percent sure, which told you something about Jason.

"Did you really draw a machine gun on Raina and Gabriel last night?"

"Yeah, I did."

A woman stepped out of Richard's bedroom with an armful of towels. She was about five foot six, with short brown hair so curly it had to be natural. She wore navy slacks and a short-sleeved sweater. Open-toed sandals completed the outfit. She looked me up and down, sort of disapproving or maybe disappointed. "You must be Anita Blake."

"And you are?"

"Sylvie Barker." She offered a hand and I took it. The moment I touched her skin, I knew what she was. "Are you with the pack?" I asked.

She took her hand back and blinked at me. "How could you tell?"

"If you're trying to pass for human, don't touch someone who knows what they're looking for. Your power prickles down my skin."

"I won't waste time trying to pass then." Her power flooded over me, pouring like a blast of heat when you open an oven door.

"Impressive," I said, glad my voice was steady.

She gave a small smile. "That's quite a compliment, coming from you. Now, I've got to get these towels to the kitchen."

"What's happening?" I asked.

Sylvie and Jason exchanged glances. She shook her head. "You knew Richard was hurt?" She made it a question.

My stomach clenched tight. "He said he'd be all right."

"He will be," she said.

I felt my skin go pale. "Where is he?"

"Kitchen," Jason said.

I didn't run, it wasn't that far, but I wanted to. Richard sat at the kitchen table, shirtless, his back to me. His back was a mass of fresh claw marks. There was a bite mark in his left shoulder where a piece of flesh was missing.

Dr. Lillian was blotting blood off his back with a kitchen towel. She was a small woman in her mid-fifties with salt-and-pepper hair cut in a short, no-nonsense style. She'd treated my own wounds twice before, once when she was furry and looked like a giant man-rat.

"If you had called for medical attention last night, I wouldn't be having to do this, Richard. I do not enjoy causing my patients pain."

"Marcus was on call last night," Richard said. "Under the circumstances, I thought it best to go without."

"You could have let someone clean and bandage the wounds."

"Yes, Richard, you could have let me help you," I said.

He glanced back over his shoulder, his hair spilling around his face. There was a bandage on his forehead. "I'd had enough help for one night."

"Why? Because I'm a woman, or because you know I'm right?"

Lillian took a small silver knife to the lower half of a claw mark. She sliced the blade down the wound, reopening it. Richard took in a deep breath and let it out.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Lycanthropes heal, but sometimes without medical attention, we can scar. Most of the wounds will heal, but a few of them are deep enough that he really needs some stitching before the skin starts to close, so I'm having to reopen some of the wounds and add a few stitches."

Sylvie handed Dr. Lillian the towels.

"Thank you, Sylvie."

"What are you two lovebirds fighting about?" Sylvie asked.

"Let Richard tell you, if he wants to."

"Anita agrees with you," Richard said. "She thinks I should start killing people."

I walked over to where he could see me without straining. I leaned against the cabinet island and tried to watch his face rather than Lillian's slicing knife. "I don't want you to start killing people indiscriminately, Richard. Just back your threat up. Kill one person and the rest will back down."

He glared up at me, outraged. "You mean make an example of one of them?"

Put that way, it sounded sort of cold-blooded, but truth was truth. "Yeah, that's what I mean."

"Oh, I like her," Sylvie said.

"I knew you would," Jason said. They exchanged a glance that I didn't quite get, but it seemed to amuse the hell out of them.

"Am I missing a joke here?"

They both shook their heads.

I let it go. Richard and I were still fighting, and I was beginning to think this fight had no end. He winced as the doctor sliced open another wound. She was only adding a stitch here and there, but it was still more than I'd have wanted in my flesh. I didn't like stitches.

"No painkillers?" I asked.

"Anesthesia doesn't work well on us. We metabolize it too quickly," Lillian said. She wiped the silver knife on one of the clean towels and said, "One of the claw marks drops below your jeans. Take them off so I can see."

I glanced at Sylvie. She smiled at me. "Don't mind me. I like girls."

"That's what you two were laughing about," I said to Jason.

He nodded, smiling happily.

I shook my head.

"The others will be here soon for the meeting. I don't want my ass hanging out as everyone comes in the door." Richard stood up. "Let's finish up in the bedroom." There were a ring of puncture wounds just below his collarbone. I remembered the man-wolf lifting with its claws last night.

"You could have been killed," I said.

He glanced at me. "But I wasn't. Isn't that what you always say?"

I hated having my own words fed back to me. "You could have killed Sebastian or Jamil and the rest wouldn't have jumped you."

"You've already decided who I should kill." His voice was thick with anger.

"Yeah," I said.

"She's actually making pretty good choices," Sylvie said.

Richard turned his dark, dark eyes to her. "You stay out of this."

"If it was just a lovers' quarrel, Richard, I would," she said. She went to stand in front of him. "But Anita's not saying anything that I haven't said. That most of us haven't begged you to do. For a few months, I was willing to try it your way. I hoped you were right, but it isn't working, Richard. Either you're alpha male or you're not."

"Is that a challenge?" he asked. His voice had grown very quiet. Power flowed through the room like a warm wind.

Sylvie backed up a step. "You know it's not."

"Do I?" he said. The power in the room built, growing like a flash of electricity. The hairs on my arms stood to attention.

Sylvie stopped backing up, hands in fists at her sides. "If I thought I could defeat Marcus, I'd do it. If I could protect us all, I would. But I can't do it, Richard. You're our only chance."

Richard loomed over her. It wasn't just physical size. His power flowed over her, filled the room, until it was almost chokingly close.

"I won't kill just because you think I should, Sylvie. No one is going to force me into it. No one."

He turned his gaze on me, and it took a lot to meet his eyes. There was a force to them, a burning weight. It wasn't a vampire's drowning power, but it was something. My skin shivered with his power, his energy, and I didn't turn away.

I stared at the wounds just below his neck and knew I'd come close to losing him. That was unacceptable.

I walked closer until I could have reached out and touched him. His otherworldly energy whirled over me until it was hard to draw a good breath. "We need to talk, Richard."

"I don't have time for this right now, Anita."

"Make time," I said.

He glared down at me. "Talk to me while Lillian finishes up. I've got people coming over for a meeting in about fifteen minutes."

"What meeting?" I asked.

"To discuss the Marcus situation," Sylvie said. "He scheduled the meeting before last night's adventure."

Richard stared at her, and it wasn't a friendly look. "If I'd wanted her to know about the meeting, I'd have told her."

"What else haven't you told me Richard?"

He turned those angry eyes to me. "What haven't you told me?"

I blinked at him, genuinely puzzled. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"A shotgun fires over your head twice and you don't know what I'm talking about."

Oh that. "I did the right thing, Richard."

"You're always right, aren't you?"

I looked at the floor and shook my head. When I looked back at him, he was still angry, but I was losing my anger. A first. This was going to be *the* fight. The one that ended it. I wasn't wrong. No amount of talking would change that. But if we were going to break up, we'd go down in flames. "Let's finish this, Richard. You wanted to go into the bedroom."

He stood up, body stiff with an anger that was deeper than I could comprehend. It was controlled rage, and I didn't understand where it was coming from. It was a bad sign. "You sure you can stand to see me naked?" His voice was utterly bitter, and I didn't know why.

"What's wrong, Richard? What did I do?"

He shook his head too vigorously, making him wince as his shoulder caught the movement. "Nothing, nothing." He walked out of the room. Lillian looked at me, but followed him. I sighed and joined them. I wasn't looking

forward to the next few minutes, but I wasn't going to chicken out. We'd say all the ugly things and make it as nasty as possible. Trouble was, I didn't have any nasty things to say. It made the fight a lot less fun for me.

Jason whispered as I walked by, very softly, "Go, Anita, go, Anita."

It made me smile.

Sylvie watched me with cool eyes. "Good luck." It didn't sound completely sincere.

"Do you have a problem?" I'd have much rather fought with her than Richard.

"If he wasn't dating you, then he might choose a mate. It would help things."

"You want the job?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "I do, but sex is integral and I'm not up for it."

"Then I'm not standing in your way," I said.

"Not in mine, no," she said. Which implied there were others, but I didn't give a shit, not today. I said, "It is too damn early in the morning for furball politics. If someone wants a piece of me, tell them to go to the back of the line."

She cocked her head to one side, like a curious dog. "Is it a long line?"

"Lately, yeah."

"I thought all your enemies were dead," Jason said.

"I keep making new ones," I said.

He smiled. "Fancy that."

I shook my head and walked towards the bedroom. I'd have rather faced Raina again than Richard. I almost hoped the assassin would jump out of the woodwork and give me something to shoot at. It would hurt less than breaking up with Richard.

Chapter 10

Richard's bedroom was painted pale green, a vibrant rug thrown in front of the bed like a piece of stained glass. The bed was a heavy four-poster, and even hurt, he'd made the bed, pulling the solid red spread up over it. He had three solid spreads that he rotated on the bed; green, blue, and red. Each color picked up a different color in the rug and the painting over the bed. The painting was of wolves in a winter scene. The wolves were looking directly out of the picture as if you'd just come around a tree and surprised them. There was a deer bleeding on the snow, its throat torn out. It was an odd choice for a bedroom, but it fit somehow. Besides, I liked it. It had that quality that all fine paintings do, as if when you leave the room the painting will move, life suspended and captured on canvas. The green spread emphasized the evergreens, the blue

spread caught the washed blue of the sky and the bluish shadows, the red caught the stain of blood on the snow.

Richard lay on his stomach across the crimson cloth. He was totally nude, his jeans thrown on the corner of the bed. His tanned skin looked dark and smooth and incredibly touchable against the red cloth. I felt heat rise up my face as my eyes followed the curve of his body, over the smooth expanse of his buttocks. Lillian had just finished sewing up a curve of claw that had spilled down from his buttocks. I looked away.

I'd seen Richard nude once when I first met him, but never since. We hadn't even been thinking about dating then. I had to look away, mainly because I wanted to look. I wanted to see him like that, and it was too embarrassing for words. I studied the contents of the built-in shelves on his bedroom wall like I'd memorize them. Bits of quartz, a small bird's nest. There was a lump of fossilized coral as big as my hand, a dark rich gold in color with streaks of white quartz. I'd found it on a camping trip and given it to him because he collected bits and pieces, and I didn't. I touched the bit of coral, and didn't want to turn around.

"You said you wanted to talk, then talk," Richard said.

I glanced back. Lillian snipped the black thread she was using to close his skin. "There," she said. "You shouldn't even have a scar."

Richard folded his arms on the bed, resting his chin on his forearms. His hair spread around his face, foaming and touchable. I knew it was as soft as it looked.

Lillian glanced from one to the other of us. "I believe I'll leave you two alone." She began putting things into her bag, which was brown leather and looked more like a fishing tackle box than anything else. She looked at Richard and back to me. "Take a piece of advice from an old lady. Don't screw up."

She left with Richard and me both staring after her.

"You can get dressed now," I said.

He glanced at his crumpled jeans, moving only his dark eyes. His eyes came back to me, and they were as angry as I'd ever seen them. "Why?"

I concentrated on meeting those angry eyes and tried not to stare at his body. It was harder than I would have admitted out loud. "Because its hard to fight with you when you're naked."

He raised up on his elbows, hair falling down into his eyes, until he stared at me through a curtain of brown gold hair. It reminded me of Gabriel, and that was unnerving as hell.

"I know you want me, Anita. I can smell it."

Oh, that made me feel better. I blushed for the second time in five minutes. "So, you're gorgeous. So what? What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

He raised up on all fours, knees, and hands. I looked away so fast it made me dizzy. "Please put on your jeans."

I heard him slide off the bed. "You can't even look at me, can you?"

There was something about the way he said it that made me want to see his face, but I couldn't turn around. I just couldn't. If this was the last fight we

ever had, I didn't want the memory of his body imprinted on my mind. It would be too cruel.

I felt him standing behind me. "What do you want from me, Richard?"

"Look at me."

I shook my head.

He touched my shoulder, and I jerked away.

"You can't even stand for me to touch you, can you?" For the first time. I heard pain in his voice, raw and hurting.

I turned then. I had to see his face. His eyes glittered with unshed tears, eyes wide so they wouldn't fall. He'd pushed his hair back from his face, but it was already spilling forward. My eyes traveled down his muscular chest, and I wanted to run my hands over his nipples, down his slender waist, and lower. I drew my eyes back up to his face with force of will alone, my face pale now, rather than blushing. I was having trouble breathing. My heart was beating so hard, it was hard to hear.

"I love it when you touch me," I said.

He stared down at me, his eyes filled with pain. I think I preferred the anger. "I used to admire you for saying no to Jean-Claude. I know you want him, and you keep refusing. I thought it was very moral of you." He shook his head, one tear slid from the corner of his eye, trailing in slow motion down his cheek.

I brushed the tear from his face with my fingertip. He caught my hand in his, holding it a little too hard, but not hurting, only surprising. It was also my right hand, and drawing the gun left-handed was going to be a bitch. Not that I really thought I'd need the gun, but he was acting so strangely.

Richard spoke, staring down at me. "But Jean-Claude's a monster and you don't sleep with monsters. You just kill them." Tears slid from both of his eyes and I let them fall. "You don't sleep with me, either, because I'm a monster, too. But you can kill us, can't you, Anita? You just can't fuck us."

I jerked away from him, and he let me. He could have bench pressed the heavy cherry wood bed, so he let me go. I didn't like that much. "That was an ugly thing to say."

"But it's true," he said.

"I want you, Richard, you know that."

"You want Jean-Claude, too, so that's not very flattering. You tell me to kill Marcus, like it would be easy. Do you think it wouldn't bother me to kill him because he's a monster, or because I am?"

"Richard," I said. This was an argument I hadn't seen coming. I didn't know what to say, but I had to say something. He was standing there with tears drying on his face. Even nude and gorgeous, he looked lost.

"I know it would bother you to kill Marcus. I never said it wouldn't," I said.

"Then how can you urge me to do it?"

"I think it's necessary," I said.

"Could you do it? Could you just kill him?"

I thought about that for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, I could."

"And that wouldn't bother you?" he asked.

I stared straight at him, looked him right in his pain-filled eyes, and said, "No."

"If you really mean that, it makes you a bigger monster than I am."

"Yeah, I guess it does."

He shook his head. "It doesn't bother you, does it, knowing that you could take a human life?" He laughed, and it was bitter. "Or don't you consider Marcus human?"

"The man I killed last night was human," I said.

Richard stared at me, fresh horror growing in his eyes. "And you slept just fine didn't you?"

I nodded. "Pretty good, considering you sent Stephen to my bed."

A strange look passed through his eyes, and for a split second, I saw him wonder.

"Sweet Jesus, you know me better than that."

He looked down. "I know. It's just that I want you so badly, and you keep saying, no. It makes me doubt everything."

"Shit. I am not going to stroke your ego in the middle of a fight. You sent Stephen to me because you were mad. Said I could protect him. Had it occurred to you that I'd never slept—just slept—in the same bed with a man before?"

"What about your fiancé in college?"

"I had sex with him, but I didn't sleep over," I said. "The first time I woke up in the morning with a man curled around me, I wanted it to be you."

"I'm sorry, Anita. I didn't know. I . . ."

"You didn't think. Great. Now, what's with the no clothes? What's going on, Richard?"

"You saw the fight last night. You saw what I did, what I can do."

"Some of it, yeah."

He shook his head. "You want to know why I don't kill? Why I always stop just short of it?" The look in his eyes was almost desperate, wild.

"Tell me," I said, softly.

"I enjoy it, Anita. I love the feel of my hands, my claws ripping into flesh." He hugged himself. "The taste of fresh, warm blood in my mouth is exciting." He shook his head harder, as if he could erase the sensation. "I wanted to rip Sebastian apart last night. I could feel it, like an ache in my shoulders, in my arms. My body wanted to kill him, the way I want you." He stared at me, still hugging himself, but his body was speaking for him. The thought of killing Sebastian did excite him, really excite him.

I swallowed hard. "You're afraid that if you let go and killed, that you'd like that, too?"

He stared at me, and that was the horror in his eyes: the fear that he was a monster, the fear that I was right not to touch him, not to let him touch me. You don't fuck the monsters, you just kill them.

"Do you enjoy killing?" he asked.

I had to think about that for a second or two. Finally, I shook my head.

"No, I don't enjoy it."

"What does it feel like?" he asked.

"Like nothing. I don't feel anything."

"You have to feel something."

I shrugged. "Relief that it wasn't me. Triumph that I was faster, meaner." I shrugged again. "It doesn't bother me to kill people, Richard. It just doesn't."

"Did it once?"

"Yes, it used to bother me."

"When did it stop bothering you?"

"I don't know. Not the first death, or the second, but when it gets to the point that you can't keep track of them all . . . It either stops bothering you or you find another line of work."

"I want it to bother me, Anita. Killing should mean something other than blood, and excitement, or even survival. If it doesn't, then I'm wrong, and we are just animals." His body reacted to the thought, too. And he did not find it exciting. He looked vulnerable and afraid. I wanted to tell him to get dressed, but I didn't. He'd chosen to be naked very deliberately, as if to prove once and for all that I didn't want him, or that I did.

I didn't much like tests, but it was hard to bitch with the fear in his eyes. He'd walked away to stand in front of the bed. He rubbed one hand up and down the opposite arm as if he were cold. It was May in Saint Louis. He wasn't cold, at least not that kind of cold.

"You aren't animals, Richard."

"How do you know what I am?" And I knew that he was asking the question more of himself than of me.

I walked over to him. I took the Firestar out of the front of my pants and laid it on the night stand beside his cut glass lamp. He watched me do it, eyes wary. Almost like he expected me to hurt him. I was going to try very hard not to do that.

I touched his arm, gently, where he was rubbing it. He froze under my touch. "You are one of the most moral people I have ever met. You can kill Marcus and not become a ravaging beast. I know that, because I know you."

"Gabriel and Raina kill and look what they are."

"You aren't like them, Richard. Trust me on that."

"What if I kill Sebastian or Marcus, and I enjoy it." His handsome face was raw with terror at the thought.

"Maybe it will feel good." I gripped his arm tighter. "But if it does, there's no shame in that. You are what you are. You didn't choose it. It chose you."

"How can you say there's no shame in enjoying killing something. I've hunted deer and I love it. I love the chase, and the kill, and eating the warm meat." As before, the thought excited him. I kept my eyes on his face as much as possible, but it was distracting.

"Everyone has different things that flip their switch, Richard. I've heard worse. Hell, I've seen worse."

He stared down at me like he wanted to believe me and was afraid to. "Worse than this." He lifted his right hand from its grip on his arm, he held his

hand in front of my face. His power prickled over my hand, down my arm, until I gasped. It was force of will alone that kept my hand on his arm.

His fingers elongated, stretching impossibly long and thin. The nails grew into heavy claws. It wasn't a wolf hand, rather his own grown into a claw. Nothing else had changed that I could see. Only that one hand.

I was having trouble breathing, for different reasons than before. I stared at the clawed hand and realized for the first time that he was right. Watching the bones in his hand stretch and pop sickened me, scared me.

I kept my hand on his arm, but I was shaking. I found my voice, and it shook, too. "I saw Raina do that once. I thought it wasn't a common ability."

"Only Raina, Marcus, and I can do it within our pack. We can partially change at will."

"That's how you stabbed Sebastian last night."

He nodded, eyes searching my face. I was fighting to keep it blank, but what he saw there wasn't reassuring enough. He turned away from me, and I didn't have to see his eyes to feel the pain.

I grabbed his hand and wrapped my fingers around those long, thin bones. I felt muscles under my hands that had never been in Richard's hand before. It took everything I had to hold that hand. To touch him like that. Everything. The effort left me shaking and unable to meet his eyes. I didn't trust what he'd see in them.

He touched my chin with his other hand and turned me slowly to face him. He stared down at me. "I can taste your fear, and I like it. Do you understand? I like it."

I had to clear my throat to talk. "I noticed," I said.

He had the grace to blush. He bent slowly to kiss me. I didn't try to stop him, but I didn't help, either. I usually rose on tiptoe to meet him halfway. I stood there, too scared to move, forcing his tall body to bend at the shoulders, to fold down towards me. The long, thin-fingered hand that I was holding convulsed around me, the claws playing lightly on my bare forearm.

I tensed, and his power poured over me. I held onto his hand while the muscles and bones slid back into place. I held on with both hands while his hand re-formed under mine. My skin shuddered with the spill of power.

His lips brushed mine, and I kissed him back, almost swaying. I let go of his hand, my fingers brushed his bare chest, playing over his hardened nipples. His hands slid around my waist, fingers kneading upward, over my ribs, along my spine. He whispered into my mouth, "You're not wearing anything under this T-shirt."

"I know," I said.

His hands slid under the shirt, caressing my back, pressing our bodies together. His naked body touched me, and even through my jeans, it made me shudder. I wanted to feel his naked flesh against mine so badly, I could feel it like a hunger in my skin. I slipped the T-shirt off, and he made a sound of surprise.

He stared down at my bare breasts, and he wasn't the only one excited. He ran his hands over my breasts, and when I didn't stop him, he dropped to his

knees in front of me. He looked up at me, his brown eyes filled with a dark light.

I kissed him while he knelt in front of me, as if I'd eat him from the mouth down. The feel of him against my naked flesh was almost too much.

He broke from the kiss and ran his mouth over my breasts. It brought a surprised moan from my throat.

There was a knock at the door. We froze. A woman's voice that I didn't recognize said, "I didn't come all this way to listen to you make out, Richard. I'd like to remind you that all of us have incredibly good hearing."

"Not to mention sense of smell." That was Jason.

"Damn," he said softly, head buried against me.

I leaned my head over him, burying my face in his hair. "I think I'll just climb out the window."

He hugged me around the waist and stood, passing his hands over my breasts one last time. "I can't tell you how long I've wanted to do that."

He reached for his jeans and underpants still lying on the bed. I touched his arm, bringing his attention back to me.

"I want you, Richard. I love you. I want you to believe that."

He stared at me, his face grew strange and solemn. "You haven't seen me change into a wolf yet. You need to see that before we go any further."

The thought did not excite me, and I was glad I was the girl, so it didn't show. "You're right, though if you'd played your cards right, we might have had sex first."

"It wouldn't be fair to you."

"So you're saying even if we'd been alone you'd have stopped and shapeshifted."

He nodded.

"Because it wouldn't be fair to sleep with me until I'd seen the whole package?"

"Exactly."

"You are such a boy scout, Richard."

"I think I just lost one of my merit badges," he said. The look on his face brought a rush of heat up my neck.

He grinned and slipped on his pants. He wore briefs. He pulled on his jeans and was careful zipping them up. I watched him get dressed with a proprietary air. An air of anticipation.

I picked the T-shirt up from the floor and pulled it back on. Richard came up behind me, sliding his hands under the shirt, cupping a hand around each breast, kneading them. I leaned back against him. He was the one who stopped, hugging me around the waist, picking me an inch off the floor. He turned me around and gave me a quick kiss. "When you make up your mind to do something, you really make up your mind, don't you?"

"Always," I said.

He took in a deep breath through his nose and out through his mouth. "I'd try to make it a quick meeting, but . . ."

"Edward should be here soon, so it doesn't matter."

He nodded, his face falling. "I almost forgot that someone was trying to kill you." He cupped my face in his hands and kissed me, eyes searching my face. "Be careful."

I touched the bandage on his shoulder. "You, too."

He pulled a black T-shirt from a drawer and slipped it on. He tucked it into his jeans, and I made myself stay away from him while he fumbled with his zipper. "Join us after you get dressed."

I nodded. "Sure." He left, closing the door behind him. I sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. Damn. I didn't want to lose Richard. I really didn't. I wanted to sleep with him. I wasn't sure how I felt about seeing him change into full animal form. The hand thing had bothered me enough. What if I couldn't take it? What if it was too gross? Dear God, I hoped not. I hoped I was a better person than that. A stronger person than that.

Richard was afraid that if he started to kill, he'd just keep killing. It wasn't a completely unreasonable fear. I hugged myself tight. The feel of his body against mine clung to my skin. The feel of his mouth on me . . . I shivered, and it wasn't fear. It was stupid to love Richard. Having sex with him would make it worse. He was going to be dead soon if he didn't kill Marcus. Simple as that. Jean-Claude would never have endangered himself like that. Never. You could always trust Jean-Claude to survive. It was one of his talents. I was almost sure it wasn't one of Richard's. Last night should have proved to me beyond any doubt that I should dump him. Or that he should dump me. You could agree to disagree on politics, or even religion sometimes, but you either killed people or you didn't. Homicide was not something you could be neutral on.

Jean-Claude didn't mind killing people. Once upon a time, I'd thought that made him monstrous. Now I agreed with him. Will the real monster please stand up?

Chapter 11

I'd finally gotten dressed, red polo shirt, black jeans, black Nikes, the Firestar 9mm in its inner-pants holster. The gun was very visible against the red shirt, but hey, why try to hide it? Besides, I could feel the roil of power just outside the door. Shapeshifters, not all of them happy. Strong emotions make it harder to hide their power. Richard was one of the best at hiding it that I'd ever met. He'd fooled me for a while, made me think he was human. No one else had ever been able to do that.

I looked at myself in the mirror and realized that it wasn't facing a room full of lycanthropes that bothered me, it was facing a room full of people who knew that Richard and I had been making out. I preferred danger to embarrassment any day. I was used to danger.

The bathroom was just off the living room, so when I opened the door, they were all there, clustered on or around the couch. They glanced at me as I stepped out, and I nodded. "Hello."

Rafael said, "Hello, Anita." He was the Rat King, the wererats equivalent of pack leader. He was tall, dark, and handsome with strong Mexican features that made his face seem stern. Only his lips hinted that perhaps there were more smiles than frowns in him. He was wearing a short-sleeved dress shirt that left the brand on his arm bare. The brand was in the shape of a crown, and was the mark of kingship. There was no equivalent mark among the wolves. Being a lycanthrope meant different things, depending on the animal; different cultures as well as forms.

"I didn't know the wererats would be interested in the packs' internal squabbles," I said.

"Marcus is trying to unify all shapeshifters under one leader."

"Let me guess," I said, "he gets to be leader."

Rafael gave a small smile. "Yes."

"So you've thrown in with Richard as the lesser evil?" I made it a question.

"I've thrown in with Richard because he is a man of his word. Marcus has no honor. His bitch Raina has seen to that."

"I still think if we killed Raina, Marcus might be willing to talk with us." This from a woman who I thought I'd seen before but couldn't place. She sat on the floor sipping coffee from a mug. She had short blond hair, and was wearing a pink nylon jogging suit, jacket open over a pink T-shirt. It was a jogging suit made for looking at, not working out in, and I remembered her. I'd seen her at the Lunatic Cafe, Raina's restaurant. Her name was Christine. She wasn't a wolf, she was a weretiger. She was here to speak on behalf of the independent shapeshifters. Those who didn't have enough people to have a leader. Not every kind of lycanthropy was equally contagious. You could get cut to pieces by a weretiger and not get it. A werewolf could barely cut you and you got furry. Almost none of the cat-based lycanthropy was as contagious as wolf and rat. No one knew why. It was just the way it worked.

Richard introduced me to about fifteen others, first names only.

I said hi and leaned against the wall by the door. The couch was full, and so was the floor. Besides, I liked being out of reach of any shapeshifter I didn't know. Just a precaution.

"Actually, I've met Christine before," I said.

"Yes," Christine said, "the night you killed Alfred."

I shrugged. "Yeah."

"Why didn't you kill Raina last night when you had the chance?" she said.

Before I could answer, Richard interrupted. "If we kill Raina," he said, "Marcus will hunt us all down."

"I don't think he's up to the job," Sylvie said.

Richard shook his head. "No, I still won't give up on Marcus."

No one said anything, but the looks on their faces were enough. They agreed with me. Richard was going to get himself killed and hang his followers out to dry.

Louie came out of the kitchen carrying two mugs of coffee. He smiled at me. Louie was Richard's best friend, and he'd gone on a lot of hiking dates with us. He was five foot six, with eyes darker than my own, true black, not just darkest brown. His baby-fine black hair had been cut recently. He'd worn it long for all the time I'd known him, not a fashion statement like Richard; he just never got around to getting it cut. Now it was short enough that his ears showed, and he looked older, more like a professor with a doctorate in biology. He was a wererat, and one of Rafael's lieutenants. He handed me one of the mugs.

"These meetings have been so much more pleasant since Richard bought that coffeemaker. Thanks to you."

I took a big breath of coffee, and felt better instantly. Coffee might not be a cure-all, but it was close. "I'm not sure everyone is happy to see me."

"They're scared. It makes them a little hostile."

Stephen came out of the guest room dressed in clothes that fit too well to be Richard's. A blue dress shirt, tucked into faded blue jeans. The only man in the room that was close to Richard's size was Jason. Jason never minded sharing his clothes.

"Why does everyone look so grim?" I asked.

Louie leaned against the wall, sipping coffee. "Jean-Claude withdrew his support of Marcus and threw in with Richard. I can't believe neither of them mentioned that."

"They said something about having formed a bargain, but they didn't explain." I thought about what he'd just told me. "Marcus must be pissed."

The smile faded from his face. "That is an understatement." He looked at me. "You don't understand, do you?"

"Understand what?" I asked.

"Without Jean-Claude's backing, Marcus doesn't stand a chance of forcing the rest of the shapeshifters under his control. His dreams of empire building are finished."

"If he doesn't stand a chance, why is everyone so worried?"

Louie gave a sad smile. "What Marcus can't control, he has a tendency to kill."

"You mean he'd start a war?"

"Yes."

"Not just with Richard and the pack, you mean, but an all-out war with all the other shapeshifters in town?"

Louie nodded. "Except the wereleopards. Gabriel is their leader and he sides with Raina."

I thought about it for a second or two. "Sweet Jesus, it would be a bloodbath."

"And there'd be no way of containing it, Anita. Some of it would spill over onto the normal world. There are still three states in this country that will pay hundreds of dollars in bounty for a dead shapeshifter, no questions asked. A war like this could make the practice look practical."

"Do you two have something better to do?" Christine asked. I was beginning not to like her. It was she that knocked on the door and interrupted Richard and me. Frankly, for that I was sort of grateful. The thought of everyone hearing us go further would have been too embarrassing for words.

Louie moved back to sit on the floor with the others. I stayed leaning against the wall, sipping my coffee.

"Are you going to join us?" she asked.

"I'm fine where I am," I said.

"Too good to sit with us?" a man in his late thirties with dark blue eyes asked. He was about five foot eight; it was hard to tell with him sitting on the floor. He was dressed in a suit, complete with tie, as if he was on his way to work. His name was Neal.

"Not good enough," I said, "not good enough by half."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" he asked. "I don't like having a normal here."

"Leave it alone, Neal," Richard said.

"Why? She's laughing at us."

Richard glanced back at me from his corner of the couch. "Come join us, Anita?"

Sylvie was sitting beside Richard, not too close, but still, there was not enough room for me. Rafael sat on the end of the couch, spine straight, ankle propped on one knee.

"Couch looks full," I said.

Richard held out his hand to me. "We'll make room."

"She isn't even pack," Sylvie said. "I won't give up my seat to her. No offense to you, Anita, you don't know any better." Her voice was matter-of-fact, not hostile, but the look she gave Richard wasn't exactly friendly.

"No offense taken," I said. I wasn't sure I wanted to sit on the couch surrounded by lycanthropes anyway. Even supposedly friendly ones. Everyone in the room was stronger and faster than I was, just a fact. The only leg up I had was the gun. If I sat right beside them, I'd never get it out in time.

"I want my girlfriend to sit with me, Sylvie, that's all," Richard said. "It isn't meant as a challenge to your position in the lukoi." His voice sounded patient like he was talking to a child.

"What did you say?" Sylvie asked. She looked shocked.

"We are the lukoi. Anita knows that."

"You shared our words with her?" Neal said, outrage thick in his voice.

I wanted to say that it was just words, but I didn't. Who says I'm not getting smarter?

"There was a time when sharing our secrets with normals could get you a death sentence," Sylvie said.

"Even Marcus doesn't allow that anymore."

"How much of our secrets do you know, human?"

I shrugged. "A few words, that's all."

Sylvie stared at me. "You want your human girlfriend to cuddle up next to you, is that it, Richard?"

"Yes," he said. There was no trace of anger in his voice.

Personally, I didn't like the way she'd said "human."

Sylvie knelt on the couch, staring at me. "Come human, sit with us."

I stared at her. "Why the change of heart?"

"Not everything has to do with the pack hierarchy. That's what Richard is always telling us. Sit by your lover. I'll scoot over." She did, curling up on the couch, near Rafael.

The Rat King glanced at me. He raised an eyebrow, almost a shrug. I didn't trust Sylvie, but I trusted Rafael, and I trusted Richard, at least here, today. I realized that I would have trusted Rafael last night. He wouldn't have the moral qualms that Richard had. Poor Richard was like a lone voice crying in the wilderness. God help me, I agreed with the pagans.

Louie and Stephen were curled on the floor, close by. I was among friends. Even Jason, grinning up at me, wouldn't let me get hurt. Jason was Jean-Claude's wolf to call, as was Stephen. I think if they let me get killed, they might not survive much longer than I did.

"Anita?" Richard made it a question.

I sighed and pushed away from the wall. I was among friends, so why were the muscles in my back so tight it hurt to move? Paranoid? Who me?

I walked around the couch, coffee mug in my left hand. Sylvie patted the couch, smiling, but not like she meant it.

I sat beside Richard. His arm slid over my shoulders. My right arm was pressed against his side, not too tightly. He knew how much I hated having my gun hand impeded.

Leaning into the warmth of his body, I relaxed. The tightness in my shoulders eased. I took a sip of coffee. We were all being terribly civilized.

Richard put his lips against my face, and whispered, "Thank you."

Those two words earned him a lot of brownie points. He knew what it had cost me to sit down among the wolves, rats, and cats. Not sitting with him would have undermined him in front of the pack and the other leaders. I wasn't here to make the situation worse.

"Who saved you last night, Stephen?" Sylvie asked. Her voice was sweet, face pleasant. I didn't trust her at all.

Every eye turned to Stephen. He tried to huddle into the floor, as if he could go invisible, but it didn't work. He stared at Richard, eyes wide.

"Go ahead, Stephen, tell the truth. I won't be mad."

Stephen swallowed. "Anita saved me."

"Richard was fighting about twenty lycanthropes at the time," I said. "He told me to get Stephen, so I did."

Neal sniffed Stephen, running his nose just above the other man's face and neck, down his shoulder. It wasn't a human gesture, and it was unnerving in the well-dressed man. "He has her scent on his skin." Neal glared at me. "He's been with her."

I expected an outcry, but instead, the others crowded around Stephen, sniffing his skin, touching him, and bringing their fingers close to their own

faces. Only Sylvie, Jason, Rafael, and Louie stayed sitting. One by one, the rest turned to Richard and me.

"He's right," Christine said. "Her scent clings to his skin. You don't get that much scent just by carrying someone."

Richard's hand tightened on my shoulder. I glanced at his face. It was calm, only a slight tightness around the eyes betrayed tension. "I was patrolling the woods for assassins," Richard said. "Stephen didn't want to be alone. I sent him to Anita."

"We know about the assassination attempts," Sylvie said.

I widened my eyes. "You do, do you?"

"Richard wants us to help protect you. If we're going to take a bullet for you, we need to know why."

I met her eyes. Her pretty face was harsh, the bones in her cheeks standing out.

"I'm not asking anyone to take my bullet," I said. I scooted out from under Richard's arm, which put me closer to Sylvie, not an improvement.

Richard didn't fight it. He drew his arm back. "I should have talked to you before I told them."

"Damn straight," I said.

Sylvie leaned her arms on the back of the couch, bringing her face inches from mine. "Are you going to chastise our would-be pack leader, human?"

"You say *human* like it's a bad thing, Sylvie. Jealous?"

She drew back like I'd hit her. A look that was part pain, part rage passed across her face. "Most of us here survived an attack, human. We did not choose this." Her voice was chokingly harsh.

I'd expected a lot of things from her, but not the pain of a survivor. I was sorry I'd made the crack. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything personal by it."

"You have no idea how personal it is."

"That's enough, Sylvie," Richard said.

She rose on her knees to meet Richard's face over my head. "Don't you even have the balls to be angry that she slept with a subordinate male?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "Stephen and I did not have sex. We literally slept together, nothing else."

Neal plunged his face into Stephen's crotch and sniffed. It wasn't a human gesture. Stephen let him do it, and that wasn't very human, either.

Jason leaned in, sniffing my leg.

I put my coffee cup on my knee, in front of his face. "Don't even think it," I said.

Jason grinned up at me. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

"I can," Richard said softly.

Jason smiled at him and scooted back.

Neal raised his face and shook his head. "They didn't have sex."

"He said she'd protect me," Stephen said. The silence grew so thick you could have walked on it.

"Is that what you said?" Sylvie asked. She was staring at Richard like he'd done something very bad.

Richard took a deep enough breath that his shoulders shuddered. "Yes, that's what I said."

"Stephen," Sylvie said, "Did you believe she'd protect you? If Raina had come through the door, would you have trusted Anita to save you?"

Stephen looked at the floor, then up, his eyes darted to Richard, then to me. His eyes finally stopped, staring at me. "She had me sleep near the wall so she'd be in front in case anything came through the door."

And I'd thought I'd been subtle.

"What would you have done if Raina *had* come?" Sylvie asked.

Everyone was watching me, except Richard. Their eyes were very intent, and I knew the question meant more than it should have. "I'd have killed her."

"Not just shot her or wounded her?" Christine asked.

I shook my head. "She got her free pass last night. If she comes after Stephen again, I'll kill her."

"You mean that, don't you?" Sylvie said.

"Every word," I said.

There was a hum of energy in the room, almost as if they were all sharing some telepathic message. I don't think they were, but something was happening. The energy level in the room was rising, and I didn't like it. I sat the coffee mug on the floor. I wanted both my hands free.

Sylvie grabbed me around the waist and rolled us off the couch. We were on the floor with her riding my back before I could react. I went for the gun, and her hand was there first. She jerked the gun out of its holster and tossed it away. She wasn't fast, she was miraculous, and I was in deeper shit than I could get out of.

The bend of her arm was tucked under my chin like in a strangle hold, positioned just right so she could black me out without killing me. Her legs locked around my waist, as close as she could get and not climb down my shirt.

A half dozen werewolves flowed between her and Richard. He was standing, hands in fists at his side. His power poured through the room, deeper and higher, until it was like being buried alive in some kind of static charge.

"Don't," I whispered. I wasn't talking to Richard.

I felt something open inside Sylvie, a trembling, vibrating energy flowed from her skin across my body. It was almost hot, like opening the door to an oven. Where her skin touched me, I shivered. It was painful, like small electric shocks.

"What are you doing, Sylvie?" Richard asked. His voice had gone low and growling deep; it didn't sound human. I expected his eyes to be amber, but they were the same solid brown as always. Human eyes, but the look in them was not. The beast stared out of Richard's eyes. I knew in that moment that he was truly dangerous. I also knew that all that impressive power wouldn't save me if Sylvie wanted to rip my head off.

My pulse thudded against her arm like a trapped butterfly. I forced my voice calm. "What's going on?"

"I'm going to make you his mate."

"You're not contagious in human form," I said.

"Really?" she said. The arm around my throat grew warm, pulsing like a beating heart. I felt the muscles slide under her skin.

"Richard." My voice sounded high and wispy. Fear will do that to you.

Rafael and Louie were on their feet now. The werewolves that had joined Sylvie in this little protest fanned out to cover the rats, too.

I couldn't see Stephen. He was somewhere behind us, crouched on the floor, last I saw.

Jason crouched at Richard's feet, facing the other werewolves. But at least ten of them just sat there, watching, not taking sides. "You've been holding out on us," Jason said.

Sylvie flexed the arm around my neck. I had a glimpse of a long-clawed hand. "Only Raina is higher in the pack than I am, Jason."

Richard faced the werewolves. He brought his hands upward, making a soothing gesture like he'd done at the movie set. The prickling energy in the room went down a notch. He was forcing their power back.

"All it takes is a scratch, Richard," Sylvie said. "You'll never reach us in time."

"I forbid this," Richard growled. "No one is to be infected against their will. Especially Anita."

"Why?" Sylvie said. "Because if she wasn't human, you wouldn't want her? Not taking the pack to your bed is just another way of denying what you are, Richard."

Something passed over his face behind the anger and the power: uncertainty.

I knew in that moment she was right.

Sylvie whispered in my ear, her breath warm on my face. "See his face."

"Yeah," I said.

"He accuses you of not being able to sleep with him because you think he's a monster, but if I make you one of us, he won't want you. He thinks of all of us as monsters, but not good old Richard. He's better than the rest of us."

"I will hurt you, Sylvie. I'll bleed you, do you understand," Richard said.

"But you won't kill me, will you?" she said. Her arm flexed, long claws tickled down my face.

I put my hands on her arm, trying to hold it away from me, and not succeeding. "I'll kill you," I said.

She went very still against my body. "For changing you into one of us? For losing you Richard's love when he sees you monstrous and furry?"

I spoke very low, very carefully. "You hate what you are, Sylvie."

Her arm convulsed tight enough that I couldn't breathe for a second. "I don't hate what I am. I accept what I am." Her arm loosened.

I took a shaky breath and tried again. "I saw the look on your face when I accused you of being jealous. You are jealous of me being human, Sylvie. You know you are."

She held her other hand up in front of my face, letting me get a good look at the long, thin claws. The hand at my throat combed claws through my hair.

"You know that Raina has forbidden us to make you lukoi. She's afraid if you joined us, you'd be a better bitch than she is."

"How flattering," I whispered. I looked at Richard through the backs of the werewolves. His eyes had gone amber and alien. Even now, I knew, he wouldn't kill Sylvie. Even if she bled me, infected me, he wouldn't kill her. It was there in the pain on his face. The confusion replacing the fear.

Maybe Sylvie saw it. Maybe she'd made her point. Whatever, she uncurled herself from my body and stood carefully on the other side of me.

I scuttled away on all fours as fast as I could go. It wasn't pretty, it wasn't slick, but it was effective.

I crawled until I came to the far wall. I stayed sitting against it, as far away from everything in the room as I could get.

The other werewolves had faded away. Sylvie and Richard stood facing each other. Sylvie's eyes had gone a strange liquid grey, wolf eyes.

Richard flung his power outward. It ate along my skin, tore a gasp from my throat.

Sylvie stood in that flood of power and didn't flinch. "The power is impressive, Richard, but it means nothing as long as Marcus lives."

He backhanded her, in a blur of motion that was too fast to follow. Sylvie careened into the wall and slid to the floor, stunned.

"I am pack leader," Richard's voice roared, and he raised clawed hands to the sky. He fell to his knees, and I didn't go to help. I stayed huddled against the wall, wishing I'd packed an extra gun.

Richard crouched on the floor, rocking gently. He curled on his knees into a ball, and I felt him swallow the power back. I felt it drain away. He stayed crouched on the floor, hugging himself for a long time after the power vanished from the room, head down, his hair hiding his face.

Sylvie got to her knees and crawled towards him. She crouched beside him, smoothing his hair back on one side. "We would follow you anywhere if you would kill for us. She will kill for us. If your mate, your lupa, will kill for us, it might be enough."

Richard raised his head up with a shudder. "No one is to be infected against their will, that is my word, and my order." He raised back on his knees.

Sylvie stayed crouched down, face near the floor, a sign of abasement.

"But you will not kill to enforce it."

"I will kill to protect Anita," Rafael said.

Everyone looked at him.

He met their eyes and didn't back down. "If anyone touches her against her will, I and mine will hunt them down."

"Rafael," Richard said, "don't do this."

He stared at Richard. "You bring a human among us, but you do not protect her. Someone has to."

I wanted to say I could protect myself, but it wasn't true. I was good, but I was just human. It wasn't enough.

"I can't let you do my dirty work for me," he said.

"I am your friend, Richard," Rafael said. "I do not mind."

Sylvie hugged the ground at Richard's feet. "Will you let the Rat King kill your pack? Is he our leader now?"

He stared down at her, and something happened to his face, not otherworldly, or wolf, but a hardness, almost a sadness passed over him. I watched it, and I didn't like it. If I'd had my gun, I might have shot Sylvie for making that look pass over his face. "I will kill anyone who breaks my word. I have spoken, and it is law."

Sylvie abased herself even lower, and the other wolves came crowding around, crawling on the floor, abasing themselves in front of him. Some of them licked his hands, touched his body. They moved around him until he was nearly hidden from sight.

Richard stood up, walking through them, their hands clinging to his legs. He bent down and picked up the Firestar from the floor and walked over to me. He looked normal enough, all the wolfish changes hidden away. He handed me the gun, butt first. "Are you all right?"

I cradled the gun in both hands. "Sure."

"I value your humanity, Anita. Sylvie's right. How can I ask you to embrace my beast, when I can't do it myself?" The pain on his face was heartrending. "I will kill to keep you safe. Does that make you happy?"

I stared up at him. "No," I said. "I thought it would, but no." I felt like Rafael, I'd kill for him. I'd kill to keep the pain out of his eyes.

I holstered the gun and raised my right hand to him. His eyes widened. He understood the gesture. He took my hand and raised me to my feet. He drew me with him towards the waiting wolves.

I hung back, pulling on his hand.

"I said I'd kill for you, Anita." His voice was soft and harsh at the same time. "Don't you believe I'd do it?"

His eyes were utterly sad. It was like something inside of him that he'd kept alive all these years was dead now. I believed the look in his eyes. He would kill to protect me, and the decision had cost him dearly.

The werewolves closed around us. I would have said they crawled around us, but that didn't cover what they were doing. Crawling wasn't graceful, or sensuous, but this was. They moved like they had muscles in places that people didn't. They circled us and rolled their eyes up at us. When I met those eyes, they looked away, all except Sylvie. She met my gaze and held it. It was a challenge, but I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do about it.

A hand touched me, and I jerked away from it. Only Richard's hand on mine kept me from going for my gun. He held both my hands in his and drew me to him, our bodies not quite touching. He met my eyes and held them. He wasn't afraid. I tried to relax, but it wasn't working.

"This is my lupa. Know her scent, know her skin. She has shed our blood, and shed her blood for us. She stands as protector for those weaker than herself. She will kill for us, if we ask. She is your alpha."

Sylvie and Neal stood up. They both moved out of the circle. They stood, staring at me, at Richard. The others crouched on the floor, watching.

"She is not dominant to me," Sylvie said.

"She is not even one of us," Neal said, "I won't bow to her. I could break her in half with one hand." He shook his head. "She isn't my alpha."

"What's happening, Richard?" I asked.

"I tried to bring you into the pack, make you one of us without contaminating you."

"Why?" I asked.

"If you're going to protect Stephen, then you deserve the protection of the pack. If you're going to take risks for us, then you deserve to have the benefits of our protection."

"No offense," I said, "but I haven't been too impressed with your protection so far." The minute I said it, I wished I hadn't. His face fell.

"You made it personal last night with Raina, Anita. You have no idea how dangerous she is. I wanted you to have everyone's protection in case something happened to me."

I looked up at him. "You will kill Marcus if he jumps you, right? No more being squeamish." I touched his arm. I studied his face. "Answer me, Richard."

He nodded, finally. "I won't let him kill me."

"You will kill him; promise me."

His jaw tightened, the muscle thrumming. "I promise."

"Well, hallelujah," Sylvie said. She stared at me. "I withdraw my challenge. You aren't dominant to me, but you can be his alpha female. You're a good influence on him." She stepped back into the circle, but didn't kneel. "Come on Neal," she said, "let it go."

He shook his head. "No, she isn't one of us. She can't be. I won't acknowledge her as alpha."

"All you have to do is prove to Neal that you're serious," Sylvie said. "You just have to make him hurt a little."

"Since he could probably survive a direct hit with a mack truck, how am I supposed to hurt him?"

She shrugged.

"I didn't think anyone would challenge you. I'm sorry," Richard said.

"You expect people to be nice, Richard. It's one of your best qualities and greatest weaknesses," I said.

"Refuse the challenge, Anita."

"If I refuse, then what?"

"It's over. You won't be a member of the pack, but I can order them to protect you from Raina. It's almost as good."

"I told you, I don't want anyone being ordered to take a bullet for me. Besides, no way am I volunteering to go one on one with a lycanthrope. I'll keep my gun, thanks anyway."

The doorbell rang. It was probably Edward. Damn. I looked at the little group, and even though they were in human form, he'd know what they were. He was better at smelling monsters than I was, at least live ones. "If you guys can tone it down a bit, I'll get the door."

"Edward?" Richard made it a question.

"Probably," I said.

He stared around at the group. "Everybody up off the floor. He's another normal."

They got to their feet, slowly, almost reluctantly. They seemed almost intoxicated, as if the power in the room had done more for them than for me.

I went for the door. I was halfway to it when Richard yelled, "No!"

I dropped to the ground, rolling, and felt the air whistling over me where Neal had swung. If he'd been any good at fighting, he'd have nailed me. The missed swing put him off balance, and I foot-swept him to the floor, but he got to his feet again before I could stand, like there were springs in his spine. It was impressive as hell.

"Stop it, Neal," Sylvie said.

"She didn't refuse the challenge. It's my right."

I scuttled backwards, still on the ground, not sure what to do. The closed drapes of the picture window were at my back if I stood up. I wasn't sure standing up was my best bet. "Give me the rules, quick," I said.

"First blood," Sylvie said. "Human form only."

"If he shapeshifts, you can shoot him," Richard said.

"Agreed," Sylvie said, others murmured their agreement.

Peachy. Neal leaped for me, leaving the ground completely, hands outstretched. I came up on one knee, grabbed his jacket, and rolled on my back, letting his amazing momentum carry us both. I shoved both feet into his stomach and pushed with everything I had. He flew over me in a near perfect arc. He'd set himself up for a textbook tomoe-nage throw.

He smashed through the window, taking the curtain with him. I rolled to my feet and stared at the gaping window. Broken shards of glass sprinkled onto the carpet and the yard beyond. Neal struggled out of the curtain, blood running down his face where the glass had cut him.

Edward was on the ground in a combat stance, gun out. He pointed it at Neal, as he struggled free of the curtain.

"Don't shoot him," I said. "I think the fight's over."

Neal stood, kicking free of the clinging curtain. "I'll kill you."

I drew the Firestar and pointed it at him. "I don't think so."

Richard stepped up beside me. "She drew first blood, Neal. The fight is over, unless you want to fight me, too."

"And me," Sylvie said. She stepped up on the other side of Richard. The rest of the pack stepped up behind us. Stephen crouched at my feet.

"She is pack now," Sylvie said. "You fight one of us, and you fight all of us."

Edward raised his eyebrows at me. "What is going on, Anita?"

"I think I've been adopted," I said.

Neal glared at me.

"Do it, Neal," Sylvie said.

Neal knelt in the glass and the curtain. The cuts were already beginning to heal on his face. Glass wasn't silver or the claws of another monster, so he healed almost magically.

"You are dominant. You are alpha." The words were dragged from his throat. "If this window hadn't been here, you couldn't have bloodied me."

"Why do you think I moved in front of it, Neal?" I asked.

His eyes squinted. "You planned this?"

I nodded and raised my gun skyward. "I'm not just another pretty face."

Richard took my left hand, squeezing it gently. "That's the God's honest truth."

I put up the Firestar.

Edward shook his head, smiling, but didn't put his gun up. He did stop pointing it at anyone. "You are the only person I know who leads a more interesting life than I do."

Jason patted me on the back. "Tomorrow night we'll take you out chasing deer."

"I thought you'd chase cars," I said.

He grinned. "What fun is that? Cars don't bleed."

I smiled, and then stopped. His eyes were as innocent as spring skies, as joyous, and staring into them, I wasn't sure if he was kidding me or not. I almost asked, but didn't. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Chapter 12

Edward was five foot eight, with blond hair cut very short and close to his head. He was blue-eyed and the epitome of WASP breeding. He was also the most dangerous man I'd ever met, living or dead.

He was amused as hell by the gathering of lycanthropes. The group broke up soon after his arrival, mainly because all the business had been taken care of. The meeting had mainly been a last-ditch effort to convince Richard to compromise his morals and kill someone. Barring that, for him to pick a lupa who would kill for him. We'd sort of killed two birds with one stone, pun intended. But I was very aware that I'd gotten lucky with Neal. If he'd had a background in any martial art, if he'd known anything about fighting, I'd have been toast.

Richard had boarded up the broken window and had a call in to a glass repair shop that was willing, for an exorbitant fee, to come out and repair the damage immediately. I'd offered to pay for the damages since I made them.

Edward, Richard, and I sat around the kitchen table. Edward and I sipped coffee. Richard drank tea. One of his few serious faults was a total dislike of coffee. Hard to trust a man who won't drink coffee.

"What have you found out?" I asked.

Edward sipped his coffee and shook his head. "Not much. The contract has been picked up."

"Even with the time limit?" I asked.

He nodded.

"When is the twenty-four hours up?" I asked.

"Let's say two o'clock. I got the offer about one o'clock last night, but we'd add an hour to be safe."

"To be safe," Richard said. I think it was sarcasm.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked.

"Am I the only one in this room who's worried?"

"Panicking won't help, Richard."

He stood up, emptying his mug in the sink and rinsing it automatically. He turned, leaning his butt against the cabinets, arms crossed over his chest. "You need a clear head to plan?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

He stared at us. I watched him thinking about something serious. He finally said, "I don't understand how the two of you can be calm. I'm shocked that someone has put a contract out on Anita. Neither of you is shocked."

I looked at Edward, and he looked back at me. We had one of those moments of perfect understanding, and I knew I couldn't explain it to Richard. I wasn't even sure I could explain it to myself. "I've stayed alive this long because I don't react the way most people react."

"You've stayed alive because you're willing to do things other people aren't."

I nodded. "That, too."

His face was very serious, like a little boy asking about the facts of life. "Let me ask one stupid question; then I'll shut up."

I shrugged. "Ask away."

"Anita says she doesn't enjoy killing. That she feels nothing when she kills."

I realized then that the question was going to be for Edward. I wasn't sure how that would go over.

"Do you enjoy killing?"

Edward sat very still in his chair, drinking his coffee quietly. His blue eyes were as neutral and unreadable as any vampire's, and in some ways just as dead. I wondered for the first time if my eyes ever looked like that. "Why do you want to know?"

"I agreed to kill Marcus," Richard said. "I've never killed anyone."

Edward stared up at him. He set his coffee down carefully and met Richard's eyes. "Yes."

"Yes, you enjoy killing?" Richard asked.

Edward nodded.

Richard was waiting for him to explain. You could see it in his face.

"He's answered your question, Richard."

"But does he enjoy the sensation of killing? Is it physical? Or is it the planning that he enjoys?"

Edward picked up his coffee.

"The question and answer session is over, Richard," I said.

A look halfway between stubbornness and frustration crossed Richard's face. "But 'yes,' doesn't tell me anything."

"After you kill Marcus," Edward said, "you can ask the question again."

"And you'll answer it?" Richard asked.

Edward gave the barest of nods.

For the first time, I realized that Edward liked Richard. Not as a friend, maybe, but he didn't think Richard was a complete waste of time.

Richard stared into Edward's face for a long time, then shook his head.

"Okay." He sat back down. "No more questions. What's the plan?"

I smiled at him. "To keep the hitter from killing me."

"That's your entire plan?" Richard asked.

"And to take out the man with the money," Edward said. "As long as the money is out there, Anita won't be safe."

"Any ideas how to accomplish this?" Richard asked.

Edward nodded and up-ended his coffee mug, finishing the last of it. He went to the counter and refilled it, like he was at home. He sat back down. Good ol' Edward, comfortable wherever he was.

I sat waiting, watching him quietly. He'd tell us when he was ready and not before. Richard was practically dancing in place. "What?" he finally asked.

Edward smiled, I think at Richard, or maybe at that eternal music that only he could hear. The rhythm that kept him self-contained and alive.

"The assassin might come here today, and we'll take precautions for that. A herd of shapeshifters was perfect. I'd have passed on the hit myself until they cleared out."

I glanced around the quiet kitchen. The spot between my shoulder blades was itching. "You think we're in danger now?"

"Maybe." He didn't seem too worried. "But I think they'll hit you tonight on your date with the Master of the City."

"How did you know I had a date tonight?"

Edward just smiled. "I know that the Master of the City is taking the Executioner to the opening of his dance club, Danse Macabre. I know that you'll be arriving in a limo."

"I didn't even know that," I said.

He shrugged. "It wasn't hard to find out, Anita."

"I was going to cancel my date tonight and hide out."

"If you stay here, the assassin will almost certainly come here."

I glanced at Richard. "Oh," I said.

"I can take care of myself," Richard said.

"Could you kill a human being?" I asked.

He blinked at me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean if someone came at you with a gun, could you kill them?"

"I said I'd kill to protect you."

"That's not what I asked, Richard, and you know it."

He stood up and paced a small circle in the kitchen. "If it was standard ammunition, it couldn't kill me."

"You wouldn't know whether it was silver ammo until it was too late," I said.

He hugged his arms, ran his hands through his long hair, and turned to me. "Once you decide to start killing, it never stops, does it?"

"No," I said.

"I don't know if I could kill a human being."

"Thanks for the honesty," I said.

"But that means you'll take an assassin into a club crowded with people? You'll endanger all of them to keep me safe?"

"I would endanger almost anyone to keep you safe."

Edward made a small sound, almost a laugh. His face was pleasant and empty. He sipped coffee. "Which is why I don't want Richard in the line of fire. You'll be so busy worrying about him, it might make you careless."

"But all those people, you can't put them in danger," Richard said.

Edward looked at me and didn't say what he was thinking. I was grateful for that. "I think Edward has a plan for that, too, Richard."

"I think they'll hit you on the way home from the club. Why work in the middle of a crowd if they don't have to? Plant a bomb on the limo, or wait until you're alone on the drive back."

"Is that what you would do?" Richard asked.

Edward looked at him for a moment, then nodded. "Probably. Not the bomb, but I'd hit the limo."

"Why not the bomb?" Richard asked.

I didn't ask, because I knew the answer. Edward's eyes flicked to me. I shrugged.

"Because I like to kill up close and personal. With a bomb there's no personal risk."

Richard stared at him, studying his face. He finally said, "Thank you for answering the question."

Edward acknowledged him with a nod. Richard was gaining brownie points from both of us. But I knew that Richard had illusions. If Edward seemed to like him, Richard would assume Edward wouldn't kill him. I knew better. If the situation called for it, Edward could pull the trigger on anyone.

"Let's say you're right," I said. "I go on the date and let the hitter make his move. Then what?"

"We take him out."

"Wait a minute," Richard said. "You're betting that the two of you are better than a professional assassin. That you'll get to him before he gets to Anita."

We both nodded.

"What if you're not better?"

Edward looked at him like he'd said the sun wouldn't rise tomorrow.

"Edward will be better," I said.

"You'd bet your life on that?" Richard asked.

"I am betting my life on that," I said.

Richard looked a touch pale. He nodded. "I guess you are. What can I do to help?"

"You heard Edward," I said. "You stay here."

Richard shook his head. "I heard, but surely in a crowd of people even Superman will need a few more eyes and ears. The pack can help watch your back."

"It doesn't bother you to endanger them?"

"You said you'd risk almost anyone to keep me safe," Richard said. "I feel the same way."

"If they want to volunteer, that's one thing, but I don't want them ordered into it. People aren't good bodyguards if they resent doing it."

Richard laughed. "Very practical. For a second there, I thought you were really worried about my wolves."

"Practical will keep me alive, Richard, sentimentality won't."

"If we had some extra watchers, it'd free me up a little," Edward said.

I looked at him. "You'd trust monsters to watch my back?"

He smiled, and it wasn't pleasant. "Monsters make excellent cannon fodder."

"They aren't cannon fodder," Richard said.

"Everyone's cannon fodder," Edward said, "eventually."

"If I really thought we were endangering innocent bystanders, I wouldn't go to the club. You know that, Richard."

He stared at me for a second, then nodded. "I know that."

Edward made a small sound low in his throat. "Innocent bystanders." He shook his head, smiling. "Let's get dressed," Edward said. "I bought some new toys for you to use tonight."

I looked at him. "Dangerous toys?" I asked.

"Is there any other kind?" We grinned at each other.

"You two are enjoying this," Richard said. It was almost accusatory.

"If we didn't enjoy it, we'd both do something else," Edward said.

"Anita doesn't kill people for money, and you do."

I watched the humor drain from Edward's eyes like the sun sinking behind clouds, leaving them pitiless and empty. "Think what you like, loverboy, but Anita could have chosen another line of work, one that wouldn't put her in harm's way. But she didn't. There's a reason for that."

"She's not like you."

Edward looked at me with empty eyes. "Closer than she used to be." His voice was soft, almost neutral, but it made me shiver.

I met his eyes, and for the first time in a long time, wondered what I'd given up to be able to pull the trigger. The same thing Edward had given up inside himself to be able to kill so easily? I looked up at Richard and wondered if he could do it. If, when the fur flew, he could really kill anyone. Some people couldn't. No shame in that. But if Richard backed out, he was dead. Not tonight or tomorrow, but eventually, because Marcus would see to it. Richard had beaten Marcus twice and refused the kill. I doubted Marcus would let him have

another shot at it. They'd taken Stephen last night, knowing what Richard would do. If I hadn't been with him, he might be dead now. Shit.

All I had to do was kill the assassin before he or she killed me. Trust Richard not to let Marcus kill him. Keep Raina from killing me. And let's see, I was sure there was something else. Oh, yeah, decide whether I'm going to sleep with Richard, and if I did, what that would mean for Jean-Claude and myself. There were days when my life was too complicated even for me.

Chapter 13

Finding dress-up clothes that you can hide a gun in is a bitch. I actually hadn't planned to carry a gun on my date with Jean-Claude. Of course, that was before the assassin. Now I wasn't going out without one. If I'd known I'd be needing a gun tonight, I'd have worn the little black dress yesterday and saved the pants suit. But who knew, and now all I'd packed besides jeans was the dress. It was a little black dress with just enough strap to allow a bra, if you were careful. I'd bought a black bra to be safe. Flashing a white bra strap in a black dress always looked so tacky. The jacket was a deep black velvet, a bolero cut that hit me at the waist. Black beading edged the collar and hem.

The jacket was hanging on the doorknob of Richard's closet. He was sitting forlornly on the bed, watching me put the last touches on my lipstick. I was leaning forward, peering at myself in the mirror on his dresser. The skirt was short enough that I decided to wear a black teddy under it, not for underwear but to go over my panty hose, so everything matched. Ronnie hadn't trusted me not to bend over at least once tonight. She was right. So even if I forgot, the teddy covered more than most bathing suits. I'd have never picked out something so short on my own. Ronnie was a bad influence on me. If she'd known I was planning to wear it for Jean-Claude, she'd have probably chosen something else. She called him fangface. Or worse. She liked Richard.

"Nice dress," Richard said.

"Thanks." I turned in front of the mirror to check the way the skirt hung. It was just full enough to swing when I moved. The black knife sheaths on my forearms actually matched the dress. The knives made a nice touch of silver. The wrist sheaths almost covered the scars on my arms. Only the mound of scar tissue at my left elbow was visible. A vampire had torn up my arm once upon a time. The same vamp had bitten through my collarbone. The scars were normal for me, but every once in a while I'd be out enjoying myself and catch someone looking, staring. They'd look hurriedly away, or meet my eyes. It wasn't that the scars were awful to look at. They weren't that bad—really. But they told a story of pain and something out of the ordinary. They said I'd been places that most people hadn't, and I'd survived. Worth a stare or two, I guess.

The black straps that held the new knife down along my spine showed a little at the shoulders, but more across the back. The hilt was hidden under my hair, but I wouldn't be taking the jacket off.

"Why didn't you wear this last night?" Richard asked.

"The pants suit seemed more appropriate."

He stared at me, eyes roving over my body more than my face. He shook his head. "For seeing someone you're not going to sleep with, that is a very sexy outfit."

I had never planned on Richard seeing the dress, at least not on the night I wore it for Jean-Claude. I wasn't sure what to say, but I'd try. "I trust myself with Jean-Claude more than I trust myself with you, so he gets the short skirt and you don't." That was the truth.

"You're saying I don't get the sexy outfit because I'm so irresistible?"

"Something like that."

"If I ran my hands up your legs, would I find panty hose or garters?" He looked so solemn, hurt. With everything else going down, I shouldn't have had to worry about my boyfriend's hurt feelings, but there it was. Life goes on, even if you're ass deep in alligators.

"Panty hose," I said.

"Will Jean-Claude find out what kind of hose you're wearing?"

"He could ask, like you did," I said.

"You know that's not what I meant," he said.

I sighed. "I don't know how to make this easier on you, Richard. If there's anything that would make you feel more secure about this, ask."

To his credit, he didn't ask me not to go. I think he knew he wouldn't like the answer. "Come here," he said and held out his hand to me.

I walked over to him and took his outstretched hand. He sat me on his lap, legs sideways like you'd sit on Santa. He encircled me with one arm, then laid his other hand on my thigh. "Promise me you won't sleep with him tonight."

"With assassins ready to jump out of the woodwork, I think that's a safe bet," I said.

"Don't joke, Anita, please."

I smoothed my hand through his hair. He looked so serious, so hurt. "I've said no for a very long time, Richard. Why should you be worried about tonight?"

"The dress," he said.

"I admit it's short, but . . ."

He smoothed his hand up my thigh until it vanished under the skirt. He rested his hand just below the lace of the teddy. "You're wearing lingerie, for God's sake; you never wear lingerie."

I would have explained about everything matching, but somehow I didn't think that would be comforting. "Okay, I won't sleep with him tonight. I hadn't planned on it to begin with."

"Promise me you'll come back and sleep with me." He smiled when he said it.

I smiled back and slid off his lap. "You'd have to shift first. I'd have to see your beast. Or so you keep telling me."

"I could shift when you get back."

"Could you take human form again quickly enough to do us any good tonight?"

He smiled. "I'm strong enough to be Ulfric, Anita. One of the things I can do is change form almost at will. I don't pass out when I change back to human form like most shapeshifters."

"Handy," I said.

He smiled. "Come back tonight, and I'll change for you. Sylvie's right. I have to accept what I am."

"Part of that is trying it out on me, huh?"

He nodded. "I think so."

Staring into his solemn eyes, I knew that if he changed for me tonight and I couldn't deal with it, it would destroy something inside of him. I hoped I was up to it. "When I come back tonight, I'll watch you shift."

He looked grim as if he expected that I'd run screaming. "Kiss me, and get out of here," he said.

I kissed him, and he licked his lips. "Lipstick." He kissed me again. "But underneath I can still taste you."

"Hmmm," I said. I stared down at him and almost didn't want to go. Almost. The doorbell rang, and I jumped. Richard didn't, as if he'd heard it before I had.

"Be careful. I wish I could be with you."

"There'll be media all over the place," I said. "Wouldn't do to get your picture taken with a bunch of monsters. It might blow your cover."

"I'd blow my cover if it would keep you safe."

He loved teaching, yet I believed him. He'd come out of the closet for me. "Thanks, but Edward's right. I'd be so worried about keeping you alive, I wouldn't be taking good care of myself."

"You don't worry about Jean-Claude?"

I shrugged. "He can take care of himself. Besides, he's already dead."

Richard shook his head. "You don't really believe that anymore."

"No, he's dead, Richard. That I know. Whatever keeps him alive is a form of necromancy, different than my own powers, but still magic."

"You can say it, but in your heart you don't believe it."

I shrugged again. "Maybe not, but it's still the truth."

There was a knock on the door. Richard said, "Your date's here."

"I'm coming. Now I have to fix my lipstick all over again."

He wiped fingers across his mouth, coming away with crimson stains. "At least I'll be able to tell if you've been kissing him. This stuff will show up like blood on his white shirt."

I didn't argue. Jean-Claude always wore black and white. I'd only seen him in one shirt that wasn't white. It had been black. I reapplied the lipstick and put it in the beaded black purse on the dresser. The purse was too small even for the Firestar. I did have a Derringer, but except at close quarters, it was pretty

worthless. With an assassin I might not want to get that close. Edward had a solution. He'd loaned me his Seecamps .32 autoloader. It was about the same size as a small .25, only a little wider than my own hand, and I had a small hand. It was a very nice gun, and for the caliber and the size, I'd never seen better. I wanted one. Edward informed me that he'd had to wait nearly a year for the gun to come in. It was pretty much a custom order. Otherwise, he'd have made it a gift. Fine, I'd order my own—if I survived the night. If I didn't, well, I wouldn't be ordering anything.

I'd managed not to think too much about that. I'd concentrated on dressing, putting the weapons in place, Richard, anything but that I was putting myself out as bait for someone good enough to earn 500,000 dollars a pop. I was having to trust that Edward would keep me alive. Because though Edward would have stopped the limo and fired only when he could see my face, most hit men wouldn't. Most professionals prefer to take you out from a nice, safe distance. A high-powered rifle could be yards or even miles away. Not much I, or even Edward, could do about that. I knew nothing about explosives. I was going to have to depend on Edward to take care of any bombs. I was putting myself in Edward's hands tonight, trusting him like I'd never trusted anyone before. Scary thought, that.

I checked the purse again; ID, lipstick, money, gun. I'd have normally carried a small travel hairbrush, but there wasn't room. I could live with messy hair for one night.

The thought made me check my hair in the mirror and run a brush through it one last time. I had to admit that it looked great. It was one of my best features. Even Ronnie couldn't improve on it. It was all natural curl. Even tonight I'd shoved hair goop in it after my shower and let it dry naturally. I'd had a woman get angry with me once in California because I wouldn't tell her where I'd gotten my hair permed. She wouldn't believe it was natural.

I slipped the purse over my shoulders so the thin strap went across my chest. It blended with the dress well enough that it looked almost as good with it as without. But the purse rode at my ribs, just a little lower than my shoulder holster. I tried drawing the gun a couple of times, and it wasn't too bad. Not as good as a holster, but what was? I slipped the jacket on and checked myself in the mirror for the umpteenth time. Neither the knives nor the gun showed. Great. I slipped my cross on last. I made sure the cross was inside the dress, then put a small piece of masking tape over it. This way I kept my cross, but it didn't spill out of my clothes and glow at Jean-Claude. I picked up the brush again and put it down without using it.

I was stalling. It wasn't just the assassin I was afraid of. I was dreading the moment Richard and Jean-Claude met tonight. I wasn't sure how they were going to react, and I wasn't up to an emotional confrontation. I rarely was.

I took a deep breath and went for the door. Richard followed me. It was his house. I couldn't ask him to hide in the bedroom.

Jean-Claude stood by the television, peering at the shelves of videos, as if studying the titles. He was tall and slender, though not as tall as Richard. He wore black pants and a short black jacket, cut just at the waist like my own. He

had on high, leather boots that covered nearly his entire leg, the soft leather tops were held in place by black straps with small silver buckles. His black hair spilled over his shoulders, inches longer than when I first met him.

He turned at last, as if he hadn't known we were standing there. I made a small involuntary gasp as he faced me. His shirt was red, a pure, clear crimson that blazed inside his open jacket. The collar was high, held in place by three antique jet beads. The shirt gaped open below the collar, showing a large oval of his chest. The cross-shaped burn scar on his chest showed in the circle of red cloth as if it were framed for viewing. The circle of bare skin ended just above the black pants, where the shirt was safely tucked away.

The shirt looked splendid against his pale skin, the black wavy hair, his midnight blue eyes. I closed my gaping mouth, and said, "Spiffy, very spiffy."

He smiled. "Ah, *ma petite*, always the perfect thing to say." He glided across the carpet in his nifty boots, and I found myself wanting him to take the jacket off. I wanted to see his hair spill over that shirt, black over red. I knew it would look wonderful.

Richard came up behind me. He didn't touch me, but I could feel him standing there. A warm, unhappy presence at my back. I couldn't blame him. Jean-Claude looked like an advertisement for Wet Dreams "R" Us. I couldn't blame anyone for being jealous.

Jean-Claude stood in front of me, close enough that I could have reached out and touched him. I stood between the two of them, and the symbolism wasn't lost on any of us.

"Where's Edward?" I managed to ask. My voice sounded almost normal. Good for me.

"He is checking the car. I believe for incendiary devices," Jean-Claude said with a small smile.

My stomach clenched tight. Someone really wanted me dead by midnight tonight. Edward was sweeping the car for bombs. Even for me, it didn't seem quite real.

"*Ma petite*, are you well?" Jean-Claude took my hand in his. "Your hand is cold."

"Nice complaint, coming from you," Richard said.

Jean-Claude looked over my shoulder at Richard. "It was not a complaint but an observation."

His hand was warm, and I knew that he had stolen that warmth from someone. Oh, they'd been willing enough. There were always people willing to donate to the Master of the City. But still, he was a blood sucking corpse, no matter what he looked like. Staring up at him, I realized part of me didn't buy that anymore. Or maybe I just didn't care anymore. Damn.

He raised my hand slowly to his lips, eyes watching not me but Richard. I drew my hand out of his. He looked at me. "If you want to kiss my hand, fine, but don't do it just to get on Richard's nerves."

"My apologies, *ma petite*. You are quite right." He looked past me to Richard. "My apologies to you as well, Monsieur Zeeman. We are in a . . . ticklish position. It would be childish to make it worse with game playing."

I didn't have to see Richard's face to know he was frowning.

Edward came in and saved us. We could all shut up and leave. Hopefully.

"The car's clean," he said.

"Glad to hear it," I said.

Edward was dressed for the evening. A brown leather coat hung to his ankles and moved like something alive as he came into the room. The coat hung strangely heavy in places. He'd shown me some of his toys that were positioned here and there. I knew there was a garotte hidden in the stiff white collar of his shirt. A garotte was a little too up-and-close even for me.

His eyes flicked to the two men in my life, but all he said was, "I'll follow the limo. Don't look around for me tonight, Anita. I'll be there, but we don't want the hitter alerted to the fact that you've got a bodyguard."

"A second bodyguard," Jean-Claude said. "Your, how do you say, hitter will know I will be by her side."

Edward nodded. "Yeah, if they hit the limo, you'll be there. They'll have to plan on taking you out, too, which means it's got to be serious firepower."

"I am both a deterrent and an invitation to up the stakes, is that it?" Jean-Claude asked.

Edward looked at him like the vampire had finally done something interesting. Edward didn't meet his eyes though. I was the only human I knew that could meet the Master's eyes and not be bespelled. Being a necromancer had its uses. "Exactly." He said it like he hadn't expected the vampire to grasp the situation. But if there was one thing Jean-Claude was good at, it was surviving.

"Shall we go then, *ma petite*? The party awaits us." He made a sweeping motion with his arms, directing me towards the door but not taking my hand. He glanced at Richard, then at me. He was behaving himself terribly well. Jean-Claude was a world-class pain in the ass. It wasn't like him to be a good boy.

I glanced at Richard. "Go on. If we kiss good-bye, it'll smear your lipstick again."

"You are wearing quite enough of her lipstick already, Richard," Jean-Claude said. For the first time tonight, I heard that warm edge of jealousy.

Richard took two steps forward, and the tension level in the room soared. "I could kiss her good night again, if that would make you happy."

"Stop it, both of you," I said.

"By all means," Jean-Claude said. "She is mine for the rest of the evening. I can afford to be generous."

Richard's hands balled into fists. The first trickle of power oozed through the room.

"I'm leaving now." I made for the door and didn't look back. Jean-Claude caught up with me before I reached the door. He reached for the doorknob first, and then released it, letting me get it.

"I do forget your penchant for doors," he said.

"I don't," Richard said softly.

I turned and looked at him standing there in his jeans, his T-shirt molded to the muscles of his arms and chest. He was still barefoot, his hair a wavy mass around his face. If I'd been staying here, we could have cuddled on the couch in front of one of his favorite movies. We were beginning to have our favorite movies, songs, sayings that were ours. Maybe a moonlight walk. His night vision was almost as good as my own. Maybe later we could finish what we'd started before the meeting.

Jean-Claude slid his fingers through mine, drawing my attention to him. I stared up into those blue, blue eyes like a sky before a storm, or seawater where the rocks lie deep and cold. I could touch those three black buttons and see if they were really antique beads. My gaze traveled downward to the pale glimpse of his chest. I knew that the cross-shaped burn scar was a rough slickness to the touch. Looking at him made my chest tight. He was so beautiful. Would my body always feel the pull of him, like a sunflower turning towards the light? Maybe. But standing there holding his hand, I realized it wasn't enough.

Jean-Claude and I could have had a glorious affair, but I could see spending my life with Richard. Was love enough? Even if Richard killed for self-preservation, could he really accept my body count? Could I accept his beast, or would I be as horrified by it as he was himself? Jean-Claude accepted me lock, stock, and gun. But I didn't accept him. Just because we both looked at the world through dark glasses, didn't mean I liked it.

I sighed, and it wasn't a happy sound. If this was the last time I ever saw Richard, I should have jumped his body and given him a kiss he would never forget, but I couldn't do it. Holding Jean-Claude's hand, I couldn't do it. It would have been cruel to all of us.

"Bye, Richard," I said.

"Be careful," he said. He sounded so alone.

"Louie and you are going to the movies tonight, right?" I asked.

He nodded. "He should be here soon."

"Good." I opened my mouth to say more, but didn't. There was nothing to say. I was going with Jean-Claude. Nothing I said would change that.

"I'll wait up for you," Richard said.

"I wish you wouldn't."

"I know."

I left, walking a little too fast out to the waiting limo. It was white. "Well, isn't this shiny and bright," I said.

"I thought black looked too much like a hearse," Jean-Claude said.

Edward had come out also. He closed the door behind us. "I'll be there when you need me, Anita."

I met his eyes. "I know you will."

He gave the briefest of smiles. "But just in case, watch your back like a son of a bitch."

I smiled. "Don't I always?"

He glanced at the vampire standing by the open limo door. "Not as well as I thought you did." Edward walked into the darkness towards his waiting car

before I could think of a reply. It was just as well. He was right. The monsters had finally gotten me. Seducing me was almost as good as killing me, and nearly as crippling.

Chapter 14

The name of the club, Danse Macabre, blazed in red neon letters nearly eight feet high. The letters were curved and flowed at an angle like some giant hand had just finished writing them. The club was housed in an old brewery warehouse. The place had stood on the Riverfront, boarded up and abandoned for years. It had been the only eyesore in a line of chic restaurants, dance clubs, and bars. Most of them were owned by vampires. The Riverfront was also known as The District, or Blood Square, though not in polite vampire company. For some reason, the nickname bugged them. Who knew why?

The crowd had spilled out from the sidewalk into the street, until the limo was stopped by the sheer weight of people. It was so bad that I spotted a uniformed cop trying to ease the people back enough for the cars to get through. I looked through the dark tinted windows at the press of people. Was the assassin out there? Was one of those well-dressed, smiling people waiting to kill me? I opened my purse and slipped the Seecamp out.

Jean-Claude eyed the little gun. "Nervous, *ma petite*?"

"Yes," I said.

He looked at me, head to one side. "Yes, you are nervous. Why does one human assassin unnerve you so much more than all the preternatural creatures you have faced?"

"Everyone else who's wanted to kill me, it was personal. I understand personal. Whoever this is wants to kill me because it's business. Just business."

"But why is that more frightening to you? You will be just as dead, regardless of your assailant's motives."

"Thanks a lot," I said.

He touched my hand, as it gripped the gun. "I am trying to understand, *ma petite*, that is all."

"I don't know exactly why it bothers me. It just does," I said. "I like to put a face on my enemies. If someone kills you, it shouldn't be only for money."

"So killing for hire offends your moral sensibilities?" he asked. His voice was very bland, too bland, as if he were laughing silently to himself.

"Yes, dammit, it does."

"Yet you are friends with Edward."

"I never said I was consistent, Jean-Claude."

"You are one of the most consistent people I have ever known, *ma petite*."

"How consistent can I be if I'm dating two men?"

"Do you think being unable to choose between us makes you frivolous?" He leaned towards me as he said it, hand smoothing up the sleeve of my jacket.

The trouble was I had almost chosen. I almost told him, but I didn't. First, I wasn't a hundred percent sure. Second, Jean-Claude had blackmailed me into dating him. Date him or he'd kill Richard. He wanted a chance to woo me away from Richard. Which meant really dating him. As he put it, "If you allow Richard to kiss you, but not me, it is not fair." Supposedly, if I chose Richard, Jean-Claude would merely step aside. I think he was egotist enough to mean it. The Master of the City couldn't imagine anyone not being won over, eventually. Not if you had access to his lovely body. He kept offering it. I kept refusing. If I chose Richard over him, would he really bow out gracefully, or would he take us all down in a bloodbath?

I stared into his deep blue eyes and didn't know. I'd known him for years. Dated him for months. But he was still a mystery to me. I just didn't know what he would do. I wasn't willing to push that button, not yet.

"What are you thinking about so seriously, *ma petite*? Do not say it is the assassin. I would not believe you."

I didn't know what to say, so I just shook my head.

His hand slid over my shoulders until I was resting in the curve of his arm. The feel of his body that close to mine made my stomach flutter. He bent forward as if to kiss me, and I stopped him, the back of my left hand against his chest. Since I was now touching bare skin, I wasn't sure this helped.

"You behaved yourself the entire drive up here. What gives now?" I asked.

"I am trying to comfort you, *ma petite*."

"Yeah, right," I said.

He wrapped his other arm around my waist, turning my upper body against him. The gun was still in my hand, but it began to seem awkward. I wasn't going to use it on Jean-Claude, and the assassin wasn't coming through the locked doors. That much violence in a crowd this large with cops directing traffic seemed a little bold even for a professional.

I slid my arm across his back, the gun still in my hand. "If you kiss me, I'll have to redo my lipstick."

He leaned his face close enough to kiss, lips so close to mine he could have breathed me in. He whispered just above my mouth. "We mustn't have that." He kissed my cheek, running his lips down the edge of my jaw.

I touched his face with the edge of the gun, moving his face where I could see it. His eyes had gone drowning blue. "No necking," I said. I meant that. I'd only volunteered once for blood donation and that was when he was dying. I did not share bodily fluids with the Master of the City.

He rubbed his cheek against the gun. "I had something a bit lower in mind."

He ducked his head to my collarbone, licking down my skin. For a second I wondered how low he was planning on going, then I pushed him off of me.

"I don't think so," I said, half-laughing.

"Do you feel better now, *ma petite*?"

I stared at him for a heartbeat, then laughed. I did. "You are a devious son of a bitch, did you know that?"

"I've been told that before," he said, smiling.

The police had pushed the crowd back, and the limo moved forward. "You did that just to cheer me up." I sounded almost accusatory.

He widened his eyes. "Would I do such a thing?"

I stared at him and felt the smile slide from my face. I really looked at him for a moment, not just as the world's greatest lust object, but as him, Jean-Claude. The Master of the City was worried about my feelings. I shook my head. Was he becoming nicer, or was I just fooling myself?

"Why so solemn, *ma petite*?"

I shook my head. "The usual, trying to figure out how sincere you are."

His smile widened. "I am always sincere, *ma petite*, even when I lie."

"Which is what makes you so good at it," I said.

He nodded his head once, almost a bow. "Exactly."

He glanced ahead of us. "We are about to embark on a sea of media, *ma petite*. If you could put the gun up? I think the press would find it a bit much."

"Press?" I said. "You mean local media?"

"Local, yes."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"When the door opens, take my arm and smile, please, *ma petite*."

I frowned at him. "What is about to happen?"

"You are about to be introduced to the world."

"Jean-Claude, what are you up to?"

"This is not my doing, *ma petite*. I do not like the limelight quite this much. The vampire council has chosen me to be their representative to the media."

"I know you had to come out of the casket to the local vampires after you won your last challenge, but isn't it dangerous? I mean you've been pretending to be some mysterious master's number-one flunkie. It's kept you safe from outside challengers."

"Most masters use a stalking horse, *ma petite*. It cuts down on challenges and human assassins."

"I know all that, so why are you going public?"

"The council believes that skulking in the shadows gives ammunition to our detractors. Those of us who would make good media fodder have been ordered into the light, as it were."

I stared at him. "How into the light?"

"Put the gun away, *ma petite*. The doorman will open the door and there will be cameras." I glared at him, but I slid the Seecamp into my purse.

"What have you gotten me into, Jean-Claude?"

"Smile, *ma petite*, or at least do not frown." The door opened before I could say anything else. A man in a tux held the door. The flash of lightbulbs was blinding, and I knew it had to bother his eyes more than mine. He was smiling as he held a hand back for me. If he could stare that much light in the face without blinking, I could be gracious. We could always fight later.

I stepped out of the limo and was glad I was holding his hand. Flashbulbs were everywhere like tiny suns blasting off. The crowd surged forward, microphones shoved at us like knives. If he hadn't been holding my hand tight, I'd have crawled back into the limo. I moved closer to him, just to be able to keep my feet. Where the hell was crowd control?

A microphone nearly touched my face. A woman's voice yelled from far too close, "Is he good in bed? Or would that be coffin?"

"What?" I said.

"Is he good in bed?" There was a moment of near silence, while everyone waited for my answer. Before I could open my mouth and say something scathing, Jean-Claude moved in, graceful as always.

"We do not kiss and tell, do we, *ma petite*?" His French accent was the thickest I'd ever heard it.

"*Ma petite*—is that your pet name for her?" a man's voice.

"*Oui*," he said.

I looked up at him, and he leaned down as if to kiss my cheek. He whispered, "Glare at me later, *ma petite*. There are cameras everywhere."

I wanted to say that I didn't give a damn, but I did. I mean, I think I did. I felt like a rabbit caught in headlights. If the assassin had jumped out with a gun at that moment, I'd have stood there and let him shoot me. That thought, more than anything else, brought me back to myself, helped me to think again. I started trying to see past the lights, the microphones, a few tape recorders, and video cameras. I caught at least two major network emblems on the cameras. Shit.

Jean-Claude was fielding questions like a pro, smiling, gracious, the perfect vampire cover boy. I smiled and leaned into him, standing on tiptoe, putting my lips so close to his ear that I could have licked it, but I was hoping the microphones wouldn't pick up what I was saying. I was sure it looked coy and girlish as hell, but hey, nothing was perfect. I whispered, "Get me out of here now, or I pull the gun and clear a path for myself."

He laughed, and it flowed down my skin like fur, warm, and ticklish, and vaguely obscene. The reporters oohed and aahed. I wondered if Jean-Claude's laugh worked off a recorder, or on video. That was a frightening thought.

"Oh, *ma petite*, you naughty girl."

I whispered, "Don't ever call me that again."

"My apologies." He smiled, waved, and began escorting me through the press of reporters. Two vampire doormen had come out to help clear our path. They were both large and muscular, and neither of them had been dead long. They looked rosy-cheeked and almost alive. They'd fed on someone tonight. But then, so had Jean-Claude. It was getting harder and harder for me to throw stones at the monsters.

The door opened, and we slipped inside. The silence was wonderful. I turned on him. "How dare you drag me into that kind of media coverage."

"It does not endanger you, *ma petite*."

"Had it occurred to you that if I chose Richard over you, that I might not want everybody in the world to know I was dating a vampire?"

He gave a slight smile. "Good enough to date, but not good enough to go public with?"

"We've gone to everything from the symphony to the ballet together. I'm not ashamed of you."

"Really?" The smile was gone, replaced by something else, not anger exactly, but close. "Then why are you angry, *ma petite*?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it. Truth was that I would rather not have gone quite this public, because I guess I didn't really believe I could choose Jean-Claude. He was a vampire, a dead man. In that one moment I realized how prejudiced I still was. He was good enough to date. Good enough to hold hands with, and maybe a bit more. But there was a limit. Always a point where I knew I'd say stop because he was a corpse. A beautiful corpse, but a vampire is a vampire. You couldn't really fall in love with one. You couldn't have sex with one. No way. I'd broken Jean-Claude's one rule for dating both of the boys. I'd never really given Jean-Claude the same chance that I'd given Richard. And now, with national television coverage, the bat was out of the bag. It embarrassed me that anyone would think I might actually date him. That I might actually care for a walking dead man.

The anger washed away in the knowledge that I was a hypocrite. I don't know how much of it showed on my face, but Jean-Claude cocked his head to one side. "Thoughts are flying across your face, *ma petite*, but what thoughts?"

I stared up at him. "I think I owe you an apology."

His eyes widened. "Then this is a truly historic occasion. What are you apologizing for?"

I wasn't sure how to put it into words. "You're right; I'm wrong."

He put his fingers to his chest, face wide with mock surprise. "You admit that you have treated me like some guilty secret, hidden away. Exiled from your true feelings while you cuddle with Richard and his living flesh."

I frowned at him. "Enough already. See if I ever give you another apology for anything."

"A dance would suffice," he said.

"I don't dance. You know that."

"This is the grand opening of my dance club, *ma petite*. You are my date. Are you truly going to deny me even one dance?"

Put that way it sounded petty. "One dance."

He smiled, wicked, enticing. The smile that the serpent must have given Eve. "I think we will dance well together, *ma petite*."

"I doubt it."

"I think we would do many things well together."

"Give you one dance and you want the whole package. Pushy bastard."

He gave a small bow, smiling, eyes shining.

A female vamp strode towards us. She was inches taller than Jean-Claude, which made her at least six feet tall. She was blond and blue-eyed, and if she'd looked any more Nordic, she'd have been a poster girl for the master race. She was wearing a violet blue body suit with strategic holes cut out. The body that showed through was broad-shouldered, muscular, and still managed to be full-

breasted. Leather boots in the exact same color rode her long, muscular legs all the way up to her thighs.

"Anita Blake, this is Liv."

"Let me guess," I said. "Jean-Claude chose the outfit."

Liv looked at me from her considerable height as if simply being tall made her intimidating. When I didn't flinch, she smiled. "He is the boss."

I stared up at her. I almost asked why. I could feel her age pressing down on me like a weight. She was six hundred years old. Twice Jean-Claude's age or more. So why wasn't she the boss? I could feel the answer along my skin like a cool wind. Not enough power. She wasn't a master vampire, and no amount of age would change that.

"What are you staring at?" she asked. She looked me right in the eyes and shook her head. "She really is immune to our gaze."

"To your gaze," I said.

She put her hands on her hips. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you don't have enough juice to do me," I said.

She took a step forward. "How about I just pick you up and squeeze some juice out of you?"

Here was where not having a gun in a holster was going to get me killed. I could get one of the knives out, but unless I was willing for her to come very close, it wouldn't help. I could slip my hand in the purse; most people didn't expect a gun to come out of a purse so small. Of course, if Liv caught me going for the gun, she could get to me before I could draw it. With a holster I'd have tried it. From a purse hanging from a strap, I didn't think so. Vampires are just that fast.

"How many vampire kills do you have now, Anita?" Jean-Claude asked.

The question surprised me, and my answer surprised me more. "Over twenty legal kills."

"How many kills altogether, *ma petite*?"

"I don't know," I said. It had to be over thirty now, but truthfully, I didn't remember anymore. I didn't know how many lives I'd taken. A bad sign, that.

"Liv is mine, *ma petite*. You may speak freely in front of her."

I shook my head. "Never admit to murder in front of strangers, Jean-Claude. Just a rule."

Liv looked at me. She didn't seem to like what she saw. "So this is the Executioner." She shook her head. "She's a little on the small side, isn't she?" She stalked around me like I was a horse for sale. When she was at my back, I opened the purse. By the time she came around again, I had the gun out, behind the purse, unobtrusive, though in a pinch I guess I could have shot through the purse. But why, if I didn't have to?

Liv shook her head. "She's pretty, but she's not very impressive." She stood behind Jean-Claude, running her strong hands over his shoulders, his arms. She ended with her hands around his waist, fingers kneading his body.

I was getting very tired of Liv.

"I can do things that no human can do for you, Jean-Claude."

"You are being rude to Anita. I will not remind you of it again." There was a cold, even threat in his voice.

Liv unwrapped herself from him and stood between us, hands on hips. "The great Jean-Claude driven to celibacy by a human. People are laughing behind your back."

"Celibacy?" I asked.

Jean-Claude glanced at me, then sighed. "Until you give up your nunnish ways, *ma petite*, I am playing monk."

My eyes widened. I couldn't help it. I knew that Richard and I had each had one lover and chosen celibacy afterwards. But I'd never thought about Jean-Claude and what he might be doing to satisfy his needs. Abstinence would not have been one of my choices for him.

"You seem surprised, *ma petite*."

"I guess anyone who exudes sex the way you do . . . I just never thought about it."

"Yet if you discovered that I had been sleeping with another female, alive or dead, while we were dating, what would you do?"

"Drop you in a hot minute."

"Exactly."

Liv laughed, a loud, unattractive bray of sound. "Even your human doesn't believe you."

Jean-Claude turned to her, his eyes a blaze of sapphire flame. "You say they laugh behind my back."

She nodded, still laughing.

"But only you are laughing to my face."

Her laughter died abruptly like a turned switch. She stared at him.

"A little more submissiveness, Liv, or is this a challenge to my authority?"

She looked startled. "No, I mean . . . I never meant . . ."

He just looked at her. "Then you had best ask my forgiveness, had you not?"

She dropped to one knee. She didn't look afraid, more as if she'd done some huge social gaffe and now had to make amends. "I beg your forgiveness, Master. I forgot myself."

"Yes, you did, Liv. Do not make it a habit."

Liv got to her feet, all smiles, all forgiven. Just like that. The political maneuvering was thick in the air. "It's only that she doesn't look nearly as dangerous as you painted her."

"Anita," Jean-Claude said, "show her what you have in your hand."

I moved the purse to one side, flashing the gun.

"I could have your throat in my hands before you could point that toy," Liv said.

"No," I said, "you couldn't."

"Is that a challenge?" she asked.

"Six hundred years of life, plus or minus a decade," I said. "Don't throw it away for a little grandstanding."

"How did you know my age?"

I smiled. "I am really not in the mood to bluff tonight, Liv. Don't try me."

She stared at me, her extraordinary eyes narrowing. "You are a necromancer, not just a corpse-raiser. I can feel you inside my head, almost like another vampire." She looked at Jean-Claude. "Why couldn't I feel her before?"

"Her power flares when she feels threatened," he said.

This was news to me. To my knowledge, I wasn't using any power right now. But I didn't say it out loud. Now was not the time to ask stupid questions or even smart ones.

Liv stepped to one side, almost as if she was afraid. "We're opening in an hour. I've got work to do." She moved towards the door, never taking her eyes from me.

I watched her move, happy with her reaction but not understanding it.

"Come, Anita," Jean-Claude said, "I want to show you my club."

I let him lead me into the main area of the club. They had gutted the warehouse until it rose three stories straight up with railings around each floor. The main dance floor was huge, shining and slick, gleaming in the subdued light. Track lighting was hidden away so it was hard to tell where the light was coming from.

Things hung from the ceiling. At first glance I thought they were bodies, but they were mannequins, life-size rubber dolls, crash-test dummies. Some were naked, one wrapped in cellophane, some in black leather or vinyl. One rubber doll wore a metal bikini. They were hung from chains at different levels. It was a mobile.

"That's different," I said.

"A promising new artist did it especially for the club."

I shook my head. "It does make a statement." I slipped the gun back into my purse but kept the purse open. That way I was able to get to the gun surprisingly quickly. Besides, I couldn't walk around all night with a loaded gun in my hand. Eventually, your hand starts cramping, no matter how small the gun is.

Jean-Claude glided across the dance floor, and I followed. "Liv was afraid of me. Why?"

He turned gracefully, smiling. "You are the Executioner."

I shook my head. "She said she could feel me in her head like another vamp. What did she mean?"

He sighed. "You are a necromancer, *ma petite*, and your power grows with use."

"Why would that scare a six-hundred-year-old vampire?"

"You are relentless, *ma petite*."

"It's one of my best things."

"If I answer your question, will you enjoy my club with me, be my date until the assassin shows up?"

"Thanks for reminding me."

"You had not forgotten."

"No, I hadn't. So, yeah, answer my question and I'll play date."

"Play?"

"Stop stalling and answer the question." I thought of one other question I wanted answered. "Two questions."

He raised his eyebrows, but nodded. "Vampires are given powers in folklore and popular myth that we do not possess: controlling weather, shapeshifting into animals. Necromancers are supposedly able to control all types of undead."

"Control? You don't mean just zombies, do you?"

"No, *ma petite*."

"So Liv's afraid I'll take her over?"

"Something like that."

"But that's crazy. I can't order vampires around." The moment I said it, I wished I hadn't. It wasn't true. I had raised a vampire once. Once. Once had been enough.

Something must have shown on my face, because Jean-Claude touched my cheek.

"What is it, *ma petite*? What fills your eyes with such . . . horror?"

I opened my mouth and lied. "If I could order vampires around, Serephina wouldn't have cleaned my clock two months ago."

His face softened. "She is dead, *ma petite*. Well and truly dead. You saw to that." He leaned forward and kissed my forehead. His lips were silken soft. He brushed his lips across my forehead, moving his body in closer, comforting me.

It made me feel guilty as hell. I did still have nightmares about Serephina, that much was true. Just saying her name out loud made my stomach clench. Of all the vampires I'd faced, she'd come the closest to getting me. Not killing me, that would happen sooner or later. No, she had nearly made me one of them. Nearly made me want to be one of them. She had offered me something more precious than sex or power. She'd offered me peace. It had been a lie, but as lies go, it had been a good one.

Why not tell Jean-Claude the truth? Well, it was none of his damn business. Frankly, what I'd done frightened me. I didn't want to deal with it. Didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to know what the philosophical ramifications of raising a vampire during daylight hours might be. I was very good at ignoring things I didn't want to deal with.

"*Ma petite*, you are trembling." He pushed me back from him to search my face.

I shook my head. "There's an assassin out to kill me, and you ask why I'm trembling."

"I know you too well, *ma petite*. That is not why you tremble."

"I don't like you using me like some kind of bogeyman for vampires. I'm not that scary."

"No, but I have encouraged the illusion."

I pushed away from him. "You mean, you've been telling other vamps that I could control vampires?"

"A hint or two." He smiled, and in that one simple expression, you just knew he was thinking wicked thoughts.

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"I have taken a lesson from our diplomatic Richard. He has won over many wolves by simply promising to treat them well, not to force them to do things they do not want to do."

"So?" I said.

"I have invited vampires to join my flock with the promise not of fear and intimidation but of safety."

"Like Liv?" He nodded.

"How do you make sure they don't stage a palace revolt?" I asked.

"There are ways."

"Like threatening them with a necromancer," I said.

He smiled. "Indeed."

"Not everyone will believe it."

"I know I don't," a voice said.

Chapter 15

I turned to find another new vampire. He was tall and slender with skin the color of clean white sheets, but sheets didn't have muscle moving underneath, sheets didn't glide down the steps and pad godlike across a room. His hair fell past his shoulders, a red so pure it was nearly the color of blood. The color screamed against his paleness. He was wearing a black frock coat like something out of the 1700s, but his chest gleamed lean and naked inside it. The heavy cloth was nearly covered in thick embroidery, a green so vivid it gleamed. The embroidery matched his eyes. Green as a cat's eyes, green as an emerald. From the waist down, he was wearing green lycra exercise pants that left little to the imagination. A sash was tied at his waist like a pirate belt, black with green fringe. Knee-high black boots completed the outfit.

I thought I knew all the bloodsuckers in town, but here were two new ones in less than two minutes. "How many new vampires are in the city?" I asked.

"A few," Jean-Claude said. "This is Damian. Damian, this is Anita."

"I feel silly in this outfit," he said.

"But you look splendid, doesn't he, *ma petite*?"

I nodded. "Splendid is one way of putting it."

Jean-Claude walked around the new vampire, flicking imaginary specks of lint from the coat. "Don't you approve, Anita?"

I sighed. "It's just . . ." I shrugged. "Why do you make everyone around you dress like they stepped out of a sexual fantasy with a high costume budget?"

He laughed, and the sound wrapped around me, tugged at things lower than he'd ever gotten to touch. "Stop that," I said.

"You enjoy it, *ma petite*."

"Maybe, but stop it anyway."

"Jean-Claude has always had a killer fashion sense," Damian said, "and sex was always one of his favorite pastimes, wasn't it?" There was something about the way he said that last that made it not a compliment.

Jean-Claude faced him. "And yet, for all my foppish ways, here you are, in my lands, seeking my protection."

The pupils in Damian's eyes were swallowed by a rush of green fire.

"Thank you so much for reminding me."

"Remember who is master here, Damian, or you will be banished. The council themselves interceded with your old master, rescued you from her. She did not want to give you up. I spoke for you. I ransomed you because I remember what it was like to be trapped. To be forced to do things you didn't want to do. To be used and tormented."

Damian stood a little straighter but didn't look away. "You've made your point. I am . . . grateful to be here." He looked away, then to the floor, and a shudder ran through him. "I am glad to be free of her." When he looked back up, his eyes had returned to normal. He managed a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Wearing a few costumes is not the worst thing I've ever done."

There was a sorrow to his voice that made me want to ask Jean-Claude to let him change into a pair of pants, but I didn't. Jean-Claude was walking a very fine line here. Damian was over five hundred years old. He wasn't a master, but that was still a hell of a lot of power. Jean-Claude might be able to handle Liv and Damian, but if there were more, Master of the City or not, he wasn't up to the job. Which meant these little dominance games were necessary. The others couldn't be allowed to forget who was Master, because once they did, he was done for. If he'd asked for my vote before he put out the invitations, I'd have said no.

A door at the far side of the room opened. It was a black door in the black walls, and it seemed almost magical as a woman stepped out. She was about my own height, with wavy, waist-length brown hair that foamed over the shoulders of her ankle-length black coat. She was wearing a pair of hot turquoise exercise pants with a matching sports bra. Crisscrossing straps went from pants to the bra, emphasizing her small waist. Black vinyl boots reached to her knees, with a small projection that covered the knees. She walked down the steps and strode across the floor with a free-swinging walk that was almost a run. She entered the room like it was her room, or maybe she was her own room, comfortable wherever she went.

She stopped by us, smiling, pleasant, hazel eyes greener because of the strip of turquoise around her neck. "What do you think?"

"You look lovely, Cassandra," Jean-Claude said.

"You look better in yours than I do in mine," Damian said.

"That's a matter of opinion," I said.

The woman looked at me. Her eyes flicked down the length of Damian's body. She met my eyes, and we both laughed.

Damian looked puzzled. Jean-Claude looked at me. "Share your humor with us, *ma petite*, please."

I met Cassandra's eyes again, swallowed another laugh, and shook my head. I took a few deep breaths. When I was pretty sure I could speak without laughing, I said, "Girl humor, you wouldn't understand."

"Very diplomatic," Cassandra said. "I'm impressed."

"If you knew how hard diplomacy comes to *ma petite*, you would be even more impressed," Jean-Claude said. He had gotten the joke, as if there'd been any doubt.

Damian was frowning at us, still puzzled. It was just as well.

Jean-Claude looked from Cassandra to me and back again. "Do you two know each other?"

We shook our heads in unison.

"Cassandra, Anita. My newest wolf, meet the light of my life. Cassandra is one of your guards for the night."

"You're very good. I wouldn't have picked up on it."

Her smile widened. "Richard said you didn't know he was a werewolf at first, either."

Instantly, a little spark of jealousy flared. Of course, if she were a werewolf and with Jean-Claude, then she was one of Richard's followers. "You weren't at the meeting."

"Jean-Claude needed me here. He couldn't do without both Jason and me."

I looked at Jean-Claude. I knew what Jason did for him. He bled Jason when he woke, and sucking blood was damn close to sex for a vampire. "Really," I said.

"Don't worry, *ma petite*. Cassandra won't share blood with me, either. She and Richard have many similarities. I believe that Richard chose her for me because she bears a certain resemblance to you, not just physically, but a certain *je ne sais quoi*."

"*Je ne sais quoi* is French for nothing," I said.

"It means an indefinable something that is difficult to put into words, *ma petite*. A quality that transcends vocabulary."

"He does talk pretty, doesn't he?" Cassandra said.

"He has his moments," I said. "You can't be draining Jason every morning. Even a werewolf needs a little recoup time."

"Stephen is a willing donor."

"Why wasn't Stephen with you last night?" I asked.

"Is that an accusation?" Jean-Claude asked.

"Just answer the question."

"He had requested an evening off to spend time with his brother. Who am I to stand in the way of familial obligations?" He stared at me while he answered like he wasn't completely happy with the conversation. Tough. Neither was I.

Stephen's own brother had betrayed him, acted as bait for the trap. Damn. "Where is Stephen?"

"He's in the back room," Cassandra said. "He helped me get into this thing. I couldn't reach all the straps." She dropped the coat off her shoulders and turned so I could see her back. The straps formed a tight web, most of them in places you couldn't have fastened without help. She slipped the coat back on and turned, looking at me. "You're taking this alpha female thing seriously, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "I'm serious about Stephen's safety."

Cassandra nodded, face solemn, thoughtful. "I like that. Sometimes alpha female is just a token position. Just a word for the pack leader's lover. Most of them aren't as active as Raina." She made a face when she said the name, like she'd tasted something bitter.

Jean-Claude interrupted. "I will leave you two girls to your conversation. I have things to attend to before the club opens." He kissed the back of my hand and was gone, leaving us standing in the middle of the club, alone. Damian had gone at his heels as if he'd been asked.

For a moment, I was nervous. Cassandra and I were very much in the open. "Let's go over there." I motioned to the steps that led to the next level. We sat down on them, me having to smooth my skirts down. Even that didn't help. I had to keep my feet and knees together or I would have flashed the room. Sigh.

"Let me guess," I said. "Raina wanted you for her movies."

"She wants everyone that is remotely attractive for her movies. Though sometimes sharing her bed for a tryout can get you out of it. She offered me to Gabriel for my tryout. That damn leopard is not even a pack member."

"If he were, she'd make him pack leader," I said.

Cassandra shook her head. "Gabriel couldn't defeat Marcus, let alone Richard. He's the leader of the wereleopards only because there's no one stronger. He's an alpha, but he's flawed. It makes him weak."

"Sexual perversion doesn't always mean you'll lose a fight," I said.

"It's not that," Cassandra said. "He's into dangerous sex. Lycanthropes can take a lot of damage." She shivered. "The things he wanted to do to me." She looked at me, and the fear showed in her eyes. "He says you nearly gutted him once while he had you pinned to the ground."

I looked away. "Yeah."

Cassandra touched my arm, and there was no sense of power. She was every bit as good as Richard at hiding what she was. She made Sylvie look like an amateur. The touch made me turn back to her. "He's hot for you, Anita. I didn't tell Richard because, well, I'm new in the pack. Got into town about two weeks ago. I was afraid that if I told him what Gabriel had said about you, he might do something stupid. But meeting you, maybe telling you is enough. You can decide whether Richard needs to know."

She looked so serious. It scared me. "What did Gabriel say?"

Cassandra took a deep breath. "He has a fantasy about you. He wants to arm you with knives and let you try to kill him, on film, while he rapes you."

I stared at her. I wanted to say, you're kidding, but I knew she wasn't. Gabriel was just that twisted. "How does the movie end in his version?"

"With you dead," she said.

"While he rapes me?" I said.

She nodded.

I hugged myself, running my hands down my arms, tensing my back, feeling the weapons I was carrying. I was armed. I was safe, but shit.

She touched my shoulder. "You all right?"

"Well, isn't this touching," a man's voice on the stairs behind us.

Cassandra was on her feet, facing it in an instant. I slid my hand into the open purse and drew the Seecamp out. The gun caught a bit on the cloth lining and cost me a couple of seconds, but it was out and ready. I felt better. I'd twisted on the steps, coming up on one knee, not bothering to stand. Sometimes, standing made you a better target.

Sabin stood about five steps above us. Frightfully close for neither of us to have sensed him. He was dressed as I'd seen him in the office; hooded cloak covering him from head to toe. I could see under the cloak now. There were no feet. He was floating above the step. "I wish you could see the look on your face, Ms. Blake."

I swallowed my pulse back into my mouth and said, "I didn't know you'd be here tonight, Sabin."

Cassandra took a step towards him, a soft growl oozing from her throat. "I don't know you," she said.

"Calm yourself, wolf. I am Jean-Claude's guest, aren't I, Ms. Blake?"

"Yeah," I said. "He's a guest." I stopped pointing the gun at him, but I didn't put it up. He was awfully damn good to have snuck up on me and a werewolf.

"You know him?" Cassandra asked. She was still standing above me, blocking the vampire's path. She was taking this bodyguard thing very seriously.

"I've met him."

"He safe?"

"No," I said, "but he's not here to hurt me."

"Who is he here to hurt?" Cassandra asked. She still hadn't given any ground.

Sabin eased down the steps, cloak billowing around him in an odd motion, like the sleeve of an amputee. "I have come to watch the night's entertainment, nothing more."

Cassandra backed up to stand a step ahead of me. I stood but still kept the gun out. I was jumpier than normal. I was also remembering how Sabin had bled me from a distance with his laughter. Keeping a gun handy seemed like a good idea.

"Where's Dominic?"

"He's here somewhere." His hood was a cup of darkness, smooth and empty, but I knew he was watching me. I felt his gaze like a weight.

He stayed on the step just above Cassandra, two steps above me. "Who is your lovely companion?"

"Sabin, this is Cassandra; Cassandra, Sabin."

A black-gloved hand slid out of the cloak. He reached towards Cassandra as if he'd caress her face.

She jerked back. "Don't touch me."

His hand froze in midmotion. A stillness washed over him. I'd seen other vampires fill with that utter quietness, but I'd thought it was made up of visual clues. There was no visual from Sabin, but that same emptiness flowed outward. The illusion was almost better this way as if it was just an empty cloak somehow hovering on the stairs.

His voice came out of that stillness. It was startling. "Is my touch so repulsive?"

"You smell of sickness and death."

Sabin drew his hand back inside his cloak. "I am a visiting master. It is within my rights to ask for a bit of . . . companionship. I could ask for you, wolf."

Cassandra growled at him.

"No one's forcing anyone into anyone's bed," I said.

"Are you so sure of that, Ms. Blake?" Sabin asked. He floated around Cassandra. The cloak brushed her, and she shuddered.

I couldn't smell him; I didn't have a werewolf's sense of smell. But I'd seen some of what was under that cloak. It was worth a shudder or two.

"Cassandra is only on loan to Jean-Claude. She belongs to the pack, so yeah, I'm sure."

Cassandra glanced back at me. "You'd protect me?"

"It's part of my job description now, isn't it?"

She studied my face. "Yes, I suppose it is." Her voice was soft, the growling like a distant dream. She looked terribly normal except for the outfit.

"You've seen what I am, Ms. Blake. Do you shudder at my touch?"

I moved down a step until I was on the floor. Better footing than the stairs. "I shook your hand earlier."

Sabin floated to the floor. The darkness faded from inside the hood. He pushed it back to reveal that golden hair and that ravaged face.

Cassandra let out a hiss. She backed up until she hit the banister. I think Sabin could have pulled a gun and shot her right that second, and she wouldn't have reacted in time.

He smiled at her. His beautiful mouth pulling the rotted flesh loose. "Have you never seen anything like this?"

She swallowed hard enough for me to hear, like she was trying not to throw up. "I've never seen anything so horrible."

Sabin turned back to me. His one eye was still a clear, pure blue, but the other had burst in the socket in a welter of pus and thinner liquid.

I did my own swallowing. "Your eye was fine yesterday."

"I told you it was virulent, Ms. Blake. Did you think I was exaggerating?"

I shook my head. "No."

His gloved hand came out of hiding once more. I remembered the way his hand had squished when I shook it yesterday. I did not want him to touch me, but there was a look in his beautiful eye, some pain on what was left of his

face, that made me hold still. I wouldn't flinch. I felt sorry for him, pretty stupid, but true.

That black glove hovered beside my face, not quite touching me. The Seecamp was forgotten in my hand. Sabin's fingertips brushed my face. The glove was liquid-filled, like some kind of obscene balloon.

He stared at me. I stared back. He spread his hand over my lower jaw and pressed. There were solid things inside the glove, thicker pieces, and bone, but it wasn't a hand anymore. Only the glove gave it shape.

A small sound crawled out of my throat. I couldn't stop it.

"Perhaps I should ask for you?" he said.

I eased back out of his grip. I was afraid to move too quickly. Afraid that sudden movement might tear off the glove. I did not want to see him spill out in a flood of foul-smelling liquid. He was a horror show enough without that.

Sabin didn't try to hold me; maybe he was afraid of the same thing.

"Are you abusing my hospitality again?" Jean-Claude said. He stood on the dance floor, looking at Sabin. His eyes were pure blue light. His skin had gone pale and smooth like carved marble.

"You have not yet shown me true hospitality, Jean-Claude. It is customary to offer me companionship."

"I didn't think there was enough of you left to have such needs," Jean-Claude said.

Sabin grimaced. "It is a cruel illness. Not all of my body has rotted away. The need remains, though the vessel is so grotesque that no one will touch me, not by choice." He shook his head, and the skin split on one side. Something black and thicker than blood oozed down the side of his face.

Cassandra made a small sound. My bodyguard was about to be sick. Maybe it smelled bad to her.

"If one of my people angers me enough while you are in my territory, you may have them. But I cannot give someone to you just because you wish it. Not everyone's sanity would survive it."

"There are days, Jean-Claude, when my own sanity is in doubt." Sabin looked from Cassandra to me. "It would break your wolf, I think. But your servant, I think she would survive."

"She is off limits to you, Sabin. If you abuse my hospitality with such an insult, council edict or no council edict, I will destroy you."

Sabin turned to him. The two vampires stared at each other. "There was a time, Jean-Claude, when no one spoke to me like that, no one short of the council."

"That was before," Jean-Claude said.

Sabin sighed. "Yes, before."

"You are free to enjoy the show, but do not tempt me again, Sabin. I have no sense of humor where *ma petite* is concerned."

"You share her with a werewolf but not with me."

"That is our business," Jean-Claude said, "and we will never speak of this again. If we do, it will be a challenge between us, and you are not up to it."

Sabin gave a half bow, hard to get the leverage for it without legs. "You are Master of the City. Your word is law." The words were correct. The tone was mocking.

Liv came up to stand behind and to one side of Jean-Claude. "It is time to open the doors, Master." I think that last was deliberate. Jean-Claude usually chastised his flock for calling him master.

Jean-Claude said, "Everyone to their places then." His voice sounded strangled.

"I will find a table," Sabin said.

"Do so," Jean-Claude said.

Sabin raised the hood back into place. He glided back up the stairs, headed for the tables on the upper level. Or maybe he'd just float in the rafters.

"My apologies, *ma petite*. I believe the sickness has progressed to his mind. Be wary of him. Cassandra is needed for the show. Liv will remain with you."

I looked at the tall vampire. "She won't take a bullet for me."

"If she fails me, I will give her to Sabin."

Liv paled, which is a neat trick for a vampire, even one that's fed. "Master, please."

"Now I believe she'll take a bullet for me," I said. If the choices were sleeping with Sabin or getting shot, I'd take the bullet. From the look on Liv's face, she agreed.

Jean-Claude left to make his entrance.

Cassandra met my eyes. She wasn't just pale, she was green. She jerked her gaze from mine as if afraid of what I'd see. "I am sorry, Anita." She went for the door she'd first entered through. She seemed embarrassed. Guess I couldn't blame her.

Cassandra had failed the bodyguard test. She was a powerful lycanthrope, but Sabin had totally unnerved her. She'd have probably been just fine if the vampire had tried violence, but he'd just stood there and rotted at her. What do you do when the monsters start being piteous?

The doors opened, and the crowd flowed in like a tidal wave, spilling in a wash of thunderous noise. I slipped the gun back into the purse but didn't shut it.

Liv was at my elbow. "Your table is over here." I went with her because I didn't want to be alone in the jostling crowd. Besides, she was suddenly taking my safety very seriously. Couldn't blame her. Sabin's diseased body was a wonderful threat.

I'd have felt better if I hadn't believed Jean-Claude would do it. But I knew better. He'd give Liv to Sabin. He really would. There was a look in the vampire's eyes that said she knew it, too.

Chapter 16

The table was the largest of a string of small, black lacquer tables. It blended nearly perfectly with the black walls. My dress matched the decor. I was really going to have to look into something in a different color scheme. The table was set away from the wall, near the railing so that the growing crowd couldn't block my view of the dance floor. It also meant that my back was exposed. I had scooted my chair so that the wall was at my back, but I was very aware that the edge of the railing curved around on my right side, so that someone could walk up and shoot me, relatively hidden from anyone else.

Of course, Liv was with me. She stood at my back, arms crossed over her stomach. All she needed was a sign over her head that flashed bodyguard.

Admittedly, my purse was open. The gun was within reach, and it was tempting to put it in my lap. I was spooked, but that wasn't the point. We had a plan. The plan did not include the assassin being scared away.

I touched Liv's arm.

She bent down.

"You're supposed to be unobtrusive."

She looked puzzled. "I'm supposed to keep you safe."

"Then sit down and pretend to be my friend. The trap won't work if I look like I'm being guarded."

She knelt by me; too far to bend down, I suppose. "I will not risk being given to Sabin. I don't care if your assassin knows I'm here or not."

It was hard to blame her, but I was willing to make the effort. I leaned into her. "Look, either work with the program, or get away from me."

"I obey Jean-Claude, not his strumpet."

As far as I could remember, I'd never done anything in my life to deserve being called a strumpet. "Jean-Claude said if you failed him, he'd give you to the rotting corpse, right?"

Liv nodded. Her eyes searched the crowd behind me. She really was trying to do the job, and the effort showed.

"He didn't say you'd be punished if I got hurt, did he?"

Liv's eyes flicked to me. "What are you saying?"

"If you scare away the hitter and spoil the plan, that's failure."

She shook her head. "No, that's not what he meant."

"He said never to fail him again."

I watched her try to work out the logic. I was betting that logic wasn't one of her strong points.

"Clever, Anita, but if you get killed, Jean-Claude will punish me. You know he will."

I was wrong. She was a lot smarter than she looked. "But if you spoil our plan, he'll punish you anyway."

Fear flashed through her eyes. "I'm trapped."

I felt sorry for her. Pity for two monsters—no three—in one night. I was losing my edge. "If I don't get killed, I'll make sure you don't get punished."

"You swear it?" She said the phrase like it meant more. Giving your oath was not a casual thing to her. A lot of vampires came from times when a man's or a woman's word was their bond.

"I give you my word."

She stayed kneeling for a moment longer, then stood. "Try not to get killed." She moved into the crowd, leaving me on my own, like I'd asked.

The rest of the tables filled up quickly. The crowd spilled around the edges of the room on the raised area around the dance floor. So many people stood at the fenced edges that if the table had been by the wall, I'd have lost my view of the dance floor. Under other circumstances, I'd have appreciated the thoughtfulness. Another bodyguard could come along at any time. I was ready for some company.

The crowd filled the two levels above, standing room only. I looked for Sabin's dark cloak, but didn't see him. The main dance floor was untouched. The way to the floor was barred by half a dozen vampires. They had quietly but firmly motioned everybody back to the sides of the room. Both male and female were dressed nearly identically, black lycra pants, boots, and black fishnet shirts. The women wore black bras under their shirts, but that was the only difference. I approved. Short little skirts or hot pants for the women would have pissed me off. The thought occurred that maybe Jean-Claude had dressed them with me in mind. He knew me too well in some ways and didn't have a clue in others.

I scanned the crowd for Edward and for anything suspicious, but it was hard to pick out any one person in the jostling, laughing crowd. I couldn't spot Edward. I had to just trust that he was there somewhere. And although I did trust him to be there, the tightness in my chest didn't ease.

Edward had cautioned me to be casual, not to look suspicious. Outwardly, I was trying. Inwardly, I was almost dizzy searching the crowd and that painful empty spot to the right and almost behind me where the railing went. I put my hands in my lap and forced myself to look down. If the assassin came now, I wouldn't be looking, but I had to get hold of myself. If I didn't, I was going to be so busy jumping at shadows, I wouldn't be ready when the real thing came. I was beginning to wish I'd let Liv stay.

I took deep, even breaths, in and out, concentrating on the rhythm of my own body. When I could hear the blood flowing inside my head, I raised my face slowly.

I stared calmly out at the crowd and the dance floor. I felt empty, distant, calm. Much better.

A vampire came up to the railing in front of my table. Willie McCoy was dressed in a suit so horribly green it could only be called chartreuse. Green shirt, and a wide tie with Godzilla crushing Tokyo on it. No one would ever accuse Willie of matching any decor.

I smiled. I couldn't help it. Willie had been one of the first vampires to ever cross that line from monster to friend. He scooted one of the chairs around so his back was to the open space. He sat down like he hadn't done it on purpose. I didn't have to pretend to be happy to see him.

He had to lean a bit into me to be heard over the crowd's rising murmur. I could smell the sweet scent of the goop he used to slick back his short hair. Him being this close didn't even make me tense. I trusted Willie more than I trusted Jean-Claude.

"How ya doing, Anita?" He grinned enough to show fang. Willie hadn't been dead three years yet. He was one of the few vamps I'd known before and after death.

"I've been better," I said.

"Jean-Claude said we were to bodyguard you, but to keep it casual. We'll drift in and out. But you looked spooked."

I shook my head, smiling. "That obvious?"

"To someone who knows ya, yeah."

We smiled at each other. Looking into Willie's face from inches away, I realized that he was on my list. The list that Stephen was on. If someone killed Willie, I'd hunt them down. It surprised me to realize that any vamp had made the list. But Willie had, and come to think of it, I guess, so had one other vampire.

Jean-Claude appeared on the far side of the club. Speak of the devil. A spotlight hit him from somewhere. It had to be coming from a fly loft, but it was hidden away so that it was hard to tell. A perfect place for a high-powered rifle. *Stop it, Anita. Stop tormenting yourself.*

I hadn't truly realized how crowded the opening would be. Edward by himself searching for one lone assassin in this mass of people would have been poor odds. Maybe the vamps and werewolves were amateurs, but their extra eyes couldn't hurt.

The lights began dimming until the only illumination was the spotlight on Jean-Claude. He seemed to glow. I wasn't sure if it was a trick or if he was making his own light from the skin outward. Hard to tell. Whichever, I was in the dark with an assassin, maybe, and I was not a happy camper.

Hell with it. I put the Seecamp in my lap. Better. Not perfect, but better. The fact that just the touch of a gun in my hand made me feel better was probably a bad sign. The fact that I missed my own guns was a worse one.

Willie touched my shoulder and made me jump enough that people near us glanced back. Shit.

He whispered, "I got your back covered. Easy."

Willie would make great cannon fodder, but he wasn't up to protecting me. He'd been a bit player before he died, and dying hadn't changed that. I realized if the shooting started and the bad guys were using silver bullets, I was worried about Willie. Worrying about your bodyguard is not good.

Jean-Claude's voice rose through the darkness, filling it with a sound that caressed my skin. A woman standing near the table shivered as if she'd been touched. Her date put his arm around her shoulders, and they huddled in the dark, surrounded by Jean-Claude's voice.

"Welcome to Danse Macabre. The night will be filled with surprises. Some wondrous." Two smaller spotlights hit the crowd. Cassandra appeared balanced on the railing on the second floor. She swept the coat back, revealing

her body, stalking along the inches-wide iron bar like it was the floor, nearly dancing. Wild applause broke out. The second spot hit Damian on the first floor. He glided out of the crowd, swishing the embroidered coat around him like a small cape. If he felt silly in the outfit, it didn't show.

He moved through the crowd with the spotlight following him. He touched a shoulder here, ran his hands through waist-length hair, put his arm around one woman's waist. Each one, man or woman, didn't seem to mind. They leaned into him or whispered in his ear. He came to a woman with long brown hair parted in the middle. She was dressed rather modestly for the crowd. Navy blue business skirt and jacket. Her white blouse had one of those big bows that are supposed to look like a tie but never do. Of the women around Damian, she looked the most normal. He circled her so closely that his body brushed her. She jerked away from every touch, eyes wide with fear I could see, even from across the room.

I wanted to say, "Leave her alone," but I didn't want to yell. Jean-Claude wouldn't allow anything illegal, at least not in front of this many witnesses. Bespelling a group of people wasn't illegal. Mass hypnosis wasn't permanent. But one on one, it was permanent. Which meant that Damian could stand under the woman's window and call her out some dark night, no time limitation.

Willie was leaning forward in his chair, his dark eyes on the woman and Damian. He didn't seem to be looking for assassins right that second.

I watched the woman's face go blank of all expression, until she was like one asleep. Her empty eyes stared at Damian. He took her hand and leaned against the railing. He rolled both legs over, ending on his feet, still holding her hand. She took two hesitant steps to the railing edge. He put his hands on her waist, under her jacket, and lifted her high in the air, effortlessly, setting her down on the dance floor in her sensible black pumps.

The spotlights on Jean-Claude and Cassandra died until the only light was that on Damian and the woman. He led her to the center of the dance floor. She walked, looking only at him as if the rest of the world no longer existed.

Dammit. What Damian was doing was illegal. Most of the crowd wouldn't pick it up. Vampires were allowed to use their powers for entertainment purposes so even the media, if they were inside, would be okay with it. But I knew the difference; I knew the law. Jean-Claude had to know I'd recognize what was happening for what it was. Was she an actress? A plant for the show?

I leaned into Willie, close enough to brush the shoulder of his suit. "Is she an actress?"

He turned startled eyes to me, and I could see that the pupils had been swallowed by the brown of his eyes. Down a long dark tunnel there was a hint of fire.

I swallowed hard and eased back from him, glad of the gun in my lap. "It's real, isn't it?"

Willie licked his lips nervously. "If I say it is, you're going to do something to mess up the show. Jean-Claude will get mad at me. I don't want him mad at me, Anita."

I shook my head but didn't argue with him. I'd seen what Jean-Claude did to vamps that angered him. Torture was putting it mildly. I had to find out what was going on but without disrupting things and drawing more attention to myself than I wanted tonight.

Damian stood the woman in the center of the light. He focused her face on something we could not see. She stood there, empty and waiting for his commands. He stood behind her, folding his arms around her waist, rubbing his cheek against her hair. He undid the bow at her throat, and the first three buttons of her blouse. He rubbed his lips along her exposed neck, and I couldn't take any more. If she was an actress, fine; but if she was an unwilling victim, this had to stop.

"Willie?"

He turned to me slowly, reluctantly. His hunger made him want to watch. His fear of what I was about to ask made him slower.

"What's up?"

"Go tell Jean-Claude that the show is over."

Willie shook his head. "If I leave your side and you get wasted, Jean-Claude will kill me. Slow and painful. I'm not leaving your side until I'm supposed to."

I sighed. Fine. I leaned over the railing and motioned one of the vampire waiters over to me. He glanced off in the dark as if he could see Jean-Claude, even though I couldn't, then he walked over to me.

"What is it?" he whispered. He leaned in close enough that I could smell the mints on his breath. Nearly ever vampire I knew used breath mints.

I still had the Seecamp naked in my hand. I figured I could afford to get up close and personal with the new dead, so I leaned in and whispered back, "Is she an actress?"

He glanced back at the little tableau. "Just a volunteer from the audience."

"She wasn't a volunteer," I said. There had been a half dozen people that would have volunteered, but the vampire had chosen the one who was afraid. That extra little bit of sadism—they just couldn't resist it.

"Tell Jean-Claude that if he doesn't stop this, I will."

He blinked at me.

"Just do it," I said.

He walked around the edge of the dance floor, vanishing into the darkness. I could sort of follow him, more an impression of movement than anything else. I couldn't see Jean-Claude at all.

Damian passed his hand above the woman's face, and when his hand came away, she blinked, awake at last. Her hands flew to her blouse, eyes frantic. "What's happening?" Her voice carried, thin with fear.

Damian tried to take her in his arms, but she drew away, and all he caught was a wrist. She strained against him, and he held her easily. "Let me go, let me go, please!" She reached out to someone in the crowd. "Help me!"

The crowd had gone very quiet, quiet enough that I could hear the voice of her supposed friend, "Enjoy it. It's just part of the show."

Damian jerked her around to face him, hard enough that there would be bruises. As soon as her eyes met his, her face went blank. She sagged to her knees, still held by one wrist.

He raised her to her feet, gently now. He clasped her against him and drew her hair to one side, exposing a long line of neck. He turned in a slow circle as if they were dancing, showing her bare flesh to all.

Willie leaned forward, tongue dancing over his lower lip as if he could taste her skin already. Willie was my friend, but it was good to remember that he was also a monster.

The vampire waiter was coming back. I could see him moving towards me.

Damian curled his lips, exposing fangs. He thrust his neck back giving everyone a view. I saw his neck muscles tense and we were out of time.

Willie looked up as if realizing the shit was hitting a different fan, but there was no time.

I shouted, "Don't do it, Damian." I pointed the gun at his back, about where the heart would be. When a vamp gets around five hundred, one shot to the chest, silver bullets or not, doesn't always guarantee a kill. But we would by God find out if he bit her.

Willie raised his hand toward me.

"Don't, Willie." I meant it. Just because nobody else was allowed to kill him, didn't mean I couldn't.

Willie sank back into his chair.

Damian relaxed enough to turn his head and look at me. He turned so that the girl was in front of him like a shield. Her hair was still back on one side, her neck still exposed. He stared at me, running one finger down her naked flesh. Daring me.

A dim spotlight shone on me, and the illumination built as I walked very carefully to the two steps that led down to the dance floor. Vaulting the railing might have looked better, but it made it damn hard to hold a target. I could probably have made the head shot from the railing, but with an unfamiliar gun, it was too risky. I didn't want to accidentally shoot the woman in the head. Killing the hostage is always frowned upon.

The vampire waiters and waitresses didn't know what to do. If I'd been some schmuck off the street, they might have tried to jump me, but I was their master's beloved, which made things a little sticky. I kept a sort of peripheral eye on them. "You guys back up and give me some room—right now."

They all glanced at each other.

"You don't want to crowd me, boys and girls, so move it!" They moved.

When I was close enough to feel confident that I could make the shot, I stopped. "Let her go, Damian."

"She will not be harmed, Anita. Just a little fun."

"She's unwilling. That's against the law, even for entertainment purposes, so let her go, or I'll blow your fucking head off."

"Would you really shoot me in front of all these witnesses?"

"You bet," I said. "Besides, you're over five hundred years old. I don't think one shot to the head will kill you, not permanently at least. But it'll hurt like hell and may leave scars. You wouldn't want to spoil that beautiful face, now would you?" I was getting tired of holding one arm out. It wasn't that the gun was heavy, but it was hard to hold a one-handed pose for long without starting to waver. I didn't want to waver.

He stared at me for a space of heartbeats. He very carefully, very slowly licked the side of the woman's neck, strange green eyes staring at me the whole time. It was a dare. If he thought I was bluffing, he'd picked the wrong girl.

I let my breath out until my body was quiet, and I could hear my pulse in my ears. I sighted down my arm, down the gun, and . . . he was gone. He'd moved so suddenly it startled me. I moved my finger off the trigger and pointed the gun skyward, waiting for my heart to stop pounding.

He was standing just at the edge of the light, leaving the woman empty-faced, waiting. Damian stared at me.

"Are you going to interrupt our entertainment every night?" he asked.

"I don't like it," I said, "but pick a volunteer, and I have no quarrel with you."

"A volunteer," he said, turning in a circle to view the audience. They all stared at him. He licked his lips, and hands went up.

I shook my head and put the gun up. I took the woman's hand. "Release her, Damian," I said.

He glanced back at her and did it. Her eyes flew open wide, searching frantically like someone awakened from a nightmare to find it real. I patted her hand.

"It's all right. You're safe now."

"What's happening? What's happening?" She caught sight of Damian and started sobbing hysterically.

Jean-Claude appeared on the edge of the light. "You have nothing to fear from us, fair lady." He glided towards us.

She started screaming.

"He won't hurt you," I said. "I promise. What's your name?"

She kept screaming. She was taller than me, but I touched her face, putting a hand on either side, forcing her to look at me. "What's your name?"

"Karen," she whispered, "my name's Karen."

"We're going to walk off this dance floor, Karen, and no one will hurt you. You have my word."

She nodded over and over, breath coming so fast I was afraid she was going to pass out.

Cassandra walked into the light, but stayed back. "Can I help?"

Jean-Claude had not moved since Karen started screaming. He just looked at me, and I still couldn't read his expression.

"Yeah," I said, "I could use some help."

Karen shied away from her. "She's not a vampire," I said.

She let Cassandra take her other arm, and we led her off the dance floor away from the light. Jean-Claude stepped onto center stage, and his voice

followed us into the darkness. "Did you enjoy our little melodrama?" There was a puzzled silence. His voice was like fur wrapping the crowd in the dark, breathing in their fear, giving them back desire. "We do not tease here at Danse Macabre. Who would like to experience the reality of Damian's kiss?" Someone would take him up on it. Someone always did. If anyone could salvage the show after the woman's hysterics, Jean-Claude could.

Liv came to help, I think. Karen took one look at the muscle-bound vamp and fainted dead away. She was not a small woman, and it surprised both Cassandra and myself. She sagged to the floor. Liv started to come closer, but I waved her off.

A woman from the crowd came towards us, hesitantly. "Can I help?" she asked. She was about the same size as Cassandra and me, small, with long reddish hair that swung to her waist, straight and fine. She was dressed in a pair of dark brown dress slacks, the kind that run large and have cuffs and are usually linen. For a shirt she wore only a vest with a silk camisole under it.

I glanced at Cassandra. She shrugged. "Thanks, if you could take her feet." Cassandra could have flung the woman across her shoulders in a fireman's carry, but most lycanthropes didn't like to show off their strength. I could have carried her, too, even if she was so bloody tall. I could still have carried her for a short distance, but not fast, and not too far.

The woman shoved her clutch purse under one arm and took the unconscious woman's feet. We got moving a little awkwardly, but we managed to get a rhythm and Cassandra took us to the women's rest room. Or I should say, lounge. The front part had a couch and a lighted vanity. It was white and black, with a mural on the wall that was from a woodcut that I knew, entitled "Demon-Lover." The demon in this version looked suspiciously like Jean-Claude, and I doubted it was accidental.

We laid Karen on the black couch. The woman who was helping dampened some paper towels without being asked and brought them back. I laid them against Karen's forehead and neck. "Thanks."

"Is she going to be all right?" the woman asked.

I didn't answer, because that all depended on Damian. "What's your name?"

The woman smiled almost shyly. "Anabelle, Anabelle Smith."

I smiled up at her. "Anita Blake. This is Cassandra." I realized I didn't know her last name. Jean-Claude always called his wolves by only their first names, like a pet. "I'm sorry. I don't know your last name."

"Cassandra is fine." She shook Anabelle's hand. They smiled at each other.

"Should we report what happened to the police?" Anabelle asked. "I mean that vampire was going to force himself on her. That's illegal, right?"

Karen stirred on the couch, moaning.

"Yeah, it's illegal," I said.

Anabelle raised an interesting point. I could report it to the cops. If a vampire acquired three complaints against him or her, you could get a death warrant issued, if you got the right judge. I would talk to Jean-Claude and

Damian first, but if they didn't give me the answers I wanted, maybe I should go to the cops. I shook my head.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Nothing worth sharing," I said.

The bathroom door opened. Raina walked in wearing a cream-colored dress as short as my own. The dark hose and stiletto high heels made her legs go on forever. She wore a fur jacket in a dusty red, probably fox. She was the only shape-shifter I'd met who wore real fur that wasn't her own.

She'd pulled her auburn hair on top of her head in a soft bun with loose strands of hair curled artfully around her face and neck.

Karen chose that minute to regain consciousness. I wasn't sure she was going to like her wake-up call. I knew I didn't.

I stood. Cassandra moved in front of me and a little to one side, not blocking me, but closer to the danger than I was. I wasn't used to anyone guarding me. It felt odd. I could take care of myself. That was the point, wasn't it?

"What's happening?" Anabelle asked.

Karen was looking around, eyes going wide again. "Where am I?"

"Anabelle, can you sit with Karen, please?" I smiled when I asked, but I didn't take my eyes from Raina. The door had closed behind her, and there wasn't enough room to maneuver, not really. If Cassandra could hold her for a even a few seconds, I could get the gun out, but somehow I didn't think Raina had come to fight. I think she'd have worn different shoes.

Anabelle sat on the couch and literally held Karen's hand. But she was watching the rest of us. Hell, it might be a better show than what was outside.

"What do you want, Raina?" I asked.

She gave a wide smile with her lipsticked mouth, baring small, even white teeth. "It's the ladies' room, isn't it? I came to powder my nose. And to see how our frightened guest is doing." She took two steps into the room, and Cassandra moved in front of her, blocking her way.

Raina stared down at her. "You forget yourself, wolf." Her voice held a low edge of growl.

"I forget nothing," Cassandra said.

"Then stand aside," she said.

"What did you mean by our guest?" I asked.

She smiled at me. "I am Jean-Claude's partner in this little enterprise. Didn't he tell you?" From the look on her face, she knew the answer and was enjoying it.

"I guess it slipped his mind," I said. "Why aren't you part of the show then?"

"I'm a silent partner," she said. She pushed past Cassandra, body brushing the smaller woman. She knelt by the couch. "How are you feeling, my dear?"

Karen stammered, "I just want to go home."

"Of course you do." She glanced up and smiled. "If one of you would help me get her to her feet, there's a cab waiting to take her anywhere she wants to go at the club's expense. Or did you want to ride home with your friends?"

Karen shook her head. "They aren't my friends."

"So wise of you to realize that," Raina said. "So many people put their trust in the wrong people." She stared at me while she said the last. "And they get hurt, or worse."

Anabelle had moved away from Raina. She was staring at all of us, clutching her purse. I don't think she understood everything we were saying, but she obviously was not having a good time. One good deed and she was already being punished.

"Can you stand? Why don't you help me?" Raina asked Anabelle.

"No, let Cassandra help you," I said.

"Afraid I might eat your newfound friend?"

I smiled. "You'll eat anything that can't get away. We all know that."

Her face tightened, anger flashing through her amber brown eyes. "In the end, Anita, we will see who eats what." She helped the woman to stand.

Cassandra whispered, "Jean-Claude told me to guard you."

"Make sure she gets into a cab that really is going to take her home. Then you can follow me around for the rest of the evening, okay?"

Cassandra nodded. "Jean-Claude won't like it."

"I'm not too happy with him right now, either," I said.

"A little help here," Raina said.

Cassandra sighed, but she took Karen's other arm, and they helped her through the door. When the door closed behind them, Anabelle let out a long sigh. "What is going on?"

I turned to the lighted mirror, leaning my hands on the vanity top. I shook my head. "It's too long a story, and the less you know, the safer you'll be."

"I have to confess I have an ulterior motive." I watched her through the mirror, and she looked embarrassed. "I didn't just help out of the goodness of my heart. I'm a reporter, freelance. A quote from the Executioner would really put me on the map. I mean I could name my price, especially if you explained what just happened here."

I bowed my head. "A reporter. Not exactly what I needed tonight."

Anabelle came up behind me. "It was real on the dance floor, wasn't it? That vampire—Damian, right? He was really going to do her, right there, as part of the show."

I watched her face in the mirror. She was vibrating with eagerness. She wanted to touch me. You could see her hands fluttering, nervous. It was a big story if I corroborated it. It would serve Jean-Claude right if I did.

Something went through Anabelle's eyes. Some of the brightness leaked away.

Several things happened almost simultaneously. Anabelle jerked my purse, the strap broke, she took a step back, and drew a gun from an inner-pants holster under her vest. The door opened, and three laughing women entered. The women screamed.

Anabelle looked at the door for just a heartbeat. I drew a knife and turned. I didn't try and walk those two steps to her. I dropped to one knee and lunged my body like a line with the knife as the point. The knife entered her upper

stomach. The gun moved towards me. I used my left hand to sweep the arm away. The shot went wild, cracking the mirror. I shoved the knife upward, under her sternum, shoved it until the hilt met flesh and bone, and jerked the blade up and sideways.

Her hand convulsed on the gun and another shot hit the carpeted floor. The silencer made each shot seem muffled, almost anticlimactic.

She sank to her knees, eyes wide, mouth opening and closing. I ran my hand down her arm and took the gun from her. She blinked at me, eyes unbelieving, then she fell abruptly as if her strings had been cut. She twitched twice and died.

Edward was at the door, gun out, pointed. He stared from me to the fresh corpse. He took in the knife still protruding from her chest, the gun with silencer in my hand. He relaxed, pointing the gun at the floor. "Some bodyguard I turned out to be, letting you get dusted in the ladies' room."

I stared up at him. I felt numb, distant with shock. "She almost got me," I said.

"But she didn't," he said.

I heard men's voices shouting, "Police! Everybody stay where they are. We'll check it out."

"Shit," I said softly and with feeling. I laid Anabelle's gun by her body and sat back on the carpet. I wasn't sure I could stand right then.

Edward holstered his gun and moved back from the door to join the crowd that was pushing forward to see the show. Just another part of the anonymous throng. Yeah, right.

I sat there beside the corpse and tried to think of something to tell the cops. I wasn't sure the truth was an option I could afford right now. I began to wonder if I was going to see the inside of a jail tonight. Watching the blood soak the front of Anabelle's vest, it seemed likely.

Chapter 17

I was sitting in a straight-backed chair in Jean-Claude's office at Danse Macabre. My hands were cuffed behind me. They hadn't let me wash the blood off my right hand, and it had dried to a nice tacky substance. I was used to having dried blood on me, but it was still uncomfortable. The uniformed officers had taken the other knife and found the Seecamp in my purse. They had not found the big knife in the spine sheath. It had been a sloppy search to have missed a knife longer than my forearm, but the uniform that did it had at first assumed that I was another victim. It had shaken him to find out that the pretty little woman was a murderer. Oh, excuse me, alleged murderer.

The office had white walls, black carpet, a desk that looked like carved ebony. There was a red lacquer screen with a black castle done high on top of a black mountain. There was a framed kimono on the far wall, scarlet with black and royal blue designs. Two smaller frames held fans: one white and black with what looked like a tea ceremony painted on it, the other blue and white with a flock of cranes. I liked the cranes best, and I'd had plenty of time to make a choice.

One of the uniforms had remained in the room with me the entire time. They'd drunk coffee and not offered me any. The younger uniform would have uncuffed me, but his partner had pretty much threatened to beat the shit out of him if he did it. The partner was grey-haired with eyes as cold and empty as Edward's. His name was Rizzo. Looking at him, I was glad I'd put the gun on the floor before he came into the room.

Why, you may ask, wasn't I at the police station being questioned? Answer: The media had bayed us. Four uniforms had been enough to control traffic and keep the media from mobbing anyone—until they smelled a breaking story. Suddenly, there were cameras and microphones everywhere, like mushrooms after a rain. The uniforms had called for backup and barricaded the murder scene and the office. Everything else had fallen to the cameras and microphones.

There was a homicide detective standing over me—looming, actually. Detective Greeley was just under six feet tall, so broad-shouldered he looked like a big square. Most black people aren't truly black, but Greeley was close. His face was so dark it had purple highlights. His close-cropped greying hair looked like wool. But black, white, or brown, his dark eyes were neutral, secret, cop eyes. His gaze said he'd seen it all and hadn't been impressed by any of it. He certainly wasn't impressed by me. If anything, he looked bored, but I knew better. I'd seen Dolph get the same look right before he pounced on someone and tore their alibi apart.

Since I didn't have an alibi, I wasn't worried about that. I'd told my story before they read me my rights. After Greeley mirandized me, all I'd said was that I wanted a lawyer. I was beginning to sound like a broken record, even to me.

The detective pulled a chair around so he was sitting facing me. He even hunkered down trying not to be so intimidating. "Once we get a lawyer in here," Greeley said, "we can't help you anymore, Anita."

He didn't know me well enough to call me by my first name, but I let it go. He was pretending to be my friend. I knew better. Cops are never your friends if they suspect you of murder. Conflict of interest.

"It sounds like a clear-cut case of self-defense. Tell me what happened, and I'll bet we can do a deal."

"I want my lawyer," I said.

"Once we involve a lawyer, the deal goes out the window," he said.

"You don't have the authority to make a deal," I said. "I want my lawyer."

The skin around his eyes tightened; otherwise he looked the same, unmoved. But I was pissing him off. Couldn't blame him.

The door to the office opened. Greeley looked up, ready to be angry at the interruption. Dolph walked inside, flashing his badge. His eyes gave the briefest of flicks to me, then settled solidly on Greeley.

Greeley stood up. "Excuse me, Anita. I'll be right back." He even managed a friendly smile. He was putting so much effort into the act, it was almost a shame I wasn't buying it. Besides, if he was really being friendly, he'd have taken the cuffs off.

Greeley tried to get Dolph to step outside, but Dolph shook his head. "The office is secure. The rest of the club isn't."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Greeley said.

"It means your murder scene, complete with victim, is being flashed on national television. You ordered that no one was to talk to the press, so they've been speculating. Vampires run amok is the choice rumor."

"You want me to tell the media that a woman attached to a police squad is being charged with murder?"

"You have three witnesses that all say Ms. Smith pulled her gun first. That it was self-defense."

"That's something for the assistant district attorney to decide," Greeley said.

Funny how when he was talking to me he could make a deal. Now that he was talking to another cop, suddenly the ADA was the only one who could make a deal.

"Call them," Dolph said.

"Just like that," Greeley said. "You want to cut her loose?"

"She'll make a statement after we get her and her lawyer down to the station."

Greeley made a rude sound in his throat. "Yeah, she's real hot for her lawyer."

"Go talk to the press, Greeley."

"And tell them what?"

"That vampires aren't involved. That it was just bad timing that the murder happened at Danse Macabre."

Greeley glanced back at me. "I want her here when I get back, Storr. No disappearing act."

"We'll both be here."

Greeley glared at me, all his anger and frustration filling his eyes for a second. The friendly mask was gone. "Make sure you are. The brass may want you in on this, but this is a homicide case, *my* case." He shoved a finger at Dolph, not quite touching him. "Don't fuck with it."

Greeley pushed past him and shut the door firmly. Silence thick enough to walk on filled the room.

Dolph pulled a chair up in front of the desk, next to me, and sat facing me. He clasped his big hands together and stared. I stared back.

"The three women say Ms. Smith pulled her gun first. She ripped your purse off, so she knew where your gun was," he said.

"I flashed it a little too much tonight. My fault."

"I heard about you joining the show out there. What happened?"

"I had to police the show a little. The woman didn't want to play. It's illegal to use preternatural powers to coerce anyone into doing something they don't want to do."

"You aren't a policeman, Anita."

It was the first time he'd ever reminded me of that. Usually, Dolph treated me like one of his people. He'd even encouraged me to simply say I was with his squad so people would assume I was a detective.

"You kicking me off the squad, Dolph?" My stomach was tight as I asked. I valued working with the police. I valued Dolph and Zerbrowski and the rest of the guys. It would hurt more than I wanted to admit to lose all that.

"Two bodies in two days, Anita, both of them normal humans. That's a lot of explaining at headquarters."

"If they'd been vamps or some other creepie-crawlie, everyone would look the other way, is that it?"

"Picking a fight with me isn't your best bet right now, Anita."

We stared at each other for a second or two. I looked away first, and nodded. "Why are you here, Dolph?"

"I handle the media a lot."

"But you're letting Greeley talk to the press."

"You've got to tell me what's going on, Anita." His voice was quiet, but I knew by the tightness around his eyes, the way he held his shoulders, that he was angry. I guess I couldn't blame him.

"What do you want to hear, Dolph?" I asked.

"The truth would be nice," he said.

"I think I need a lawyer first." I wasn't going to spill my guts just because Dolph was my friend. He was still a cop, and I had killed someone.

Dolph's eyes narrowed. He turned to the uniform still leaning against the wall. "Rizzo, go get some coffee, black, for me. What do you want in yours?"

Coffee was coming. Things were looking up. "Two sugars, one cream."

"Get some for yourself, Rizzo, and take your time."

Officer Rizzo pushed away from the wall where he'd been leaning. "You sure about this, Sergeant Storr?"

Dolph looked at him, just looked at him.

Rizzo held his hands out in a sort of push away gesture. "I don't want Greeley riding my ass about leaving you two alone."

"Get the coffee, Officer Rizzo. I'll take any heat that comes down."

Rizzo left, shaking his head, probably at the stupidity of plainclothes detectives. When we were alone, Dolph said, "Turn around."

I stood up and offered him my hands. He uncuffed me, but didn't pat me down again. He probably assumed Rizzo had done it. I didn't tell him about the knife they missed, which would piss him off if he found it later, but hey, I couldn't let the cops confiscate all my weapons. Besides, I didn't want to be unarmed tonight.

I sat back down, resisting the urge to rub my wrists. I was heap-big-vampire-slayer. Nothing could hurt me. Yeah, right.

"Talk to me, Anita."

"Off the record?" I asked.

He stared at me, eyes flat and unreadable, good cop eyes. "I should say no."

"But," I said.

"Off the record, tell me."

I told him. I changed only one thing: that an anonymous call had alerted me to the contract on me. Other than that, it was the absolute truth. I thought Dolph would be happy, but he wasn't.

"And you don't know why someone would put a contract out on you?"

"For that kind of money, with a time limit on it, no."

He stared at me, as if trying to decide how much truth I was telling him. "Why didn't you tell us about the anonymous phone call earlier?" He put a lot of stress on the word *anonymous*.

I shrugged. "Habit, I guess."

"No, you wanted to hotdog it. Instead of hiding out, you came here and played bait. If the hitter had used a bomb, you could have gotten a lot of people hurt."

"But she didn't use a bomb, did she."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. If I hadn't known better, I'd have said he was counting to ten.

"You got lucky," he said.

"I know."

Dolph stared at me. "She nearly did you."

"If those women hadn't come in when they did, I wouldn't be talking to you now."

"You don't seem worried."

"She's dead. I'm not. What's to worry about?"

"For that kind of money, Anita, there'll be someone else tomorrow."

"It's after midnight, and I'm still alive. Maybe the contract will be canceled."

"Why the time limit?"

I shook my head. "If I knew that, I might know who put the hit out on me."

"And if you find out who put the money up, what will you do?" he asked.

I stared at him. Off the record or not, Dolph was still the ultimate cop. He took his job very seriously. "I'll turn the name over to you."

"I wish I believed that, Anita, I really do."

I gave him my best wide-eyed, innocent look. "What do you mean?"

"Can the little girl routine, Anita. I know you too well."

"Fine, but you and I both know that as long as the money is out there, hitters will keep coming. I'm good, Dolph, but no one's that good. Eventually, I'll lose. Unless the money goes away. No contract, no more hitters."

We stared at each other. "We can put you in protective custody," Dolph said.

"For how long? Forever?" I shook my head. "Besides, the next hitter might use a bomb. You want to risk your people? I don't."

"So you'll hunt the money man down and kill him."

"I didn't say that, Dolph."

"But that's what you're planning," he said.

"Don't keep asking the question, Dolph. The answer won't change."

He stood, hands gripping the back of the chair. "Don't cross the line with me, Anita. We're friends, but I'm a cop first."

"I value our friendship, Dolph, but I value my life and yours more."

"You think I can't handle myself?"

"I think you're a cop, and that means you have to play by the rules. Dealing with professional hitters, that can get you killed."

There was a knock on the door. "Enter," Dolph said.

Rizzo came in with a round tray and three slender black china mugs. There were little red coffee stirrers in each one. Rizzo glanced from Dolph to me. He stared at my uncuffed hands but didn't say anything. He sat the tray on the desk far enough from me that I couldn't have grabbed him. Officer Rizzo looked like a twenty-year man, and he was still treating me like a very dangerous person. I doubted that he'd have turned his back on Anabelle. If she hadn't grabbed my purse, she could have shot me in the back. Oh, I'd have seen it in the mirror, but I'd have never gotten my gun out in time. I'd never have let a man, no matter how friendly or how helpful, come up behind me like that. I'd made the same mistake with Anabelle that people made with me. I'd seen a small, pretty woman and underestimated her. I was a female chauvinist piglet. It had nearly been a fatal flaw.

Dolph handed me the mug that held the lightest-colored coffee. It was too much to hope that the cream would be real, but either way it looked wonderful. I'd never met coffee that wasn't wonderful. It was just a matter of how wonderful it was. I took a hesitant sip of the steaming liquid and made appreciative 'mmm' sounds. It was real coffee and real cream.

"Glad you like it," Rizzo said.

I looked up at him. "Thank you, Officer."

He grunted and moved away from us to lean against the other wall.

"I talked to Ted Forrester, your pet bounty hunter. The gun in your purse is registered to him." Dolph sat back down, blowing on his coffee.

Ted Forrester was one of Edward's aliases. It had stood up to police scrutiny once before when we ended up with bodies on the ground. He was, as far as the police knew, a bounty hunter specializing in preternatural creatures. Most bounty hunters stayed in the Western states where there were still substantial bounties on shapeshifters. Not all of them were particularly careful that the shapeshifter they killed was really a danger to anyone. The only criteria some states had was that after death, the body was medically certified as a lycanthrope. A blood test was sufficient in most cases. Wyoming was thinking of changing its laws because of three wrongful death suits that had made it all the way to their state supreme court.

"I needed a gun small enough to fit in the purse but with stopping power," I said.

"I don't like bounty hunters, Anita. They abuse the law."

I sipped coffee and stayed quiet. If he knew just how much Edward abused the law, he'd have locked him up for a very long time.

"If he's a good enough friend to bail your ass out of this kind of trouble, why haven't you mentioned him before? I didn't know he existed until that last trouble you had with those shapeshifter poachers."

"Poachers," I said and shook my head.

"What's wrong?" Dolph asked.

"Shapeshifters get killed, and its poaching. Normal people get killed, and it's murder."

"You sympathizing with the monsters now, Anita?" he asked. His voice was even quieter, so still you might have mistaken it for calm, but it wasn't. He was pissed.

"You're mad about something other than the body count," I said.

"You're involved with the Master of the City. Is that how you keep getting all that inside info on the monsters?"

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Sometimes."

"You should have told me, Anita."

"Since when is my personal life police business?"

He just looked at me.

I looked down into my coffee mug, staring at my hands. I finally looked back up. It was hard meeting his eyes, harder than I wanted it to be. "What do you want me to say, Dolph? That I find it embarrassing that one of the monsters is my boyfriend? I do."

"Then drop him."

"If it were that easy, trust me, I'd do it."

"How can I trust you to do your job, Anita? You're sleeping with the enemy."

"Why does everyone assume I'm sleeping with him? Doesn't anybody but me date people and not have sex?"

"I apologize for the assumption, but you got to admit a lot of people are going to assume the same thing."

"I know."

The door opened, and Greeley came back inside. His eyes took in the handcuffs being gone, the coffee. "You have a nice chat?"

"How'd your statement to the press go?" Dolph asked.

He shrugged. "I told them Ms. Blake was being questioned in connection with a death on the premises. Told 'em that no vamps were involved. Not sure they believed me. They kept wanting to speak to the Executioner. Though most of them were calling her the Master's girlfriend."

That made me flinch. Even with a career of my own, I was going to end up being Mrs. Jean-Claude in the press. He was more photogenic than I was.

Dolph stood. "I want to take Anita out of here."

Greeley stared at him. "I don't think so."

Dolph set his coffee on the desk and went to stand next to the other detective. He lowered his voice, and there was a lot of harsh whispering. Greeley shook his head. "No."

More whispering. Greeley glared at me. "All right, but she comes down to the station before the night is over or it's your ass, Sergeant."

"She'll be there," Dolph said.

Rizzo was staring at all of us. "You're taking her out of here, but not to the station house?" It sounded accusatory even to me.

"That's my decision, Rizzo," Greeley said. "You got that?" His voice growled the words. Somehow Dolph had pulled rank, and Greeley didn't like it. If Rizzo wanted to make himself a convenient target for that anger, fine.

Rizzo faded back against the wall, but he wasn't happy about it. "I got that."

"Get her out of here," Greeley said. "Try the back. But I don't know how you'll get past the cameras."

"We'll walk through," Dolph said. "Let's go, Anita."

I set my mug on the desk. "What's up, Dolph?"

"I got a body for you to look at."

"A murder suspect helping with another case. Won't the brass get mad?"

"I cleared it," Dolph said.

I looked at him, eyes wide. "How?" I asked.

"You don't want to know," he said.

I looked at him. He stared back. I finally looked away first. Most of the time, when people said I didn't want to know, it meant just the opposite. It meant I probably needed to know. But from a handful of people, I'd take their word for it. Dolph was one of those people. "Okay," I said. "Let's go."

Dolph let me wash the dried blood off my hands, and we went.

Chapter 18

I'm not a big one for idle chatter, but Dolph makes me seem loquacious. We drove down 270 in silence, the hiss of the wheels on the road and the thrum of the engine the only sounds. Either he'd turned off his radio or nobody was committing crimes in Saint Louis tonight. I was betting the radio was off. One of the good things about being a detective on a task force is you don't have to listen to the radio all the time, because most of the calls aren't your problem. If Dolph was needed somewhere, they could always beep him.

I tried to hold out. I tried to make Dolph talk first, but after nearly fifteen minutes, I broke. "Where are we going?"

"Creve Coeur."

My eyebrows raised. "That's a little upscale for a monster kill."

"Yeah," he said.

I waited for more; there wasn't any more. "Well, thanks for enlightening me, Dolph."

He glanced at me, then back to the road. "We'll be there in a few minutes, Anita."

"Patience has never been my strong suit, Dolph."

His lips twitched, then he smiled. Finally, he laughed, a short, abrupt sound. "I guess not."

"Glad I could lighten the mood," I said.

"You're always good for a laugh when you're not killing people, Anita."

I didn't know what to say to that. Too close to the truth, maybe. Silence settled over the car, and I left it alone. It was an easy, friendly quiet this time, tinged with laughter. Dolph wasn't mad at me anymore. I could stand a little silence.

Creve Coeur was an older neighborhood, but it didn't look it. The age showed in the large houses set in long, sloping yards. Some of the houses had circular drives and servants' quarters. The few housing developments that had crept in here and there didn't always have big yards, but the houses had variety, pools, rock gardens. No cookie cutter houses, nothing *déclassé*.

Olive is one of my favorite streets. I like the mix of gas stations, Dunkin' Donuts, custom order jewelry stores, Mercedes-Benz dealerships, and Blockbuster Music and Video. Creve Coeur isn't like most ritzy areas, at war with the peons. This part of the city has embraced both its money and its commerce, as comfortable buying fine antiques as taking the kiddies through the drive-up line at Mickey-D's.

Dolph turned on a road sandwiched between two gas stations. It sloped sharply, making me want to use the brake. Dolph didn't share this desire, and the car coasted down the hill at a nice clip. Well, he was the police. No speeding ticket, I guess. We sped past housing developments that branched off the road like true suburbia. The houses were still more distinct, but the yards had shrunk, and you knew that most of what you were driving past had never had servants' quarters. The road climbed just a touch, then evened out. Dolph hit his turn signal while we were still in the shallow valley. A tasteful sign said Countryside Hills.

Police cars clogged the narrow streets of the subdivision, lights strobing the darkness. There was a huddle of people being held back by uniformed police, people clutching light coats over their jammies or standing with robes tied tight. The crowd was small. As we got out of the car, I saw a drape twitch in a house across the street. Why come outside when you can peek from the comfort of your own home?

Dolph led me through the uniforms and the twist of yellow Do-Not-Cross tape. The house that was the center of attention was one story with a brick wall as tall as the walls of the house forming an enclosed courtyard. There was even a wrought iron gate to the curved entrance, very Mediterranean. Except for the courtyard, the house looked like a typical suburban ranch. There was a stone path and square, rock-edged beds full of rosebushes. Floodlights filled the

walled garden, lending every petal and leaf its own shadow. Someone had gone way overboard on the in-ground lighting.

"You don't even need a flashlight in here," I said.

Dolph glanced at me. "You've never been here then?"

I met his eyes and couldn't read them. He was giving me cop eyes. "No, I've never been here. Should I have been?"

Dolph opened the screened door without answering. He led the way in, and I followed. Dolph prides himself on not influencing his people, letting them come in cold and make their own conclusions. But even for him, he was being mysterious. I didn't like it.

The living room was narrow but long with a TV and video center at the end of it. The room was so thick with cops there was barely room to stand. Every murder scene gets more attention than it needs. Frankly, I wonder if more evidence is lost with all the traffic than is found with all the busy hands. A murder can make a cop's career, especially that jump from uniform to plainclothes. Find *the* clue or *the* evidence, shine at the critical time, and people notice. But it's more than that. Murder is the ultimate insult, the last worst thing you can do to another human being. Cops feel that, maybe more than the rest of us.

The cops parted before Dolph, eyes shifting to me. Most of the eyes were male, and after the first glance, almost all of them did the full body look. You know the look. The one that if the face and top match, they just have to see if the legs are as good as the rest. It works in reverse, too. But any man that starts at my feet and ends with my face has lost every brownie point he ever had.

Two short hallways led straight off the living room at right angles, a dining room directly off of the first room. An open door revealed carpeted stairs leading to a finished basement. Cops were traveling up and down the stairs like ants, with bits of evidence in plastic baggies.

Dolph led me down one of the hallways, and there was a second living room with a fireplace. It was smaller and more boxlike, but the far wall was entirely brick, which made it seem warmer, cozier. The kitchen showed to the left through an open doorway. The top half of the wall was a pass-through, open like a window so you could work in the kitchen and still talk to people in the living room. My father's house had a pass-through.

The next room was obviously new. The walls still had that raw paint look of fresh construction. Sliding glass doors made up the left-hand wall. A hot tub took up most of the floor space. Water still clung in beads to its slick surface. They'd finished the hot tub before they'd painted the room. Priorities.

A hallway so roughed out it still had that heavy plastic they put down for workers to walk on led away from the tub. There was another larger bathroom, not quite finished, and a closed door at the end of the hall. The door was carved, new wood, light-colored oak. It was the first closed door I'd seen inside the house. That was kind of ominous.

Except for the cops, I hadn't seen a damn thing out of place. It looked like a nice upper-middle-class house. A family kind of house. If I'd walked straight into carnage, I'd have been all right, but this long buildup had tightened my

stomach, filled me with dread. What had happened in this nice house with its new hot tub and brick fireplace? What had happened that needed my kind of expertise? I didn't want to know. I wanted to leave before I saw some new horror. I'd seen enough bodies already this year to last a lifetime.

Dolph put his hand on the doorknob. I touched his arm. "It's not kids, is it?" I asked.

He glanced over his shoulder at me. Normally, he wouldn't have answered. He'd have said something cryptic like, "You'll see in a minute." Tonight, he said, "No, it's not kids."

I took a deep breath through my nose and let it out slowly through my lips. "Good." I smelled damp plaster, fresh cement, and underneath that, blood. The scent of freshly spilled blood, faint, just behind the door. What does blood smell like? Metallic, almost artificial. It isn't really much of a smell all by itself. The smell won't make you sick, it's what goes with it. We all know in some ancient part of ourselves that blood is the thing. Without it, we die. If we can steal enough of it from our enemies, we steal their lives. There's a reason that blood has been associated with almost every religion on the planet. It's primal stuff, and no matter how sanitized we make our world, part of us still recognizes that.

Dolph hesitated, hand still on the doorknob. He didn't look at me while he spoke. "Tell me what you think of the scene, then I have to take you back for a statement. You understand that."

"I understand," I said.

"If you're lying to me, Anita, about any of this, tell me tonight. Two bodies in two days takes a lot of explaining."

"I haven't lied to you, Dolph." *At least not much*, I added in my head.

He nodded without turning around and opened the door. He went in first and turned so he could watch my face as I entered the room.

"What's wrong, Dolph?" I asked.

"See for yourself," he said.

All I could see at first was pale grey carpet and a bureau with a large mirror against the right-hand wall. A cluster of cops blocked my view of the rest of the room. The cops stepped aside at a nod from Dolph. Dolph never took his eyes from me, my face. I'd never seen him so intent on my reaction before. It made me nervous.

There was a body on the floor. A man, spread-eagled, pinned at wrists and ankles with knives. The knives had black hilts. He lay in the middle of a large red circle. The circle had had to be large so the blood didn't leak out and spoil it. Blood had soaked into the pale carpet, spread across it like a red ruin. The man's face was turned away from me. All I could see was short blond hair. His chest was bare, so slick with blood it looked like a red shirt. The knives held him in place. They hadn't been what killed him. No, what had killed him was a gaping hole in his lower chest just below the ribs. It was like a red-lined cave big enough to plunge both hands into.

"They took his heart," I said.

Dolph looked at me. "You know that from the doorway?"

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"If you were going to take his heart out, why not go straight down?"

"If you wanted him to survive, like heart surgery, you'd have to break the ribs and go down the hard way. But they wanted him dead. If all you want is the heart, going under the ribs is easier."

I walked towards the body.

Dolph moved ahead of me, watching my face. "What?" I said.

He shook his head. "Just tell me about the body, Anita."

I stared at him. "What is your problem tonight?"

"No problem."

It was a lie. Something was up, but I didn't press it. It wouldn't have done me any good. When Dolph decides not to share information, he doesn't share, period.

There was a king-size bed with purple satin sheets and more pillows than you knew what to do with. The bed was rumpled as if it had been used for something other than sleeping. There were dark stains on the sheets, nearly black.

"Is that blood?"

"We think so," Dolph said.

I glanced at the body. "From the murder?"

"When you're finished looking at the body, we'll bag the sheets and get them down to the lab."

A subtle hint to get on with the job. I walked towards the body and tried to ignore Dolph. That was easier than it sounded. The body sort of stole the show. The closer I got, the more details I could see, and the more I didn't want to see. Under all that blood was a nice chest, muscular but not too much of a good thing. The hair was cut very short, curly and blond. There was something naggingly familiar about that head. The black daggers had silver wire curled around them. They'd been shoved to their hilts in the flesh, bones had broken when they'd been driven in. The red circle was definitely blood. Cabalistic symbols ran round the inside of the circle, traced in blood. I recognized some of them, enough to know that we were dealing with some form of necromancy. I knew the symbols that stood for death and the symbols that watched against it.

For some reason, I didn't want to enter the circle. I walked carefully around the edge of it until I could see the face. With my back leaning against the wall I stared into the wide eyes of Robert the vampire. Monica's husband. The soon-to-be daddy.

"Shit," I said softly.

"You know him?" Dolph asked.

I nodded. "Robert. His name's Robert." The death symbols made sense if you were going to sacrifice a vampire. But why? Why like this?

I took a step forward and hit the circle. I stopped dead. It was like a million insects crawled and swarmed over my body. I couldn't breathe. I stepped back off the blood line. The sensation stopped. I could still feel it like a memory on my skin, in my head, but I was okay now. I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and stepped forward again. It wasn't like hitting a wall. It was

more like hitting a blanket, a drowning, suffocating, maggot-crawling blanket. I tried to walk forward, tried to move past the circle, and couldn't. I staggered back from it. If the wall hadn't been there, I'd have fallen.

I let myself slide down until I was sitting with my knees tucked up. My toes were inches from the circle. I did not want to touch it again.

Dolph walked through the circle like it wasn't there and knelt beside me, part of him still in the circle. "Anita, what's wrong?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure." I stared up at him. "It's a circle of power, and I can't cross it."

He glanced back at his own body partially inside the circle. "I can."

"You're not an animator. I'm not a witch, and I don't know a lot of official magic, but some of the symbols are either death symbols or maybe symbols of protection from the dead." I stared up at him, my skin still shivering from trying to cross the line. A new horror spread through my mind. "It's a spell to both contain and keep out the dead, and I can't cross it."

He stared down at me. "What exactly does that mean, Anita?"

"It means," said a female voice, "that she didn't create the circle."

Chapter 19

A woman stood just inside the door. She was tall, slender, dressed in a purple skirt suit with a white man-tailored shirt. She walked into the room with an eagerness that made me knock about ten years off her age. She looked thirty, but she wasn't. Twenty-something and full of herself. Probably around my own age, but there was a shiny newness to her that I'd lost years ago.

Dolph stood, offering me a hand up. I shook my head. "Unless you want to carry me, I can't stand yet."

"Anita, this is Detective Reynolds," he said. He didn't sound entirely happy about it.

Reynolds walked around the edge of the circle as I had, but she was coming for a better view of me. She ended up on the opposite side from Dolph. She stared down at me, smiling, eager. I stared up at her, skin still jumping from trying to force my way past the circle.

She leaned down and whispered, "You're flashing the room, dear."

"That's why the underwear matches," I said.

She looked surprised.

There was no way for me to stretch my legs out without touching the circle again, so if I wanted to quit flashing the room, I had to stand up. I held my hand up to Dolph. "Help me up, but whatever you do, don't let me fall into that thing."

Detective Reynolds took my other arm without being invited, but frankly, I needed the help. My legs felt like spaghetti. The moment she touched me, the hair on my body stood at attention. I jerked away from her and would have fallen into the circle if Dolph hadn't caught me.

"What's wrong, Anita?" Dolph asked.

I leaned into him and tried to breathe slowly and evenly. "I can't take anymore magic right this moment."

"Get her a chair from the dining room," Dolph said. He didn't speak to anyone in particular, but a uniform left the room, probably to get the chair.

Dolph picked me up while we waited. Since I couldn't stand, it was hard to protest, but I felt like a damn fool.

"What's on your back, Anita?" Dolph asked.

I'd forgotten about the knife in the spine sheath. I was saved from having to answer by the uniform bringing one of the straight-backed chairs into the room.

Dolph eased me into the chair. "Did Detective Reynolds try a spell on you?"

I shook my head.

"Someone explain what just happened."

An unhealthy flush crept up Reynold's pale neck. "I tried to read her aura, sort of."

"Why?" Dolph asked.

"Just curious. I've read about necromancers but never met one before."

I looked up at her. "If you want to do any more experiments, Detective, ask first."

She nodded, looking younger, more unsure of herself. "I am sorry."

"Reynolds," Dolph said.

She looked at him. "Yes, sir."

"Go stand over there."

She glanced at both of us and nodded. "Yes, sir." She walked over to stand by the other cops. She tried to be nonchalant about it, but she kept looking over at us.

"Since when do you have a witch on the payroll?" I asked.

"Reynolds is the first detective ever with preternatural abilities. She got her pick of assignments. She wanted to join our squad."

I was happy to hear him call it "our" squad. "She said I didn't draw the circle. Did you really think I'd done that?" I pointed at the body.

He stared down at me. "You didn't like Robert."

"If I killed everyone I didn't like, Saint Louis would be littered with bodies," I said. "Why else did you drag me down here? She's a witch. She probably knows more about the spell than I do."

Dolph stared down at me. "Explain."

"I raise the dead, but I'm not a trained witch. Most of what I do is just," I shrugged, "sort of natural ability. I studied basic magic theory in college, but for only a couple of classes, so if you want feedback on a detailed spell like this one, I can't help you."

"If Reynolds hadn't been here, what would you have suggested we do?"

"Find a witch to undo the spell for you."

He nodded. "Any thoughts on who or why?" He jabbed his thumb behind his back at the body.

"Jean-Claude made Robert a vampire. That's a strong bond. I think the spell was to prevent him from knowing what was happening."

"Could Robert have alerted his master from this far away?"

I thought about that. I wasn't sure. "I don't know. Maybe. Some master vampires are better at telepathy than others. I'm not sure how good Jean-Claude is with other vampires."

"This setup took a while," Dolph said. "Why kill him like this?"

"Good question," I said. I had a nasty idea. "It's a weird way to do it, but this might be a challenge to Jean-Claude's control over his territory."

"How so?" Dolph had his little notebook out now, pen poised. It was almost like old times.

"Robert belonged to him, and now somebody's killed him. Could be a message."

He glanced back at the body. "But who is the message meant for? Maybe Robert pissed someone off, and it was personal. If it was a message for your boyfriend, why not kill him at Jean-Claude's club? That's where he worked, right?"

I nodded. "Whoever did this couldn't have pulled off something so elaborate at the club, with other vampires around. No way. They needed privacy. They might have needed the spell just to keep Jean-Claude or some other vamp from riding to the rescue." I thought about it. What did I really know about Robert? Not much. I knew him as Jean-Claude's flunkie. Monica's boyfriend, now husband. A soon-to-be daddy. Everything I knew about him was through other people's perceptions of him. He'd been killed in his own bedroom, and all I could think of was that it was a message for Jean-Claude. I was thinking of him like a flunkie because Jean-Claude treated him that way. Because he wasn't a master vampire, no one would want to kill him for his own sake. Geez, I was actually thinking of Robert like a disposable commodity. We could always make more.

"You've thought of something," Dolph said.

"Not really. Maybe I've been hanging around vampires too long. I'm beginning to think like one of them."

"Explain," Dolph said.

"I assumed that Robert's death was connected to his master. My first thought was that no one would kill Robert for his own sake, because he wasn't important enough to kill. I mean, killing Robert won't make you Master of the City, so why do it?"

Dolph looked at me. "You're beginning to worry me, Anita."

"Worry, hell," I said, "I'm beginning to scare me." I tried to look at the murder scene fresh, not like a vampire. Who would go to this much trouble to kill Robert? I didn't have the faintest idea. "Except for this being a challenge to Jean-Claude's authority, I have no idea why anyone would kill Robert. I guess I

don't really know that much about him. It could be one of the hate groups, Humans First or Humans Against Vampires. But they'd have to have some heavy magical know-how, and either group would stone a witch as fast as stake a vampire. They consider them both devil spawn."

"Why would the hate groups single out this vampire?"

"His wife's pregnant," I said.

"Another vampire?" Dolph asked.

I shook my head. "Human."

Dolph's eyes widened just a fraction. It was the most surprise I'd ever seen from him. Dolph, like most cops, doesn't ruffle easily.

"Pregnant? And the vampire is the father?"

"Yes," I said.

He shook his head. "Yeah, that might earn him a starring roll on the hate group hit parade. Tell me about vampire reproduction, Anita."

"First, I need to call Jean-Claude."

"Why?"

"Warn him," I said. "I agree this probably is something personal to Robert. You're right. Humans First especially would kill him in a heartbeat, but just in case, I want to warn Jean-Claude." I had another thought. "Maybe that's why someone wanted me dead."

"What do you mean?"

"If they want to harm Jean-Claude, killing me would be a good way to do it."

"I think half a million dollars is a little steep for bumping off someone's girlfriend." He shook his head. "That kind of money is personal, Anita. Someone's afraid of you, not your toothy boyfriend."

"Two hired killers in two days, Dolph, and I still don't know why." I stared up at him. "If I don't figure this thing out, I'll be dead."

He touched my shoulder. "We'll help you. Cops are good for some things, even if the monsters won't talk to us."

"Thanks, Dolph." I patted his hand. "Did you really believe Reynolds when she said I could have done this?"

He straightened, then met my eyes. "For a second, yes. After that, it was a matter of listening to my detective. We hired her so she could help out on the preternatural stuff. It would be stupid to ignore her on her first case."

Not to mention demoralizing, I thought. "Okay, but did you really think I was capable of doing that?" I motioned towards the body.

"I've seen you stake vamps, Anita. I've seen you decapitate them. Why not this?"

"Because Robert was alive while they carved open his chest. Until they removed his heart, he was alive. Hell, when they took his heart, I'm not sure how long he might have lived. Vampires are strange when it comes to death wounds. Sometimes they linger."

"Is that why they didn't take his head? So he'd suffer more?"

"Maybe," I said. "Jean-Claude needs to be told, in case it is a threat," I repeated.

"I'll have someone call."

"You don't trust me to tell him?"

"Leave it alone, Anita."

For once I did what he asked. Even a year ago I wouldn't have trusted anyone dating a vampire. I'd have assumed they were corrupt. Sometimes, I still assumed that. "Fine, just call him now. Be bad if Jean-Claude got wasted while we were debating who should warn him."

Dolph motioned one of the uniforms over. He scribbled something in his notebook, tore the page out, folded it, and handed it to the uniform. "Take this to Detective Perry."

The uniform left, note in hand.

Dolph glanced back at his notes. "Now, tell me about vampire reproduction." He stared at what he'd written in his notebook. "Even saying that sounds wrong."

"Newly dead males often have leftover sperm from before death. That's the most common. Doctors recommend you wait six weeks before sex after you've become a vampire, sort of like after a vasectomy. Those babies are usually healthy. Being fertile is a lot rarer in older vamps. Frankly, until I saw Robert and his wife at a party, I didn't know vamps as old as he is could make babies."

"How old was Robert?"

"A century and some change."

"Can female vamps get pregnant?" he asked.

"Sometimes with the newly dead it happens, but the body spontaneously aborts or reabsorbs the baby. A dead body can't give life." I hesitated.

"What?" Dolph asked.

"There have been two reported cases of an older female vampire giving birth." I shook my head. "It wasn't pretty, and it certainly wasn't human."

"Did the babies survive?"

"For a while," I said. "The case that's the best documented was from the early 1900s. Back when Dr. Henry Mulligan was trying to find a cure for vampirism in the basement of Old Saint Louis City Hospital. One of his patients had given birth. Mulligan thought it was a sign that life was returning to her body. The baby had been born with a full set of pointed teeth and been more cannibal than vampire. Doctor Mulligan carried a scar on his wrist from the delivery until the day he died, which was about three years later when one of his patients crushed his face."

Dolph stared down at his notebook. "I write it all down. But frankly, this is one bit of information I hope I never have to use. They killed the baby, didn't they?"

"Yes," I said. "Before you ask, the father was not mentioned. The implication is that the father was human and may even have been Dr. Mulligan himself. Vampires can't make babies without a human partner, as far as we know."

"Nice to know humans are good for something besides blood," he said.

I shrugged. "I guess." Truthfully the thought of giving birth to a child with severe Vlad syndrome scared the hell out of me. I never planned on having sex with Jean-Claude, but if it ever came up, we were definitely taking precautions. No spontaneous sex, unless it included a condom.

Something must have shown on my face, because he asked, "Penny for your thoughts."

"Just glad I have high moral standards, I guess. Like I said, until I saw Robert and his wife, I thought a vampire over a century was sterile. And considering the length of time you'd have to keep the vamp's body temperature up—I shook my head—"I don't see how it could be accidental. But they both claimed it was. She hasn't even gotten their amnio results back yet."

"Amnio test for what?" he asked.

"Vlad syndrome," I said.

"Is she healthy enough to stand up under this kind of news?" he asked.

I shrugged. "She looked fine, but I'm no expert. I'd say she shouldn't be told over the phone, and she probably shouldn't be alone. I just don't know."

"Are you friends with the wife?"

I shook my head. "No, and don't even ask. I am not going to hold Monica's hand while she cries over her dead husband."

"All right, all right, it's outside your job description. Maybe I'll let Reynolds do it."

I glanced at the young woman. She and Monica probably deserved each other, but . . . "Jean-Claude might know who Monica's friends are. If he doesn't, I know of one. Catherine Maison-Gillete and Monica work together."

"Monica is a lawyer?" Dolph said.

I nodded.

"Great," he said.

"How much are you telling Jean-Claude about this?" I asked.

"Why?" Dolph asked.

"Because I want to know how much I can tell him."

"You don't discuss ongoing homicide cases with the monsters," he said.

"The victim was his companion for over a century. He's going to want to talk about it. I need to know what you're telling him so I won't let something slip by accident."

"You don't have a problem withholding information from your boyfriend?"

"Not on a homicide. Whoever did this is at the very least a witch, and maybe something scarier. It's probably one of the monsters, one way or another. So we can't tell the monsters all the details."

Dolph looked at me long and steady, then nodded. "Keep back the heart and the symbols used in the spell."

"He'll have to know about the heart, Dolph, or he'll guess. Head or heart, there isn't a lot else that'll kill a century-old vamp."

"You said you'd withhold information, Anita."

"I'm telling you what will wash and what won't, Dolph. Keeping back the heart from the vamps won't work because they'll guess. The symbols, fine, but

even there, Jean-Claude's going to have to wonder why he didn't feel Robert die."

"So what can we withhold from your boyfriend?"

"The exact symbols used in the spell. The knives." I thought about it for a moment. "How they got the heart out. Most people will still go through the ribs to tear out a heart. They see all the hospital shows on TV and they don't think about doing it differently."

"So if we get a suspect, we ask how'd you get the heart out?"

I nodded. "The crazies will start talking about stakes. Or be vague."

"Okay," he said. Dolph looked at me. "If anyone hated the monsters, I thought it was you. How can you date one of them?"

I met his eyes this time, not flinching. "I don't know."

He closed his notebook. "Greeley's probably wondering where I took you."

"What did you whisper to him? I would have bet money that he'd have held on to me."

"Told him you were a suspect in another murder. Said I wanted to watch your reaction."

"And he bought that?"

Dolph glanced back at the body. "Close to the truth, Anita."

He had me there. "Greeley didn't seem to like me very much," I said.

"You'd just killed a woman, Anita. Tends to give a bad first impression."

He had a point. "Do I need to have Catherine meet us down at the station?" I asked.

"You're not under arrest," Dolph said.

"I'd still like Catherine to meet us at the station."

"Call her."

I stood.

Dolph touched my arm. "Wait." He turned to the other cops. "Everybody wait outside for a minute." There were some glances, but no one argued, they just went. They'd all worked with Dolph before, and no one present outranked him.

When we were alone behind closed doors, he said, "Give it up."

"What?"

"You've got some kind of freaking blade down your back. Let's see it."

I sighed and reached under my hair to the hilt. I drew the knife out. It took a while. It was a long knife.

Dolph held out his hand. I handed it to him.

He balanced it on his open hands and gave a low whistle. "Jesus, what were you planning to do with this?"

I just looked at him.

"Who frisked you at the club?"

"Rizzo's partner," I said.

"Have to have a talk with him." Dolph looked up at me. "Be a bad thing to miss on someone who might use it. Is it the only weapon he missed?"

"Yep."

He stared at me. "Lean on the bureau, Anita."

My eyebrows raised. "You're going to pat me down?"

"Yeah."

I thought about arguing but decided not to. There were no more weapons to find. I leaned on the bureau. Dolph laid the knife on the chair and searched me. If there'd been anything to find, he'd have found it. Dolph was thorough in everything he did, methodical. It was one of the things that made him a great cop.

I looked at him in the mirror without turning around. "Satisfied?"

"Yeah." He handed the knife back to me, hilt first.

I must have looked as surprised as I felt. "You're giving it back to me?"

"If you'd lied to me about it being your last weapon, I'd have kept it and everything I found." He took a deep breath and let it out. "But I won't take your last weapon, not with a contract out on you."

I took the knife and resheathed it. It was a lot harder putting it back than getting it out. I finally had to use the mirror to sort of direct me.

"I take it it's a new weapon?" Dolph asked.

"Yeah." I flipped my hair out over the sheath and presto, you couldn't see it. I was really going to have practice with it more. It was too good a hiding place not to use more often.

"Any other impressions of the scene before I take you back?"

"Was there forced entry?"

"No."

"Someone he knew then," I said.

"Maybe."

I glanced at Robert's still form. "Could we finish this discussion in another room?"

"This one bother you?"

"I knew him, Dolph. I might not have liked him, but I knew him."

Dolph nodded. "You can finish telling me all about it in the nursery."

I looked at him. I could feel myself going pale. I was not up to seeing what Monica would have done with a nursery. "You're developing a mean streak, Dolph."

"Can't seem to get past the fact you're dating the Master of the City, Anita. Just can't shake it."

"You want to punish me because I'm dating a vampire?"

He looked at me, a long searching look. I didn't look away. "I want you to not date him."

"You're not my dad."

"Does your family know?"

I did look away then. "No."

"They're Catholic, aren't they?"

"I am not going to have this discussion with you, Dolph."

"You need to have it with someone," he said.

"Maybe, but not with you."

"Look at him, Anita. Look at him, and tell me you could sleep with that."

"Drop it," I said.

"I can't."

We stared at each other. I was not going to stand here and explain my relationship with Jean-Claude to Dolph. It wasn't any of his business. "Then we have a problem."

There was a knock on the door. "Not now," Dolph said.

"Come in," I said.

The door opened. Goody. Zerbrowski walked in. Even better. I knew I was grinning like an idiot, but I couldn't seem to stop. The last time I'd seen him had been the day he got out of the hospital. He'd been nearly gutted by a shapeshifter, a wereleopard the size of a pony. His attacker had been not a lycanthrope but a shapeshifting witch. That was why Zerbrowski wasn't turning furry once a month. The witch had clawed him up horribly. I'd killed it. I'd held my hands over his stomach and pressed his intestines back into his body. I still had the scars from the same monster.

Zerbrowski's hair is normally curly and a mess, black going grey. He'd cut it short enough that it stayed in place. Made him look more serious, more grown-up, less like Zerbrowski. His suit was brown and looked like he'd slept in it. His tie was medium blue and matched nothing that he was wearing.

"Blake, long time no see."

I couldn't help myself; I walked over and hugged him. There are benefits to being a girl. Though, before Richard came into my life, I might have resisted the urge. Richard was bringing out my feminine side.

Zerbrowski hugged me awkwardly, laughing. "I always knew you wanted my body, Blake."

I pushed away from him. "You wish."

He eyed me up and down, eyes glittering with laughter. "If you dress up like that every night, I might leave Katie for you. If that skirt was any shorter, it'd be a lamp shade."

Even with the teasing, I was glad to see him. "How long have you been back on full duty?"

"Not long. I saw you on the news with your boyfriend."

"News?" I said. I'd forgotten about the media blitz Jean-Claude and I had walked through.

"He sure was pretty for a dead guy."

"Shit."

"What?" Dolph asked.

"It was national media, not just local."

"So?"

"My father doesn't know."

Zerbrowski laughed. "He does now."

"Shit."

"I guess you'll have that talk with your father after all," Dolph said.

There must have been something in Dolph's voice or my face, because the humor faded from Zerbrowski's face. "What's up, you two? You look like someone stepped on your puppy."

Dolph looked at me. I looked at him. "Philosophical differences," I said finally. Dolph didn't add anything. I hadn't really expected him to.

"Okay," Zerbrowski said. He knew Dolph well enough not to pry. Me alone, he'd have bugged the hell out of me, but not Dolph.

"One of the nearest neighbors is a serious right-wing vampire hater," he said. That got our attention.

"Explain," Dolph said.

"Delbert Spalding and his wife Dora sat on the couch, holding hands. She offered me iced tea. He objected to me saying that Robert had been murdered. Said you couldn't kill the dead." Zerbrowski dug a wrinkled notebook out of his suit pocket. He flipped some pages, tried to smooth the page down, gave up, and quoted. "Now that someone has destroyed that thing, the woman should abort that monster she's carrying. I don't believe in abortion normally, but this is abomination, pure abomination."

"Humans Against Vampires, at the very least," I said, "Maybe even Humans First."

"Maybe he just doesn't like living next door to a vampire," Dolph said. Zerbrowski and I looked at him.

"Did you ask Mr. Spalding if he belonged to either of the hate groups?" Dolph asked.

"He had HAV's newsletters scattered on his coffee table, gave me one."

"Great," I said, "evangelizing hatemongers."

"HAV doesn't advocate this kind of violence," Dolph said.

The way he said it made me wonder what mailing list Dolph was on. I shook my head. I wouldn't believe the worst of him just because he didn't like me dating the walking dead. A few months back, I'd have felt the same way.

"Humans First does," I said.

"We'll find out if Mr. Spalding is a member of Humans First," Dolph said.

"You also need to find out if the Spaldings have any magical talent," I said.

"How?" Dolph said.

"I could meet them, be in the same room with them. To be sure, I might have to touch them, shake hands."

"I shook Mr. Spalding's hand," Zerbrowski said. "It was like shaking anybody else's hand."

"You're a great cop, Zerbrowski, but you're almost a null. You could shake the grand high pooh-bah's hand and not get more than a twinge. Dolph's a complete null."

"What's a null?" Dolph asked.

"A magical null. Someone who has no magical or psychic ability. It's what let you cross the blood circle and kept me out."

"So you're saying *I* have some magical ability?" Zerbrowski asked.

I shook my head. "You're a tiny bit sensitive. Probably one of those people who get hunches that turn out to be right."

"I get hunches," Dolph said.

"I'll bet your hunches are based on experience, years of police work. Zerbrowski will make a leap of logic that makes no sense, but proves to be true. Am I wrong?"

They looked at each other, then at me, then both nodded. "Zerbrowski has his moments," Dolph said.

"You want to come shake the Spaldings' hands?" Zerbrowski asked.

"Detective Reynolds can do it. It's one of the reasons you brought her on board, right?"

They looked at each other again. Zerbrowski grinned. "I'll get Reynolds and go back over." He stopped at the door. "Katie's been after me to invite you over for dinner, meet the kids, a real domestic affair." He stared at me with his brown eyes guileless behind dark-rimmed glasses. "I was going to tell you to bring Richard, but if you're dating Count Dracula now, guess that'd be awkward." He stared at me, asking without asking.

"I'm still seeing Richard, you pushy son of a bitch."

He smiled. "Good. Bring him over a week from Saturday. Katie'll fix her famous mushroom chicken."

"If I was only dating Jean-Claude, would the invitation still include my boyfriend?"

"No," he said. "Katie's a little nervous. I don't think she'd be up to meeting Count Dracula."

"His name's Jean-Claude."

"I know." He shut the door behind him, and Dolph and I were alone with the body once more. The night was not looking up.

"What are we hunting for, Anita?" I was actually relieved that Dolph was talking business. I'd had enough personal chitchat to last the night.

"More than one murderer."

"Why?"

I looked up at him. "I don't know if there's enough humans in the world to pin a vampire to the floor like that. Even if it was other vampires or shapeshifters, it'd take more than one. I'd say two beings with abnormal strength to hold, and a third to put in the knives. Maybe more to hold, maybe more to do the spell. I don't know, but at least three."

"Even if they were vampires?" Dolph asked.

I nodded. "Unless one vamp was strong enough to have mind control over Robert." I looked down at the body, careful not to touch the circle. I forced myself to stare at what had been done to him. "No, once they started putting knives in him, I don't think any mind control would work. A human, yeah, they could have done this to a human and made him smile while they did it, but not another vamp. Did any of the neighbors see or hear anything? I mean the Spaldings may be involved, so they'd lie, but someone had to see or hear something. He didn't go quietly."

"They say no," Dolph said. He said it like he knew some or all of them had lied. One of the things cops learn first is that everyone lies. Some people to hide things, some people just for the hell of it, but everyone lies. Assume that everyone is hiding something, it saves time.

I stared at Robert's face, his mouth half-open, slack. There were rubbed marks at each corner of his mouth, a slight reddening. "Did you notice the marks by his mouth?"

"Yes," Dolph said.

"And you weren't going to mention them to me?"

"You were a suspect."

I shook my head. "You didn't really believe that. You're just playing all the details close to your chest, like always. I get tired of putting the pieces together when you've already done it."

"So, what do you make of the marks?" he asked, his voice neutral.

"You know damn well what I make of them. He may have been gagged while they did this to him. The neighbors really might not have heard anything. But that still doesn't say how the killers got into the house. If vampires were involved, they couldn't cross the threshold without an invitation. Robert wouldn't have invited strange vamps into his house, so someone with them had to be known, or human, or at least not vampire."

"Could a human cross the threshold and invite vampires inside?"

"Yes," I said.

Dolph was making notes, not looking at me. "So we're looking for a mixed group, at least one vamp, at least one not vamp, at least one witch or necromancer."

"You got that last from Reynolds," I said.

"You disagree?"

"No, but since I'm the only necromancer in town, it has to be outside talent." The moment I said it, I realized that outside talent was in town now. Dominic Dumare.

"John Burke couldn't do it?"

I thought about that. "John's a vaudun priest, but this isn't voodoo. I don't know if his knowledge of the arcane stretches this far. I also don't know if he's powerful enough to have done this, even with the knowledge."

"Are you powerful enough?"

I sighed. "I don't know, Dolph. I'm sort of new at necromancy. I mean, I've raised the dead for years, but not this formally." I motioned at the body. "I've never seen a spell like this."

He nodded. "Anything else?"

I hated dragging Dominic into it, but it was too bloody big a coincidence that a powerful necromancer hits town and a vamp gets taken out with necromancy. If he was innocent, I'd apologize. If he wasn't innocent, it was a death penalty case.

"Dominic Dumare is a necromancer. He just got into town."

"Could he have done this?" Dolph asked.

"I only met the man once, Dolph."

"Give me an opinion, Anita."

I thought about the feel of Dominic in my head. His offer to teach me necromancy. The big thing was that killing Robert and leaving the body for us to find was stupid. Dominic Dumare didn't strike me as a stupid man.

"He could have. He's a vampire's human servant, so it gives you two of your mixed group."

"Did the vampire know Robert?"

I shook my head. "Not to my knowledge."

"You got a number where we can reach Mr. Dumare?"

"I can call our night secretary and get it for you."

"Great." Dolph stared down at his notes. "Is Dumare your best suspect?"

I thought about that. "Yeah, I guess he is."

"You got any proof?"

"He's a necromancer, and this was done by someone with knowledge of necromancy." I shrugged.

"The same reason we suspected you," Dolph said. He almost smiled when he said it.

"Point taken," I said. "Prejudiced little me."

Dolph closed his notebook. "I'll take you down for your statement then."

"Fine. Now can I call Catherine?"

"There's a phone in the kitchen."

Zerbrowski opened the door. "The wife's here, and she's pretty hysterical."

"Who's with her?" Dolph asked.

"Reynolds."

Through the open door, I heard a woman talking, just below the level of screaming. "Robert, my husband, dead? He can't be dead. He can't be dead. I have to see him. You don't understand what he is. He isn't dead." The voice was coming closer.

"She's doesn't need to see this, Anita."

I nodded. I walked out the door and closed it tightly behind me. I couldn't see Monica yet, but I could hear her. Her voice rising, growing thinner with panic. "You don't understand. He isn't really dead."

I was betting that Monica wouldn't take my word for Robert being well and truly dead. I guess if it was Jean-Claude lying in there, I wouldn't, either. I'd have to see for myself. I took a deep breath and walked forward to meet the grieving widow. Damn. This night just kept getting better and better.

Chapter 20

The hospital room was soft mauve with paintings of flowers on the wall. The bed had a mauve bedspread and pink sheets. Monica lay in the bed hooked up to an IV and two different kinds of monitors. A strap across her belly monitored the contractions. Gratefully, the lines had gone flat. The other monitor was the baby's heartbeat. The sound had scared me at first; too fast, like the heart of a small bird. When the nurses assured me the heartbeat was

normal, I relaxed. After nearly two hours, the frantic beat had become a comforting sound like white noise.

Monica's auburn hair was plastered in wet tendrils to her forehead. Her careful makeup was smeared across her face. They had been forced to give her a sedative, though it wasn't great for the baby. She had fallen into a light, almost feverish sleep. Her head turned, eyes flicking behind her lids, mouth working, caught in some dream, a very bad dream probably, after the night she'd had. It was almost two o'clock, and I still had to go to the station and make my statement to Detective Greeley. Catherine was on her way to take my place at Monica's bedside. I'd be glad to see her.

I had little crescent nail marks on my right hand. Monica had clung to it like it was all that was holding her together. At the worst of the contractions, when it looked like Monica would lose her baby as well as her husband, her long, painted nails had bitten into me, and only when blood trickled down my hand in fine crimson lines did a nurse say something. When Monica calmed down, they had insisted on messing with the wounds. They'd used the cartoon bandages they kept for the babies, so that my hand was covered in Mickey Mouse and Goofy.

There was a television on a shelf on the wall, but I hadn't turned it on. The only sounds were the whirr of air circulating through the vents and the baby's heartbeat.

A uniformed cop stood outside the door. If Robert had been killed by a hate group, then Monica and the baby were possible targets. If he'd been killed for personal reasons, Monica might know something. Either way, she was in danger. So they'd put a guard on her. Fine with me, since all I had left was a knife. I was really missing my guns.

The phone on the bedside table rang, and I flung myself out of the chair, scrambling for it, terrified that it would wake Monica. I cupped the receiver against my mouth and spoke quietly while my pulse pounded. "Yes?"

"Anita?" It was Edward.

"How did you know where I was?"

"All that matters is that if I can find you, so can someone else."

"Is the contract still on?"

"Yes."

"Damn. What about the time deadline?"

"Expanded to forty-eight hours."

"Well, shit. Aren't *they* determined."

"I think you should go underground for a while, Anita."

"You mean hide?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you wanted me to be bait."

"If you stay out as bait, we need more bodyguards. The werewolves and vamps are monsters, but they're still amateurs. We're professionals, it's what gives us our edge. I'm good, but I can't be everywhere."

"Like following me into the women's john," I said.

I heard him sigh. "I let you down."

"I was careless, too, Edward."

"So you agree?"

"To hiding? Yeah. You got some place in mind?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"I don't like the tone in your voice, Edward."

"It's the most secure place in town and has built-in bodyguards."

"Where?" That one word sounded suspicious even to me.

"Circus of the Damned," he said.

"You have got to be out of your freaking mind."

"It's the Master's daytime retreat, Anita. It's a fortress. Jean-Claude's sealed up the tunnel we came through to get Nikolaos. It's secure."

"You want me to spend the day bedded down with vampires. I don't think so."

"You going back to Richard's house?" Edward asked. "How safe are you going to be there? How safe will you be anywhere above ground?"

"Dammit, Edward."

"I'm right, and you know it."

I wanted to argue, but he was right. The Circus was the most secure place I knew. Hell, the place had dungeons. But the idea of voluntarily sleeping there made my skin crawl. "How can I rest surrounded by vampires, even friendly ones?"

"Jean-Claude's offered you his bed. Before you get mad, he'll sleep in his coffin."

"That's what he says now," I said.

"I'm not worried about your virtue, Anita. I'm worried about keeping you alive. And I'm admitting that I can't keep you safe. I'm good. I'm the best money can buy, but I'm only one person. One person, no matter how good, isn't enough."

That was scary. Edward admitting that he was in over his head. I never thought I'd live to see it. Come to think of it, I almost hadn't.

"Okay, I'll do it, but for how long?"

"You hide out, and I'll check some things. If I don't have to guard you, I can do more."

"How long?"

"A day, maybe two."

"What if whoever it is finds out I'm at the Circus?"

"They might try for you," Edward said. His voice was very matter-of-fact when he said it.

"And if they do?"

"If you, a half dozen vampires, and almost that many werewolves can't handle the action, then I don't think it matters."

"You're just comforting as hell."

"I know you, Anita. If I was any more comforting, you might refuse to hide."

"Twenty-four hours, Edward, then I want another plan. I am not going to hide at the bottom of a hole and wait for people to kill me."

"Agreed. I'll pick you up after you make your statement to the cops."

"Where do you get your information?"

He laughed, but it was harsh. "If I know where you'll be, so does someone else. Might ask your cop friends if they have a spare vest."

"You mean a bulletproof vest?"

"Couldn't hurt."

"Are you trying to scare me?"

"Yes."

"You're doing a good job."

"Thanks. Don't come out of the police station until I come in and get you. Avoid being in the open if you can."

"You really think someone else will try to hit me tonight?"

"We're planning for worst-case scenarios from now on, Anita. No more chances. I'll see you then." He hung up before I could say anything else.

I stood there holding the phone, scared. In all the panic with Monica and her baby, I'd almost forgotten that someone was trying to kill me. Probably not a good thing to forget.

I started to hang the phone up, but dialed Richard's number instead. He answered on the second ring, which meant he'd been waiting up. Damn.

"Richard, it's me."

"Anita, where are you?" His voice sounded relieved, then cautious. "I mean, are you coming back here tonight?"

The answer was no, but not for the reasons he feared. I told him what had happened, the shortest possible version.

"Whose idea was it that you stay with Jean-Claude?" There was a hint of anger in his voice.

"I am not staying with Jean-Claude. I am staying at the Circus."

"And the difference is what?"

"Look, Richard, I am too tired to argue with you about this. Edward suggested it, and you know he likes Jean-Claude even less than you do."

"I doubt that," he said.

"Richard, I did not call you to fight. I called to tell you what's happening."

"I appreciate the call." I'd never heard him sound so sarcastic. "Do you want your clothes?"

"Damn, I hadn't even thought about that."

"I'll bring them to the Circus."

"You don't have to do that, Richard."

"You don't want me to?"

"No, I'd love to have my stuff, and not just the clothes if you get my drift?"

"I'll bring it all."

"Thanks."

"I'll pack a bag for myself."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I've stayed at the Circus before. Remember, I used to be one of Jean-Claude's wolves."

"I remember. Should you ask Jean-Claude's permission before you invite yourself over?"

"I'll phone first. Unless you don't want me there tonight." His voice was very quiet.

"If it's okay with Jean-Claude, it's fine with me. I could use the moral support."

He let out a breath like he'd been holding it. "Great. Great, I'll see you there."

"I have to give a statement to the cops about the incident at Danse Macabre. It could take a couple of hours, so don't rush."

"Afraid Jean-Claude will hurt me?" He was quiet for a moment. "Or are you afraid I'll hurt him?"

I thought about that. "Worried about you."

"Glad to hear it," he said, and I could hear him smile.

The reason I was worried about Richard is he wasn't a killer. Jean-Claude was. Richard might start a fight, but Jean-Claude would finish it. I didn't say any of this out loud. Richard wouldn't have appreciated it.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you tonight," he said.

"Even at the Circus?"

"Anywhere. Love you."

"Love you, too."

We hung up. Neither of us had said good-bye, a Freudian slip, perhaps.

I was betting that Richard and Jean-Claude would find something to fight about, and I was really too tired to mess with it. But if I'd told Richard to stay away, he would have assumed I wanted to be alone with Jean-Claude, which was certainly not true. So they'd have their little fight. Frankly, I had my own fight all picked out, one involving me, Jean-Claude, and Damian. They'd broken the law at Danse Macabre, broken it enough that with the right judge, I might have gotten a warrant of execution on Damian. We could have one great big glorious knock-down, drag-out fight.

I wondered where everybody would sleep, and with who.

Chapter 21

Circus of the Damned is a combination of traveling carnival, circus, and one of the lower rungs of hell. Out front, fanged clowns dance above the lights that spell the name. Posters stretch the sides of the building, proclaiming, "Watch zombies rise from the grave. See the Lamia—half-snake, half-woman." There is no trickery at the Circus, everything advertised is absolutely real. It is one of the few vampire tourist attractions that welcome children. If I'd had a

kid, I wouldn't have brought the little tyke near the place. Even I didn't feel safe.

Edward had picked me up outside the police station, just like he said he would. My statement had taken three hours, not two. The only reason I got out that soon was Bob, Catherine's husband and fellow lawyer, had finally told them to charge me or let me go. Truthfully, I thought they might charge me. But I had three witnesses saying the killing was self-defense, witnesses that I'd never met before tonight. That helped. The DA usually didn't charge on self-defense cases. Usually.

Edward took me into the Circus through a side door. There were no lights to mark it as special, but there was also no doorknob on the outside of the steel reinforced door. Edward knocked. The door opened, and in we went.

Jason closed the door behind us. I had missed him earlier at Danse Macabre. I certainly would have remembered the outfit. He was wearing a sleeveless plastic shirt, molded to his body. The pants were half crinkly blue cloth that looked like colored foil, with oval plastic windows, exposing his thigh, calf, and as he turned, one buttock.

I shook my head, smiling. "Please tell me Jean-Claude didn't make you wear that out where people could see you."

Jason grinned at me and turned so he flashed his butt at me. "Don't you like it?"

"I'm not sure," I said.

"Discuss fashion later, in a more secure place," Edward said. He glanced at the door to our right that led into the main part of the Circus. It was never locked, though it had a sign above the door about authorized personnel only. We were standing in a stone room with an electric light dangling from the ceiling. It was a storage area. A third door was set in the far wall. Behind it was a stairway and the nether regions where the vampires stayed during the day.

"I'll be underground, literally, soon enough, Edward."

Edward looked at me for a long moment. "You promised to hide out for twenty-four hours. No going outside for any reason. Don't even go into the main part of the Circus when it's open to the public. Just stay downstairs."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"This isn't a joke, Anita."

I tugged at the bulletproof vest I'd put over my dress. It was too large for me, hot, and uncomfortable. "If I thought it was funny, I wouldn't have worn this."

"I'll bring you some armor that fits when I come back."

I met his pale blue eyes and saw something I'd never seen before. He was worried.

"You think they're going to kill me, don't you?"

He didn't look away. He didn't flinch. But what I saw in his face made me wish he had. "When I come back tomorrow, I'll have help with me."

"What kind of help?"

"My kind."

"What does that mean?"

He shook his head. "Twenty-four hours means that you hide until dawn tomorrow, Anita. With luck, I'll have a name for us, and we can kill him. Don't be careless while I'm gone."

I wanted to say something casual, joking, like "I didn't know you cared," but I couldn't. I couldn't joke staring into his serious eyes.

"I'll be careful."

He nodded. "Lock the door behind me." He went outside and Jason locked the door.

Jason leaned against the door for a second. "Why does he scare me?"

"Because you're not stupid," I said.

He smiled. "Thanks."

"Let's get downstairs," I said.

"Nervous?"

"It's been a long night, Jason. No games."

He pushed away from the door and said, "Lead the way."

I opened the door to the stone stairway, which led downward. It was wide enough for us to walk abreast. In fact, there was almost room for a third, as if the stairway had been built for wider things than human bodies.

Jason closed the door with a resounding thump. It made me jump. He started to say something, but the look on my face stopped him. Edward's parting comments had unnerved me. If I didn't know better, I'd have said I was scared. Naw.

Jason walked down the steps ahead of me, exaggerating his walk just a touch to show off his derriere.

"You can cut the peep show," I said.

"You don't like the view?" He leaned against the wall, hands pressed behind him, showing off his chest.

I laughed and walked past him, clicking my nails down his shirt. It was solid and hard as a beetle's carapace. "Is that as uncomfortable as it looks?"

He fell into step beside me. "It's not uncomfortable. The ladies at Danse Macabre liked it a lot."

I glanced at him. "I bet they did."

"I like flirting."

"No joke."

He laughed. "For someone who doesn't flirt, you have a lot of guys after you."

"Maybe because I don't flirt," I said.

Jason was quiet as we walked to the bend in the stairs. "You mean because you're a challenge, they keep coming around?"

"Something like that."

I couldn't see around the bend of the stairs. I hated not being able to see around corners. But this time I was invited; I hadn't come to kill anybody. The vamps tended to be a lot friendlier when you weren't trying to kill them.

"Is Richard here yet?"

"Not yet." He glanced back at me. "Do you think it's a good idea to have them both here at the same time?"

"No," I said, "absolutely not."

"Well, at least we all agree it's a bad idea," he said.

The door at the bottom of the stairs was iron bound, made of a heavy, dark wood. It looked like a portal to another time—a time when dungeons were in vogue, and knights rescued ladies fair or slaughtered a few peasants and no one minded, except maybe the peasants.

Jason drew a key out of his pants pocket. He unlocked the door and pushed. It opened on well-oiled hinges.

"Since when did you get a key?" I asked.

"I live here now."

"What about college?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't seem very important anymore."

"You plan on being Jean-Claude's lap-wolf forever?"

"I'm having a good time," he said.

I shook my head. "I fight like hell to stay free of him, and you just give in. I don't understand that at all."

"You have a college degree, right?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"I don't. But here we both are, ending up in the same place."

He had me there.

Jason motioned me through the door with a low flourish that had imitation Jean-Claude written all over it. Jean-Claude made it seem courtly and real. Jason meant it for a joke.

The door led into Jean-Claude's living room. The ceiling stretched up into darkness, but silken drapes hung in black and white folds that formed cloth walls on three sides. The fourth side was bare stone, painted white. A white stone fireplace looked original, which I knew it wasn't. The mantelpiece was black-veined white marble. A silver fireplace screen hid the hearth. There were four chairs in black and silver grouped around a wood and glass coffee table. A black vase sat on the table filled with white tulips. My high heels sank into the thick, black carpet.

There was one other addition to the room that stopped me in my tracks. A painting hung above the fireplace. Three people dressed in the style of the 1600s. The woman wore white and silver with a square bodice showing quite a bit of décolletage, her brown hair styled in careful ringlets. She held a red rose loosely in one hand. A man stood behind her, tall and slender, with dark gold hair in ringlets over his shoulders. He had a mustache and a Vandyke beard, so dark gold they were almost brown. He wore one of those floppy hats with feathers and was dressed in white and gold. But it was the other man who made me walk towards the painting.

He was seated just behind the woman. He was dressed in black with silver embroidery and a wide lace collar and lace cuffs. He held a floppy black hat with a single white feather and a silver buckle across his lap. Black hair fell in ringlets over his shoulders. He was clean shaven, and the artist had managed to capture the sinking blue of his eyes. I stared at Jean-Claude's face painted hundreds of years before I was born. The other two were smiling. Only he was

solemn and perfect, dark to their lightness. He was like the shadow of death come to the ball.

I knew Jean-Claude was centuries old, but I'd never had such obvious proof, never had it shoved in my face. The portrait bothered me for another reason. It made me wonder if Jean-Claude had lied about his age.

A sound made me turn. Jason had slumped into one of the chairs. Jean-Claude stood behind me. He'd taken off his jacket and his curling black hair spilled across the shoulders of his crimson shirt. The shirt cuffs were long and tight at the wrist, held by three antique jet beads just like the high neck of the shirt. Without the jacket to distract the eye, the pale oval of skin framed by the red cloth gleamed. The cloth covered his nipples but left his belly button bare and drew the eye to the top of his black pants. Or maybe it just drew me. It was a bad idea to be here. He was just as dangerous as the assassin, maybe more. Dangerous in ways I had no words for.

He glided towards me in his black boots. I watched him walk closer like a deer caught in headlights. I expected him to flirt or ask how I liked the painting. Instead, he said, "Tell me of Robert. The police said he was dead, but they know nothing. You have seen the body. Is he truly dead?"

His voice was thick with concern, worry. It caught me completely off guard. "They took his heart."

"If it is only a stake through the heart, he might survive if it was removed."

I shook my head. "The heart was taken out completely. We couldn't find it in the house or the yard."

Jean-Claude stopped. He slumped suddenly into one of the chairs, staring at nothing, or nothing I could see. "Then he is truly gone." His voice held sorrow the way it sometimes held laughter, so that I felt his words like a cold, grey rain.

"You treated Robert like dirt. Why all this weeping and wailing?"

He looked at me. "I am not weeping."

"But you treated him badly."

"I was his master. If I had treated him kindly, he would have seen it as a sign of weakness. He would have challenged me and I would have killed him. Do not criticize things that you do not understand." There was anger in that last sentence, enough to brush heat along my skin.

Normally, it would have pissed me off, but tonight . . . "I apologize. You're right. I don't understand. I didn't think you gave a damn about Robert unless he could further your power."

"Then you do not understand me at all, *ma petite*. He was my companion for over a century. After a century, I would mourn even an enemy's passing. Robert was not my friend, but he was mine. Mine to punish, mine to reward, mine to protect. I have failed him."

He stared up at me, eyes gone blue and alien. "I am grateful to you for seeing to Monica. The last thing I can do for Robert is to tend his wife and child. They will want for nothing."

He stood suddenly in one smooth motion. "Come, *ma petite*. I will show you to our room." I didn't like the our, but I didn't argue. This new, improved, emotional Jean-Claude had me confused.

"Who are the other two in the painting?"

He glanced at it. "Julianna and Asher. She was his human servant. The three of us traveled together for nearly twenty years."

Good. He couldn't give me some bullshit about the clothing being costumes now. "You're too young to have been a Musketeer."

He stared at me, face carefully blank, giving nothing away. "Whatever do you mean, *ma petite*?"

"Don't even try. The clothing is from the 1600s, around the time of Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*. When we first met, you told me you were two hundred and ten. Eventually, I figured out you were lying, that you were closer to three hundred."

"If Nikolaos had known my true age, she might have killed me, *ma petite*."

"Yeah, the old Master of the City was a real bitch. But she's dead. Why still lie?"

"You mean why am I lying to you?" he said.

I nodded. "Yeah, that's what I mean."

He smiled. "You are a necromancer, *ma petite*. I would have thought you could judge my age without my help."

I tried to read his face and couldn't. "You've always been hard to read; you know that."

"So glad I can be a challenge in some area."

I let that go. He knew exactly how much of a challenge he was, but for the first time in a long time, I was bothered. Telling a vamp's age was one of my talents, not an exact science to be sure, but one I was good at. I'd never been off by this much. "A century older, my, my."

"Are you so sure that it is only a century?"

I stared at him. I let his power beat across my skin, rolled the feel of it around in my head. "Pretty sure."

He smiled. "Do not frown so, *ma petite*. Being able to hide my age is one of my talents. I pretended to be a hundred years older when Asher was my companion. It allowed us freedom to wander through the lands of other masters."

"What made you stop trying to pass for older?"

"Asher needed help, and I was not master enough to help him." He looked up at the portrait. "I . . . humbled myself to gain him aid."

"Why?"

"The Church had a theory that vampires could be cured by holy items. They bound Asher with holy items and silver chains. They used holy water on him, drop by drop, trying to save his soul."

I stared up at that handsome, smiling face. I'd been bitten by a master vampire once upon a time and had the wound cleansed with holy water. It had felt like a red-hot brand was being shoved into my skin, like all the blood in my body had turned to boiling oil. I had vomited and screamed and thought myself

very brave for not passing out altogether. That had been one bite mark, one day. Having what amounted to acid dripped on you until you died was in the top five ways not to go out.

"What happened to the girl, Julianna?"

"She was burned as a witch."

"Where were you?"

"I had taken a ship to see my mother. She was dying. I was on my way back when I heard Asher's call. I could not get there in time. I swear by all that is holy or unholy that I tried. I rescued Asher, but he never forgave me."

"He's not dead?" I asked.

"No."

"How hurt was he?"

"Until I met Sabin I thought Asher's scars the worst injury I'd ever known a vampire to survive."

"Why did you hang the painting if it bothers you this much?"

He sighed and looked at me. "Asher sent it as a present, to congratulate me for becoming Master of the City. The three of us were companions, almost family. Asher and I were true friends, both masters, both of near equal power, both in love with Julianna. She was devoted to him, but I had her favor as well."

"You mean a ménage à trois?"

He nodded.

"Asher doesn't hold a grudge?"

"Oh, no, he holds a grudge. If the council would allow it, he would have come with the picture and had his revenge."

"To kill you?"

Jean-Claude smiled. "Asher always had a strong sense of irony, *ma petite*. He petitioned the council for your life, not mine."

My eyes widened. "What did I ever do to him?"

"I killed his human servant; he kills mine. Justice."

I stared back up at the handsome face. "The council said no?"

"Indeed."

"You have any other old enemies running around?"

Jean-Claude gave a weak smile. "Many, *ma petite*, but none in town at the moment."

I looked up at those smiling faces. I didn't know quite how to phrase it, but said it anyway. "You all look so young."

"I am physically the same, *ma petite*."

I shook my head. "Maybe young isn't the word I want. Maybe naive."

He smiled. "By the time this painting was made, *ma petite*, naive was not a word that described me, either."

"Fine, have it your way." I looked at him, studying his face. He was beautiful, but there was something in his eyes that wasn't in the painting, some level of sorrow or terror. Something I had no word for, but it was there just the same. A vampire may not wrinkle up, but living a couple of centuries leaves its mark. Even if it's only a shadow in the eyes, a tightness around the mouth.

I turned to Jason, who was still slumped in the chair. "Does he give these little history lessons often?"

"Only to you," Jason said.

"You never ask questions?" I asked.

"I'm just his pet. You don't answer questions for your pet."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

Jason smiled. "Why should I care about the painting? The woman's dead, so I can't have sex with her. Why should I care?"

I felt Jean-Claude move past me, but couldn't follow with my eyes. His hand was a blur. The chair clattered to the floor, spilling Jason with it. Blood showed at his mouth.

"Never speak of her again in such a manner."

Jason touched the back of his hand to his mouth and came away with blood. "Whatever you say." He licked the blood off his hand with long slow movements of his tongue.

I stared from one to the other of them. "You are both crazy."

"Not crazy, *ma petite*, merely not human."

"Being a vampire doesn't give you the right to treat people like that. Richard doesn't beat people up."

"Which is why he will never hold the pack."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Even if he swallows his high morals and kills Marcus, he will not be cruel enough to frighten the rest. He will be challenged again and again. Unless he begins slaughtering people, he will eventually die."

"Slapping people around won't keep him alive," I said.

"It would help. Torture works well, but I doubt that Richard would have the stomach for it."

"I couldn't stomach it."

"But you litter the ground with bodies, *ma petite*. Killing is the best deterrent of all."

I was too tired to be having this conversation. "It's 4:30 in the morning. I want to go to bed."

Jean-Claude smiled. "Why, *ma petite*, you are not usually so eager."

"You know what I mean," I said.

Jean-Claude took a gliding step towards me. He didn't touch me, but he stood very close and looked at me. "I know exactly what you mean, *ma petite*."

That brought heat in a rush up my neck. The words were innocent. He made them sound intimate, obscene.

Jason righted the chair and stood, licking the blood off the corner of his mouth. He said nothing, merely watched us like a well-trained dog, seen and not heard.

Jean-Claude took a step back. I felt him move, but couldn't follow it with my eyes. There had been a time only months ago that it would have looked like magic, like he'd just appeared a few feet away.

He held his hand out towards me. "Come, *ma petite*. Let us retire for the day."

I'd held his hand before, so why was I left standing, staring, like he was offering me the forbidden fruit that once tasted would change everything? He was nearly four hundred years old. Jean-Claude's face from all those long years ago was smiling down at me, and there he stood with almost the same smile. If I'd ever needed proof, I had it. He'd struck Jason down like a dog he didn't much like. And still he was so beautiful, it made my chest ache.

I wanted to take his hand. I wanted to run my hands over the red shirt, explore that open oval of flesh. I folded my hands over my stomach and shook my head.

His smile widened until a hint of fang showed. "You have held my hand before, *ma petite*. Why is tonight any different?" His voice held an edge of mockery.

"Just show me the room, Jean-Claude."

He let his hand drop to his side, but he didn't seem offended. If anything, he seemed pleased, which irritated me.

"Bring Richard through when he arrives, Jason, but announce him before he comes. I don't want to be interrupted."

"Anything you say," Jason said. He smirked at us, at me, a knowing look on his face. Did everyone and their wolf believe I was sleeping with Jean-Claude? Of course, maybe it was a case of the lady protesting too much. Maybe.

"Just bring Richard to the room when he comes," I said. "You won't be interrupting anything." I glanced at Jean-Claude while I said the last.

He laughed, that warm touchable sound of his that wove over my skin like silk. "Even your resistance to temptation grows thin, *ma petite*."

I shrugged. I would have liked to argue, but he'd smell a lie. Even a run-of-the-mill werewolf can smell desire. Jason wasn't run-of-the-mill. So everyone in the room knew I was hot for Jean-Claude. So what?

"No is one of my favorite words, Jean-Claude. You should know that by now."

The laughter faded from his face, leaving his blue, blue eyes gleaming, but not with humor. Something darker and more sure of itself looked out his eyes. "I survive on hope alone, *ma petite*."

Jean-Claude parted the black and white drapes to reveal the bare, grey stones that the room was made of. A large hallway stretched deeper into the labyrinth. Torchlight gleamed beyond the electricity of the living room. He stood there, backlit against the flame and the soft modern lights. Some trick of light and shadow plunged half his face into darkness and brought a pinprick glow to his eyes. Or maybe it wasn't a trick of the light. Maybe it was just him.

"Shall we go, *ma petite*?"

I walked into that outer darkness. He didn't try to touch me as I moved past him. I'd have given him a brownie point for resisting the urge, except I knew him too well. He was just biding his time. Touching me now might piss me off. Later, it might not. Even I couldn't guarantee when the mood would be right.

Jean-Claude moved ahead of me. He glanced back over his shoulder. "After all, *ma petite*, you do not know the way to my bedroom."

"I've been there once," I said.

"Carried unconscious and dying. It hardly counts." He glided down the hall. He put a little extra sway to his walk, somewhat like Jason had done on the stairs, but where it had been funny with the werewolf, Jean-Claude made it utterly seductive.

"You just wanted to walk in front so I'd have to stare at your butt."

He spoke without turning around. "No one makes you stare at me, *ma petite*, not even me."

And that was the truth. The horrible truth. If in some dark part of my heart I hadn't been attracted to him from the beginning, I'd have killed him long ago. Or tried to. I had more legal vampire kills than any other vampire hunter in the country. They didn't call me the Executioner for nothing. So how did I end up being safer in the depths of the Circus of the Damned with the monsters than above ground with the humans? Because somewhere along the line, I didn't kill the monster I should have.

That particular monster was gliding up the hallway ahead of me. And he still had the cutest butt I'd ever seen on a dead man.

Chapter 22

Jean-Claude leaned one shoulder against the wall. He'd already opened the door. He motioned me inside with a graceful sweep of his hand.

My high heels sank into the deep, white carpet. White wallpaper with tiny silver designs graced the walls. There was a white door in the left-hand wall near the bed. The bed had white satin sheets. A dozen black and white pillows were grouped at the head of the bed. A fan of black and white drapes fell from the ceiling, forming a partial canopy over the bed. The black lacquer vanity and chest of drawers still sat in opposite corners. The wallpaper and the door were new. Guess which bothered me more.

"Where does the door go?"

"The bathroom." He closed the outer door and walked past me to sit on the edge of the bed. There were no chairs.

"A bathroom. That wasn't here last time," I said.

"Not in its present form, but it was here just the same."

He leaned back on his elbows. The movement strained the cloth of his shirt, exposing as much skin as the shirt would allow. The line of dark hair that started low on his belly peeked just above the cloth.

The room was getting warmer. I undid the velcro fastenings on the bulletproof vest and slid it over my head. "Where do you want me to put this?"

"Anywhere you like," he said. His voice was soft and more intimate than the words themselves.

I walked around to the far side of the bed, away from him, and laid the vest across the satin sheets.

He lay back against the sheets, his black hair framing his pale face to perfection. Warmer, it was definitely getting warmer in here.

"Mind if I freshen up?"

"Whatever I have is yours, *ma petite*. You should know that by now."

I backed into the door and opened it with a feeling of relief. I closed the door without really looking at the bathroom. When I looked up, I let out a silent *wow*.

The room was long and narrow. It had a double sink and mirrors with round white lightbulbs edging it. The sinks were black marble with white veins running through. Every faucet, every metal edge, gleamed silver. The floor was black carpeting. A half wall of silver and mirrored panels hid the black stool against a black wall. Another half wall graced the other side. Then there was the bathtub. Three marble steps led up to a black bathtub, big enough for four people. The faucet was a silver swan with outspread wings. There was no way to take a shower, which was my preferred method, and the swan was a bit much, but other than that, it was lovely.

I sat down on the cool marble edging. It was nearly five in the morning. My eyes burned from lack of sleep. The adrenaline rush of nearly getting killed had long since faded. What I wanted was to be comforted, held, yes, sex was in there somewhere, but that wasn't my highest priority tonight. I think both Richard and Jean-Claude would say it was never my highest priority, but that was their problem. Okay, it was our problem.

If it had been Richard stretched out on the bed in the next room, I would have jumped him tonight. But it wasn't Richard, and once Richard got here, we'd be sleeping in Jean-Claude's bed. Seemed pretty tacky to have sex for the first time in your other boyfriend's bed. But it wasn't just the boys suffering from sexual tension, I was drowning, too.

Was Richard right? Was the fact that Jean-Claude wasn't human the only thing keeping me out of his bed? No. Or at least I didn't think so. Out of Richard's bed? The answer, sadly, was yes, maybe.

I freshened up and couldn't help checking myself in the mirror. The makeup had faded a little, but the liner still made my large, dark eyes stand out in dramatic contrast. The blush was almost gone, and the lipstick had long ago vanished. I had lipstick in my purse. I could freshen that at least. But freshening my lipstick was like admitting I cared what Jean-Claude thought of me. I did care. That was the truly scary part. I did not put on more lipstick. I walked back into the bedroom as is, let him make of it what he would.

He was leaning on one elbow, watching me as I came through the door.

"*Ma petite*, you are beautiful."

I shook my head. "Pretty, I'll give you, but not beautiful."

He cocked his head to one side, sending a wave of hair over one shoulder.

"Who told you you were not beautiful?"

I leaned against the door. "When I was a little girl, my father would come up behind my mother. He would wrap his arms around her waist, bury his face in her hair, and say, 'How is the most beautiful woman in the world today?' He said it at least once a day. She would laugh and tell him not to be silly, but I agreed with him. To me, she was the most beautiful woman in the world."

"She was your mother. All little girls think that of their mother."

"Maybe, but two years after she died, Dad remarried. He married Judith, who was tall and blond and blue-eyed, and nothing like my mother. If he had really believed my mother was the most beautiful woman in the world, why did he marry some Nordic ice princess? Why didn't he marry someone small and dark like my mother?"

"I don't know, *ma petite*," he said quietly.

"Judith had a daughter only a couple of years younger than me. Then they had Josh together and he was as blond and blue-eyed as the rest of them. I looked like a small dark mistake in the family photos."

"Your skin is almost as pale as mine, *ma petite*."

"But I have my mother's eyes and hair. My hair isn't brunette, it's black. A woman asked Judith once in front of me if I was adopted. Judith said, no, I was from her husband's first marriage."

Jean-Claude slid off the bed. He moved towards me, and I had to look at the floor. I wanted badly to be held, to be comforted. If it had been Richard, I'd have gone to him. But it wasn't Richard.

Jean-Claude touched my cheek and raised my face until I had to look at him. "I have lived for over three hundred years. In that time, the ideal of beauty has changed many times. Large breasts, small, thin, curved, tall, short, they have all been the height of beauty at one time or another. But in all that time, *ma petite*, I have never desired anyone the way I desire you." He leaned towards me, and I didn't move away. His lips brushed mine in a gentle kiss.

He took that one last step to press our bodies together, and I stopped him, one hand on his chest, but all I met was bare skin. The slickness of his cross-shaped burn scar met my fingertips. I moved my hand and found his heart beating against my palm. Not an improvement.

He drew back, a breath, and whispered into my mouth, "Tell me no, *ma petite*, and I will stop."

I had to swallow twice before I could speak. "No."

Jean-Claude stepped away from me. He lay back on the bed as he had earlier, propped on his elbows, his legs from the knees hung off the bed. He stared at me, daring me to come join him, I think.

I wasn't that stupid. There was some dark part of me that was tempted. Lust has less logic than love, sometimes, but it's easier to fight.

"I have played the mortal for you these many months. I thought in March when you held my naked body, when you shared blood with me, that it would be a changing point for us. That you would give in to your desire and admit your feelings for me."

A burning wash of color crept up my face. I had no good excuse for the foreplay that got out of hand. I was weak, so sue me. "I gave you blood because you were dying. I'd have never done it otherwise. You know that."

He stared at me. It wasn't vampire tricks that made me want to look away. It was a raw honesty that I'd never seen in his face before. "I know that now, *ma petite*. When we returned from Branson, you threw yourself into Richard's arms as though he were a lifeline. We continued to date, but you drew away. I felt it and did not know how to stop it."

He sat up on the bed, hands clasped in his lap. A look of frustration and confusion passed over his face. "I have never had another woman deny me, *ma petite*."

I laughed. "Oh, your ego isn't big."

"It is not ego, *ma petite*, it is the truth."

I leaned against the bathroom door and thought about that one. "No one in almost three hundred years has ever said no to you?"

"You find that so hard to believe?"

"If I can do it, so can they."

He shook his head. "You do not appreciate how very harsh your strength of will is, *ma petite*. It is impressive. You have no idea how impressive."

"If I'd fallen into your arms the first time we met, or even the dozenth time we met, you'd have bedded me, bled me, and dumped me."

I watched the truth of my words fill his face. I hadn't realized until this moment how much control he kept over his facial expressions, how it was the lack of reaction that made him seem more otherworldly than he was.

"You are right," he said. "If you had giggled and fawned over me, I would not have given you a second glance. Your partial immunity to my powers was the first attraction. But it was your stubbornness that intrigued me. Your flat refusal of me."

"I was a challenge."

"Yes."

I stared into his suddenly open face. For the first time, I thought I might see the truth in his eyes. "Good thing I resisted. I don't like being used and tossed aside."

"Once you were only a challenge, something to be conquered. Then I became intrigued by your growing powers. I saw possibilities that I could use you to strengthen my position if only you would join with me."

Something like pain passed over his face, and I wanted to ask if it was real. If any of this was real, or if it was only another act. I trusted Jean-Claude to do whatever it took to stay alive. I didn't trust him to tell the truth sitting on a stack of Bibles.

"I saved your ass enough times. I'm your declared human servant. What more do you want?"

"You, *ma petite*." He stood, but didn't come closer. "It is no longer challenge or the promise of power that makes me look to you."

My pulse was suddenly thudding in my throat, and he hadn't done a damn thing.

"I love you, Anita."

I stared at him, my eyes growing wide. I opened my mouth, closed it. I didn't believe him. He lied so easily, so well. He was the master of manipulation. How could I believe him now? "What do you want me to say?"

He shook his head, and his face fell back into its normal lines. That beautiful perfection that was what passed for ordinary. But I knew now that even this was a mask, hiding his deeper emotions.

"How did you do that?"

"After several centuries of being forced to school your face into pleasant, unreadable lines, you lose the knack of anything else. My survival has depended on my expression more than once. I wish you understood the effort that little display of humanity cost me."

"What do you want me to say, Jean-Claude?"

"You love me a little, that I am sure of."

I shrugged. "Maybe, but a little isn't enough."

"You love Richard a lot, don't you?"

I met his eyes and wanted to lie, to save his feelings, but those kinds of lies hurt more than the truth. "Yeah."

"Yet, you have not made your choice. You have not told me to leave the two of you to matrimonial bliss. Why is that?"

"Last time we had this talk, you said you'd kill Richard."

"If that is all that is stopping you, *ma petite*, have no fear. I will not kill Richard merely because you go to his bed and not mine."

"Since when?" I asked.

"When I threw my support to Richard, Marcus became my enemy. That cannot be changed." He leaned his shoulder against the dark wooden bedpost closest to me. "I had thought to petition another pack. There is always an ambitious alpha male out there somewhere. Someone who would like his own pack but either through sentimentality or lack of strength is doomed to play second forever. I could kill Richard and bring someone else in to kill Marcus."

I listened to his plan told so matter-of-factly. "What changed your mind?"

"You."

"Come again?"

"You love him, *ma petite*. You truly love him. His death would destroy something inside of you. When Julianna died, I thought I would never feel for anyone again. And I didn't, until I met you."

"You won't kill Richard because it would hurt me?"

"*Oui*."

"So I could tell Richard when he gets here that I've chosen him, and you would let us go off, get married, whatever?"

"Isn't there one hurdle to your marriage besides myself?" he asked.

"What?"

"You must see him change into wolf form." Jean-Claude smiled and shook his head. "If Richard was human, you would meet at the door with a smile and a yes. But you fear what he is. He is not human enough for you, *ma petite*."

"He isn't human enough for himself," I said.

Jean-Claude raised his eyebrows. "Yes, Richard runs from his beast, as you have run from me. But Richard shares a body with his beast. He cannot outrun it."

"I know that."

"Richard is still running, *ma petite*. And you run with him. If you were secure that you could accept him, all of him, you would have done it by now."

"He keeps finding excuses not to change for me."

"He fears your reaction," Jean-Claude said.

"It's more than that," I said. "If I can embrace his beast, I'm not sure he'll be able to accept me."

Jean-Claude cocked his head to one side. "I do not understand."

"He hates what he is so badly. I think if I can accept his beast, he won't . . . he won't love me anymore."

"Being able to embrace his beast would make you what . . . perverse?"

I nodded. "I think so."

"You are trapped on the horns of a nasty dilemma, *ma petite*. He will not make love to you or marry you until you have seen and accepted his beast. Yet if you accept it, you fear he will turn from you."

"Yeah."

He shook his head. "Only you could choose two men in one human lifetime that are this confusing."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

He pushed away from the bed. He stopped two small steps from me, staring down. "I tried to play the mortal for you, *ma petite*. But Richard is much better at being human than I am. I have not been truly human for so very long. If I cannot be the better man, let me be the better monster."

My eyes narrowed. "What's that suppose to mean?"

"It means, *ma petite*, that Jason told me of what happened this afternoon. I know how close you and Richard came."

How much had the lycanthropes been able to hear? More than I was comfortable with, that was for sure. "I just love being spied on."

"Do not be flippant, *ma petite*, please."

It was the please that got me. "I'm listening."

"I told you once that if Richard could touch you and I could not, it would not be fair. That is still true."

I pushed away from the door. He'd stepped over the line. "Are you asking me to let you touch me where Richard touched me?"

He smiled. "Such righteous indignation, *ma petite*. But have no fear. Forcing myself upon you in such a way would smack of rape. I have never been interested in such things."

I took a step back, putting a little space between us. Unless I was really angry, it was never good to get that close. "So, what are you saying?"

"You have always forbidden me to use vampire tricks, as you call them, with you." He held a hand up before I could say it. "I do not mean bespelling you with my eyes. I am not even sure that is possible anymore. I cannot be

human, *ma petite*. I am a vampire. Let me show you that has pleasures beyond humanity."

I shook my head. "No way."

"A kiss, *ma petite*, that is all I ask. A chaste kiss."

"And the catch is?" I asked.

His eyes were solid, sparkling blue. His skin glowed like alabaster under lights.

"I don't think so," I said.

"If you were truly sure of Richard, I would leave you to him. But does the fact that I love you not earn me so much as a kiss?" He glided towards me. I backed up, but the door was right there, and there was nowhere to go.

He was like a living sculpture, all ivory and sapphire, too beautiful for words. Too beautiful to touch. His hands smoothed over my forearms, along my hands. I gasped. Power rushed along my skin in a smooth wash, like air dancing over my body.

I must have tensed up because Jean-Claude said, "It will not hurt, that I promise."

"Just a kiss," I whispered.

"Just a kiss," he whispered. His face lowered towards mine. His lips brushed mine, gently, slowly. The power flowed across his lips into my mouth. I think I stopped breathing for a second. My skin felt like it was melting away and I would sink into his body, into that shining power.

"Looks like I got here just in time." It was Richard in the doorway.

I shoved my hand into Jean-Claude's chest and pushed him away hard enough for him to stumble. I was gasping for air like I'd been drowning. My skin pulsed and beat with the power that still crawled over me, into me.

"Richard," I whispered. I wanted to say that it wasn't what it looked like, but I couldn't get enough air.

Jean-Claude turned, smiling. He knew exactly what to say. "Richard, how good of you to join us. How did you get past my wolf?"

"It wasn't that hard."

I stared at both of them. I was still having trouble breathing. It felt like every nerve in my body had been touched all at once. The line between pleasure and pain was damn narrow, and I wasn't sure which side this went on.

The light was seeping away from Jean-Claude, leaving him pale, lovely, almost human.

Richard stood directly inside the door. His eyes glowed not with inner light but with anger, an anger that made his eyes dance, tightened the muscles across his shoulders and down his arms so that the effort showed from across the room. I'd never been so aware of how physically large he was. He seemed to fill more space than he should have. The first skin-prickling rush of his power swirled over me.

I took a deep, shaking breath and started walking towards him. The closer I got, the thicker the power, until about six feet from him, it was like stepping into a nearly solid mass of pulsing, vibrating energy.

I stood there, trying to swallow my heart back into my throat. He was dressed in jeans and a green flannel work shirt with sleeves rolled over his forearms. His hair fell loose round his shoulders in a wavy mass. I'd seen him like this a hundred times, but suddenly it was all different. I had never been afraid of Richard, not really. Now, for the first time, I saw that there was something to fear. Something swam behind his eyes, his beast, he called it. It was there now just behind those true, brown eyes. A monster waiting to be set loose.

"Richard," I said and had to cough to clear my throat, "what's wrong with you?"

"Tomorrow is the full moon, Anita. Strong emotions aren't good right now." Rage thinned his face, made those lovely cheekbones high and tight. "If I hadn't interrupted, would you have broken your promise to me?"

"He still doesn't know what kind of hose I'm wearing," I said.

Richard smiled, some of the tension easing away.

"Too smooth for garters," Jean-Claude said. "Panty hose, though they could be crotchless, of that I am not sure."

Richard snarled.

I glanced back at Jean-Claude. "Don't help me."

He smiled and nodded. He'd leaned his back on one of the bedposts, fingers playing over the bare skin of his chest. It was suggestive, and he meant it to be. Damn him.

A low, bass growl brought my attention back to Richard. He stalked towards the bed as if each movement hurt. The tension sang through the building power. Was I going to get to see him change here and now? If he changed, there'd be a fight, and for the very first time, I was worried for Jean-Claude's safety, as well as Richard's.

"Don't do this, Richard, please."

He was staring past me at Jean-Claude. I didn't dare look behind to see what mischief the vampire was doing; I had my hands full with the werewolf in front of me.

Something flickered across his face. I was sure Jean-Claude had done something behind my back. Richard made a sound more animal than human and rushed for the bed. I didn't move out of the way. I stood my ground, and when he was even with me, moving past me, I threw my body into him and threw him in a nearly perfect shoulder roll. His momentum did the rest. Maybe if I'd let go of his arm, we could have avoided the rest, but I made the classic mistake. I didn't think Richard would really hurt me.

He grabbed the arm that was holding him and flung me across the room. He was flat on his back and didn't have much leverage, and that was all that saved me. I was airborne for just a second and rolled along the carpet when I hit. The world was still spinning when my hand went for the knife. I couldn't hear anything but the blood rushing in my own head, but I knew, I knew he was coming.

He touched my arm, rolled me over, and I laid the silver blade against his neck. He froze, bent over, trying, I think, to help me stand. Richard and I stared

at each other from inches away. The anger was gone from his face. His eyes were normal, as lovely as ever, but I kept the knife against the smooth skin of his neck, dimpling it so he knew I meant business.

He swallowed carefully. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Anita. I am so sorry."

"Back off," I said.

"Are you hurt?"

"Back off, Richard. Now!"

"Let me help you." He bent closer, and I pressed the blade in hard enough to draw a trickle of blood.

"Let go of me, Richard."

He let go and moved slowly away. He looked puzzled and hurt. He touched the blood at his neck as if he didn't know what it was.

When he was out of reach, I let myself sag against the carpet. Nothing was broken, of that I was sure, and I wasn't bleeding. If he'd thrown me into a wall with that much force, it would have been a different story. I'd been dating him for seven months, nearly slept with him more than once, and in all that time, I hadn't fully appreciated what I was playing with.

"*Ma petite*, are you all right?" Jean-Claude was standing at the foot of the bed. He was watching Richard closely as he moved towards me.

"I'm all right, I'm all right." I glared up at him. "What did you do behind my back to piss him off?"

Jean-Claude looked embarrassed. "I did tease Monsieur Zeeman. Perhaps I even wanted a fight. Jealousy is a foolish emotion. How was I to know you would not move out of the way of a charging werewolf?"

"I don't back up, not for anyone." I almost laughed. "Though next time, maybe I'll make an exception."

"I didn't mean to hurt you," Richard said. "But seeing you together like that . . . Knowing you're with him isn't the same thing as having it rubbed in my face." His anger had vanished the moment he'd hurt me. Horror at what he'd done, fear for my safety, sanity returning in a rush.

"We were only kissing, Richard, nothing else, no matter what he wants you to believe."

"I was suddenly so jealous. I'm sorry."

"I know it was an accident, Richard. I'm just glad there wasn't a wall closer."

"I could have hurt you badly." He took a step towards me, hands reaching, and stopped himself. "And you want me to let the beast loose enough to kill. Don't you understand how hard I fight to control it?"

"I understand better than I did a few minutes ago," I said.

"Your bags are in the hallway. I'll bring them in, then I'll go." This was the look I'd been dreading. This crushed, puppy dog look. The anger had been easier to deal with, if more dangerous.

"Don't go."

They both looked at me.

"Jean-Claude staged this." I held a hand up before he could protest. "Oh, I know you enjoyed yourself, but you still wanted Richard to see us together."

You wanted to pick a fight. You wanted to show me he was as much a monster as you are. You succeeded on all counts beautifully. Now, get out."

"You are throwing me out of my own bedroom?" He looked amused.

"Yeah." I stood up and was only a little wobbly on the high heels.

Jean-Claude sighed. "I am to be relegated forever to my coffin then, to never know the joy of your company for my slumber."

"You don't go to sleep, Jean-Claude. You die. Maybe I lust after your warm, breathing body, but I'm not up to the full package yet."

He smiled. "Very well, *ma petite*. I will leave you and Monsieur Zeeman to discuss the last few minutes. I would ask one thing."

"And that is?" I asked.

"That you not make love in my bed when I cannot join you."

I sighed. "It would be pretty tacky to make love with Richard in your bed. I think you're safe on that one."

Jean-Claude glanced at Richard. His eyes seemed to take in every inch of him, lingering on the open wound at his neck, though maybe that was just my imagination. "If anyone could withstand the temptation, it is you, *ma petite*." Jean-Claude looked at me, his face unreadable. "I am sorry you were nearly hurt. I did not mean for that to happen."

"You always have good intentions," I said.

He sighed, then smiled. He glanced at Richard. "Perhaps I am not the better monster, after all."

"Get out," I said.

He left, still smiling. He closed the door behind him, and I was left with his power dancing over my skin, the feel of his lips and hands on my body. It was only a kiss. Foreplay. But even the rush of adrenaline, of nearly being thrown into a wall, couldn't chase away the aftereffects.

Richard stood staring at me, as if he could sense the power somehow. "I'll go get the bags," he said. He could have said so many things, but that was safest.

He went to get the bags, and I sat down on the bed. Richard could have killed me. Jean-Claude would never have lost control like that. I wanted Richard to embrace his beast, but maybe, just maybe, I didn't understand what that meant.

Chapter 23

I sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for Richard to come back into the room. My skin was jumping from Jean-Claude's parting gift. Only a kiss, and Richard had nearly torn into Jean-Claude and me. What would Richard have

done if he'd caught us doing something truly lascivious? It was better not to find out.

Richard set my suitcase and both bags inside the door. He went out and came back with his small overnight bag.

He stood there, just inside the door, staring at me. I stared back. Blood still trickled down his throat from where I'd cut him. Neither of us seemed to know what to say. The silence grew until it was so thick it began to have weight.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," he said. "I've never lost control like that before." He took a step into the room. "But seeing you with him . . ." He held out his hands, then let them fall to his sides, helplessly.

"It was only a kiss, Richard. That's all."

"It's never only a kiss with Jean-Claude."

I couldn't argue that.

"I wanted to kill him," Richard said.

"I noticed."

"You're sure you're all right?"

"How's your neck?" I asked.

He touched the wound and came away with fresh blood. "Silver blade, it won't heal immediately." He came to stand in front of me, looking down, so close that the legs of his jeans nearly brushed my knees. It was almost too close. The lingering brush of Jean-Claude's power made my skin ache. Richard's nearness made it worse.

If I stood up, our bodies would touch, he was that close. I stayed sitting, trying to swallow the last bits of Jean-Claude's kiss. I wasn't sure what would happen if I touched Richard now. It felt almost like whatever Jean-Claude had done reacted to Richard's body. Or maybe it was me. Maybe I was becoming that needy. Maybe my body was tired of saying no.

"Would you really have killed me?" Richard asked. "Could you have plunged that blade home?"

I stared up at him and wanted to lie to the sincerity in his eyes, but I didn't. Whatever we were doing with each other, whatever we meant to each other, it couldn't be based on lies. "Yes."

"Just like that," he said.

I nodded. "Just like that."

"I saw it in your eyes. Cold, dispassionate, like someone else was looking out. If I was sure I could kill coldly, it wouldn't scare me so much."

"I wish I could promise you that you wouldn't enjoy it, but I can't."

"I know that." He stared at me. "I couldn't kill you. Not for any reason."

"It would destroy something in me to lose you, Richard, but my first reaction is to protect myself at all costs. So, if we ever have another misunderstanding like we did tonight, don't help me up, don't come close to me, until I'm sure you're not going to eat me. Okay?"

He nodded. "Okay."

The energy rush that Jean-Claude had given me was fading, calming. I stood up, and Richard's body touched mine. I felt an instant rush of warm energy that had nothing to do with the vampire. Richard's aura enveloped me

like a breath of warm air. His arms slid behind my back. I slid my hands around his waist and laid my cheek against his chest. I listened to the deep throbbing of his heart, running my hands over the softness of the flannel shirt. There was a measure of comfort in Richard's arms that simply wasn't there when Jean-Claude held me.

He ran his hands through my hair, putting one on either side of my face. He pulled me back until he could see my face. He bent towards me, lips parted. I stretched on tiptoe to meet him.

A voice said, "Master."

Richard turned with me still in his arms, so we could see the door. Jason crawled across the white carpet, dripping crimson drops as he moved.

"My God, what happened to you?" I asked.

"I happened to him," Richard said. He walked over to the crawling man.

"What do you mean, you happened to him?"

Jason abased himself at Richard's feet, face pressed to the carpet. "I'm sorry."

Richard knelt and raised Jason to a sitting position. Blood ran down his face from a cut above his eyes. It was deep and would need stitches.

"You threw him into a wall?" I asked.

"He tried to stop me from reaching you."

"I can't believe you did this."

Richard looked up at me. "You want me to be pack leader. You want me to be alpha. Well, this is what it takes." He shook his head. "You should see your face. You look so damned outraged. How can you want me to kill another human being and be upset by a little rough and tumble?"

I didn't know what to say. "Jean-Claude said that killing Marcus wouldn't be enough. That you'd have to be willing to terrorize the pack to rule it."

"He's right." Richard wiped the blood off Jason's face. The cut was already beginning to close. He put his bloody fingers into his mouth and licked them clean.

I stood there, frozen, staring, like an unwilling witness to a car crash.

Richard bent close to Jason's face. I thought I knew what he was going to do, but I had to see it to believe it. He licked the wound. He ran his tongue over the open wound like a dog will do.

I turned away. This couldn't be my Richard, my safe, comforting Richard.

"You can't stand to watch, can you?" he asked. "Did you think that killing was the only thing I had refused to do?"

His voice made me turn back.

There was a smudge of blood on his chin. "Watch it all, Anita. I want you to see what it takes to be alphic. Then you tell me if it's all worth it. If you can't stomach it, don't ever ask me to do it again." The look in his eyes made it a challenge.

I understood challenges. I sat on the edge of the bed. "Go to it. I'm all yours."

Richard brushed the hair on one side, exposing the wound on his neck. "I am alpha and I feed the pack. I spilled your blood, and now I give it back to you." The warm rush of his power spilled through the room.

Jason stared up at him, his eyes rolled almost to white. "Marcus doesn't do this."

"Because he can't," Richard said. "I can. Feed on my blood, on my apology, my power, and never stand against me again." The air was so thick with power it was hard to breathe.

Jason rose on his knees and put his mouth over the wound, tentatively at first, as if afraid he'd be turned away or hurt. When Richard didn't say anything, Jason pressed his mouth to the open wound and drank. His jaw muscles worked, his throat swallowed. One hand slipped behind Richard's back, one hand on his shoulder.

I walked around them until I could see Richard's face. His eyes were closed, his face peaceful. He must have felt me watching him, because he opened his eyes. There was anger there, anger at me, partly. It wasn't only about killing Marcus, it was about giving up pieces of his humanity. I hadn't understood that, not until now.

He touched Jason's shoulders. "Enough." Jason pressed himself harder against the wound, like a nursing puppy. Richard pulled him forcibly off of his neck. A hicky had already spread around the wound.

Jason lay back, half-cradled in Richard's arms. He licked the edges of his mouth, getting the last drops of blood. He giggled and rolled away from Richard, to kneel on the floor. He rubbed his face along Richard's leg. "I've never felt anything like that. Marcus can't share power like that. Does anybody else in the pack know you can share blood?"

"Tell them," Richard said. "Tell them all."

"You really are going to kill Marcus, aren't you?" Jason asked.

"If he gives me no other choice, yes. Now, go, Jason, your other master is waiting."

Jason stood, and almost fell. He righted himself, rubbing his hands down his legs and arms as if he was bathing in something I couldn't see. Maybe it was the warm, ruffling power that he tried to tie around himself. He laughed again. "If you'll feed me, you can hit me into a wall anytime."

"Get out," Richard said.

Jason got out.

Richard was still kneeling on the floor. He looked up at me. "Do you understand now why I didn't want to do this?"

"Yes," I said.

"Maybe if Marcus knows I can share blood, my power, he'll back down."

"You're still hoping not to kill him," I said.

"It's not only the killing, Anita. It's everything that goes with it. It's what I just did with Jason. A hundred things, none of them very human." He looked at me, and there was a sorrow in his brown eyes that I had never seen before.

I understood suddenly. "It isn't the killing exactly, is it? Once you take over the pack by blood and brute force, you have to keep the pack with blood and brute force."

"Exactly. If I could force Marcus out somehow, if I could make him back down, then I'd have room to do things differently." He came to stand in front of me, his face eager. "I've brought nearly half the pack either to my side or at least to be neutral. They aren't backing Marcus anymore. No one's ever divided a pack like this without deaths."

"Why can't you split into two packs?"

He shook his head. "Marcus would never allow it. The pack leader gets a tithe from every member. It would cut not just his power but his money."

"You getting money now?" I asked.

"Everyone's still tithing to Marcus. I don't want the money, and it's just one more fight. I think tithing should be abolished."

I watched the light in his face, the plans, the dreams. He was building a power base of fairness and boy scout virtues with creatures that could rip out your throat and eat you afterwards. He believed he could do it. Watching his handsome, eager face, I almost believed it, too.

"I thought you could kill Marcus and that would be it. But it won't be, will it?"

"Raina will see to it that I'm challenged. Unless I put the fear of me into them."

"As long as Raina is alive, she'll be trouble."

"I don't know what to do about Raina."

"I could kill her," I said.

The look on his face was enough.

"Just kidding," I said. Sort of. Richard wouldn't agree with the ultimate practicality, but if he was going to be safe, Raina had to die. Cold-blooded, but true.

"What are you thinking, Anita?"

"That maybe you're right and the rest of us are wrong."

"About what?"

"Maybe you shouldn't kill Marcus."

Richard's eyes widened. "I thought you were angry with me for not killing Marcus."

"It's not killing Marcus. It's endangering everybody by not killing Marcus."

He shook his head. "I don't see the difference."

"The difference is that killing is a means to an end, not an end in itself. I want you alive. Marcus gone. The pack members that follow you safe. I don't want you to have to torture the pack to keep your place. If we can accomplish all that without you having to kill anyone, I'm okay with that. I don't think there's an option that doesn't involve killing. But if you can come up with one, I'll support you."

He studied my face. "Are you telling me that you think I shouldn't kill now?"

"Yeah."

He laughed, but it was with more irony than humor. "I don't know whether to yell at you or hug you."

"I affect a lot of people that way," I said. "Look, when we went to rescue Stephen, you should have called a few people. Gone into the situation from a position of strength, with three or four lieutenants at your back. There is a compromise between playing Sir Lancelot and being Vlad the Impaler."

He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Being able to feed power through my blood is a rare talent. It's impressive, but it won't be enough. I'd have to have some major scary stuff to get Marcus and Raina to back down. I'm powerful, Anita, really powerful." He said it like it was simply the truth, no ego, no pride. "But it's not that kind of powerful."

I sat down beside him. "I'll do anything I can, Richard. Just promise me you won't be careless."

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I won't be careless if you'll kiss me."

We kissed. The taste of him was warm and sure, but underneath it was the sweet salt of blood, and Jason's aftershave. I drew away from him.

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head. Telling him I could taste other people's blood in his mouth was not going to be helpful. We were going to work so he didn't have to do things like that. It wasn't his beast that would steal his humanity, it was a thousand smaller things.

"Change for me," I said.

"What?"

"Change for me, here, now."

He stared at me, as if trying to read something in my face. "Why now?"

"Let me see all of you, Richard, the whole package."

"If you don't want Jean-Claude sharing the bed, you don't want a wolf in bed with you, either."

"You wouldn't you be trapped in wolf form until morning, you said so earlier."

"No, I wouldn't," he said softly.

"If you change tonight, and I can accept it, we can make love. We can start planning the wedding."

He laughed. "Can I kill Marcus before I have to kill Jean-Claude?"

"Jean-Claude promised not to hurt you," I said.

Richard went very still. "You've already talked to him about this?"

I nodded.

"Why wasn't he angry with me?"

"He said he'd step aside if he couldn't win me, so he's stepping aside." I didn't add the part about Jean-Claude loving me. Save it for later.

"Call your beast, Richard."

He shook his head. "It isn't just my beast, Anita. It's the lukoi, the pack. You have to see them, too."

"I've seen them."

He shook his head. "You haven't seen us at the lupanar. Our place of power. We're real there, no pretense, not even to ourselves."

"I've just told you that I want to marry you. Did you pick up on that?" I asked.

Richard stood. "I want to marry you, Anita, more than almost anything in the world. I want you so badly my body aches with it. I don't trust myself to be here tonight."

"We've managed to stay chaste so far," I said.

"By the skin of our teeth." He picked up his overnight case. "The lukoi call sex the killing dance."

"So?"

"We use the same phrase for battles of succession."

"I still don't understand the problem."

He stared at me. "You will. God help us both. You will."

There was something so sad, so wistful about him suddenly, that I didn't want to let him go. Tomorrow he'd face Marcus, and just because he'd agreed to kill didn't mean he could. When the moment came, I didn't trust him not to flinch. I didn't want to lose him.

"Stay with me, Richard. Please."

"It wouldn't be fair to you."

"Don't be such a frigging boy scout."

He smiled and gave a very bad Popeye imitation, "I am what I am." He closed the door behind him. I didn't even get to kiss him good-bye.

Chapter 24

I woke to darkness and someone bending over me. I couldn't really see, but I felt something in the air above me like a weight. My hand slid under the pillow and came out with the Firestar. I shoved the gun into whoever it was, and they were gone like a dream. I slid off the bed, pressing my back against the wall, making myself as small a target as possible.

A voice came out of the darkness. I aimed for it, straining my ears for sounds of more intruders.

"It's Cassandra. The light switch is above you. I'll stay right here while you turn on the lights." Her voice was low, even, the sort of voice you used for crazy people, or people who had guns pointed at you.

I swallowed past my pulse and scooted my back up the wall. I swiped my left hand up the wall until it hit the switch plate, then I knelt back down, fingers touching the switch. When I was as far down as I could get and still turn on the light, I hit it. Light flared. There was a moment of dazzling blindness while I hunkered on the floor, gun pointed blindly. When I could see, Cassandra stood

near the foot of the bed, hands out to either side, staring at me. Her eyes were a little too wide. The lace on her Victorian nightgown fluttered with her breath.

Yes, Victorian nightgown. She looked delicate, doll-like. I'd asked her last night if Jean-Claude picked out the gown. No, she'd picked it out. Each to their own.

She stood on the carpet, frozen, staring. "Anita, are you all right?" Her tone said she didn't think so.

I took a deep breath and pointed the gun at the ceiling. "Yeah, I'm all right."

"Can I move?"

I stood, holding the gun at my side. "Don't try to touch me when I'm in a sound sleep. Say something first."

"I'll remember that," she said. "May I move?"

"Sure. What's up?" I asked.

"Richard and Jean-Claude are outside."

I checked my watch. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. I'd had nearly six hours of sleep. Or would have had if Cassandra and I hadn't talked for an hour. I hadn't had a sleep-over in years, and frankly, girl or no, she was still a lycanthrope that I'd met only that night. It felt strange to trust her at my back as my bodyguard. I've never been too fond of sleeping with strangers. It's not sexual. It's plain suspicion. Being deeply asleep is as helpless as most of us get.

"What do they want?"

"Richard said he has a plan."

I didn't need to ask what plan. There was only one thing on his mind the day of the full moon: Marcus.

"Tell them I'm getting dressed first." I went for my suitcase. Cassandra padded to the door. She opened it only a crack, speaking softly. She closed it firmly behind her and came back to me. She looked puzzled. In the nightgown with a puzzled frown on her face, she looked about twelve.

I knelt by the suitcase, clothes in my hands, looking up at her. "What now?"

"Jean-Claude said not to bother getting dressed."

I stared at her for a heartbeat. "Yeah, right. I'm getting dressed. They can just bloody well wait that long."

She nodded and went back to the door.

I went for the bathroom. I stared at myself in the mirror. I looked as tired as I felt. I brushed teeth, took care of necessities, and wished for a shower. It would have helped wake me up. I could have run a bath, but I wasn't sure the boys would last that long. Besides, a bath was something I did to get ready for bed, not for waking up. I needed something stimulating, not something soothing.

Richard had a plan, but Jean-Claude was with him. That meant that the vampire had helped come up with the plan. It was a scary thought.

Tonight Richard would fight Marcus. He could be dead by tomorrow. The thought made my chest tight. There was a pressure behind my eyes that had more to do with tears than anything else. I could live with Richard off

somewhere. It would hurt if he wasn't with me, but I'd survive. I might not survive his death. I loved Richard. I really loved him. I didn't want to give him up. Not for anything.

Jean-Claude was being a perfect gentleman, but I didn't trust it. How could I? He always had a dozen different reasons for everything he did. What was the plan? The quicker I dressed, the quicker I'd find out.

I'd pretty much just grabbed stuff out of the suitcase. You can mix and match almost all the clothing I own. Dark blue jeans, navy blue polo shirt, white jogging socks. I hadn't dressed to impress anyone. Now that I was a little more awake, I wished I'd chosen something a little less practical. Love makes you worry about stuff like that.

I opened the door. Richard stood by the bed. The sight of him stopped me in my tracks. His hair was brushed until it fell like a frothy mass around his shoulders. He was wearing nothing but a pair of silky undershorts, royal purple. They were slit high on each side, giving glimpses of his thighs as he turned towards me.

When I could close my mouth and talk, I said, "Why are you dressed like that?"

Jean-Claude leaned one shoulder against the wall. He was wearing a black ankle-length robe edged with black fur. His hair mingled with the fur collar until it was hard to tell where one blackness ended and the other began. His pale neck and a triangle of his chest showed almost perfectly white against the fur.

"You look like you've just stepped out of two different porno movies. Cassandra said something about a plan. What's the plan?"

Richard glanced at Jean-Claude. They exchanged a look between them that said better than words that they'd been plotting behind my back.

Richard sat on the edge of the bed. The shorts clung a little too close for comfort and I had to look away, so I looked at Jean-Claude. Not comforting, but at least most of him was covered.

"Do you remember some months ago, before Christmas, when we accidentally set off some sort of magical energy in your apartment?" Jean-Claude asked.

"I remember," I said.

"Monsieur Zeeman and I believe that the three of us could share power, become a triumvirate."

I looked from one to the other. "Explain."

"There is a link between myself and wolves. There is a link between you, my little necromancer, and the dead. Lust and love have always held a magical energy. I can show you individual spells that can use the link between vampire and their animal, between necromancer and vampire. We should not be surprised that there is power between us."

"Make your point," I said.

Jean-Claude smiled. "I believe we could call up enough power to back down a certain Ulfric. I know Marcus. He will not fight if he believes he has no hope of winning."

"Jean-Claude's right," Richard said. "If I can shine with enough power, Marcus will back down."

"How do you know we can even call this whatever-it-is up again?" I asked.

"I have done some research," Jean-Claude said. "There are two cases of master vampires who could call animals, who then made one of those animals in were-form a sort of human servant."

"So?"

"It means that there is a chance of my being able to bind you both."

I shook my head. "No way, no vampire marks. Been there, done that, didn't like it."

"There were no marks on either of you in December," Jean-Claude said. "I think it will work without any now."

"Why are the two of you dressed like that?"

Richard looked embarrassed. "It was all I brought. I thought we were going to be sharing the bed last night."

I motioned at the shorts. "Those would not have helped us stay chaste, Richard."

Heat crept up his face. "I know; sorry."

"Tell me there is no lingerie in your suitcase, *ma petite*."

"I never said there wasn't." Ronnie had talked me into an outfit just in case I gave in to Richard. She was willing for me to bed him before the wedding if it would knock Jean-Claude out of the running.

"Who'd you buy it for?" Richard asked quietly.

"You, but don't distract me. Why the nice jammies?"

"Richard and I have made an attempt or two on our own to call the power. It does not work with only the two of us. His dislike of me has rendered it useless."

"Is this true, Richard?"

He nodded. "Jean-Claude says we need our third; we need you."

"What's with the clothes?"

"Lust and anger were what drew the power the first time, *ma petite*. We have our anger. We are missing our lust."

"Wait just a damn minute." I stared from one to the other of them. "Are you saying we become a ménage à trois?"

"No," Richard said. He stood up. He walked towards me in his little shorts, flashing the room. "No sex, I promise you that. Even for this, I wouldn't have agreed to sharing you with him."

I ran my fingertips down the silk of his shorts, lightly, almost like I was afraid. "Then why the costumes?"

"We're running out of time, Anita. If this is going to work, it's got to work fast." He gripped my arms, his hands warm on my skin. "You said you'd help me with a plan. This is the plan."

I drew away from him slowly and turned to Jean-Claude. "And what do you get out of it?"

"Your happiness. No wolf will challenge Richard if we are a true triumvirate."

"My happiness, right." I studied his calm, lovely face, and had an idea. "You tasted Jason, didn't you? You tasted the power that he sucked off of Richard, didn't you? Didn't you, you son of a bitch?" I walked towards him as I talked, fighting an urge to hit him when I got there.

"What of it, *ma petite*?"

I stood right in front of him, throwing the words into his face. "What do you gain from all this? And don't give me crap about my happiness. I've known you too long."

His face was at its mildest, its most disarming. "I would gain enough power that no master vampire, short of the council itself, would dare challenge me."

"I knew it. I knew it. You don't do anything without a dozen ulterior motives."

"I benefit in exactly the same way Monsier Zeeman benefits. We would both secure our power bases."

"Fine, what do I get out of it?"

"Why, Monsieur Zeeman's safety."

"Anita," Richard said softly. He touched my shoulder.

I whirled to face him. My angry words died at the look on his face. So serious, so solemn.

He gripped my shoulders, one hand cupping the side of my face. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

"Do you understand what he's suggesting, Richard? We would never be free of him." I touched his hand where he held my face. "Don't tie us to him like this, Richard. Once he gets a piece of you, he never lets go."

"If you really believed he was evil, you would have killed him a long time ago and been free of him."

If I didn't do this, and Richard died tonight, would I be able to live with it? I leaned into him, pressing my face against his chest, breathing in his scent. No. If he died and I could have saved him, I'd never be rid of the guilt.

Jean-Claude came to stand near us. "It may have been one of those freakish accidents that cannot be duplicated under controlled conditions, *ma petite*. Magic is often like that."

I turned my face and looked at him, cheek still pressed to Richard's bare chest, his arms wrapped around my back. "No vampire marks on either of us, right?"

"I promise. The only thing I would ask is that none of us back away. We need a true idea of how much power we can call. If it is not much, then it is moot, but if it is as I believe, then it will solve a great many problems."

"You manipulative bastard."

"Is that a yes?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

Richard hugged me. I let his arms hold me, comfort me, but it was Jean-Claude's eyes I met. There was a look on his face that was hard to describe. The

devil must look like that after you've signed on the dotted line and given away your soul. Pleased, eager, and a little hungry.

Chapter 25

"You and Monsieur Zeeman have a nice visit. I will take my turn in the bathroom, then join you."

Just hearing him say it out loud made me want to refuse. But I didn't. "Are you sure this isn't just your elaborate way of forming us into a ménage à trois?"

"Would I be so devious?"

"Yeah."

He laughed, and the sound shivered over my skin like an ice cube dropped down my spine.

"I will leave you two alone." He brushed past us into the bathroom.

I stalked after him and caught the door before it could close. He looked at me through the opening. "Yes, *ma petite*?"

"There better be something under that robe besides skin."

He smiled wide enough to show just a hint of fang. "Would I be so crude, *ma petite*?"

"I don't know."

He nodded and closed the door.

I took a deep breath and turned to face the other man in my life. Richard's clothes lay folded on my suitcase. He moved towards me. The shorts were slit high enough that I could see almost a clear line from foot to waist.

If we were truly alone, I would have gone to him. What should have been romantic was suddenly chokingly awkward. I was very aware of the sounds of running water from the bathroom. Jean-Claude planned to join us. Sweet Jesus.

Richard still looked scrumptious with his hair falling across one eye. He had stopped moving closer. He finally shook his head. "Why is this suddenly so awkward?"

"I think the biggest reason is in the bathroom getting ready to join us."

He laughed and shook his head again. "It doesn't usually take us this long to be in each other's arms."

"No," I said. At this rate, we were going to be staring at each other like high school kids at a dance when Jean-Claude came back out.

"Meet me halfway," I said.

Richard smiled. "Always." He walked to meet me. The muscles in his stomach rippled as he moved.

I was suddenly sorry that I was wearing jeans and a polo shirt. I wanted him to see me in the lingerie I'd bought. I wanted his hands to run over the silk and my body underneath.

Richard and I stopped inches away from each other, neither one touching. I could smell his aftershave faintly. I was close enough to feel the warmth of his body. I wanted to run my hands over his bare chest. I wanted to run my hands down the front of those silk shorts. The thought was so real I crossed my arms to keep my hands busy.

Richard leaned over me. He ran his lips over my eyebrows, kissed my eyelids ever so gently. He reached my mouth, and I rose on tiptoe to meet him. He slid his arms around me.

I fell against him, my hands searching his body, my mouth pressing against his. He bent and slid his arms under my butt, lifting me until our faces were even. I broke the kiss and started to say, "Put me down," but staring at his face from an inch away, I couldn't say it. I wrapped my legs around his waist. He braced his legs to catch his balance. I kissed him, and the first brush of power broke over me in a line of skin-prickling, belly-tickling warmth.

Richard made a small sound in his throat that was more growl than moan. He knelt on the floor with me still riding him, and when he took me to the floor, I didn't stop him. He raised his upper body over me, bracing with his arms, his lower body pressed against me. When he stared down at me, his eyes had gone wolfish. Something must have shown on my face because he turned his head so I wouldn't see.

I raised up underneath him, grabbed a handful of his thick hair, and turned his head back to me none too gently. Whether it was the pain or something else, he turned back with a snarl. I didn't flinch. I didn't look away.

Richard lowered his face towards mine, and I lay back on the floor. His mouth hovered over mine. There was a brush of warmth as our mouths met, as if I was tasting his energy, his essence.

The bathroom door opened. The sound froze me, making my eyes slide towards the open door. Richard hesitated for a second, mouth uncertain above mine, then he kissed the edge of my chin, running his lips down my neck.

Jean-Claude stood in the doorway, dressed in black silk pajamas. The long-sleeved top was unbuttoned so that it fanned around his naked upper body as he moved. The look on his face, in his eyes, panicked me.

I patted Richard's shoulder. He'd worked his way to the base of my neck and was nuzzling the collar of my polo shirt, as if he'd put his face inside the shirt. He raised those startling amber wolf eyes to me, and the only thing I could read on his face was desire, almost a hunger. His power breathed along my skin like a line of hot wind.

My pulse thudded against the skin of my throat until I thought it would burst the skin. "What's wrong with you, Richard?"

"Tonight is the full moon, *ma petite*. His beast calls to him." Jean-Claude padded across the carpet towards us.

"Let me up, Richard."

Richard went to his hands and knees, leaving me to squirm out from under him. I stood, and he knelt in front of me, wrapping his arms around my waist. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid of you, Richard." I stared at Jean-Claude.

Richard ran his hands down my ribs, fingers digging into the flesh as if he were massaging my back. It brought my attention back to him. "I would never hurt you willingly. You know that."

I did know that. I nodded.

"Trust me now." His voice was soft and deep, with a roll of bass to it that wasn't normal. He started pulling my shirt out of my pants. "I want to touch you, smell you, taste you."

Jean-Claude padded around us, not coming any closer. He circled us like a shark. His midnight blue eyes were still human, more human looking than Richard's.

Richard raised my shirt free of my pants, pushing it back until he exposed my stomach. He ran his hands over my bare skin and I shuddered, but it wasn't sex, or not only sex. That warm, electric power of his flowed from his hands across my skin. It was like having a low-level current tracing over me. It didn't quite hurt, but it might if it didn't stop. Or it might feel very good, better than anything else. I wasn't sure which thought scared me more.

Jean-Claude stood just out of reach, watching. That thought scared me, too.

Richard put his hands on either side of my exposed waist, holding the shirt up, draped over his wrists.

Jean-Claude took that last step, pale hand outstretched. I tightened up, fear overriding the remains of desire. He let his hand fall back without touching us.

Richard licked my stomach, a quick, wet motion. I stared down at him, and he stared back with brown eyes. Human eyes. "I won't let anything happen to you, Anita."

I didn't know what it had cost him to swallow his beast back down inside, but I knew it hadn't been easy. There were many lesser lycanthropes who could not go back once they started to change. It would have been more reassuring if his true brown eyes hadn't held a darkness all their own. But it wasn't his beast, it was something more basic, more human: sex. Even lust doesn't cover that look in a man's eyes.

Jean-Claude was standing behind me. I could feel him. Without touching me at all, I could feel his power, like a cool, seeking wind. He brushed his face against my hair. My heart was beating so loudly I couldn't hear anything but the thundering of my own blood in my head.

Jean-Claude brushed my hair to one side. His lips touched my cheek and his power burst over me in a quiet rush, cool as a wind from the grave. It flowed through me, seeking Richard's warmth. The two energies hit, mingled inside me. I couldn't breathe. I felt that thing inside me that could call the dead from the grave—magic, for lack of a better word—I felt it coil and flare against them both.

I tried to pull away from Richard, but his fingers dug into my ribs. Jean-Claude's arms tightened around my shoulders. "Build the power, do not fight it, *ma petite*."

I fought the panic, my breath coming in quick gasps. I was going to hyperventilate and pass out if I couldn't get a handle on it. I rode the power and my own fear, and I was losing.

Richard's mouth bit gently at my stomach. His mouth sucking my skin. Jean-Claude's lips touched my neck, nibbling gently. His arms cradled me against his chest. Richard was a growing warmth at my waist. Jean-Claude like some cool fire at my back. I was being eaten from both ends like a piece of wood going up in flames. The power was too much. It had to go somewhere. I had to do something with it or it was going to burn me alive.

My legs buckled, and only Richard's and Jean-Claude's hands on me kept me from falling. They lowered me to the floor, still cradled in their arms. My shoulder touched the ground, then my hand, and I knew what I could do with the power. I felt it surge through the ground, seeking, seeking the dead. I rolled onto my stomach. Jean-Claude's hands were on my shoulders, his face brushing mine. Richard's hands were under my shirt touching my back, roaming higher, but it was all secondary. I had to do something with the power.

I found the dead I needed, and it didn't work. The power continued to build until I would have screamed if I could have gotten enough air. A step, an ingredient, something was missing.

I rolled onto my back, staring up at both of them. They stared down at me. Jean-Claude's eyes had gone solid, midnight blue. They both leaned towards me at once. Richard went for my mouth, Jean-Claude went for my neck. Richard's kiss was almost a burning. I could feel the brush of fangs as Jean-Claude fought not to bite me. Temptation was everywhere. Someone's hand was under my shirt, and I wasn't sure whose it was anymore. Then I realized it was both of them.

What was one thing I needed for raising the dead? Blood. I must have said it out loud: "Blood."

Jean-Claude raised up, staring at me from inches away. His hand was just below my breast. I'd grabbed his wrist without thinking about it. "What, *ma petite?*"

"Blood to finish it. We need blood."

Richard raised his face up like a drowning man. "What?"

"I can give you blood, *ma petite.*" Jean-Claude leaned into me. I stopped him with a hand on his chest, at the same time that Richard put a hand on his shoulder. The power poured over us in a searing wash, and I was seeing white spots.

"You won't use me to sink fangs into her for the first time," Richard growled it at him. His anger fed the magic and I screamed.

"Give me blood, or get off me." I held up my own wrist between them. "I don't have a knife, someone do it."

Richard leaned over me. He swept his hair back from one side of his neck. "Here's your blood."

Jean-Claude didn't argue. He leaned into him, lips drawn back. I watched in a sort of slow motion as he bit the side of Richard's neck. Richard tensed, a

hiss of breath as the fangs sank home. Jean-Claude's mouth sealed over his skin, sucking, throat working.

The power roared through me, raising every hair on my body, creeping through my skin until I thought I'd come apart. I sent it all outward to the dead that I'd found. I filled them up and still there was too much power. I reached outward, outward, and found what I was looking for. The power left us in a cool, burning, rush.

I lay gasping on the floor. Jean-Claude lay on my left, propped on one elbow. Blood stained his lips, trickling down his chin. Richard lay on his stomach to my right, pinning my arm underneath his cheek. His chest rose and fell in great gasps, sweat glistening along his spine.

The world was gold-edged, almost floating. Sound returned slowly, and it was like I was listening down a long tube.

Jean-Claude licked the blood from his lips, wiping a shaking hand across his chin, licking the hand clean. He lay down beside me, one hand across my stomach, his head cradled on my shoulder. His bare chest and stomach lay across my arm. His skin was almost hot, feverish. He'd never felt like that before. His heart pounded against my skin like a captive bird.

His hair fell against my face. It smelled of some exotic shampoo and of him. He gave a shaky laugh and said, "It was glorious for me, was it good for you, *ma petite*?"

I swallowed, and was too tired to even laugh. "Trust you to know just what to say."

Richard raised himself up on his elbows. Blood trickled down his neck where two neat fang marks showed. I touched the bite mark, and my fingers came away stained crimson.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"Not really." He grabbed my wrist, gently, licking the blood off my fingers, sucking them clean.

Jean-Claude's strangely warm hand caressed my stomach under my shirt. He undid the button of my pants.

"Don't even think it," I said.

"Too late, *ma petite*." He bent and kissed me. I could taste the metallic sweetness of Richard's blood on his tongue. I rose up to meet him, pushing at his mouth. I'd asked for the blood, not either of them. The truth was, we weren't done with the bloodletting today. Whatever I'd called from the grave had to be put back. That would take blood, fresh blood. The only question was who would donate it and how would it be gathered. Oh, one more question, how much blood would we need?

Chapter 26

Jean-Claude's fingertips slid along the edge of my pants. Richard grabbed his wrist. Anger flared from both of them, and that shared power flickered to life.

"You won't use this as an excuse to get into her pants, either," Richard said. His voice was thick and dark with more than anger. His hand tightened on Jean-Claude's wrist.

Jean-Claude balled his hand into a fist and bent his arm at the elbow. Concentration and anger touched both their faces. I could feel the trembling effort through their chests. Their anger prickled along my skin. It was too soon to do all this shit over again. "You can arm-wrestle later, boys, we've got to go see what I raised from the dead."

There was a fraction of hesitation, then they both looked down at me. Their arms were still straining against each other. Richard's face showed the effort. Jean-Claude's face had gone blank and curious, as if it was no effort to hold off a werewolf. But I could feel the fine trembling through his body. Illusion was all with Jean-Claude. With Richard it was all nerve endings and reality.

"What did you say, *ma petite*?"

"She said she raised the dead," Richard said.

"Yep, so get off me. You can fight later, but right now, we need to check on what I did."

"We did," Jean-Claude said. He eased away from Richard, and after a second, Richard released his hand.

"What we did," I said.

Richard stood, the muscles in his bare legs moving under the skin, and it was hard not to touch them, feel the movement of him. He offered me a hand up.

"Give me a minute," I said.

Jean-Claude stood as if drawn to his feet by strings. He offered me a hand, too.

They stood glaring at each other. Their anger played through the air like invisible sparks. I shook my head. I seemed to be more worse for wear than either of them, poor human that I was. I'd have actually taken a hand up, which was rare for me. I sighed, got my feet under me, and stood without help from either of them.

"Behave yourselves," I said. "Can't you feel what's in the air? Anger works just fine to call whatever it is, so stop it. We may have to do it again to lay to rest what we've already called from the grave."

Jean-Claude looked instantly relaxed, at ease. He gave a low bow. "As you like, *ma petite*."

Richard rotated his neck, trying to loosen his shoulders. His hands were still balled into fists, but he nodded. "I don't understand how what we did called zombies."

"I can act as a focus for other animators. It's a way to combine powers and raise an older zombie or more than one or two zombies. I don't know how to do

anything else but raise the dead, so when you shoved that much power in my face . . ." I shrugged. "I did what I know how to do."

"Did you raise all of Nikoloas's old cemetery?" Jean-Claude asked.

"If we're lucky," I said.

He put his head to one side, puzzled.

Richard looked down at himself. "Can I get some pants on?"

I smiled. "Seems a shame," I said, "but yeah."

"I will fetch my robe from the bathroom," Jean-Claude said.

"Help yourself," I said.

"No comment about how it is a shame that I am getting dressed?"

I shook my head.

"Cruel, *ma petite*, very cruel."

I smiled and gave him a little bow.

He returned the smile, but there was a challenge to his eyes as he walked towards the bathroom.

Richard was sliding into his jeans. I watched him zip them up and button them into place. It was fun just to watch him dress. Love makes the smallest movements fascinating.

I walked past him, towards the door, leaving him to put a shirt on if he was going to. The only way to ignore him was to just not look. The same theory worked with Jean-Claude most of the time.

I walked to the door. My hand was reaching for the knob when Richard grabbed me from behind, lifting me off my feet, carrying me back from the door.

My feet were literally dangling off the ground. "What the hell are you doing? Put me down."

"My wolves are coming," he said, as if that explained everything.

"Put me down."

He lowered me enough for my feet to touch the floor, but his arms stayed wrapped around me, as if he was afraid I'd go for the door. His face was distant, listening. I heard nothing.

A howl echoed up the corridor and raised the hairs on my arms. "What's going on, Richard?"

"Danger," he almost whispered it.

"Is it Raina and Marcus?"

He was still listening to things I could not hear. He pushed me behind him and went to the door, still shirtless, wearing nothing but his jeans.

I ran for the bed and the weapons. I got the Firestar out from under the pillow. "Don't go out there empty-handed, dammit." I dragged the Uzi out from under the bed.

A chorus of howls went up. Richard flung the door open and raced down the hallway. I called his name, but he was gone.

Jean-Claude came out of the bathroom in his black, fur-lined robe. "What is it, *ma petite*?"

"Company." I slipped the Uzi's strap across my chest.

The sounds of snarling wolves came distant. Jean-Claude ran past me, the long robe flying out behind him. He ran like a dark wind. When I got out to the corridor, he was nowhere in sight.

I was going to be the last one there. Dammit.

Chapter 27

Running full tilt towards a fight was not the best way to stay alive. Caution was better. I knew that, and it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but getting there in time. In time to save them. *Them*. I didn't dwell on that; I ran, the Firestar gripped tightly in my right hand, the Uzi in my left. I was running like an idiot, but at least I was armed.

A roaring shout thundered off the walls ahead. Don't ask me how, but I knew it was Richard. I didn't think I could run any faster. I was wrong. I spilled into the open, breath coming in throat-closing gasps, not looking left or right. If someone had had a gun, they could have blown me away.

Richard stood in the middle of the room, a zombie held at arm's length above his head. A wolf the size of a pony had pinned another zombie to the floor, savaging it. Stephen stood at Richard's back in human form, but crouched and ready to fight. Cassandra stood back from them. She turned to me as I skidded into the room. There was a look on her face that I couldn't quite read, and didn't have time to puzzle over.

Jean-Claude was at the far left, away from the werewolves. He was staring at me, too. I couldn't read his face, but he was in no danger. He hadn't waded into the zombies. He knew better. Richard didn't.

The room had been a narrow rectangle, but the far wall had blasted outward, scattering rubble across the floor. It looked like the zombies had crawled out from behind the wall. A graveyard that I, at least, hadn't known was there.

The dead stood in front of the ruins. Their eyes shifted to me as I saw them, and I felt the weight of their gaze like a blow to my heart.

The fear for everyone's safety was gone, washed away in a rush of anger. "Richard, put it down, please, it won't hurt you. Call Jason off the other one." It had to be Jason unless there was another werewolf down here. And if it was someone else, where was Jason?

Richard turned his head to look at me, the zombie, once a human male, still held effortlessly above his head. "They attacked Jason."

"They wouldn't have done anything without orders. Jason jumped the gun."

"They didn't attack us," Cassandra said. "They started pouring out of the wall. Jason changed and attacked them."

The giant wolf had opened the zombie's stomach and was tearing at intestines. I'd had enough. "Grab the wolf," I said. The zombie under him locked its arms around the wolf's forequarters. The wolf sank teeth into the corpse's throat and tore it out in a spurt of dark fluid and flesh.

The rest of the zombies, somewhere between sixty and eighty, surged toward the wolf. "Let him up, Jason, or I'll show you what it's like to be attacked by zombies."

Richard bent his elbow and tossed the zombie away from him. The body tumbled through the air and landed in the mass of waiting zombies. They fell like bowling pins, except that these bowling pins got to their feet, though one lost an arm in the process.

Richard crouched by his wolves. "You're attacking us?" He sounded outraged.

"Pull your wolf off my zombie and it stops here."

"You think you can take us?" Cassandra said.

"With this many dead, I know I can," I said.

Stephen's face crumpled, almost like he'd cry. "You'd hurt us."

Shit, I'd forgotten. I was their lupa now. I'd threatened to kill Raina if she hurt Stephen again, and here I was about to feed him to zombies. There was a logic gap somewhere.

"If I'm supposed to protect you all, then you have to obey me, right? So Jason gets the fuck off my zombie or I beat the hell out of him. Isn't that pack protocol?"

Richard turned to me. There was a look on his face I'd never seen before: anger and arrogance, or something close to it. "I don't think Jason really expected you to demand his obedience. I don't think any of us did."

"Then you don't know me very well," I said.

"*Mes amies*, if we kill each other, won't Marcus be pleased."

We all turned to Jean-Claude. I said, "Stop." All the zombies stopped at once like a freeze frame. One tumbled to the floor, caught in midshuffle, rather than take that last partial step. Zombies were terribly literal.

The giant wolf tore another piece out of the zombie. The dead man made a small involuntary cry. "Drag Jason off of it now, or we are going to do this dance. Fuck Marcus. I'll worry about it later."

"Off of him, Jason, now," Richard said.

The wolf reared back, tearing at the zombie's arm. Bone cracked. The wolf worried the arm like a terrier with a bone. Blood and thicker fluids flew in a spray.

Richard grabbed the wolf by the scruff of the neck, jerking it off its feet. He grabbed the front of its furry throat and turned it to face him. The muscles in his arms corded with the effort. The wolf's claws scrambled in the air while it strangled. The massive claws raked Richard's bare skin. Blood flowed in thin crimson lines.

He threw the wolf across the room into the waiting dead. "Never disobey me again, Jason, never!" His voice was lost in a growling that turned into a howl. He threw back his head and bayed. The sound rose from his human

throat. Cassandra and Stephen echoed him. Their howls filled the room with a strange, ringing song.

I realized then that Richard might avoid killing Marcus, but he'd never control the lukoi without brutality. He was already casual about it. Almost as casual as Jean-Claude. Bad sign or good sign? I wasn't sure.

Jason scrambled out of the dead. He turned pale green wolf eyes to me, as if waiting for something. "Don't look at me," I said, "I'm pissed with you, too."

Jason stalked towards me on paws bigger across than my hands. The fur at his neck rose in a prickling brush. His lips curled back from his teeth in a silent growl.

I pointed the Firestar at him. "Don't do it, Jason."

He kept coming, each step so stiff and full of tension that it looked robotic. He gathered his body, legs squirming into position for a leap. I wasn't going to let him finish the movement. If he'd been in human form, I'd have aimed to wound, but in wolf form, I wasn't taking any chances. One scratch and I'd be alpha female for real.

I sighted down the barrel and felt that quietness fill me. I felt nothing while I stared down the gun at him. Nothing but a cool, white emptiness.

"Stop it, both of you!" Richard growled. He walked towards us. I kept my eyes on the wolf but had a peripheral sense of Richard moving closer.

He kept coming, easing himself between Jason and me. I had to aim the gun skyward to keep from pointing it at his chest. He stared at me, his face thoughtful. "You won't need the gun." He knocked the great wolf to the floor with his fist. The wolf lay stunned. Only the rise and fall of its chest showed it was still alive.

When he turned back to me, his eyes were amber, and no longer human. "You are my lupa, Anita, but I am still Ulfric. I won't let you do to me what Raina has done to Marcus. I lead this pack." There was a hardness to his voice that was new. I'd discovered his male ego at last.

Jean-Claude laughed, a high, delighted sound that made me shiver. Richard hugged his bare arms as if he felt it, too.

"Don't you realize by now, Richard, that *ma petite* is either your equal or your master? She knows no other way to be." He came to stand by us. He looked amused as hell.

"I want her to be my equal," Richard said.

"But not within the pack," Jean-Claude said.

Richard shook his head. "No, I mean . . . No, Anita is my equal."

"Then what are you bitching about?" I said.

He glared at me with his alien eyes. "I am Ulfric, not you."

"Lead, and I'll follow, Richard." I stepped close to him, almost touching. "But lead, Richard, really lead, or get out of the way."

Chapter 28

"As amusing as this is," Jean-Claude said, "and believe me, *ma petite*, Richard, it is amusing. We do not have time for this particular argument, not if Richard stands any hope of not being forced to kill tonight."

We both glared at him, and he gave that graceful shrug that meant everything and nothing. "We must call the magic again, but this time, Richard needs to try and pull some of it into himself. He needs to do something that would impress his pack. This," he motioned to the zombies, "though impressive, looks too much like Anita's work."

"You've got a suggestion, I take it."

"Perhaps," he said. His eyes turned very serious then, the humor dying away until his face was lovely and blank. "But first, I think I have a question or two for you, myself, *ma petite*. I think it is not only Richard that you are emasculating today."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

He cocked his head to one side. "Perhaps you honestly do not know?" He sounded surprised. "There is a small hallway to the right. Look inside it."

I could see the archway at the top of the hall, but the zombies filled the space, hiding the rest from view. "Move forward," I said. The zombies moved like a single organism, their dead eyes watching my face as if I were all that mattered. To them, I was.

The zombies moved like a shambling curtain. I could see the smaller hallway now, and the figures waiting inside. "Stop," I said. The zombies stopped as if I'd hit a switch.

Liv, the blond bouncer from Danse Macabre, stood just inside the smaller hallway. She was still dressed in her violet body suit. Her extraordinary violet eyes stared at me, empty, waiting. My pulse thudded in my throat. There were other figures behind her.

Richard said softly, "This isn't possible."

I didn't argue with him. It would have been too hard.

"Bring them out, *ma petite*, let us see who you have called from their coffins." His voice was warm with the beginnings of anger.

"What's eating you?"

He laughed, but it was bitter. "I threatened my people with this, but you said nothing. You did not tell me you could truly raise vampires like any other zombie."

"I've only done it once before."

"Indeed," he said.

"Don't get all pissy on me."

"I shall get pissy if I want to," he said. "These are my people, my companions, and you have them walking around like puppets. I find that most disquieting."

"So do I," I said. I looked back at the vampires. Liv, who had been so animated last night, stood there like a well-preserved zombie. No. No, I'd never

have mistaken her for a zombie. I could feel a difference. But there she stood, that muscular body waiting for my next order. There were others behind her. I couldn't see how many. Too many.

"Can you put my vampires back, *ma petite*?"

I continued to look at Liv, avoiding Jean-Claude's eyes. "I don't know."

He touched my chin, turning me to face him. He studied my face, eyes searching, as if some hint of truth might show through. I let anger fill my face, anger was always a great thing to hide behind.

"What did you do with the last vampire you raised, *ma petite*?"

I pulled away from him. He grabbed my arm unbelievably fast. Too fast to see. What happened next was simply automatic. He held my right upper arm, but I could still bend at the elbow and point the Firestar at him. The Uzi in my left hand pointed at him, too. He could have crushed my arm before I fired one gun, but not both. But for the first time, staring down the barrel of a gun at him was problematic. The sash of his robe had come loose and I could see a triangle of pale flesh. I could see where his heart would be. I could blow his heart out his back and sever his spine. And I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to splatter that beautiful body all over the wall. Damn.

Richard came closer. He didn't touch either of us. He just stared from one to the other. "Is he hurting you, Anita?"

"No," I said.

"Then should you be pointing a gun at him?"

"He shouldn't be touching me," I said.

Richard's voice was very mild. "He just finished touching you a lot more than this, Anita."

"Why are you helping him?"

"He helped me. Besides, if you kill him over something small and stupid, you'll never forgive yourself."

I took a deep breath and let it out. Some of the tension eased with the breath. I lowered the Uzi.

Jean-Claude released my arm.

I pointed the Firestar at the floor and looked at Richard. There was something in his eyes, even the wolf's amber eyes, that was all too human. Pain. He knew how much Jean-Claude meant to me. It was there in his eyes. That one comment said that he understood my relationship with the vampire, maybe better than I did.

I wanted to apologize to him, but I wasn't sure he'd understand what it was for. I wasn't even sure I could explain it. If you love someone, truly love them, you should never cause them pain. Never fill their eyes with something so close to grief.

"I'm sorry I got mad at you earlier. You want what's best for the pack, I know that."

"You still think I'm a fool to want a bloodless coup," he said.

I stood on tiptoe and kissed him gently. "Not a fool, just naive, terribly naive."

"Very touching, *ma petite*. And I do appreciate your interference on my behalf, Richard, but these are my people. I promised them certain freedoms when they joined me. I ask again. Can you put them back as they were?"

I turned to Jean-Claude, one hand still balancing against Richard's chest. "I don't know."

"Then you had better find out, *ma petite*."

It sounded too much like a threat for my taste, but . . . there was a figure behind Liv the bouncer that I couldn't take my eyes off of. I walked towards the waiting vampires. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. My stomach clenched into a hard lump, my chest was tight. I finally said it: "Willie McCoy, come to me."

Willie walked out from behind the tall blond vampire. He was wearing the same chartreuse suit he'd had on at Danse Macabre. His brown eyes seemed to see me, but they were empty of that spark that was Willie. He wasn't home. It was like watching a puppet moving, and I was the puppet master. I tasted something bitter at the back of my throat. My eyes were hot and tight. I wasn't sure if I was going to throw up or cry first.

I stopped him about two feet from me. Close enough that I couldn't pretend or wish it away. I swallowed hard, and tears hot enough to scald ran down my face. "I didn't want to know this," I whispered.

Jean-Claude came to stand beside me. "Willie," he said, his voice vibrated through the room. Willie's body thrummed to the sound like a tuning fork struck. "Willie, look at me."

The blank, familiar face turned slowly towards his master. Something flickered through the eyes for a moment; something moved that I had no name for.

"This has possibilities," Jean-Claude said.

"Willie," I said, "look at me." My voice wasn't nearly as impressive as the vampire's, but Willie turned to me.

"No," Jean-Claude said, "look at me, Willie."

Willie hesitated.

"Willie," I said, "come to me." I held out a hand and he took a step towards me.

Jean-Claude said, "Stop, Willie, do not go to her."

Willie hesitated, almost turning to Jean-Claude.

I concentrated on that curl of power inside of me, that thing that allowed me to raise the dead and let it wash over me, flow out of me. I called Willie's body to me and nothing Jean-Claude could do would get him to turn away from me.

Richard said, "Stop it, both of you. He isn't a doll."

"He isn't alive, either," I said.

"He deserves better than this," Richard said.

I agreed. I turned to Jean-Claude. "He's mine, Jean-Claude. They're all mine. When night falls, they will be yours again, but their empty shells are mine." I stepped close to him, and that swirl of power lashed out.

He took a hissing breath and backed up. Holding his hand as if I'd struck him.

"Never forget what I am and what I can do. No more threats between us, ever, or it will be the last threat."

He stared at me, and for just a second, there was a flash of something I hadn't seen before: fear. Fear of me for the first time. Good.

Willie stared at me with empty, waiting eyes. He was dead, well and truly dead. Tears flowed down my face, tight and hard. Poor Willie, poor me. He wasn't human. All these months of being his friend and he was dead. Just dead. Damn.

"What happened to the first vampire you raised, *ma petite*? Why didn't you put it back into its coffin?" A thought slid behind his eyes. I watched the idea form, and fall from his lips. "How did Monsieur Bouvier get the lower half of his body melted away?"

Magnus Bouvier had been Serephina's mortal servant. It had been his job to keep me near Serephina's coffin until she rose to finish me off. I scrubbed at my face, trying to get rid of the tears. Always ruins the effect when you cry. "You know the answer," I said. My voice sounded strained and small.

"Say it aloud, *ma petite*, let me hear it from your own lips."

"I feel like I'm missing part of this conversation," Richard said, "What are you two talking about?"

"Tell him, *ma petite*."

"The vampire grabbed Magnus around the waist and held on. I'd planned on it slowing him down, nothing else. I got to the door and ran outside. The sunlight hit the vampire and it burst into flames. I expected Magnus to go back inside, but he didn't. He kept coming, dragging her into the light." Saying it fast didn't make it any better.

I stood in the middle of the dead I had called, hugging myself. I still had dreams about Serephina. Still saw Magnus reaching out to me, begging me to save him. I could have shot him and never lost a moment's sleep, but burning him alive was torture. I didn't do torture. Not to mention that Ellie Quinlan had already risen as a vampire, which made her legally alive. I'd killed them both, and it hadn't been pretty.

Richard was looking at me, a look of something close to horror on his face. "You burned the man and the vampire alive?" I watched the brown in his eyes swim back to the surface. The entire shape of the eye changed while I watched. It looked almost like it should hurt. If it did hurt, he never showed it.

"I didn't plan it, Richard. I didn't want it to happen, but I would have done anything to escape Serephina. Anything."

"I don't understand that."

"I know," I said.

"There is no shame in surviving, *ma petite*." I turned to Jean-Claude. There was no shock on his face. It was lovely and unreadable as a doll's.

"Then why can't I read your face right now?"

Life flowed back into his face, filled his eyes, moved behind his skin until he was there, staring at me. The look in his eyes wasn't what I expected. Fear was still there and surprise, but underneath was worry.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes." I frowned. "What's worrying you?"

He sighed. "All honesty is eventually punished, but not usually this quickly."

"Answer me, Jean-Claude."

His eyes went past me to the werewolves waiting at Richard's back. "No one must speak of what has happened here, not to anyone."

"Why not?" Richard asked.

"It would embarrass *ma petite*."

"That's true," I said, "but that's not what you mean. You don't mind embarrassing me. Hell, this story would make a great threat for all your vampires. It'd scare the hell out of them."

"That, *ma petite*, is the point."

I sighed. "Stop being obtuse and just tell us."

"I do not want this," he waved at the vampires, "coming to the attention of the vampire council."

"Why not?" Richard and I asked together.

"Put simply, *ma petite*, they will kill you."

"I'm your registered human servant," I said, "you said you did that to keep me safe."

"For this they will come and see for themselves, *ma petite*. Whoever they send will know instantly that you do not bear my marks. You are my servant in name only. That will not be enough for them. Without any binding between us, they will not trust you."

"So they'll kill her, just like that?" Richard asked. He moved closer to me as if he'd touch me, but his hands hesitated above my shoulders.

Without looking at him, I said, "One story about burning people alive and you don't want to touch me. You prejudiced little werewolf, you." I tried to keep my voice light but a harsh edge crept in.

His hands gripped my shoulders tightly. "It really bothers you, what you did, doesn't it?"

I turned to see his face, his hands still on my shoulders. "Of course it bothers me. I didn't just kill Magnus, I tortured him to death. Ellie Quinlan didn't deserve to be burned alive." I shook my head and tried to step away from him. He slid his arms across my back, holding me gently against him.

"I'm sorry you had to do it." He touched my hair with one hand, the other still against my back. "Your eyes are haunted by it, by what you did. Don't take this wrong, but it makes me feel better to see that pain in your eyes."

I pushed away from him. "Did you think I could kill someone by torture and feel nothing?"

He met my eyes but it seemed like it was an effort. "I wasn't sure."

I shook my head.

Jean-Claude took my left hand; the other was still holding the Firestar. He turned me to face him. He raised my hand towards his lips as he bowed slowly towards me. He spoke as he moved, "There is nothing that you could ever do that would make me not desire the touch of your body." He kissed my hand. His lips lingered a little longer than was polite. His tongue licked across my skin, and I pulled away.

"It scares you that I can raise vampires like this."

"Perhaps, *ma petite*, but I have frightened you for years and yet you are still here."

He had a point. I stared at Willie. "Let's see if we can put everyone back where they belong." I hoped I could do it. I wanted Willie back, even if it was only a lie. He walked, he talked, it was still Willie. Or maybe, I just wanted it to be Willie. Maybe I needed it to be Willie.

Chapter 29

"Take me to the coffin room," I said.

"Why?" Jean-Claude asked. There was something in the way he said that one word that made me stare at him.

"Because I asked."

"How would my flock feel if I allowed the Executioner to enter their private chamber while they slept helpless?"

"I'm not going to kill anybody today, not on purpose."

"I do not like the way you said that, *ma petite*."

"Uncontrolled power is unpredictable, Jean-Claude. All sorts of unpleasant things can happen. I need to see where the vampires will be resting. I want to try and put them back in a controlled manner."

"What sorts of unpleasant things?" Richard asked.

It was a good question. Since I was pretty much flying blind, I didn't have a good answer. "It takes less power to put back than it does to raise. If we just call it up wild and try to will them back . . ." I shook my head.

"You could extinguish their life force," Cassandra said.

I looked at her. "What did you say?"

"You're going to put them back in their coffins as you would a zombie, but with a zombie you will it to be dead again, correct?"

I hadn't really thought of it that way, but she was right.

"If you will the vampires back in their coffins, you're in effect willing them dead again like a zombie, right?"

"Yeah."

"But you don't want them permanently dead."

My head was beginning to hurt. "No, I don't want them permanently dead."

"How do you know so very much about necromancy, Cassandra?" Jean-Claude asked.

"I have a master's degree in magical theory."

"That must be useful on a resume," I said.

"Not in the least," she said, "but it might be useful now."

"Did you know your newest pack member was so well-educated, Richard?" Jean-Claude asked.

"Yes," he said, "it's one of the reasons I gave her permission to move here."

"Permission to move here?" I said. "Why did she need your permission?"

"A werewolf has to get the permission of the local pack leader before they can enter a new territory. If they don't, it's considered a challenge to his authority."

"Did she have to ask your permission or Marcus's?"

"Both," Cassandra said. "Most werewolves won't come near Saint Louis while this power struggle is going on."

"Why did you come, then, my wolf?" Jean-Claude asked.

"I liked what I heard about Richard. He's trying to bring the pack into the twentieth century."

"Did you come planning to be his lupa?" I asked. Yes, a little twinge of jealousy had reared its ugly head.

Cassandra smiled. "Maybe, but the job's filled. I came here to avoid fighting, not to start it."

"You have come to the wrong place, I fear," Jean-Claude said.

She shrugged. "If I waited until the battle was over and it was safe, I wouldn't be worth much, would I?"

"You came to fight at Monsieur Zeeman's side?"

"I came because I agree with what he's trying to do."

"You don't approve of killing?" I asked.

"Not really."

"Why, Richard, you have found a kindred spirit," Jean-Claude said, smiling, and far too pleased.

"Cassandra believes in the sanctity of life; a lot of people do," Richard said. He wouldn't look at me.

"If she's a better match for you than I am, I won't stand in your way."

He turned to me, a look of astonishment on his face. "Anita . . ." He shook his head. "I'm in love with you."

"You'd get over it," I said. My chest was tight with the offer, but I meant it. Richard and I had a basic fundamental difference of opinion. It wasn't going away. One of us was going to have to compromise, and it wasn't going to be me. I couldn't quite meet Richard's eyes, but I didn't take it back.

He stepped in front of me, and all I could see was his bare chest. There was a scratch just below his left nipple, blood drying on his skin in darkening

strings. He touched my chin, raising my face until I met his eyes. He studied my face like he'd never seen it before.

"I would never get over losing you, Anita. Never."

"Never's a long time to tie yourself to a killer."

"You don't have to be a killer," he said.

I stepped away from him. "If you're hanging around me waiting for me to soften up and become this good little girl, you might as well leave now."

He grabbed my arms, pulling me against his body. "I want you, Anita, all of you." He kissed me, arms locked behind my back, raising me up against him.

I slid my hands behind his back, Firestar still in one hand. I pressed my body against his hard enough to know he was happy to see me.

We came up for air, and I pulled back, but not out of his arms, half-laughing. I caught a glimpse of Jean-Claude standing to one side. The look on his face wiped the smile from my lips. It wasn't jealousy. It was hunger. Desire. Watching us together had excited him.

I drew back from Richard and found blood on my hands. It was hard to tell on the navy blue shirt but there were wet spots where I'd pressed myself against the bloody scratches. Some of the wounds were deep enough that they were still seeping blood.

Richard was looking at Jean-Claude, too, now. I stepped away from Richard, holding up the bloody hand. I walked towards the vampire, and his eyes stayed on the fresh blood, not on me. I stopped less than a foot from him, my hand held out in front of his face.

"Which would you rather have right now, sex or blood?"

His eyes flicked to my face, back to my hand, then to my face. I watched the effort it took for him to keep eye contact. "Ask Richard which he would rather have just after he changes into a wolf, sex or fresh meat?"

I glanced back at Richard. "What's your choice?"

"Just after the change, meat." He said it like I should have known the answer.

I turned back to the vampire. I slid the Firestar into the front of my pants, and moved the bloody hand towards his lips.

Jean-Claude grabbed my wrist. "Do not tease me, *ma petite*. My control is not boundless." A tremor ran through his arm and down his hand. He looked away, eyes closed.

I touched his face with my right hand, turning him back to face me. "Who says I'm teasing?" I said softly. "Take us to the coffin room."

Jean-Claude searched my face. "What do you offer me, *ma petite*?"

"Blood," I said.

"And sex?" he asked.

"Which would you rather have, right this minute?" I stared at him, willing the truth in his face.

He gave a shaky laugh. "Blood."

I smiled, and pulled my wrist away. "Remember, it was your choice."

A look passed over his face that was a mixture of surprise and irony. "Touché, *ma petite*, but I am beginning to have hopes that this will not be the

last time I am given the choice." There was a heat to his voice, his eyes, just standing this close to his body, that made me shiver.

I glanced back at Richard. He was watching us. I expected to see jealousy or anger, but all I could read in his eyes was need. Lust. I was pretty sure that Richard's choice right this minute would be sex, but the thought of a little blood thrown in didn't seem to worry him. In fact, it seemed to excite him. I was beginning to wonder if the werewolf and vampire shared similar tastes in foreplay. The thought should have scared me, but it didn't. That was a very, very bad sign.

Chapter 30

The last time I'd been in the coffin room under Circus of the Damned, I'd come to slay the current Master of the City. I'd come to slay every vampire in the place. My, how things had changed.

Track lighting in solid white fixtures clung to the walls, casting soft halos of light on each of seven coffins. Three of the coffins were empty, their lids propped open. All of the coffins were modern, new, roomy. They were all a rich varnished oak, stained nearly black. Silver handles graced the wood. The satin linings of the open coffins were different colors; white, blue, red. The coffin with the red interior held a sword in a specially made side sheath: a freaking two-handed sword as long as I was tall. A pair of the ugliest fuzzy dice I'd ever seen were suspended from the white satin coffin. It had to be Willie's. The blue satin held a small extra pillow. Standing over the coffin, the smell of herbs rose musty, vaguely sweet. I touched the small pillow and found it filled with dried herbs. "Herbs for sweet dreams," I said to no one in particular.

"Is there some purpose to you handling their personal belongings, *ma petite*?"

I looked at him. "What keepsakes do you have in your coffin?"

He just smiled.

"Why all the same coffins?"

"If you came in here to kill us, where would you start?"

I looked around at the identical coffins. "I don't know. If someone comes in, they can't tell who's the oldest or who's the Master of the City. It covers your ass but endangers the rest."

"If someone comes to kill us, *ma petite*, it is to everyone's benefit if the oldest are not killed first. There is always a chance that one of the older ones could awaken in time to save the rest."

I nodded. "Why the extra-wide, extra-high interiors?"

"Would you want to spend eternity on your back, *ma petite*?" He smiled and came to stand beside me, leaning his butt against the open coffin, arms crossed over his chest. "There are so many other more comfortable positions."

I felt heat rise up my face.

Richard joined us. "Are you two going to exchange witty repartee or are we going to do this?" He leaned on the closed end of the coffin, forearms resting on it. There was a bloody scratch on his right upper arm. He seemed at home. Jason, still furry and big enough to ride, padded over the stone floor, nails clicking. The wolf's head was high enough that it licked Richard's bloody arm while still on all fours. There were moments when I felt Richard was too normal to fit into my life. This wasn't one of them.

"Yeah, we're going to do it," I said.

Richard stood, running his fingers through his thick hair, getting it out of his face, and showing his chest off to good advantage. For the first time, I wondered if he'd done it on purpose. I searched his face for that edge of teasing that Jean-Claude had, that knowledge that even that simple movement touched me. There was nothing. Richard's face was guileless, handsome, empty of ulterior motives.

I exchanged glances with Jean-Claude. He shrugged. "If you do not understand him, do not look to me. I am not in love with him."

Richard looked puzzled. "Did I miss something?" He stroked under the wolf's throat, pressing the head against his chest. The wolf made a high whimpering sound of pleasure. Glad to be back in the pack leader's good graces, I guess.

I shook my head. "Not really."

"Why are we here?" Stephen asked. He was as close to the door as he could get and not be outside the room. His shoulders were hunched. He was scared, but of what?

Cassandra stood near Stephen, inside the room, closer to us. Her face was bland, unreadable except for a certain wariness around the eyes. They both wore jeans with oversized shirts. Stephen's was a man's pale blue dress shirt. Cassandra had an oversized T-shirt a dull pine green with a wolf's head done large with huge, yellow eyes.

"What's wrong, Stephen?" Richard asked.

Stephen blinked and shook his head.

"We all heard Anita tell Jean-Claude she'd need more blood, fresh blood," Cassandra said. She looked at me while she finished the thought. "I think Stephen's worried where the fresh blood's coming from."

"I'm not into human sacrifice," I said.

"Some people don't consider a lycanthrope human," Cassandra said.

"I do," I said.

She looked at me, judging my words. Some lycanthropes could tell if you were lying. I was betting she was one of them. "Then where are you going to get the blood?"

It was a good question. I wasn't sure I had a good answer. "I don't know, but it won't take a death."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

I shrugged. "If it takes a death to put them back, they're dead. I'm not going to kill anybody else to bring them back." I looked at the three waiting vampires after I said it. Liv, Willie, and surprisingly, Damian. Raising the vampires was impressive enough, raising one as powerful as Damian was downright scary. He wasn't a master vampire, never would be, but he'd have frightened me in a fair fight. Now he stood dressed only in the green lycra pants and the pirate sash. His upper body gleamed like muscled marble under the glow of the lights. His green eyes stared at me with a patient waiting that only the truly dead can manage.

"You are shivering, *ma petite*."

"We raise the power again, then we need blood." I looked at Jean-Claude and Richard. "If Richard has to fight Marcus tonight, I'm not sure he should be the one who supplies this round of blood."

Jean-Claude cocked his head to one side. I expected him to say something irritating, but he didn't. Maybe even a very old dog could learn new tricks.

"He is not sinking fangs into you," Richard said. Anger made his brown eyes dark and sparkling, he was lovely when he was angry. That aura of energy flared around him, close enough to creep down my bare skin.

"You can't donate twice this close together, with Marcus waiting for you," I said.

Richard grabbed me by the upper arms. "You don't understand, Anita. Feeding is like sex to him."

Again, I half-expected Jean-Claude to chime in, but he didn't. I had to say it. Damn. "It won't be the first time he's done it, Richard."

Richard's fingers dug into my arms. "I know that. I saw the fang marks on your wrist. But remember, you weren't under any mind control that time."

"I remember," I said. "It hurt like hell."

Richard drew me to him with his hands still holding only my upper arms, drew me to tiptoe as if he'd drag me to his face. "Without mind control, it's like rape, not the real thing. It'll be real this time."

"You're hurting me, Richard." My voice was calm, steady, but the look on his face scared me. The intensity in his hands, his face, his body, was unnerving.

He eased down, but didn't take his hands away. "Take blood from Jason or Cassandra."

I shook my head. "That might work or it might not. If the blood comes from one of us, I know it'll work. Besides, should you be offering up other people's blood without asking them first?"

Doubt slid behind his eyes, and he let me go. His long hair fell forward, hiding his face. "You say you've chosen me. That you're in love with me. That you don't want to have sex with him. Now, you tell me you want him to feed off of you. That's as bad as sex." He stalked the room, pacing around the waiting vampires, swinging back in an agitated stride that filled the room with a warm, creeping power.

"I didn't say I wanted to feed him," I said.

He stopped in the middle of the room, staring at me. "But you do, don't you?"

"No," I said, and it was true. "I've never been interested in that."

"She speaks the truth," Jean-Claude said at last.

"You stay out of this," Richard said, pointing a finger at him.

Jean-Claude gave a small bow and fell silent. He was behaving himself far too well. Made me nervous. Of course, Richard was having enough of a fit for both of them.

"Then let me feed him again."

"Isn't it sexual for you, too?" I asked.

Richard shook his head. "It was you I was looking at, Anita, not him. A little pain is fine."

It was my turn to shake my head. "Are you truly saying that letting him sink fangs into my body would bother you as much as sinking . . ." I let the thought die unspoken. "I see donating blood as the lesser evil, Richard. Don't you?"

"Yes," he hissed. His power was filling the room like warm, electric water. I could almost reach out and grab it.

"Then what are you bitching about?" I said. "We wouldn't have done it the first time, but you wanted me to do it. You wanted us to do it." I stalked towards him, finally angry myself. "You don't want to kill Marcus, fine, but this is the price. You want enough power to cow the rest of the pack without losing your humanity, great, but that kind of power isn't free." I stood in front of him, so close that his power danced over my skin like fine needles, like sex that rode that edge between pleasure and pain.

"It's too late to back out now. We are not going to strand Willie and the others because you're getting cold feet." I took that last step, putting our bodies so close together that a deep breath would have made them touch. I lowered my voice to a whisper, though I knew everything in the room would still hear me. "It isn't the blood that bothers you. What bothers you is that you enjoyed it." I lowered my voice until it was almost a movement of lips with only a breath of sound. "Jean-Claude isn't just seducing me, he's seducing us."

Richard stared down at me, and the look in his true brown eyes was lost, hopeless. A little boy who's discovered the monster under the bed is actually real, and it's screwing Mommy.

Jean-Claude's power eased through the room, mingling with Richard's electric warmth like a cool wind from the grave. We both turned and looked at the vampire. He was smiling ever so slightly. He undid his robe and let it fall to the floor. He glided towards us, wearing nothing but his silk pajamas and a knowing smile. His own power making his long hair flare round his face like a small wind.

Richard touched my shoulders and even that chaste touch sent a line of warm, shivering energy along my skin. The power was there for the calling, just below the surface. We didn't need all the sexual charades.

Jean-Claude reached a pale hand out towards me. I met his hand with mine, and that one touch was enough. That cool, burning power flowed over

me, through me, into Richard. I heard Richard gasp. Jean-Claude started to move forward, like he'd press his body against mine. I held him away from me with the hand that was entwined in his, straight-arming him. "It's here, Jean-Claude, can't you feel it?"

He nodded. "Your power calls to me, *ma petite*."

Richard's hands slid over my shoulders, his face brushing my hair. "Now what?"

"We ride the power this time, it doesn't ride us."

"How?" Richard whispered.

Jean-Claude looked at me with eyes that were deep as any ocean and as full of secrets. "I believe *ma petite* has a plan."

"Yeah," I said, "I have a plan." I looked from one to the other of them. "I'm going to call Dominic Dumare and see if he knows how to put vampires back in their coffins." Dominic had been cleared of Robert's murder. He had an airtight alibi. He'd been with a woman. Even if he hadn't been, I might have asked for his help. I wanted to save Willie more than I wanted to revenge Robert.

A strange expression crossed Jean-Claude's face. "You, asking for help, *ma petite*? That is unusual."

I drew away from both of them. We could get the power back, I was pretty certain of that. I looked at Willie's empty face and the fuzzy dice hanging from his coffin. "If I make a mistake, Willie's gone. I want him back."

There were times when I thought that it wasn't Jean-Claude who had convinced me that vampires weren't always monsters. It was Willie and Dead Dave, ex-cop and bar owner. It was a host of lesser vampires that seemed, occasionally, like nice guys. Jean-Claude was a lot of things; nice was not one of them.

Chapter 31

Dominic Dumare showed up wearing a pair of black dress slacks and a black leather jacket unzipped over a grey silk T-shirt. He looked more relaxed without Sabin looking on, like an employee on his day off. Even the neatly trimmed Vandyke beard and mustache seemed less formal.

Dominic walked around the three vampires I'd raised. We'd moved back out into the rubble-strewn main area, so he could see the zombies and the vampires all at once. He paced around the vampires, touching them here and there. He grinned at me, teeth flashing in his dark beard. "This is marvelous, truly marvelous."

I fought the urge to frown at him. "Forgive me if I don't share your enthusiasm. Can you help me put them back the way they were?"

"Theoretically, yes."

"When people start using the word *theoretically*, it means they don't know how to do something. You can't help me, can you?"

"Now, now," Dominic said. He knelt by Willie, staring up at him, studying him like a bug under a bioscope. "I didn't say I couldn't help. It's true that I've never seen this done. And you say you've done this before." He stood up, brushing off the knees of his pants.

"Once."

"That time was without the triumvirate?" Dominic asked.

I'd had to tell him. I understood enough about ritual magic to know that if we withheld how we'd gotten this much power, anything Dominic helped us come up with wouldn't work. It would be like telling the police it was a burglary when it was really a murder. They'd be trying to solve the wrong crime.

"Yeah, the first time was just me."

"But both times in daylight hours?" he asked.

I nodded.

"That makes sense. We can only raise zombies after the souls have flown. It would make sense that vampires can only be raised during the day. When darkness falls, their souls return."

I wasn't even going to try and argue about whether or not vampires had souls. I wasn't as sure of the answer as I used to be.

"I can't raise zombies during daylight hours. Let alone vampires," I said.

Dominic motioned at all the waiting dead of both kinds. "But you did it."

I shook my head. "That's not the point. I'm not supposed to be able to do it."

"Have you ever tried to raise normal zombies during daylight hours?"

"Well, no. The man who trained me said it wasn't possible."

"So you never tried," Dominic said.

I hesitated before answering.

"You have tried," he said.

"I can't do it. I can't even call the power under the light of the sun."

"Only because you believe you can't," Dominic said.

"Run that by me again."

"Belief is one of the most important aspects of magic."

"You mean, if I don't believe I can raise zombies during the day, I can't."

"Exactly."

"That doesn't make sense," Richard said. He leaned against one of the intact walls. He'd been very quiet while I talked magic with Dominic. Jason, still in wolf form, lay at his feet. Stephen had cleared some of the broken stones and sat beside the wolf.

"Actually," I said, "it does. I've seen people with a lot of raw talent that couldn't raise anything. One guy was convinced it was a mortal sin so he just blocked it out. But he shone with power whether he wanted to accept it or not."

"A shapeshifter can deny his power all he wants, but that doesn't keep him from changing," Richard said.

"I believe that is why lycanthropy is referred to as a curse," Dominic said.

Richard looked at me. The expression on his face was eloquent. "A curse."

"You'll have to forgive Dominic," Jean-Claude said. "A hundred years ago, it never occurred to anyone that lycanthropy could be a disease."

"Concern for Richard's feelings?" I asked.

"His happiness is your happiness, *ma petite*."

Jean-Claude's new gentlemanly behavior was beginning to bug me. I didn't trust his change of heart.

Cassandra said, "If Anita didn't believe she could raise the dead during daylight hours, then how did she do it?" She had joined in the metaphysical discussion like it was a graduate class in magical theory. I'd met people like her in college. Theorists who had no real magic of their own. But they could sit around for hours debating whether a theoretical spell would work. They treated magic like higher physics, a pure science without any true way of testing. Heaven forbid the ivory tower magicians should actually try out their theories in a real spell. Dominic would have fit in well with them, except he had his own magic.

"Both occasions were extreme situations," Dominic said. "It works on the same principle that allows a grandmother to lift a truck off her grandchild. In times of great need, we often touch abilities beyond the everyday."

"But the grandmother can't lift a car at will, just because she did it once," I said.

"Hmm," Dominic said, "perhaps the analogy is not perfect, but you understand what I am saying. If you say you do not, you are merely being difficult."

That almost made me smile. "So you're saying that I could raise the dead in daylight if I believed I could."

"I believe so."

I shook my head. "I've never heard of any animator being able to do that."

"But you are not merely an animator, Anita," Dominic said. "You are a necromancer."

"I have never heard of a necromancer that could raise the dead in broad daylight," Jean-Claude said.

Dominic shrugged gracefully. It reminded me of Jean-Claude. It takes a couple hundred years to make a shrug pretty. "I don't know about broad daylight, but just as some vampires can walk around during the day, as long as they are sufficiently sheltered, I believe the same principle would apply to necromancers."

"So you don't believe Anita could raise the dead at high noon out of doors, either?" Cassandra said.

Dominic shrugged again. Then he laughed. "You have caught me, my studious beauty. It may well be possible for Anita to do exactly that, but even I have never heard of such a thing."

I shook my head. "Look, we can explore the magical implications later. Right now, can you help me figure a way to put the vampires back without screwing them up?"

"Define screwing them up," Dominic said.

"Do not joke, Dominic," Jean-Claude said. "You know precisely what she means."

"I want to hear it from her lips."

Jean-Claude looked at me and gave a barely perceptible shrug.

"When darkness falls, I want them to rise as vampires. I'm afraid if I do this wrong, they'll just be dead, permanently."

"You surprise me, Anita. Perhaps your reputation as the scourge of the local vampire populace is exaggerated."

I stared at him. Before I could say something that sounded like bragging, Jean-Claude spoke. "I would think what she has done today is proof enough of how very much she deserves her reputation."

Dominic and the vampire stared at each other. Something seemed to pass between them. A challenge, a knowledge, something. "She would make an amazing human servant if only some vampire could tame her," Dominic said.

Jean-Claude laughed. The sound filled the room with echoes that shivered and danced across the skin. The laughter swept through my body, and for the briefest moment, I could feel something touch me deep inside where no hand belonged. In another context Jean-Claude might have made it sexual; now it was simply disturbing.

"Don't ever do that again," Richard said. He rubbed his bare arms as if he were cold or trying to erase the memory of that invasive laughter.

Jason trotted over to Jean-Claude, to butt his head against the vampire's hand. He'd liked it.

Dominic gave a little bow. "My apologies, Jean-Claude, you have made your point. If you wished to, you could cause the damage that my master caused by accident at your office."

"My office," I said. Personally, I didn't think that Jean-Claude could cause damage with just his voice. I'd been in situations where if he could have done it, he would have. No sense telling Dominic that, though.

Dominic gave an even lower bow in my direction. "Your office, of course."

"Can we cut the grandstanding?" I said. "Can you help us?"

"I am more than willing to try."

I walked up to him, picking my way over the broken stones. When I was standing as close as was polite and maybe an inch or so more, I said, "These three vampires are not an experiment. This is not some graduate study in magical metaphysics. You offered to teach me necromancy, Dominic. I think you're not up to the job. How can you teach me when I can do things you can't? Unless, of course, you can raise vampires from their coffins?"

I stared into his dark eyes the entire time I spoke, watching the anger narrow his eyes, tighten his lips. His ego was as big as I'd hoped. I knew he wouldn't disappoint me. Dominic would do his best for us now. His pride was at stake.

"Tell me exactly how you called the power, Anita, and I will build you a spell that should work—if you have the control to make it work."

I smiled at him, and I made sure it was just this side of condescending. "You come up with it, I can pull it off."

He smiled. "Arrogance is not a becoming trait in a woman."

"I find it a very becoming trait," Jean-Claude said. "If it's deserved. If you had just raised three vampires from their daytime rest, wouldn't you be arrogant, Dominic?"

His smile widened. "Yes, I would be."

Truth was, I didn't feel arrogant. I was scared. Scared that I'd screwed Willie up and he would never rise again. I felt bad too, about Liv and Damian. It wasn't a matter of liking them or not; I didn't mean to do it. You shouldn't extinguish someone's life force by accident. If I felt half as secure as my words to Dominic, why did my stomach hurt?

Chapter 32

Dominic, Cassandra, and I came up with a spell. The part of the plan that was my idea was very simple. I had put zombies back in their graves for years. I was good at it. As far as I was able, I was going to treat this like just another job: laying the dead to rest, nothing special. Lay the zombies first, worry about the vamps later.

I had Cassandra fetch one of my knives and a wrist sheath from the bedroom. If I'd been acting as a focus for another animator, I wouldn't have let him sink teeth into me, so why did the blood have to come from Jean-Claude drinking it? It didn't, or I didn't think it did. Dominic agreed with me, but he wasn't a hundred percent sure. So zombies first. They'd be the practice. If the knife didn't work, we'd go to fangs, but what little normalcy was left to me, I was going to cling to.

I'd sent Stephen for a bowl to hold the blood. He'd returned with a small, golden bowl. I wondered if the size was deliberate, to encourage me not to spill too much blood. For a werewolf, Stephen didn't seem to like blood very much. The bowl was polished to a shine so bright it almost glowed. The inside showed the dimpled blows of hammer work. Beaten gold, and I knew as soon as I touched it, it was old. Why does everyone think you have to have something special to hold the blood? Tupperware would have worked.

We stood in the rubble-strewn room where the zombies waited, patient as only the dead can be. Some of the eyes that watched me were sunken like the blind eyes of dead fish, a few skulls were empty, and even without eyes, they all seemed to be looking at me.

I stood, knife strapped to my left wrist, facing them. Richard stood to my left, Jean-Claude to my right. They weren't touching me, by my request.

Dominic had asked for enough details of the first triumvirate that I'd been embarrassed. He agreed with me that the power was probably there without us having to crawl all over each other. Agreeing to that alone earned him brownie points. After all, the plan was to raise the magic tonight in front of the whole pack. I didn't really want to be having sex in front of that many strangers. All right, it wasn't exactly sex, but it was close enough that I didn't want an audience.

The glow was fading. Staring at the partially rotting zombies, it was hard to regain the mood. "My zombies usually hold together better than this," I said.

"If you had pulled this much power from two other necromancers, the zombies would be better," Dominic said.

"Perhaps it was the lack of control," Jean-Claude said.

I turned and looked at him. "I think Dominic means that some of the power that raised them was taken from a dead man."

"Do you believe I am a dead man, *ma petite*?"

I stared into that lovely face and nodded. "The vampires I raised are just corpses. Whatever you are, it's a form of necromancy. Necromancy only works when you start with a dead body."

He cocked his head to one side. "I hear your words, *ma petite*, but I do not think you believe them, not completely."

I shook my head. "I don't know what I believe anymore."

"Actually," Dominic said, "I don't believe it matters that Jean-Claude is a vampire. I think it is more that neither he nor Richard know anything of raising the dead. That is your talent alone. I think with practice, you could channel the power into perfect zombies, but in a way, Jean-Claude is right. The wildness of it, the lack of control, made the zombies less perfect."

Something must have shown on my face, because he said, "You had too many things to control to pay attention to all the details. I think you instinctively let the zombies go, because it was the part you were most sure of. You have excellent instincts."

"Thanks, I guess," I said.

He smiled. "I know time is growing short. As we can see from Jean-Claude's presence, not all vampires sleep until full dark. I fear that if one of the vampires passes its waking hour, that he or she will be lost. But I would ask Anita to do one thing for me that has nothing to do with her problem, but everything to do with mine."

"What problem?" I asked.

"Sabin," Jean-Claude said.

Dominic nodded. "Sabin's time is running short."

"Sabin, the vampire at the club?" Cassandra asked.

"Yeah," I said. "What do you need, Dominic? Make it quick, and I'm your girl."

Dominic smiled. "Thank you, Anita. Concentrate on one of your zombies. Try to bring it closer to perfection."

I frowned at him.

"Heal one of your zombies, *ma petite*."

"You can't heal the dead," I said, "but I can make them more lifelike."

Dominic nodded. "That would do very nicely."

"I usually do that during the initial rush of power. I've never tried to fiddle with my dead once they were raised."

"Please try," Dominic said.

"We could raise the power between the three of us, then try it," I said.

Dominic shook his head. "I am not sure what that would do to the spell. I think it would be taking a great risk with your companions."

I stared at him for a heartbeat or two. "You'd risk leaving Sabin to rot to save our friends?"

"You asked for my help, Anita. I think you are not a woman who asks for help often. It would be poor payment of such a compliment if I let you risk your friends for mine. If you can heal your dead cold, as it were, so be it. If you cannot, we will proceed to save these three vampires."

"A very honorable sentiment," Jean-Claude said.

"There are moments when honor is all that is left," Dominic said.

The vampire and the man seemed to have a moment of near perfect understanding. A wealth of history, if not shared, then similar, passed between them. I was odd woman out.

I looked to Richard and we had our own moment of perfect understanding. We valued our mortal life span. The fatalism in Dominic's voice had been frightening. How old was he? I could usually tell with a vampire, but never with a human servant. I didn't ask. There was a weight of years in Dominic's brown eyes that made me afraid to ask.

I looked at Jean-Claude's lovely face and wondered if I would be as honorable, or would I have risked anyone, everyone, to heal him? To see Jean-Claude dead would be one thing, but rotted away like Sabin . . . It would be worse than death in many ways. Of course, Sabin was dying. Powerful as he was, he couldn't hold himself together forever. Or maybe he could. Maybe Dominic could sew him up in a big sack, like the gloves the vampire wore on his hands. Maybe Sabin could go on living even after he'd been reduced to so much liquid. Now that was a hideous thought.

I stared at the standing dead. They looked back. One of the zombies was almost intact. Grey skin clung to the bones, more like clay than flesh. One blue eye stared at me. The other eye had shriveled like a raisin. It reminded me of what had happened to Sabin's eye.

It would make more sense to say I touched the eye and healed it. Or that I thought at it and smoothed the flesh like clay. It wasn't like that. I stared at the zombie. I touched that spark inside me that allowed me to raise the dead. I drew that part of me outward, coaxed it like feeding a small flame, and threw it outward into that one zombie. I whispered, "Live, live."

I'd watched it before, but it never ceased to amaze me. The flesh filled out, plumping, smoothing. A warm flesh tone spread like heat across the grey skin. The dry, strawlike hair grew and curled, brown and soft. The dead eye blew up like a small balloon, filling the socket. Two good eyes looked back at me. Even

the tattered clothing mended itself. He wore a vest with a gold watch chain. His clothes were a hundred years or more out of date.

"I am most impressed," Dominic said. "If you changed his clothes, he could pass for human."

I nodded. "I make great zombies, but that won't help your master."

"Call one of the vampires from the coffin room."

"Why?" I asked.

Dominic drew a small silver knife from a sheath at his back. I hadn't known he had a weapon. Careless of me.

"What are you going to do with that?" Jean-Claude asked.

"With your permission, I will cut one of the vampires and ask Anita to heal the wound."

Jean-Claude considered the request, then nodded. "A small cut."

Dominic bowed. "Of course."

The vamps could heal a small cut on their own eventually. If I couldn't heal it, no harm done. Though I wasn't sure the vampires would agree with me.

"Anita," Dominic said.

I called, "Damian, come to me."

Jean-Claude raised his eyebrows at my choice, I think. If he expected me to call Willie, he didn't understand. Willie was my friend. Even dead, I didn't want to see him cut up.

Damian had tried to mind-rape a woman tonight at the club. Let him get cut up just a little.

Damian walked in, staring until he found me. His face was still blank and empty. Emptier than sleep, empty as only death can make it.

"Damian, stop."

The vampire stopped. His eyes were the greenest I'd ever seen. Greener than Catherine's, more cat than human.

Dominic stepped in front of Damian. He stared at the vampire. He laid the silver blade against the pale cheek and pulled the point downward, sharply.

Blood flowed down that perfect paleness in a thin crimson wash. The vampire never reacted, not even to blink.

"Anita," Dominic said.

I stared at Damian, no, Damian's shell. I flung power at him, into him. I willed him to live. That was the word I whispered to him.

The blood slowed, then stopped. The cut knit together seamlessly. It was . . . easy.

Dominic wiped the blood away with a handkerchief he'd drawn from his jacket pocket. Damian's pale cheek was flawless once more.

It was Cassandra who said it first, "She could heal Sabin."

Dominic nodded. "She just might." He turned to me with a look of triumph, elation. "You would need the power of your triumvirate to raise Sabin during his daylight slumber, but once raised, I think you could heal him."

"A shallow cut is one thing," I said. "Sabin is a . . . mess."

"Will you try?"

"If we can put these three vamps back unharmed, yeah, I'll try."

"Tomorrow."

I nodded. "Why not?"

"I cannot wait to tell Sabin what I have seen here today. He has been without hope for so long. But first, we must put your friends back. I will help you all I can."

I smiled. "I know enough of magic, Dominic, to know that all you can do is advise from the sidelines."

"But it will be very good advice," he said with a smile.

I believed him. For Sabin's sake, he wanted us to succeed. "Okay, let's do it." I held my hands out to Richard and Jean-Claude. They took my hands dutifully enough, and it was pleasant holding their hands. Both of them were warm and lovely, but there was no instant magic. No spark. I realized that in some strange way, the sexual interplay took the place of the ritual. Rituals aren't absolutely necessary to most magic, but they serve as a way to focus, to prepare yourself for the act of casting a spell. I had no blood circle to walk. I had no sacrifice to kill. I had no paraphernalia to use. All I had was the two men standing in front of me, my own body, and the knife at my wrist. I turned away from both of them.

"Nothing's happening," I said.

"What do you expect to happen?" Dominic asked.

I shrugged. "Something. I don't know."

"You are trying too hard, Anita. Relax, let the power come to you."

I rotated my shoulders, trying to ease the tension. It didn't work. "I really wish you hadn't reminded me that some of the vamps could rise before dark. It's late afternoon, and we're underground. It could already be too late."

"Thinking like that is not helpful," Dominic said.

Jean-Claude walked up to me, and even before he touched me, there was a rush of power like a spill of warmth over my skin. "Don't touch me," I said.

I felt him hesitate behind me. "What is wrong, *ma petite*?"

"Nothing." I turned to face him. I held my hand just above his bare chest and that line of warmth traveled from his skin to mine. It was as if his body breathed against me. "Do you feel that?"

He cocked his head to one side. "Magic."

"Aura," I said. I had to fight an urge to glance at Dominic, like looking to a coach to see if this was the play he wanted. I was afraid to look away, to lose that thread. I held my hand out to Richard. "Walk towards me, but don't touch me."

He looked puzzled but did what I asked. When my hand was just above his skin, that same line of warmth came up, like a small, captive wind. I could feel their energy breathing against my skin, one to each hand. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the sensation. There. I could feel a difference, slight, almost indiscernible, but there. There was a prickling, almost electric tremble to Richard. Jean-Claude was cool and smooth. All right, we could touch auras, so what? Where did that get us?

I pressed my hands suddenly forward, through the energy, against their bodies. I forced that energy back into them, and got a gasp from both of them.

The shock of it ran up my arms and I bowed my head, breathing through the rush of power. I raised my face up to meet their eyes. I don't know what showed on my face, but whatever it was, Richard didn't like it. He started to take a step back. I dug fingernails into his stomach just enough to get his attention.

"Don't break the connection."

He swallowed. His eyes were wide and there was something close to fear in them, but he stayed put. I turned to Jean-Claude. He didn't look scared. He looked as calm and controlled as I felt.

"Very good, Anita." Dominic's voice came soft, low. "Combine their power as if they were simply two other animators. You are acting as focus. You've done that before. You've laid the dead to rest a thousand times. This is only one more time."

"Okay, coach," I whispered.

"What?" Richard said.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

I stepped back from them slowly, hands extended towards them. The power trailed between us like two ropes. There was nothing to see, but from the look on Richard's face, we all felt it. I unsheathed the knife and picked up the golden bowl without looking down, my gaze on the two of them. There was a difference between this and combining with other animators, there was lust. Love. Something. Whatever it was, it acted like fuel, or glue. I had no words for what it was, but it was there when I looked at them.

I held the gold bowl in my left hand, knife in the right. I walked back to them. "Hold the bowl for me, one hand apiece."

"Why?" Richard asked.

"Because I said so."

He looked like he wanted to argue. I laid the flat of the blade against his lips. "If you question everything I say, it spoils my concentration." I took the knife away from his mouth.

"Don't do that again," he said, voice soft, almost harsh.

I nodded. "Fine." I held my wrist over the empty bowl and drew the knife down the skin in one sharp movement. Blood welled out of the cut, falling in thick drops, splashing down the sides and bottom of the gleaming gold bowl. Yes, it did hurt.

"Your turn, Richard." I kept my wrist over the bowl; no need to waste the blood.

"What do I do?"

"Put your wrist over the bowl."

He hesitated, then did what I asked. He put his arm over the bowl, hand balled into a fist. I turned his hand over to expose the underside of his arm. I steadied his hand with my still bleeding hand. The bowl wavered where his free hand was still holding it with Jean-Claude.

I looked up at his face. "Why does this bother you more than Jean-Claude tasting you?"

He swallowed. "A lot of things don't bother me when I'm thinking about sex."

"Spoken like someone with only one X chromosome," I said. I drew the knife down his skin in one firm bite, while he was still looking at my face. The only thing that kept him from pulling away was my hold on him.

He didn't struggle after that initial surprise. He watched his blood splash into the bowl, mingling with mine. The bottom of the bowl was hidden from sight, covered in warm blood. I released his hand and he held his bleeding wrist over the bowl.

"Jean-Claude?" I said.

He held his own slender wrist out to me without being asked. I steadied his wrist as I had Richard's. I met his dark blue eyes but there was no fear there, nothing but perhaps a mild curiosity. I cut his wrist and the blood welled crimson against his white skin.

His blood splashed into the bowl. It was all red. Human, lycanthrope, and vampire. You couldn't tell who was who by just looking. We all bleed red.

There still wasn't enough blood to walk a circle of power around the sixty or so zombies. There was no way short of a true sacrifice to get that much blood. But what I had in my hands was a very potent magic cocktail. Dominic thought it would be enough. I hoped so.

A sound brought my attention away from the blood, and the growing warmth of power.

Stephen and Jason were crouched near us, one in human form, one wolf, with nearly identical looks in their eyes: hunger.

I looked past them to Cassandra. She was standing her ground, but her hands were balled into fists, and a sheen of sweat gleamed on her upper lip. The look on her face was near panic.

Dominic stood smiling and unaffected. He was the only other human in the room.

Jason growled at us, but it wasn't a real growl. There was a rhythm to the noise. He was trying to talk.

Stephen moistened his lips. "Jason wants to know if we can lick the bowl?"

I looked at Jean-Claude and Richard. The looks on their faces were enough. "Am I the only one in this room not lusting after the blood?"

"Except for Dominic, I fear so, *ma petite*."

"Do what you have to do, Anita, but do it quick. It's full moon, and fresh blood is fresh blood," Richard said.

The two other vamps I'd raised shuffled towards me. Their eyes still empty of personality, like well-made dolls.

"Did you call them?" Richard asked.

"No," I said.

"The blood called them," Dominic said.

The vampires came into the room. They didn't look at me this time. They looked at the blood, and the moment they saw it, something flared in them. I felt it. Hunger. No one was home, but the need was still there.

Damian's green eyes stared at the bowl with the same hunger. His handsome face thinned down to something bestial and primitive.

I licked my lips and said, "Stop." They did, but they stared at the freshly spilled blood, never raising their eyes to me. If I hadn't been here to stop them, they might have fed. Fed like revenants, animalistic vampires that know nothing but the hunger and never regain their humanity or their minds.

My heart thudded into my throat at the thought of what I'd almost loosed upon some unsuspecting person. The hunger wouldn't have differentiated between human and lycanthrope. Wouldn't that have been a fine fight?

I took the bloody bowl, cradling it against my stomach, the knife still in my right hand.

"Do not be afraid," Dominic said. "Lay the zombies to rest as you have a thousand times over the years. Do that and that alone."

"One step at a time, right?" I said.

"Indeed," he said.

I nodded. "Okay."

Everyone but the three vampires looked at me as if they believed I knew what I was doing. I wished I did. Even Dominic looked confident. But he didn't have to put sixty zombies back in the ground without a circle of power. I did.

I had to watch my step on the rubble-strewn floor. It wouldn't do to fall and spill all this blood, all this power. Because that's what it was. I could feel Jean-Claude and Richard at my back like two braids of a rope twisting inside me as I moved. Dominic had said that I would be able to feel both of the men. When I'd asked for specifics about how I would be able to feel them, he had gone vague. Magic was too individualistic for exactness. If he told me one way and it felt another, it would have made me doubt. He'd been right.

I stirred the knife through the blood and flung blood on the waiting zombies with the blade. Only a few drops fell on them, but every time the blood touched one, I could feel it, a shock of power, a jolt. I ended in the center of the once walled room, surrounded by the zombies. When the blood touched the last one, a shock ran through me that tore a gasp from my throat. I felt the blood close round the dead. It was similar to closing a circle of power, but it was like the closure was inside me, rather than outside.

"Back," I said, "back into your graves, all of you. Back into the ground."

The dead shuffled around me, positioning themselves like sleepwalkers in a game of musical chairs. As each one reached its place, it lay down, and the raw earth poured over them all like water. The earth swallowed them back and smoothed over them as if a giant hand had come to neaten everything up.

I was alone in the room with the earth still twitching like a horse thick with flies. When the last ripple had died away, I looked out of the blasted wall at the others.

Jean-Claude and Richard stood at the opening of the wall. The three werewolves clustered around them. Even Cassandra had knelt on the ground beside the wolf that was Jason. Dominic stood behind them, watching. He was grinning at me like a proud papa.

I walked towards them, my legs a touch rubbery, and I stumbled, splashing blood down the side of the bowl. Crimson drops fell onto the swept earth.

The wolf was suddenly there, licking the ground clean. I ignored it and kept walking. Vampires next. Everyone moved to let me pass as if they were afraid to touch me. Except for Dominic. He crowded almost too close.

I felt his own power crackle between us, shivering over my skin, down the ropes of power that bound me to Richard and Jean-Claude.

I swallowed and said, "Back up."

"My apologies." He moved back until I couldn't feel him quite so tightly. "Good enough?"

I nodded.

The three vampires waited with hungry eyes. I sprinkled them with the cooling blood. They twitched when the blood touched them, but there was no rush of power. Nothing. Shit.

Dominic frowned. "The blood is still warm. It should work."

Jean-Claude moved closer. I could feel it without turning around. I could feel him coming down the line of power between us like a fish being reeled in. "But it is not working," he said.

"No," I said.

"They are lost then."

I shook my head. Willie was staring at the bowl of blood. The look was feral, pure hunger. I'd thought that the worst thing that could happen would be for Willie to simply lie down in his coffin and be truly dead. I was wrong. Having Willie crawl out of his coffin craving nothing but blood, knowing nothing but hunger, would be worse. I would not lose him, not yet.

"Any bright ideas?" I asked.

"Feed them the blood in the bowl," Dominic said, "but hurry before it grows colder."

I didn't argue; there was no time. I wiped the knife on my jeans and sheathed it. I'd have to clean it and the sheath later, but I needed my hands free. I dipped my fingertips into the blood. It was still warm, but barely. The eyes were still brown as they followed my hand, but it wasn't Willie looking out of them. It just wasn't.

I lifted the gold bowl to Willie's mouth and said, "Willie, drink." His throat moved, swallowing furiously, and I felt that click. He was mine again. "Stop, Willie."

He stopped, and I took the bowl away from him. He didn't grab for it. He didn't move at all. His eyes were blank and empty above his bloody mouth. "Go back to your coffin, Willie. Rest until nightfall. Back to your coffin to rest."

He turned and walked back down the hallway. I'd have to trust he was going back to the coffin. I'd check later. One down, two to go. Liv left like a good little puppet. The blood was getting pretty low by the time I raised it to Damian's lips.

He drank at it, his pale throat swallowing. The blood passed down his throat and something brushed me. Something that wasn't my magic. Something

else. Damian's chest rose in a great breath like a man struggling back from drowning. And that something thrust me backwards, cast out my power, turned it back on me. It was like a door slammed, but it was more than that. A force thrust at me, hit me, and the world swirled around. My vision was eaten away in greyness and white spots. I heard my own heartbeat impossibly loud. The thudding chased me down into the darkness, then even that was lost.

Chapter 33

I woke, staring up at the white drapes above Jean-Claude's bed. There was a damp washcloth folded over my forehead and voices arguing. I lay there for a few seconds, just blinking. I couldn't remember how I'd gotten here. I remembered the sensation of being cast out of Damian. I'd been cast out like an intruder, something to be protected against. The force that touched me hadn't been evil. I'd felt evil before, and that wasn't it. But it certainly hadn't been a beneficent force, either. More neutral, maybe.

The voices were Jean-Claude and Richard. The argument was about me. Big surprise.

"How can you let her die when you could save her?" Richard asked.

"I do not believe she is dying, but even if she was, without her permission, I will never again invade her mind."

"Even if she was dying?"

"Yes," Jean-Claude said.

"I don't understand that."

"You don't have to understand it, Richard. Anita would agree with me."

I brushed the rag from my head. I wanted to sit up, but it seemed too much effort.

Richard sat down on the bed, taking my hand. I wasn't sure I wanted him to, but I was still too weak to stop him.

Jean-Claude stood behind him, watching me. His face was blank and perfect, a mask.

"How do you feel?" Richard asked.

I had to swallow before I could speak. "Not sure."

Dominic walked into view. He had, wisely, stayed out of the argument. Besides, he was already a vampire's human servant. What was he going to say? That the mark was evil, or that it was no big deal. Lies either way.

"I am very glad to see you awake."

"It thrust me out," I said.

He nodded. "Indeed."

"What thrust her out?" Richard asked.

Dominic looked at me.

I shrugged.

"When the power that animates the vampire returned and found Anita still inside the body, the power cast her out."

Richard frowned. "Why?"

"I shouldn't have been there."

"Did the soul return as you touched it?" Jean-Claude asked.

"I've felt the brush of a soul before, that wasn't it."

Jean-Claude looked at me.

I looked back.

He was the one who looked away first.

Richard touched my hair where it had gotten wet from the rag. "I don't care if it was a soul or the bogeyman. I thought I'd lost you."

"I always seem to survive, Richard, no matter who else dies."

He frowned at that.

I let him. "Is Damian all right?" I asked.

"He seems to be," Jean-Claude said.

"What were you two arguing about?"

"Dominic, could you leave us now?" Jean-Claude asked.

Dominic smiled. "Gladly. I am eager to speak with Sabin. Tomorrow, you and Richard can raise him, and you, Anita"—he touched my face lightly—"can heal him."

I didn't like him touching me, but there was almost a reverence in his face. It made it hard to yell at him.

"I'll do my best," I said.

"In all things, I think." With that, he bid us a good day and left.

When the door closed behind him, I repeated my question. "What were you two arguing about?"

Richard glanced behind at Jean-Claude, then back to me. "You stopped breathing for a few seconds. No heartbeat, either. I thought you were dying."

I looked at Jean-Claude. "Tell me."

"Richard wanted me to give you the first mark again. I refused."

"Smart vampire," I said.

He shrugged. "You have made yourself very clear, *ma petite*. I will not be accused of forcing myself upon you again. Not in any sense."

"Did someone do CPR?"

"You started breathing on your own," Richard said. He squeezed my hand. "You scared me."

I drew my hand out of his. "So you offered me to him as his human servant."

"I thought we'd agreed to be a triad of power. Maybe I don't understand what that means."

I wanted to sit up but still wasn't sure I could do it, so I had to be content with frowning up at him. "I'll share power with you both, but I won't let Jean-Claude mark me. If he ever forces himself on me again, I'll kill him."

Jean-Claude nodded. "You will try, *ma petite*. It is a dance I do not wish to begin."

"I'm going to let him mark me before I leave for the pack tonight," Richard said.

I stared up at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Jean-Claude can't come tonight. He isn't a member of the pack. If we're joined, I can still call the power."

I struggled to sit up, and if Richard hadn't caught me, I'd have fallen. I lay cradled in his arms, digging fingers into his arms, trying to make him listen to me. "You don't want to be his servant for all eternity, Richard."

"The joining of master and animal is not the same as between master and servant, *ma petite*. It is not quite as intimate."

I couldn't see the vampire over Richard's broad shoulders. I tried to push myself up, and Richard had to help me. "Explain," I said.

"I will not be able to taste food through Richard, as I could through you. It is a minor side effect, but in truth one I miss. I enjoyed tasting solid food again."

"What else?"

"Richard is an alpha werewolf. He is an equivalent power to mine in some ways. He will have more control over my entering his dreams, his thoughts. He would be able to keep me out, as it were."

"And I couldn't," I said.

He looked down at me. "Even then, before you had explored your powers of necromancy, you were harder to control than you should have been. Now," he shrugged, "now I am not sure who would be master and who would be servant."

I sat up on my own. I was feeling just a tad better. "That's why you didn't mark me while you had the chance and Richard to take the blame. After what I did today, you're afraid that I'd be the master and you'd be my servant. That's it, isn't it?"

He smiled softly. "Perhaps." He sat on the bed on the other side of Richard. "I have not worked for over two hundred years to be Master of my own lands to give up my freedom to anyone, even you, *ma petite*. You would not be a cruel master, but you would be an exacting one."

"It's not pure master and servant. I know that from Alejandro. He couldn't control me, but I couldn't control him, either."

"Did you try?" Jean-Claude asked.

That stopped me. I had to think about it. "No."

"You simply killed him," Jean-Claude said.

He had a point. "Would I really be able to order you around?"

"I have never heard of another vampire choosing a necromancer of your power as human servant."

"What about Dominic and Sabin?" I asked.

"Dominic is no match for you, *ma petite*."

"If I agreed to the first mark, would you do it or not?" I asked.

Richard tried to hug me to his chest, but I moved away. I had to put both arms down to prop myself up, but I was sitting on my own.

Jean-Claude sighed, looking down at the floor. "If we truly joined, no one could stand against us. That much power is very tempting." He looked up suddenly, letting me see his eyes. Emotions rolled across his face. Excitement, fear, lust, and finally, just weariness. "We could be bound together for all eternity. Bound together in a three-way struggle for power. It is not a pleasant thought."

"Jean-Claude told me that he would not be my master," Richard said. "We would be partners."

"And you believed him?" I said.

Richard nodded, looking terribly earnest.

I sighed. "Jesus, Richard, I can't leave you alone for a minute."

"It is not a lie, *ma petite*."

"Yeah, right."

"If it's a lie," Richard said, "I'll kill him."

I stared at him. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do." Something moved through his brown eyes, something low and dark and inhuman.

"Once you decide to kill someone, it becomes easier to kill others, doesn't it?" I said.

Richard didn't flinch or look away. "Yes, it does, but that's not it. I won't be anyone's servant. Not Jean-Claude's, not yours, not Marcus's, not Raina's."

"Do you understand that once you're bound to him, that hurting him can hurt you? Killing him can kill you?"

"I'd rather be dead than trapped."

I watched the absolute certainty in his eyes. He meant it. "You'll kill Marcus tonight," I said.

Richard looked at me, and an expression passed over his face that I'd never seen before, a fierceness that filled his eyes and sent his power shivering through the room. "If he doesn't back down, I'll kill him."

For the first time, I believed him.

Chapter 34

There was a knock on the door. Richard and Jean-Claude spoke at the same time. "Enter." "Come in." They stared at each other as the door opened.

Edward walked in. His cool blue eyes took in the three of us at a glance. "What happened to you?"

"Long story," I said. "It wasn't the assassin if that's what you're worried about."

"I wasn't. Your wolves are guarding my backup. They wouldn't let me bring him in without somebody's approval." He looked at Jean-Claude and Richard. "They weren't absolutely clear on whose permission I was supposed to get." He didn't smile while he said it, but I knew him well enough to see the shadow of humor on his face.

"This is my home," Jean-Claude said. "It is my permission that is needed."

I slid to the edge of the bed and found I could sit up. The movement put me between the two men. Richard hovered close to help me if I fell onto my face. Jean-Claude just sat there, not touching me, not offering to. In many ways, he understood me better than Richard did, but then he'd known me longer. I was sort of an acquired taste.

Jean-Claude stood up. "I will go escort your guest in."

"I better go with you," Edward said. "Harley doesn't know you, but he'll know what you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"If a strange vampire walked up to you in this place and said follow me, would you do it?"

I thought about that. "Probably not."

Edward smiled. "Neither would Harley."

Edward and Jean-Claude left to fetch Edward's friend. I tried standing while they were gone, just to see if I could do it. I always like to meet new people, especially new hired muscle, on my feet.

Richard tried to help me, and I pulled away. I had to grab for the wall to keep from falling.

"I was trying to help," he said.

"Don't try so hard."

"What is the matter with you?"

"I don't like being helpless, Richard."

"You aren't superwoman."

I glared at him. "I fainted, for God's sake. I never faint."

"You didn't faint," he said. "Whatever it was threw you out of Damian. I was still tied to you when it happened, Anita. I felt it brush me." He shook his head, hugging his arms to his chest. "You didn't faint."

I leaned my back against the wall. "It scared me, too."

"Did it?" He came to stand in front of me. "You don't seem scared."

"Are you scared about joining with Jean-Claude?"

"That bothers you more than me killing for the first time tonight, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

The door opened before we could continue the conversation. It was just as well. We'd found something else we disagreed on. Letting someone tie themselves to my mind, my soul, frightened me a lot more than killing someone.

The man that followed Edward didn't look that impressive. He was slender, only a couple of inches taller than Edward. He had curly brownish red hair receding in a soft circle to nearly the middle of his head. He slouched even

when he walked, and I couldn't tell if it was habit or some sort of spinal problem. Brown T-shirt over black corduroy pants, and sneakers. Everything looked like it had come from the Salvation Army. He wore a patched leather aviator's jacket that might have been original World War II issue. Under the jacket, I got a glimpse of guns.

He was wearing a double shoulder holster so that he had a 9 millimeter under both arms. I'd seen holsters like it, but never knew anyone who actually wore one. I thought they were mostly for show. Very few people are equally good with both hands. There was a crisscross of straps beneath the T-shirt that I didn't understand, but I knew it was for carrying something lethal. He had a duffel bag in one hand, crammed full and big enough to carry a body in. He wasn't even straining. Stronger than he looked.

I met his eyes last. They were pale and greyish green with lashes so gingery red they were almost invisible. The look in the eyes was the emptiest I'd ever seen in another human being. It was as if when he looked at me, he wasn't seeing me at all. It wasn't like he was blind. He saw something, but I wasn't sure what he saw. Not me. Not a woman. Something else. That one look was enough. I knew that this man walked in a circle of his own creation. Saw a version of reality that would send the rest of us screaming. But he functioned, and he didn't scream.

"This is Harley," Edward said. He introduced us all, as if it was an ordinary meeting.

I stared at Harley's pale eyes and realized that he scared me. It had been a long time since another human being frightened me just by entering a room.

Richard offered his hand, and Harley simply looked at it. I wanted to explain to Richard why he shouldn't have made the gesture, but I wasn't sure I could.

I did not offer to shake hands.

"I found out the name of the money man behind the attempts on your life," Edward said. He said it without preamble.

Three of us stared at him. Harley, disquietly, kept staring at me. "What did you say?" I asked.

"I know who we have to kill."

"Who?" I asked.

"Marcus Fletcher. The head of our local werewolf pack." He smiled, pleased with himself, on the effect the news was having on Richard.

"You're sure?" Richard said. "Absolutely sure?"

Edward nodded, studying Richard's face. "Does he hate you enough to kill Anita?"

"I didn't think so." Richard turned to me, the look on his face stricken, horrified. "My God, I never dreamt he'd do something like this. Why?"

"How well would you have fought tonight with *ma petite* dead?" Jean-Claude asked.

Richard stared at him so obviously overwhelmed by the dastardliness of what Marcus had done that I wanted to pat his head and tell him it was all right.

I nearly get killed twice and I wanted to comfort him. Love is just plain stupid sometimes.

"It's all so convenient," Edward said, with a happy lilt to his voice.

"What do you mean?" Richard asked.

"He means you are supposed to kill him tonight, Richard, so we don't have to," I said.

"I just can't believe that Marcus would do something so . . ."

"Evil," I suggested.

He nodded.

"It would seem more Raina's sort of idea than Marcus's," Jean-Claude said.

"It's twisted enough for her," I said.

"Marcus could have said no," Richard said. He ran his hands through his hair, combing it back from his face. His handsome face was set in very stubborn lines. "This has got to stop. He'll do anything she asks, anything, and she's crazy."

My eyes flicked to Harley. I couldn't help it. He caught my look and smiled. I didn't know exactly what he was thinking, but it wasn't pleasant and it wasn't pretty. Having Harley as backup made me wonder if I was on the right side.

"Edward, can I talk to you a minute in private?" I didn't want to be this obvious, but Harley was bothering me that much.

I walked away from the others and Edward trailed behind. It was kind of nice to walk across the room, lower my voice, and know the person I was whispering about wouldn't hear me. Both Jean-Claude and Richard would.

Edward looked at me, and there was that same touch of amusement to him, as if he knew what I was going to say and thought it was a hoot.

"Why does he keep looking at me?"

"You mean Harley?"

"You know damn well who I mean," I said.

"He's only looking, Anita. No harm."

"But why me?"

"You're a girl maybe?"

"Stop it, Edward. Whatever he's thinking, it isn't sex, and if it is, I don't want to know the details."

Edward stared at me. "Ask him."

"What?"

"Ask him why he's staring at you."

"Just like that?"

He nodded. "Harley will probably get a kick out of it."

"Do I want to know?" I asked.

"I don't know. Do you?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You're stringing me along here, Edward. What's the deal?"

"If something happens to me during the fighting, Harley needs at least one other person that he'll mind."

"Mind?"

"He's absolutely reliable, Anita. He'll stay at my back, never flinch, and kill anyone I tell him to, but he's not good without specific orders. And he doesn't take orders from just everybody."

"So you designated me?"

Edward shook his head. "I told him to pick someone in the room."

"Why me?"

"Ask him."

"Fine." I walked back towards the others, and Edward followed me. Harley watched us like he was seeing other things. It was too damned unnerving.

"Why are you staring at me?" I asked.

His voice was quiet, as if he never yelled. "You're the scariest motherfucker in the room."

"Now I know you can't see."

"I see what's there," he said.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

I tried to think of a better question and finally asked, "What do you see when you look at everybody in the room?"

"The same thing you see: monsters."

"Why do I think the monsters I see in the room aren't the same ones you see?"

He smiled, a bare upturning of lips. "They may look different, but they're still monsters. They're all monsters."

He was a card-carrying, rubber-room-renting psychotic. By the time most people got to the point where they weren't seeing reality, they were so far gone that there was no going back. Sometimes drug therapy helped, but without it, the world was a frightening, overwhelming place. Harley didn't look frightened or overwhelmed. He looked calm.

"When you look at Edward, he always looks the same to you. I mean you recognize him?"

Harley nodded.

"You'd recognize me," I said.

"If I make an effort to memorize you, yes."

"That's why you were staring."

"Yes," he said.

"What happens if Edward and I both go down?"

Harley smiled, but his eyes shifted to one side as if something low to the ground and rather small had run across the room. The movement was so natural that I looked. Nothing.

"Harley," I said.

He looked back at me, but his eyes were just a little higher up than my face should have been. "Yes," he said, his voice so quiet.

"What happens if Edward and I are both killed?"

Harley stared at me. His eyes shifted to my face for just a second, as if the fog had cleared. "That would be bad."

Chapter 35

There would be no backing down for Marcus tonight. He had to die, one way or another. Richard wasn't arguing anymore. But there was still the chance that Raina would lead a revolt of the other lukoi. Their loyalty was divided enough for a war, even with Marcus dead. Jean-Claude came up with a solution. We'd put on a better show. A better show than Raina and Marcus? He had to be kidding. Richard agreed to let Jean-Claude costume him up for the night. As his lupa, that meant I had to get dressed up, too.

Jean-Claude took Richard off to dress him. He sent Cassandra with a white cardboard clothes box to me. She was supposed to help me change, she said.

I opened the box and all that was in it was a pile of black leather straps. I kid you not. I drew it out of the box and it didn't improve. "I don't know how to get into this, even if I was willing to."

"I'll get Stephen," Cassandra said.

"I don't want to undress in front of Stephen."

"He's a stripper," she said. "He dressed me last night at Danse Macabre, remember." She patted my hand. "He'll be a perfect gentleman."

I sat down on the bed and scowled at the door. I was not wearing this crap.

An hour later, Stephen and Cassandra were turning me in front of the bathroom mirrors so I could see myself. It had been embarrassing at first having a man help squeeze me into the thing, but Cassandra was right. Stephen was not only a perfect gentleman, he simply didn't seem to be moved at all by the fact that I was mostly naked. It was like having two girlfriends help me. One just happened not to be a girl.

The top was mostly a leather bra with lining for comfort. It was one of those that lifted and showed your cleavage to absolute best advantage. But it was tight and held in place. Nothing was falling out. My cross was visible, though. I taped it. I'd peel the tape when I left the Circus. Werewolves on the menu tonight, not vamps.

The bottom was sort of leather shorts, except that where the shorts stopped, straps took over. I wouldn't be caught dead or alive in something like this, not even to make a good show of things for Richard, except that there were extras.

Two leather sheaths covered my upper arms, complete with a knife apiece. The knives were high quality, high silver content. If the hilts were a little elaborate for my taste, the balance was good, and that's what counted. Two

more sheaths covered my lower arms with two more knives, smaller, balanced more for throwing, though they both had hilts and weren't true throwing knives. The bulge under Harley's T-shirt had been throwing knives, the real McCoy, slender and innocent looking until you saw them used.

There was a leather belt around the top of the shorts that my Browning's shoulder holster fit on nicely. Edward had bought me a new Browning. It wasn't my very own gun, but it was still nice to have. Harley had fished a clip-on holster for the Firestar out of his duffel. The small clip-on rode to one side of my waist for a cross draw.

The straps down my legs had small silver loops, sheaths, two more knives, one on each thigh. No knife sheaths below the knees because boots came with the outfit. Jean-Claude had finally gotten me out of my Nikes. The boots were soft black suede with heels only a touch higher than I would have liked. A tiny stoppered vial fit in small loops just below the top of each boot. I held one up to the light, and knew what it was. Holy water. A nice gift from my vampire boyfriend, heh?

I stared at myself in the mirror. "How long has Jean-Claude been planning this outfit?"

"A little while," Stephen said. He was kneeling by me, tugging the straps into place. "We all had a running bet that he'd never get you to wear it."

"Who's we?"

"His flunkies." Stephen stood up, stepped back, and nodded. "You look amazing."

"I look like a biker slut from hell meets soldier of fortune pinup."

"That, too," Stephen said.

I turned to Cassandra. "Be honest."

"You look dangerous, Anita. Like somebody's weapon."

I stared in the mirror, shaking my head. "Somebody's sex toy, you mean."

"A dominatrix maybe, but nobody's toy," Cassandra said.

Why didn't that make me feel better?

Cassandra had insisted on helping me with my makeup. She was a great deal more skilled at it than I. Years of practice, she'd said. My hair was tight and curling, falling just below my shoulders now. It needed a cut. But for tonight, the hair was perfect. The face was still pretty. Makeup is a wonderful thing. But the outfit stripped away the pretense. I looked like what I was: something that would kill you before it would kiss you.

We walked out of the bathroom and found Edward and Harley waiting for us. They had brought two straight-backed chairs to sit on the white carpet, facing the bathroom door. I froze as Edward stared at me. He didn't say a word, just sat there with a sort of half-smile on his face.

"Well, say something, dammit."

"I would say it isn't you, but in a way, it is."

I took a deep breath. "Yeah."

Harley stared at me with vacant eyes. He was smiling, but not at the outfit. Smiling at some internal music or vision that only he could perceive.

There was a long leather coat on the bed. "One of the vampires dropped it off," Edward said. "Thought you might want something to cover up with until the big unveiling."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"I'd feel better if I could guard your back."

"You're going to do that with a rifle from the closest hill, remember."

"Night vision and scope, fine, but I can't kill them all from a distance."

"You couldn't kill them all if you were johnny on the spot, either," I said.

"No, but I'd feel better."

"Worried about me?"

He shrugged. "I'm your bodyguard. If you die under my protection, the other bodyguards will make fun of me."

It took me a second to realize he was making a joke. Harley looked back at him with an almost surprised look. I don't think either of us heard humor from Edward much.

I walked towards Edward. The leather made that little creaking sound it makes. I stopped in front of him, legs a little apart, staring down at him.

He widened his eyes a little. "Yes."

"I can't imagine anyone making fun of you, Edward."

He touched one of the leather straps. "If I went around dressed like this, they might."

I had to smile. "You probably would be dressed like this if you were going to be down in the clearing with us tonight."

He turned pale blue eyes to me. "I've worn worse than this, Anita. I'm a fine actor when I have to be." The humor drained away from his face, leaving something feral and determined behind. Edward would still do things that I wouldn't, still had fewer rules than I did, but in some ways, Edward was a mirror for me. A warning of what I was becoming, or maybe a preview.

Richard would have said it was a warning. I hadn't made up my mind yet.

There was a knock on the door. Richard came in without waiting for an invitation. He was scowling, but the grumpy look faded when he got a good look at me. His eyes widened. "I was going to come in and complain about my outfit." He shook his head. "If I complain, will you just shoot me?" A smile spread across his face.

"No laughing," I said.

The smile got wider. His voice was a little choked, but he managed, "Wonderful. You look wonderful."

There are only two things you can do when you're dressed like *Barbie Does Bondage*; you can be embarrassed or you can be aggressive. Guess what my choice was.

I stalked towards him, putting a little extra sway into my walk. The boots made it easier, somehow, giving just the right roll. I put into my eyes, my face, what the outfit promised: sex, violence, heat.

The humor faded from Richard's face, replaced by an answering heat and a hesitation, like he wasn't exactly sure we should be doing this in public.

He was wearing black leather pants with soft suede boots that were almost a match to my own. His hair had been slicked back, tied off with a black ribbon. His shirt was silk and a vibrant blue, somewhere between turquoise and royal. It looked splendid against his tanned skin.

I stopped just in front of him, legs apart. I stared up at him, defying him to think it was funny. I put a finger to his lips, trailing my fingertip down his cheek, his neck, caressing the edge of his collarbone, tracing the skin until it vanished down the buttoned front of his shirt.

I stalked to the bed, fetching the leather coat. I threw it over one shoulder so that it trailed down like a limp body, not hiding much of the outfit. I opened the door and stood for just a moment framed in it. "Coming?" I said. I walked away without waiting for an answer. The look on his face was enough. He looked like I'd hit him between the eyes with a sledgehammer.

Great. Now all I had to do was try the outfit out on Jean-Claude, and we could go.

Chapter 36

The May woods were a warm, close darkness. Richard and I stood outside the barn where Raina shot dirty pictures. The pack meeting place was among the trees around the farmhouse. There were so many cars that they were parked on every bit of spare ground, some so close to the woods that they touched the trees.

There may have been a full moon up there somewhere, but the clouds were so thick, the darkness so complete, that it was like standing inside a cave. Except this cave had movement. A small oozing wind trailed through the thick, night-darkened leaves. It was like some invisible giant trailed fingertips through the trees, bending them, rattling the leaves, giving movement to the night that made my shoulders tight. It was like the night itself was alive in a way that I'd never seen before.

Richard's hand was warm and slightly moist. He'd dampened that creeping energy so that it wasn't uncomfortable to touch him. I appreciated the effort. His leather cloak whispered as he moved closer. It was tied across his chest, covering only one shoulder. The cloak, combined with the full sleeves of the brilliant blue shirt, made the whole outfit seem antique.

Richard pulled on my hand, bringing me against his body, into the circle of his arms, the brush of the leather cloak. The clouds slid apart and suddenly we were bathed in a thick, silver glow. Richard was staring outward. He seemed to be listening to something that I couldn't hear. His hands convulsed around my hands, an almost painful squeeze. He stared down at me as if just remembering I was there.

He smiled. "Can you feel it?"

"What?"

"The night?"

I started to answer, no, then stopped. I looked around at the hurrying woods, the feeling of movement. "The woods seem more alive tonight."

His smile widened, a brief flash of teeth, almost a snarl. "Yes."

I tried to pull away, but his hands tightened. "You're doing it," I said. My heart was suddenly thudding in my throat. I'd thought to be afraid of a lot of things tonight, but not of Richard.

"We're supposed to share power. That's what I'm doing. But it has to be my power, Anita. The pack won't be impressed with zombies."

I swallowed past my beating heart and forced myself to stand very still. Made myself return the grip of his hands. I hadn't thought what it would mean. I wasn't going to be in charge. Not my power but his. I was going to be fuel for his fire, not the other way around.

"It's Jean-Claude's mark," I said. "That's what's doing it."

"We hoped it would work this way," Richard said.

And I knew that the we he was referring to didn't include me. "How does it work?"

"Like this." That trembling energy broke over his skin like a rush of warmth. It plunged through his hands into my hand. It rode like a wave over my body, and everywhere it touched, the hair and skin of my body raised and shivered.

"Are you all right?"

"Sure," but my voice was a breathless whisper.

He took me at my word. Some barrier went down, and Richard's energy crashed into me like a fist. I remembered falling, and the feel of Richard's arms around my waist, catching me, then it was like I was elsewhere. I was everywhere. I was over there in the trees, staring at us with eyes that tried to turn and see me, but I wasn't there. It was like the wind that opened inside me when I walked a cemetery, except it wasn't power that was spreading outward. It was me. I flashed through a dozen eyes, brushed bodies, some furred, some still skinned. I hurried outward, outward, and touched Raina. I knew it was her. Her power lashed out like a shield, casting me away from her, but not before I felt her fear.

Richard called me back, though call implies a voice. I slipped back inside myself in a rush of curling golden energy. I could see the color behind my eyes, though there was actually nothing to see. I opened my eyes, though I wasn't a hundred percent sure that they'd been closed. That golden energy was still there, swirling inside, along my skin. I curled my hands over Richard's shoulders and felt an answering energy in him.

I didn't have to ask what I had just experienced. I knew. It was what it meant, at least for someone as powerful as Richard, to be alpha. He could fling his essence outward and touch his pack. It was how he kept the werewolf from changing form two days ago. It was how he could share blood. Marcus couldn't do it, but Raina could.

Jean-Claude's power, even my own power, never felt so alive. It was like I was drawing energy from the trees, the wind, like being plugged into a vast battery, as if there was enough magic to go on forever. I had never felt anything like it.

"Can you run?" Richard asked.

The question meant more than just the words, and I knew that. "Oh, yeah."

He smiled, and it was joyous. He took my hand and flung us into the trees. Even if he'd been human, I couldn't have kept up with Richard in a dead run. Tonight, he didn't run so much as flowed into the woods. It was like he had sonar telling him where every branch, every tree root, every fallen trunk would be. It was like the trees moved away from him like water, or maybe moved into him like something else that I had no words for. He pulled me with him. Not just with his hand, but with his energy. It was like he'd entered me and tied us together somehow. It should have been intrusive and frightening, but it wasn't.

We spilled into the great clearing and Richard's power filled it, flowed over the lycanthropes like a fire springing from one dry branch to another. It filled them and made them turn to him. Only Marcus, Raina, Jamil, Sebastian, and Cassandra were untouched. Only they kept him out by force of will. He swept everyone else before him, and I knew that part of what let him do that was me. Distant as a dream or a half-remembered nightmare, was Jean-Claude, down that twisting power that was almost buried under Richard's shining light.

I felt every movement. It was like the world was suddenly crystalline, almost like the effect from an adrenaline rush, or shock, where everything seems carved and hard-edged and terribly, frightfully clear. It was like being dipped in reality, as if anything else would forever be a dream. It was almost painful.

Marcus sat in a chair that had been carved from rock so long ago the edges were rounded with weather and hands and bodies. I knew that this clearing had been the meeting place for the lukoi for a very long time.

Marcus wore a brown satin-lapeled tux. The shirt was of gold cloth, not gold lamé, but the real deal, as if they'd melted down jewelry and beaten him out a shirt. Raina curled on the edge of the stone chair. Her long auburn hair was done in an elaborate swirl of soft curls on top of her head, down along her face. A gold chain cut across her forehead with a diamond the size of my thumb in it. More diamonds burned like white fire at her throat. She was absolutely naked except for a sprinkling of gold body glitter, done thick enough on her nipples to make them seem metallic. A diamond anklet glittered on her right ankle. Three gold chains rode low on her hips, and that was it.

And I'd complained about my outfit.

"Welcome, Richard, Anita," Marcus said. "Welcome to our happy family." His voice was deep and thick. It flowed with its own edge of power, but it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. Richard could have worn his jeans and T-shirt, and still he would have won them over. There are things beyond clothing that make a king.

"Marcus, Raina." Richard released my hand slowly, and as he pulled away, the tie remained. It was a shadow of the way I'd bound Richard and Jean-

Claude's auras to me, but more. He took a few steps away to stand a little in front of me. I could feel him like a large, shimmering *thing*. His energy was amazing. The closest thing I'd ever felt was the power of a Daoine Sidhe, a fairie of the highest court.

"You naughty boy," Raina said. "You've made her one of us."

"No," Richard said, "she is what she always has been: herself."

"Then how can you ride her power? How can she ride yours?" Raina pushed away from the chair, stalking along the ground in front of it, pacing like a caged animal.

"What have you done, Richard?" Marcus asked.

"She is my mate."

"Raina, test it," Marcus said.

Raina smiled, most unpleasant, and stalked over the open ground. She swayed, transforming walking into a seductive dance. I felt her power tonight. Her sex rode the air like the threat of lightning, prickling along the skin, drying out the mouth. I felt every male watch her, even Richard. I didn't resent it. Hell, I watched her. She was magnificent in her sheer, naked lust. It was like sex for Raina was power, literally.

I slipped off the long, black coat and let it fall to the ground. There was a collective gasp from the human throats. I traced my hands over the bare skin of my waist, trailing down my leather-clad thighs. I laughed. A loud, joyous bark of noise. It was Raina. I was riding her power, dancing along the edge of her energy.

I stalked towards her, not waiting, but meeting her in the middle of the circle. We moved around each other, and I could match her dance. I pulled her aura of sex and violence into me, pulled it like a hand reaching inward and stealing bits of her. Fear widened her eyes, brought her breath faster.

She knew how to protect herself against another werewolf, but my brand of power was just different enough that she didn't know what to do with me. I'd never done anything like this before, didn't understand exactly what I was doing, until Raina backed off. She didn't run back to Marcus, but the shine was gone. She slunk back with her tail between her legs, and I could taste her inside my mind like I'd licked her skin.

I turned back to Richard and stalked towards him in the high-heeled boots. I felt every man watching. I knew it. I wrapped it around me and threw it all back into Richard. He stood almost frozen, his dark eyes filled with a heat that was part sex, part energy, part something else. And for the first time, I understood that something else. I heard that music, felt it dance inside my body.

I grabbed the leather cloak and pulled him down to me. We kissed and it burned, as if more than flesh was mingling. I released him abruptly, and my eyes didn't go to his face but fell lower. Without touching him, I knew he was hard and ready. I could still feel the pack, distant, but touchable. Jason's great wolf head brushed my thigh. I dug my fingers into that thick fur and knew that if Richard and I made love, the pack would know it. Here tonight, they'd be along for the ride. It wouldn't just be sex. It would be magic. And it didn't seem shameful or pagan or wrong.

"You can't let them do this," Raina said.

Marcus pushed himself to his feet. He seemed tired. "No, I don't suppose I can." He looked at Raina, naked, beautiful, fearful. "But it is not your blood that will be spilled tonight, is it, my love?" The irony was thick enough to walk on, and for the first time, I realized that Marcus knew what Raina was, maybe had always known.

Raina went to her knees in front of him, hands clutching at his legs. She rubbed her cheek along his thigh, one hand smoothing perilously close to his groin. Even now, it was what she knew best. Sex and pain.

He touched her hair gently. He stared down at her, and the naked tenderness on his face made me want to look away. It was a terribly intimate look, more intimate than sex, more powerful. The fool loved her.

If he hadn't been paying to kill me, I'd have felt sorry for him.

Marcus stepped away from Raina. He began walking across the clearing. His power opened like a door, flowing like electric water across the wolves, across me. He undid his tie, opened the first few buttons of his shirt. "No more preliminaries, Richard. Let us do this."

"I know you tried to have Anita killed," Richard said.

Marcus stopped in midmotion. His small, sure fingers hesitated. Surprise chased across his face, then changed into a smile. "You have surprised me twice tonight, Richard. Let's see if you can make it three."

"I will kill you tonight, Marcus; you know that."

Marcus shrugged out of his jacket. "You can try."

Richard nodded. "I'd planned on giving you the chance to just leave."

"I tried to have your mate killed. You can't leave me alive now." He undid the cuffs of his shirt.

"No, I can't." Richard undid the cloak's tie, letting it fall to the floor. He pulled his shirt out of his pants and slid it over his head in one quick movement. The moonlight made shadows on the muscles of his arms and chest. I suddenly didn't want him to do it. I could shoot Marcus, and it would all be done. Richard would never forgive me, but he'd be alive. They wouldn't kill each other with power. They'd use claws and teeth for the killing. All Richard's trembling, eager power wouldn't keep him from getting his throat ripped out.

Chapter 37

Richard turned to me, wearing only the leather pants and the boots. Marcus had asked that they not strip down, said something about saving an old man's dignity. Bullshit. There was something in the air that I didn't like, as if Marcus had known what was coming and he was ready.

"As acknowledged Ulfric, Marcus gets to choose the form we fight in," Richard said.

"What form did he choose?"

Richard raised his hand in front of my face. "Touch my hand."

He made it sound so serious for such a small request. I touched the back of his hand lightly.

"Grip my palm, Anita."

I wrapped my fingers around the lower part of his hand. Before I could look to his face or ask a question, I felt it. Energy welled up his hand like oil up the wick of a lamp. His skin flowed under my hand. I felt the bones lengthening. I felt his body give as if the boundaries that confined him to skin and bone and flesh had dissolved. It felt almost like he would scatter himself outward like I'd done earlier, but it wasn't his essence that was reaching outward. It was his body.

He held up his other hand, and I took it. I locked my fingers in his and felt his bones grow across my skin, watched claws form as his flesh flowed like clay. Distant as a scream, I knew I should have been scared or sickened. The power flowed down his shifting hands to my hands, flowing between us like cool fire.

He stopped when his hands were human claws with talons that could have ripped me apart. The power didn't stop abruptly; it wasn't like turning off a switch. It was like turning off a faucet, slowing the flow down to a trickle, a drop, then nothing.

I was on my knees and hadn't remembered getting there. Richard knelt in front of me, hands still clasped in mine. It took me two tries to be able to talk. "How can you stop like that?"

He drew his newly formed hands carefully out of my hands. I shivered as the tips of his claws trailed over my skin.

"Controlling the change is what separates the sheep from the wolves," he said.

It took me a second to realize he'd made a joke. He leaned into me and whispered, "If I lose control in the fight, or if I'm losing, I'll shift completely. I want you to come touch me, if I ask you."

"Why?"

His breath was warm against my cheek. He wrapped his arms around me, held me in the circle of his body, claws playing along the leather straps of the outfit. "I want you to feel the rush of power. I want you to know what it can be like between us." His arms tightened. "If I'm losing, you can ride the power and use it to get my wolves out of here. The others will kill anyone they think is disloyal."

I pushed away enough to see his face. "How can I use the power to do that?"

"You'll know." He kissed my forehead ever so gently. "Save them, Anita. Promise me."

"I promise."

He stood, my hands slipping over his body as he got to his feet. I caught one of his hands. My hand slid down the long, curved claw. It was as hard and solid and unreal as it looked. I'd felt his body shift, and yet, staring up at Richard's handsome face and those monstrous hands, it was jarring. Still, I held on. I didn't want to let him go.

"Careful of the claws, Anita. I'm not in human form anymore."

He meant that a scratch might make me furry, might not. Hard to tell. But it was enough to make me let go. No matter how good Richard felt, I wasn't ready to throw humanity completely behind me.

Richard stared down at me, and there was a world in his eyes of things unsaid, things undone. I opened my mouth, closed it. "Do you have this much control over every body part?"

He smiled. "Yes."

I was so scared I couldn't speak. I'd made my last joke. The only thing left was truth. I raised up, putting my hands on his legs for support and kissed the back of his hand. The skin was still as soft, still smelled and tasted like Richard, the bones underneath felt like someone else.

"Don't get killed."

He smiled. There was a sadness in his eyes that was bottomless. Even if he won this fight, it would cost him dearly. Murder, that's how he would see it. No matter how justified. Moral high ground is dandy, but it'll get you killed.

Raina kissed Marcus good-bye, pressing her body so tightly against him, it was like she was trying to walk through him, part him like a curtain and slip inside.

She pushed him away with a rich, throaty laugh. It was the kind of laughter that made you turn your head in bars. A joyous, slightly wicked sound. Raina stared across the clearing at me, the laughter still sparkling in her eyes, on her face. One look was enough. She was going to kill me if she could.

Since I was pretty much thinking the same thing about her, I gave her a little nod and a salute. We'd see who was dead come morning. It might be me, but somewhere on the lists of the dead would be Raina. That I could almost promise.

Marcus raised his clawed hands over his head. He turned in a slow circle.

"Two alphas fight for you here tonight. One of us will leave this circle alive. One of us will feed you tonight. Drink of our blood, eat of our flesh. We are pack. We are lukoi. We are one."

Jason threw his head back and howled, so close to me that I jumped. Furred throats echoed him, human throats joining the chorus. I stood alone among the pack and did not join in. When the last echo faded off in the rolling, wooded hills, Marcus said, "Death between us then, Richard."

"I offered you life, Marcus. You chose death."

Marcus smiled. "I suppose I did."

Marcus jumped straight at him, no feinting, no practice, just a blur of speed. Richard rolled to the ground, up and away, coming to his feet. Three thin lines bled across his belly. Marcus didn't give him a chance to recover. He covered the distance between them like a bad dream. I couldn't even keep track

of it with my eyes. I'd seen lycanthropes move before, and I'd thought they were fast, but Marcus was breathtaking.

He slashed Richard, forcing him back towards the edge of the clearing where Raina stood. Richard wasn't being hurt, but the flurry of attacks forced him backwards, kept him from attacking. I needed to ask a question. I looked down at Jason. He turned pale wolf eyes to me.

"If anyone else helps Marcus, it's cheating, right?" It felt vaguely stupid talking to something that looked like an animal, but the look in those eyes wasn't animal. I wasn't sure it was human, but it wasn't animal.

The wolf nodded its head. Awkwardly.

Richard's back was almost within Raina's reach. Jamil, the black werewolf from two nights ago, had joined her. Sebastian was already at her side. Shit.

"If they cheat, can I shoot them?"

"Yes," Cassandra joined us, walking up through the pack like a warm, prickling wind. I got the first real brush of her power and knew she could have been lupa if she wanted to be.

I pulled the Browning out, and it felt odd in my hands, as if I didn't need it. I was channeling more of the pack than I knew if I didn't want my gun. A dangerous amount more. I wrapped my fingers around the butt of the Browning, digging my hand around it, remembering the feel of it. The sensory memory brought it back to me, pushed some of the glow of power away.

I didn't see a weapon, but Richard's back was to Raina and Sebastian. I raised the Browning, not aiming, not yet. I yelled, "Behind you."

I saw Richard's back spasm. He collapsed to his knees. Everything slowed down, carved in crystal. Sebastian's hand moved with a flash of silver blade. I was already aiming at him. Marcus's claw drew back for a downward swipe at Richard's unprotected throat. I pulled the trigger and turned the gun towards Marcus, but it would be too slow, too late.

The top of Sebastian's head exploded. I had a fraction of a second to wonder what ammunition Edward had put in the gun. The body started to fall backwards. Marcus's claw came sweeping down, and Richard drove his hand under the arm, into Marcus's upper stomach. Marcus stopped, froze for a second, as the claws dug into his stomach, up under his ribs. Richard's hand went into Marcus's body past the wrist.

I kept the Browning pointed at Raina in case she got any ideas about picking up the knife.

Marcus drove his claws into Richard's back. Richard tucked his face and neck against the other man's body, protecting himself from the claws. Marcus shuddered. Richard broke away from him, bringing his bloody hand out of Marcus's chest. He tore the still-beating heart out of his chest and flung it to the wolves. They fell on the morsel with small yips and growling.

Richard collapsed to his knees beside Marcus's body. Blood poured down his lower back where the knife had gone in. I walked to him, the gun still pointed at Raina. I knelt, still keeping a bead on her. "Richard, are you all right?" It was a stupid thing to ask, but what else was I supposed to say?

"Put up the gun, Anita. It's over."

"She tried to kill you," I said.

"It's over." He turned his face to me, and his eyes were already gone. His voice fell towards a growl. "Put it away."

I stared up at Raina and knew if I didn't kill her now, I'd have to kill her later. "She'll see us dead, Richard."

Richard's hand was suddenly there, faster than I could see. He hit my hand, and the gun went spinning. My hand was numb. I tried to back away, but he grabbed me, wrapping his clawed hands around my upper arms. "No more killing . . . tonight." He threw back his head and howled. His mouth was full of fangs.

I screamed.

"Ride the power, Anita. Ride it or run." His hands convulsed around my arms. I backpedaled, dug my heels in, and tried to get loose. He collapsed on top of me, too hurt for the struggle, too far gone to fight the change. His power roared over me, into me. I couldn't see anything but the glow of power behind my eyes. If I could have breathed, I'd have screamed again, but there was nothing but the force of his power, and it spread outward from him like a rock in water. The waves touched the pack, and where it touched, fur flowed. Richard shifted and took everyone with him. Everyone. I felt Raina struggle next to us. I felt her fight it. Heard her shriek, but in the end she fell to the ground and changed.

I held onto Richard's arms, and fur flowed under my hands like water. Muscle formed and shifted, bones broke and reknit. My lower body was trapped underneath him. Clear liquid gushed from his body, pouring over me in a near scalding wave. I screamed and struggled to get out from underneath him. And the power rode me down, filled me up, until I thought my skin wouldn't hold, couldn't hold it.

Finally, he rose off me, not a wolf, but man-wolf, covered in fur the color of cinnamon and gold. His genitalia hung large and full underneath him. He stared at me with amber eyes and offered me a clawed hand as he rose on two slightly bent legs.

I ignored the hand and scooted backwards. I got to my feet, a little unsteady, and stared. The wolf form was actually taller than his human shape, about seven feet, muscled, and monstrous. There was nothing left of Richard. But I knew how good it had felt to let loose the beast. I had felt it rise out of him like a second mind, soul, rising upward, outward, filling him, spilling out of his skin.

My body was still tingling with the brush of his beast. I could feel the thick softness of his fur under my fingertips like a sensory memory that would haunt me.

Marcus's very human-looking body lay on the ground at Richard's feet. The scent of fresh blood ran through him, ran through them all. I felt it thrill through my body. I stared down at the dead man and wanted to go down to my knees and feed. I had a strong visual image of tearing flesh, warm viscera. It was a memory. It jerked me back a step.

I stared at the man-wolf. I stared at Richard and shook my head. "I can't feed. I won't."

He spoke, but it was twisted and guttural. "You're not invited. We will feast, then hunt. You can watch. You can join the hunt, or you can go."

I backed away slowly. "I'm going."

The pack was creeping closer, gigantic wolves mostly, but here and there were man-wolves, watching me with alien eyes. I couldn't see the Browning that Richard had knocked from my hand. I drew the Firestar and started to back away.

"No one will hurt you, Anita. You are lupa. Mate."

I stared into the cool eyes of the nearest wolf. "Right now, I'm just food, Richard."

"You refused the power," he said.

He was right. In the end, I'd panicked and hadn't gotten the full dose. "Whatever." I eased through the wolves, but they didn't move. I walked out, brushing through fur like wading through a fur coat factory. Every brush of breathing, living animal scared me. Panic climbed at my throat, and I still had enough glow left to know that my fear excited them. The more scared I got, the more I smelled like food.

I kept the gun ready, but I knew if they went for me, I was dead. There were too many of them. They watched me walk. They stubbornly refused to move, forcing me to brush their furred bodies. I realized they were using me for a sort of appetizer, my fear to spice their food, the brush of my human body to flavor their chase.

When I passed the last furred body, the sound of tearing flesh brought my head around. I couldn't stop myself in time. Richard's muzzle was raised skyward, slick with blood, throwing down a piece of meat that I tried not to recognize.

I ran. The woods that I'd glided through with Richard's help suddenly became an obstacle course. I ran, and tripped, and fell, and ran some more. I finally got back to the parking lot. I had driven because nobody but me was going home tonight. They'd stay here and have a moonlight jamboree.

Edward and Harley had watched all of it from a nearby hill with night scopes. I wondered what they thought of the show.

Chapter 38

Edward made me promise to go back to the Circus for one more night. Marcus was dead, so there was no more money, but if someone else had taken the contract, they might not know that yet. It would be a shame to get killed after all the effort we'd put in to save me. I walked all the way down the damn

stairs to the ironbound door before I realized I didn't have a key, and nobody was expecting me.

The clear liquid that had gushed out of Richard's body had dried to a sticky, viscous substance somewhere between blood and glue. I needed a bath. I needed clean clothes. I needed to stop seeing Richard's mouth while he ate pieces of Marcus. The harder I tried not to flash on it, the clearer the image got.

I banged on the door until my hands stung, then I kicked it. No one came. "Shit!" I screamed at no one and everyone. "Shit!"

The feel of his body on top of mine. His bones and muscle sliding on top of me like a bag of snakes. The warm rush of power, and that moment when I had wanted to drop to my knees and feed. What if I had swallowed the power whole? What if I hadn't backed off? Would I have fed on Marcus? Would I have done that and enjoyed it?

I screamed wordlessly, smacking my hands into the door, kicking it, beating on it. I collapsed to my knees, stinging palms pressed against the wood. I leaned my head against the door and cried.

"*Ma petite*, what has happened?" Jean-Claude stood behind me on the stairs. "Richard is not dead. I would feel it."

I turned and pressed my back against the door. I wiped at the tears on my face. "He's not dead, not even close."

"Then what is wrong?" He came down the steps like he was dancing, too graceful for words, even after an evening spent with shapeshifters. His shirt was a deep, rich blue, not quite dark enough to be navy, the sleeves were full, with wide cuffs, the collar high but soft, almost as if it were a scarf. I'd never seen him in blue of any shade. It made his midnight blue eyes seem bluer, darker. His jeans were black and tight enough to be skin, the boots were knee-high, with a trailing edge of black leather that flopped as he moved.

He knelt beside me, not touching me, almost like he was afraid to. "*Ma petite*, your cross."

I stared down at it. It wasn't glowing, not yet. I wrapped my hand around the cross and jerked, snapping the chain. I flung it away. It fell against the wall, glinting silver in the faint light. "Happy?"

Jean-Claude looked at me. "Richard lives. Marcus is dead. Correct?"

I nodded.

"Then why the tears, *ma petite*? I do not think I have ever seen you cry."

"I am not crying."

He touched my cheek with one fingertip and came away with a single tear trembling on the end of his finger. He raised it to his lips, the tip of his tongue licked it off his skin. "You taste like your heart has broken, *ma petite*."

My throat choked tight. I couldn't breathe past the tears. The harder I tried not to cry, the faster the tears flowed. I hugged myself, and my hands touched the sticky gunk that covered me. I held my hands away from my body like I'd touched something unclean. I stared at Jean-Claude with my hands held out in front of me.

"*Mon Dieu*, what has happened?" He tried to hug me, but I pushed him away.

"You'll get it all over you."

He stared at the thick, clear gunk on his hand. "How did you get this close to a shapeshifting werewolf?" An idea flowed across his face. "It's Richard. You saw him change."

I nodded. "He changed on top of me. It was . . . Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God."

Jean-Claude pulled me into his arms. I pushed at him. "You'll ruin your clothes."

"*Ma petite, ma petite*, it's all right. It is all right."

"No, it's not." I sagged against him. I let him wrap me in his arms. I clutched at him, hands digging into the silk of his shirt. I buried my face against his chest and whispered, "He ate Marcus. He ate him."

"He's a werewolf, *ma petite*. That's what they do."

It was such an odd thing to say, and so terribly true, that I laughed—an abrupt, almost angry sound. The laughter died in choking, and the choking became sobs.

I held onto Jean-Claude like he was the last sane thing in the world. I buried myself against him and wept. It was like something deep inside me had broken, and I was crying out bits of myself onto his body.

His voice came to me dimly, as if he had been speaking for a long time, but I hadn't heard. He was speaking French, softly, whispering it into my hair, stroking my back, rocking me gently.

I lay in his arms, quiet. I had no more tears left. I felt empty and light, numb.

Jean-Claude smoothed my hair back from my forehead. He brushed his lips across my skin, like Richard had done earlier tonight. Even that thought couldn't make me cry again. It was too soon.

"Can you stand, *ma petite*?"

"I think so." My voice sounded distant, strange. I stood, still in the circle of his arms, leaning against him. I pushed away from him gently. I stood on my own, a little shaky, but better than nothing.

His dark blue shirt was plastered to his chest, covered with werewolf goop and tears. "Now we both need a bath," I said.

"That can be arranged."

"Please, Jean-Claude, no sexual innuendo until after I'm clean."

"Of course, *ma petite*. It was crude of me tonight. My apologies."

I stared at him. He was being far too nice. Jean-Claude was a lot of things, but nice wasn't one of them.

"If you're up to something, I don't want to know about it. I can't handle any deep, dark plots tonight, okay?"

He smiled and gave a low, sweeping bow, never taking his eyes off me. The way you bow on the judo mat when you're afraid the person may pound you if you look away.

I shook my head. He was up to something. Nice to know that not everyone had suddenly become something else. One thing I could always depend on was Jean-Claude. Pain in the ass that he was, he always seemed to be there.

Dependable in his own twisted way. Jean-Claude dependable? I must have been more tired than I thought.

Chapter 39

Jean-Claude opened the bedroom door and stepped inside, ushering me through with a sweep of graceful hands. The bed stopped me. There'd been a change of bedding. Red sheets covered the bed. Crimson drapes formed a half canopy over the nearly black wood. There were still a dozen pillows on the bed and they were all screaming, brilliant red. Even after the night I'd had, it was eye-catching.

"I like the new decor, I guess."

"The linens needed to be changed. You are always complaining that I should use more color."

I stared at the bed. "I'll stop complaining."

"I will run your bath." He went into the bathroom without a single joke or risqué comment. It was almost unnerving.

Whoever had changed the sheets had also removed the chairs that Edward and Harley had used. I didn't want to sit on the clean sheets still covered in whatever the hell I was covered in. I sat down on the white carpet and tried not to think. Not thinking is a lot harder than it sounds. My thoughts kept chasing each other, like a werewolf chasing its tail. The image tore a laugh from my throat, and on the end of it a sound like a sob or a moan. I put the back of my hand against my mouth. I didn't like that sound coming out of me. It sounded hopeless, beaten.

I was not beaten, dammit, but I was hurt. If what I felt had been an actual wound, I'd have been bleeding to death.

The bathroom door opened at long last. A puff of warm, moist air flowed around Jean-Claude. He had taken off his shirt, and the cross-shaped burn scar marred the perfection of his chest. He held his boots in one hand, a towel as scarlet as the sheets in the other.

"I washed up in the sink while the tub filled." He walked barefoot across the white carpeting. "I'm afraid I used the last clean towel. I will fetch you more."

I took my hand away from my mouth and nodded. I finally managed to say, "Fine."

I stood before he could offer to help me up. I didn't need any help.

Jean-Claude moved to one side. His black hair lay in nearly tight curls across his pale shoulders, curled from the humidity of the bathroom. I ignored him as much as it was humanly possible and walked inside.

The room was warm and misty, the black marble tub full of bubbles. He offered me a black lacquer tray from the vanity top. Shampoos, soap, bath crystals, and what looked like oils were grouped on the tray.

"Get out so I can undress."

"It took two people to dress you tonight, *ma petite*. Won't you need help getting undressed?" His voice was utterly bland. His face so still, his eyes so innocent, it made me smile.

I sighed. "If you get the two straps in back, I think I can manage the rest. But no monkey business." I held my hands over the bra because one strap would loosen it. The other strap, as far as I could tell, was the pivot point for the rest of the outfit.

His fingers moved to the top strap. I watched him in the fogged mirror. The strap came unbuckled, and the leather gave with a small sigh. He moved to the second strap without so much as an extra caress. He undid it and took a step back. "No monkey business, *ma petite*." He backed out of the room, and I watched him go like a phantom in the mist-covered mirrors. When the door was shut, I started on the rest of the straps. It was like peeling myself to get the goo-soaked leather off.

I put the tray of bath accessories on the tub edge and slipped into the water. The water was hot, just this side of too hot. I sank into it up to my chin, but I couldn't relax. The gunk clung to my body in patches. I had to get it off me. I sat up in the tub and started scrubbing. The soap smelled like gardenia. The shampoos smelled like herbs. Trust Jean-Claude not to buy a name brand from the grocery store.

I washed my hair twice, sinking under the water and coming up for air. I was scrubbed and virtuous, or at least clean. The mirrors had cleared and I had only myself to stare at. I'd washed off all the careful makeup. I smoothed my thick, black hair back from my face. My eyes were enormous and nearly black. My skin so pale, it was almost white. I looked shocked, ethereal, unreal.

There was a soft knock on the door. "*Ma petite*, may I come in?"

I glanced down at myself. The bubbles were still holding. I drew a pile of them a little closer to my chest and said, "Come in." It took a lot of effort not to hunch down in the water. I sat up straight, trusting in the bubbles. Besides, I would not huddle. So I was naked in a tub of bubble bath. So what. No one can embarrass you unless you let them.

Jean-Claude came in with two thick, red towels. He closed the door behind him with a small smile. "We wouldn't want to let the hot air out."

I narrowed my eyes but said, "I guess not."

"Where do you want the towels? Here?" He started to lay them on the vanity.

"I can't reach them there," I said.

"Here?" He laid them on top of the stool. He stood there, staring down at me, still wearing nothing but the black jeans. His feet were startlingly pale against the black carpet.

"Still too far away."

He sat down on the edge of the tub, placing the towels on the floor. He stared down at me as if he could will the bubbles away. "Is this close enough?"

"Maybe a little too close," I said.

He trailed fingertips over the bubbles at the edge of the tub. "Do you feel better now, *ma petite*?"

"I said no sexual innuendo, remember."

"As I remember, you said no sexual innuendo until after you were clean." He smiled at me. "You're clean."

I sighed. "Trust you to be literal."

He trailed his fingers in the water. He turned his shoulder enough that I could see the whip scars on his back. They were slick and white, and I suddenly had an urge to trace them with my fingers.

He turned back to face me. He wiped his wet fingers across his chest, trailing shining lines of moisture across the flat slickness of the burn scar, down along his belly. His fingers played with the line of dark hair that vanished into his pants.

I closed my eyes and let out a sigh.

"What is the matter, *ma petite*?" I felt him leaning over me. "Are you faint?"

I opened my eyes. He had leaned his entire upper body across the tub, right arm on the far rim, the left near my shoulder. His hip was so far over the water that if I'd touched his chest, he'd have fallen in.

"I don't faint," I said.

His face leaned down over mine. "So glad to hear it." He kissed me lightly, a brush of lips, but even that small movement made my stomach jerk.

I gasped and pushed him away. He fell into the tub, going completely under, only his feet sticking out. He landed on my naked body, and I screamed.

He came up for air, his long, black hair streaming around his face, across his shoulders. He looked as surprised as I'd ever seen him. He crawled off me, mainly because I was shoving at him. He struggled to his feet. Water streamed down his body. He stared down at me. I was huddled against the side, staring up at him, pissed.

He shook his head and laughed. The sound filled the room, played along my skin like a hand. "I have been a lady's man for nearly three hundred years, Anita. Why is it only with you that I am awkward?"

"Maybe it's a hint," I said.

"Perhaps."

I stared up at him. He stood there, knee deep in bubble bath. He was soaking wet and should have been ridiculous, but he wasn't. He was beautiful.

"How can you be so damn beautiful when I know what you are?"

He knelt in the water. The bubbles covered his waist, so he looked naked. Water trailed down his chest in fine beads. I wanted to run my hands over him. I wanted to lick the water off his skin. I drew my legs to my chest and locked my arms around them, not trusting myself.

He moved towards me. The water sloshed and curled around my naked body. He stayed kneeling, so close that his jeans brushed my huddled legs. The

feel of him in the water, that close, made me hide my face against my knees. The pounding of my heart gave me away. I knew he could taste my need on the air.

"Tell me to go, *ma petite*, and I will go." I felt him lean over me, his face just above my wet hair.

Slowly, I raised my face.

He placed a hand on the tub edge, one arm on either side of me, bringing his chest dangerously close to my face. I watched the water bead on his skin, the way that he sometimes watched blood on mine: a need almost too overwhelming to deny, an urge so complete that I didn't want to say no.

I unclenched my arms from my knees and leaned forward. I whispered, "Don't go." I touched hands to his waist, tentative, as if it should burn, but his skin was cool under the slickness of water. Cool and smooth to the touch. I glanced up at his face and knew that there was something close to fear on my own face.

His face was lovely, and uncertain, as if he didn't know what to do next. It was a look I never thought to see on Jean-Claude's face when I was naked in his arms.

I kept my eyes on his face as I moved my mouth towards his stomach. I ran my tongue over his skin, a quick, tentative movement.

He sighed, eyes fluttering shut, body almost sagging. I pressed my mouth against his skin, drinking the water off of him. I couldn't reach his chest. I moved to my knees, hands steadying me against his slender waist.

The air was cool against my naked breasts. Kneeling had bared them. I froze, suddenly unsure. I wanted desperately to see his face and was afraid to look up.

His fingertips brushed my shoulders, sliding down the wet skin. I shivered and glanced up. The look on his face caught my breath in my throat. Tenderness, need, amazement.

"You are so beautiful, *ma petite*." He put his fingertips to my lips before I could protest. "You are beautiful. On this I do not lie."

His fingers moved across my lips, down my chin. He slid his hands to my shoulders, down my back, in slow, teasing lines. His hands stopped on either side of my waist, mirroring my hands on his own waist.

"Now what?" My voice was a little breathless.

"Whatever you like, *ma petite*."

I massaged my hands against his waist, feeling the flesh underneath, feeling him under my hands. I spread my hands wide, splaying my fingers tense against his skin, dragging my hands up his ribs.

He kneaded his fingers into my waist, pressing his hands against my ribs. He inched his hands upward along my sides. Strong fingers pressed into my skin just enough to make me sigh. He stopped with his thumbs below my breasts. His touch was feather light, almost not touching at all. But that one small brush of his skin against my breasts made my body react, tightening, nipples hardening. My body wanted him. Wanted him so badly that my skin felt large and aching with the thought of it.

My own hands were pressed against his chest. I realized that he was still mirroring me, waiting for me to move.

I stared up into his face. I searched that beauty, those dark eyes. There was no pull to them, no power, except the thick black line of his lashes, and the rich color like the sky just before darkness swallows the world when you think all is black, but there in the west is a shade of blue, dark and rich as ink. Beauty had its own power.

I slid my hands up his chest, fingers brushing across his nipples. I stared at his face while I did it, heart pounding in my throat, breath coming too fast.

His hands slid upward, cupping my breasts. The touch of his hands made me gasp. He scooted lower in the water, still touching me. He bent over my breasts and laid a gentle kiss on them. He licked the water off my skin, lips working gently.

I shuddered and had to steady myself on his bare shoulders. All I could see was his long, dark hair bent over me. I caught sight of us in the mirrors. I watched his mouth close over my breast, felt him take me into his mouth as far as he could. Fangs pressed against my breast. For a second I thought they would sink into my flesh, draw blood in a fine hot line, but he drew back. He dropped to all fours in the water, which made me taller, allowed me to look down into his face.

There was no uncertainty in his face now. His eyes were still lovely, still human, but there was a knowledge in them now, a growing darkness. Sex, for want of a better word, but that look in a man's eyes is too primitive for vocabulary. It's the darkness we all have inside of us, peeking out. That part of us that we trap in our dreams and deny in daylight hours. He stayed crouched in the water with that feral light in his eyes, and I went to him.

I kissed him, light, a brush of lips. I flicked my tongue along his lips and he opened his mouth for me. I cupped his face between my hands and kissed him, tasted him, explored him.

He came up out of the water with a sound between a moan and a cry. His arms locked behind my back and he rolled us in the water like a shark. We came up gasping. He pushed away from me to lean against the far edge of the tub. I was breathing so hard I was trembling. My pulse thudded at the back of my throat. I could taste it on my tongue, almost roll the beating pulse in my mouth like candy. I realized it wasn't just my heart I was hearing. It was Jean-Claude's.

I could see the pulse in his neck like something alive and separate, but it wasn't only my eyes that could see it. I could feel it like it was my own. I had never been so aware of the blood coursing through my body. The pulsing warmth of my own skin. The thick pumping of my heart. My life thundering inside me. Jean-Claude's body pulsed in time to mine. It was like he was riding my pulse, my blood. I felt his need, and it wasn't just sex, but for the first time, I understood it wasn't just the blood, either. It was all of me. He wanted to warm himself in my body, like holding hands to a flame, gathering my warmth, my life, to him. I felt his stillness, a depth of quiet that nothing living could touch, like a still pool of water hidden away in the dark. In one crystalline

moment, I realized that, for me, this was part of the attraction: I wanted to plunge my hands into his stillness, into that quiet place of death. I wanted to embrace it, confront it, conquer it. I wanted to fill him up with a burning wash of life, and I knew in that moment that I could do it, but only at the price of drinking in some of that still, dark water.

"My deepest apologies, *ma petite*, you have almost undone me." He sank into the water, leaning against the edge of the tub. "I did not come here to feed, *ma petite*. I am sorry."

I felt his heartbeat going away from me, pulling away from me. My pulse slowed. The only heart thudding in my ears was my own.

He stood, water dripping down his body. "I will go, *ma petite*." He sighed. "You rob me of my hard-won control. Only you can do that to me, only you."

I crawled through the water towards him and let the darkness fill my eyes. "Don't go," I said.

He watched me with a look that was part amazement, part amusement, part fear, as if he didn't trust me—or didn't trust himself.

I knelt at his feet, running my hands up the soaked cloth of his jeans. I dug my nails lightly into the cloth over his thighs and stared up at him. My face was dangerously close to places I had never touched before, not even with my hands. This close, I couldn't help noticing that he was stretched hard and firm under the tight, heavy cloth. I had a terrible urge to lay my cheek over his groin. I ran my hand lightly over him, barely touching. That small touch brought a soft groan from him.

He stared down at me like a drowning man.

I met his eyes. "No teeth, no blood."

He nodded slowly. He tried twice before he found his voice. "As my lady wishes."

I laid my cheek across him, feeling him firm and large against my skin. I felt his whole body tense. I rubbed my face against him like a cat. A small sound escaped him. I looked up. His eyes were closed, his head thrown back.

I grabbed the waistband of his jeans and used it to pull myself to my feet. Water ran down my body, suds clung to my skin.

His hands encircled my waist, but his eyes went lower. He met my gaze and smiled. It was the smile he always had. That smile that said he was thinking wicked little thoughts, things you'd only do in the dark on a dare. For the first time, I wanted everything that smile promised.

I tugged at his jeans. "Off."

He unsnapped the jeans carefully. He peeled the wet cloth away from his body. If there'd been underwear, I never saw it. The jeans ended up on the carpet. He was somehow suddenly nude.

He was like carved alabaster, every muscle, every curve of his body pale and perfect. Telling him he was beautiful was redundant. Saying golly gee whiz seemed too uncool. Giggling was out. My voice came small and strangled, hoarse with all the words I couldn't find. "You're not circumcised."

"No, *ma petite*. Is that a problem?"

I did what I'd wanted to do since I first saw him. I wrapped my fingers around him, squeezing gently. He closed his eyes, shuddering, steadying his hands on my shoulders. "Not a problem," I said.

He pulled me against him suddenly, pressing our naked bodies together. The feel of him hard and firm against my stomach was almost overwhelming. I dug fingers into his back to keep my suddenly weak knees from giving out.

I kissed his chest. I rose on tiptoe and kissed his shoulders, his neck. I ran my tongue along his skin and tasted him, rolling the scent of him, the feel of him in my mouth. We kissed, a nearly innocent brush of lips. I locked my hands behind his neck, arching my body against him. He made a small sound low in his throat.

He slid down my body, arms locked behind my back, holding me against him as he left my arms and left me standing, staring down at him.

He licked my stomach with quick, wet flicks of his tongue. His hands played along my buttocks, teasing. He licked back and forth where stomach ended and lower things began. His fingers slid between my legs.

I gasped. "What are you doing?"

He rolled his eyes upward, mouth still pressed low on my stomach. He raised his face just enough to speak. "You may have three guesses, *ma petite*," he whispered. He put a hand on each of my thighs and spread my legs wider. His hand slid over me, exploring me.

My mouth was suddenly dry. I licked my lips and said, "I don't think my legs will hold."

He ran his tongue down my hip. "When the time comes, *ma petite*, I will hold you." He kissed his way down my thigh. His finger slid inside of me. My breath fell outward in a sigh.

He kissed the inside of my thighs, running his tongue, his lips along my skin. The feel of his fingers between my legs tightened my body, and I could feel the beginnings of something large and overwhelming.

He stood, hand still between my legs. He bent and kissed me, long and slow. The movement of his hand matched his mouth. Slow and lingering, teasing along my body. When his fingers plunged inside me, I cried out, shuddering against him.

He left me standing in the water, alone and shivering, but not from cold. I couldn't even think enough to ask where'd he gone. He appeared in front of me with a condom in his hand like he'd plucked it from the air. He traced the foil down my body.

I touched him while he unwrapped it. I held him in my hands and felt the velvet smoothness of him. The skin was unbelievably soft. He drew himself gently out of my hands with a shaking laugh.

When he was ready, he picked me up, hands on the backs of my thighs. He pressed himself against me without entering, rubbing himself where his hand had touched. I whispered, "Please." He spread my legs and eased inside of me. Slowly, so slowly as if he were afraid he'd hurt me, but it didn't hurt.

When he was sheathed inside me, he looked at me. The look on his face was haunting. Emotions flowed over his face. Tenderness, triumph, need. "I

have wanted this for so long, *ma petite*, so very long." He eased in and out, slowly, almost tentatively. I watched his face until the play of emotions was too much, too honest. There was something like pain in his eyes, something that I didn't even come close to understanding.

The movements of his hips were still slow, careful. It was amazing, but I wanted more. I brought my mouth up to his and said, "I won't break." I pressed my mouth to his hard enough to feel the press of fangs.

He went to his knees in the water, pressing me against the side of the tub. His mouth fed at mine, and there was a small, sharp pain. Sweet copper blood filled my mouth, filled his mouth, and he plunged inside of me, hard and fast. I watched him in the mirrors. Watched his body coming in and out of mine. I gathered him in my arms, in my legs. I held him to me, feeling his body plunging inside of mine. Felt his need.

Someone was making a high moaning sound, and it was me. I wrapped my legs around his waist. The muscles in my lower abdomen spasmed, tightened.

I pressed my body against Jean-Claude as if I would climb through him, into him. I grabbed a handful of his long hair and watched his face from inches away. Watched his face while his body pumped into mine. The emotions were gone. His face was almost slack with need. Blood spilled down the corner of my mouth, and he licked it away, his body tightening against me.

He slowed the rhythm of his body. I felt the effort strain through his arms and back. He slowed. Every time he thrust into me, it was like I could feel it into the middle of my chest. As if he'd grown impossibly large within me. My body spasmed around him, tightened like a hand. He cried out, and his body lost its rhythm. He plunged inside me faster, harder, as if he would meld our bodies together, weld us into one flesh, one body. A wave of pleasure burst over me in a skin-tingling, body-sweeping rush. It burst over me like a rush of cool flame, and still he was not done. Every thrust of his body reached inside of me and caressed things that should never have been able to be touched. It was as if his body could reach the places his voice could touch, as if it were more than his body that plunged inside of me. The world became for a moment a shining whiteness, a melting thing. I dug fingers into Jean-Claude's back. Noises fell from my mouth that were too primitive for screams. When I realized I was drawing blood on his back, I scratched my own arms. I hadn't asked what he thought about pain.

I cuddled around him, letting him hold the full weight of my body. He climbed up the edge of the tub, lifting me out of the water. He crawled on all fours to the raised area around the tub with me hanging onto him. He lowered his body and I moved away from him. He slid out of me and was still as hard and ready as when he had started.

I looked at him. "You didn't come."

"I have not waited this long to end it so quickly." He lowered himself in a sort of push-up and ran his tongue down one of the scratches on my arm. He rolled his tongue around his lips. "If you did this for my benefit, I appreciate it. If you did it to keep from damaging me, it was not necessary. I do not mind a little pain."

"Me, either."

He slid his body across mine. "I noticed that." He kissed me slowly. He lay beside me, then scooted until he was lying on his back and I was almost back in the tub. "I want to watch you move, *ma petite*. I want you above me."

I straddled his waist and slid slowly over him. It was deeper from this angle, sharper somehow. His hands moved up my body, over my breasts. He lay back underneath me. His long, curling, black hair was almost completely dry. It fanned out around his face in a thick, soft wave. This was what I wanted. Seeing him like this. Feeling him inside me.

"Move for me, Anita."

I moved for him. I rode his body. He tightened inside me, and I gasped. I watched us in the mirrors. Watched my hips swaying above him.

"*Ma petite*," he whispered, "look into my eyes. Let it be between us as it always could have been."

I stared into his dark blue eyes. They were lovely, but they were just eyes. I shook my head. "I can't."

"You must let me inside your mind, as you let me inside your body." He spasmed inside of me, and it was hard to think.

"I don't know how," I said.

"Love me, Anita, love me."

I stared down at him and did. "I do love you."

"Then let me in, *ma petite*. Let me love you."

I felt it like a drape being pulled away. I felt his eyes, and they were suddenly drowning deep, an endless midnight blue ocean that somehow managed to burn. I was aware of my body. I could feel Jean-Claude inside my body. I could feel him like a brush of silk inside my mind.

The orgasm hit me unexpectedly, opened my mind to him more than I'd planned. Flung me wide open and falling into his eyes. He cried out underneath me, and I realized I could still feel my body, feel my hands on his chest, feel my pelvis riding him. I opened my eyes and for a dizzying second I saw his face go slack, that moment of total abandon.

I collapsed on top of him, trailing my hands down his arms, feeling his heart pound against my chest. We lay quietly for a few moments, resting, holding each other, then I slid off him, curling beside him.

"You can't hold me with your eyes anymore. Even if I let you, I can still break the hold at any time."

"Yes, *ma petite*."

"Does that bother you?"

He lifted a lock of my hair, running it between his fingers. "Let us say it does not bother me as much as it might have a few hours ago."

I raised up on one elbow so I could see his face. "Meaning what? That now that I've had sex with you, I'm not dangerous?"

He stared up at me. I couldn't read his eyes. "You will always be dangerous, *ma petite*." He raised upward, bending at the waist, bringing his lips against mine in a gentle kiss. He moved back from me just enough to speak, propping himself on one arm. "There was a time when you would have taken

my heart with stake or gun." He took my hand in his and raised it towards his mouth. "Now you have taken it with these delicate hands and the scent of your body." He kissed the back of my hand ever so gently. He lay back, drawing me with him. "Come, *ma petite*, enjoy your conquest."

I held my face back, avoiding a kiss. "You aren't conquered," I said.

"Nor, *ma petite*, are you." He ran his hands up my back. "I am beginning to realize that you will never be conquered, and that is the greatest aphrodisiac of all."

"A challenge forever," I said.

"For all eternity," he whispered. I let him draw me down into a kiss, and part of me was still not sure if I'd done a good thing or a bad thing. But just for tonight, I didn't care.

Chapter 40

I woke surrounded by bloodred sheets, naked, and alone. Jean-Claude had kissed me good-bye and gone to his coffin. I didn't argue. If I'd awakened to him cold and dead beside me . . . Let's just say I'd had all the shock I could handle from my boyfriends for awhile.

Boyfriend. That was a word for someone who walked you to your class. It didn't seem the right word after last night. I lay there, clutching the raw silk sheets to my chest. I could smell Jean-Claude's cologne on the sheets, on my skin, but more than that, I could smell him. I cuddled that scent to me, rolled in it. He said he loved me and for a time last night, I believed him. In the light of day, I wasn't so sure. How stupid was it to half-believe the vampire loved me? Not nearly as stupid as half-loving him. But I still loved Richard. One night of great sex didn't change that. I think I had hoped it would. Lust may die that easily, but love doesn't. True love is a much harder beast to kill.

There was a soft knock on the door. I had to reach under two red pillows before I came out with the Firestar. I held it at my side and said, "Come in."

A man entered the room. He was tall, muscular, with hair shaved on either side, the back left in a long ponytail.

I pointed the gun at him and clutched the sheets to my chest. "I don't know you."

His eyes went wide; his voice shook, "I'm Ernie, I'm supposed to ask if you want breakfast."

"No," I said. "Now, get out."

He nodded, eyes on the gun. He hesitated in the doorway, even staring down the barrel of a gun. I made a guess.

"What did Jean-Claude tell you to do?" It was amazing how many people were more afraid of Jean-Claude than of me. I pointed the gun at the ceiling.

"He said I was to be at your disposal, anything you want. He said I was to make that very clear to you."

"It's clear. Now, get out."

He still hesitated.

I'd had enough. "Ernie, I am sitting here naked in a bed, and I don't know you. Get out or I'm going to shoot you on principle." I aimed the gun at him for dramatic emphasis.

Ernie ran for it, leaving the door open. Great. Now I had the choice of walking to the door naked and closing it, or draping a king-size sheet around me and stumbling to the door and closing it. Sheet. I was sitting on the edge of the bed, with the sheet in front of me and most of my backside not covered, gun still clutched in one hand, when Richard appeared in the doorway.

He was dressed in jeans, white T-shirt, jeans jacket, and white tennis shoes. His hair foamed around his face in a mass of golden brown waves. A claw had caught him across the face, leaving angry red welts that chased across the entire left side of his face. The injury looked days old. It had to have happened after I left last night.

He had my leather coat in one hand and the Browning in the other. He just stood there in the doorway.

I sat on the bed. Neither of us said anything. I wasn't slick and sophisticated enough for this. What do you say to boyfriend A when he finds you naked in the bed of boyfriend B? Especially if boyfriend A turned into a monster the night before and ate someone. I bet Miss Manners didn't cover this at all.

"You slept with him, didn't you?" His voice was low, almost soft, as if he was trying very hard not to yell.

My gut tightened. I was not ready for this fight. I was armed, but I was naked. I would have traded the gun for clothes in a hot second.

"I would say it's not what it looks like, but it is." My attempt at humor did not work.

He strode into the room like an approaching storm, his anger riding before him in a crackling wave. The power poured over me and I wanted to scream.

"Stop leaking all over me."

It stopped him, almost literally in midmotion. "What are you talking about?"

"Your power, aura, it's raining all over me. Stop it."

"Why? Does it feel good? Until you panicked last night, it felt good, didn't it?"

I shoved the Firestar under the pillow and stood, clutching the sheet to me. "Yeah, it felt good until you shapeshifted on top of me. I was covered in that clear gunk, thick with it." The memory was new enough that I shuddered and looked away from him.

"So you fucked Jean-Claude. Oh, that makes perfect sense."

I looked at him and felt an answering anger. If he wanted to fight, he'd come to the right place. I held up my right hand. It was covered in a wonderful multicolored bruise. "You did this when you knocked my gun away."

"There'd been enough killing, Anita. No one else had to die."

"Do you really think that Raina is just going to let you take over? No way. She'll see you dead first."

He shook his head, his face set in stubborn lines. "I am Ulfric now. I'm in control. She'll do what I say."

"Nobody bosses Raina; not for long. Has she offered to fuck you yet?"

"Yes," he said.

The way he said it stopped me, brought my breath up short. "Did you, after I left?"

"It would serve you right if I had."

I couldn't meet his eyes on that one. "If you make her lupa, she'll let it go. She just doesn't want to lose her power base." I forced myself to look up, to meet his eyes.

"I don't want Raina." Something passed over his face so raw, that it brought tears to my eyes. "I want you."

"You can't want me now, not after last night."

"Is that why you slept with Jean-Claude? Did you think it would keep you safe from me?"

"I wasn't thinking that clearly," I said.

He laid the coat and the gun on the bed. He gripped the end of the bed. The wood groaned under the strength of his hands. He jerked back from it as if he hadn't meant to do it. "You slept with him in this bed. Right here." He put his hand over his eyes as if he was trying to erase an image inside his head.

He screamed wordlessly.

I took a step towards him, hand out, and stopped. How could I comfort him? What could I say to make this better? Not a damn thing.

He jerked at the bottom sheet, tugging it until it came loose. He grabbed the top mattress and pulled it off the bed. He grabbed the bottom of the bed and lifted.

I screamed, "Richard!"

The bed was antique solid oak, and he tossed it on its side like it was a toy. He pulled the bottom sheet off. The silk tore with a sound like skin peeling back. He was on his knees with the butchered silk in his hands. He held his hands out to me and the sheets fell away like blood.

Richard got to his feet, a little unsteady. He caught himself against the bed and took a step towards me. The Firestar and the Browning were somewhere on the floor in the welter of red silk and tossed mattress.

I backed away until I hit the corner, and I had nowhere else to go. I was still clutching the sheet around me like it was some kind of protection.

I held out a hand towards Richard, as if that would help. "What do you want from me, Richard? What do you want me to say? I'm sorry. I am sorry that I hurt you. I'm sorry that I can't handle what I saw last night. I'm sorry."

He stalked towards me, not saying anything, hands balled into fists. I realized that I was afraid of Richard. That I wasn't sure what he'd do when he reached me, and I wasn't armed. Part of me felt like I deserved to be hit at least

once, that I owed that to him. But after seeing what he'd done to the bed, I wasn't sure I'd survive it.

Richard grabbed the front of the sheet, balling it in his fist, jerking me against him. He used the sheet to raise me to tiptoe. He kissed me. For a second I froze. Hitting, yelling, that I'd expected, but not this.

His mouth bruised against my lips, forcing my mouth open. The moment I felt his tongue, I jerked my head back.

Richard put a hand on the back of my head like he'd force me to kiss him. The rage in his face was frightening.

"Not good enough to kiss now?"

"I saw you eat Marcus last night."

He let me go so suddenly I fell to the floor, stumbling over the sheet. I tried to get to my knees, but my legs had tangled. The sheet slipped over one breast. I struggled to cover myself. Embarrassed at last.

"Two nights ago, you let me touch them, suck them. Now I can't even see them."

"Don't do this, Richard."

He went to all fours in front of me, so we'd be on eye level. "Don't do what? Don't be mad that you let the vampire fuck you?" He crawled forward until our faces were almost touching. "You fucked a corpse last night, Anita. Did it feel good?"

I stared at him from inches away, not embarrassed anymore. Instead, I was getting pissed. "Yeah, it did."

He jerked back from me like I'd hit him. His face crumpled, and his eyes searched the room frantically. "I love you." He looked up suddenly, eyes wide and pain-filled. "I love you."

I kept my eyes very wide so the tears in them wouldn't fall out and run down my cheeks. "I know, and I'm sorry."

He turned away from me, still kneeling. He slapped his hands against the floor. He pounded his hands into the floor over and over until blood smeared on the white carpet.

I got to my feet. I hovered over him, afraid to touch him. "Richard, Richard, don't, please don't." The tears fell and I couldn't stop them.

I knelt beside him. "You're hurting yourself. Stop it!" I grabbed his wrists, held his bleeding hands in mine. He stared at me, and the look on his face was raw, human.

I touched his face, gently tracing the claw marks. He leaned into me, tears spilling down his cheeks. The look in his eyes held me immobile. His lips brushed mine, soft. I didn't flinch, but I didn't kiss him back, either.

He moved back from me, just enough to see my face clearly. "Good-bye, Anita." He got to his feet.

I wanted to say so much, but none of it would help. Nothing would make it better. Nothing would erase what I'd seen last night or how it had made me feel. "Richard . . . I . . . I'm sorry."

"So am I." He walked to the door. He hesitated with his hand on the doorknob. "I'll always love you."

I opened my mouth, but no sound came. There was nothing left to say but, "I love you, Richard, and I am sorrier than I know how to say."

He opened the door and stepped through it without looking back. When the door closed behind him, I sat on the floor, huddled in the silk sheet. I could smell Jean-Claude's cologne on the silk, but I could smell Richard now, too. His aftershave clung to the sheets, to my mouth.

How could I let him go like this? How could I call him back? I sat on the floor and did nothing, because I didn't know what to do.

Chapter 41

I called Edward's answering service and left a message. I couldn't stay where I was. I couldn't stay here staring at the wrecked bedroom and remembering Richard's wounded eyes. I had to get out. I had to call Dominic and tell him I wasn't coming. The triad of power didn't work without at least two of us on the spot. Jean-Claude was in his coffin and Richard was out of the picture. I wasn't sure what would happen with our little triumvirate now. I didn't see Richard standing around watching me grope Jean-Claude, if I wasn't groping him, too. I couldn't blame him on that.

Strangely, the thought of him sleeping with Raina still made me see green. I had no right to be jealous of him now, but I was. Go figure.

I dressed in black jeans, a black, short-sleeved blouse, and a black blazer. I had to work tonight, and Bert would kick a fit about me wearing black. He thought it gave the wrong image. Screw him. Tonight, black fit my mood.

The Browning in its shoulder holster, Firestar in the Uncle Mike's sidekick holster, a knife on each arm, and a knife down my spine. I was ready for work.

I was going to give Edward ten more minutes, and then I was out of there. If there was still an assassin lurking around, I'd almost have welcomed him or her.

There was a knock on the door. I sighed. "Who is it?"

"Cassandra."

"Come in."

She opened the door, caught one sight of the wrecked bed, and grinned. "I've heard of rough sex, but this is ridiculous." She was wearing a long, white dress that fell nearly to her ankles. White hose and white canvas flats completed the outfit. She looked light and summery with her long hair trailing down her back.

I shook my head. "Richard did it."

The smile left her face. "He found out you slept with Jean-Claude?"

"Does everyone know?" I asked.

"Not everyone." She walked into the room, shutting the door behind her. She shook her head. "Did he hurt you?"

"He didn't hit me, if that's what you mean, but I feel pretty shitty."

Cassandra walked to the bed, staring up at it. She grabbed the edge of the frame. She pulled with one hand and steadied with the other. She pulled several hundred pounds of wood and metal around like it was nothing. She settled the bed gently to the carpet.

I raised an eyebrow. "That was impressive."

She smiled, almost shyly. "One of the fringe benefits of being a lycanthrope is that you can pretty much lift anything you want."

"I see the appeal of that."

"I knew you would," she said. She started picking up the pillows and ripped sheets. I joined her. "We should probably put the mattress back first," she said.

"Okay. You need help?"

She laughed. "I can lift it, but it's awkward."

"Sure." I grabbed the other side of the mattress.

Cassandra came up beside me, lifting the mattress with her left hand. A look passed over her face. "I am sorry."

"I meant what I said about you and Richard earlier. I want him to be happy," I said.

"That's very flattering. I like you, Anita. I like you a lot. I wish I didn't."

I had time to frown at her, then her delicate fist came out of nowhere, a blur of speed that smashed into my face. I felt myself fall backwards. I smashed into the floor and couldn't save my head from that extra smack against the carpet. It didn't hurt. I didn't feel a damn thing when blackness closed over me.

Chapter 42

I rose out of the darkness slowly, dragging upwards like being awakened from deep sleep. I wasn't sure what woke me. I couldn't remember going to sleep. I tried to roll over and couldn't. I was suddenly very awake, eyes wide, body straining. I'd been tied up before; it was one of my least favorite things. I had a few moments of pure panic. I bucked against the ropes that tied me at the wrists and ankles. I fought, pulling until I realized that the knots were getting tighter as I struggled.

I forced myself to lie very still. My heart pounded in my ears so loudly that I couldn't hear anything else. My wrists were tied over my head at an angle sharp enough to squeeze my shoulder blades and put strain all the way down to my wrists. Even raising my head the little bit I needed to see my ankles was painful. My ankles were tied together to the foot of an unfamiliar bed. I rolled

my head back and saw the rope that tied my wrists to the head of the bed. The rope was black and soft, and if I had to guess, I'd say it was woven silk. It looked like something Jean-Claude might have lying around in a closet somewhere. I considered it for only a split second, then reality stepped into the room, and my heart stopped for just a second.

Gabriel came to the foot of the bed. He was wearing black leather pants so tight they looked poured on, and high black boots that rode his thighs all the way up, with straps at the top to hold the soft leather in place. He was naked from the waist up, a silver ring through his left nipple and another through the edge of his belly button. More silver marched up his ears to the curve, glittering as he walked around the bed. His long, thick black hair fell across his face, framing his pale, storm grey eyes. He walked around behind the headboard, out of sight, then slowly back into frame.

My heart had started beating again. It was beating so hard I was going to choke on it. They'd taken the Browning and Firestar, holsters and all. The wrist sheaths were gone. I tensed my back and could still feel the back sheath. When I put my head back, I didn't feel the knife's handle. I guess I was grateful they hadn't stripped me to get the sheath. The way Gabriel was circling the bed, I was betting we'd get to that.

I tried to talk, couldn't, swallowed, and tried again. "What's going on?" My voice sounded amazingly calm. Even to me.

A woman's laugh, high and rich, filled the room. But of course, it wasn't a room. We were at the farm where they made dirty movies. The room I was tied in had only three walls. The lights hung above me were dead, not on yet.

Raina stalked into sight on high, spiked heels the color of blood. She was wearing what looked like a red leather teddy that left most of her long legs and hips bare. "Hello, Anita, you're looking well."

I took a deep breath in through my nose and let it out slowly. My heart slowed a bit. Good. "You should talk to Richard before you do anything drastic. The position of lupa just opened up today."

She cocked her head to one side, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"She slept with Jean-Claude." Cassandra came to stand on the edge of the fake room, back to the wall. She looked like she'd always looked. If she felt uncomfortable having betrayed me to Raina, it didn't show. I hated her a lot for that.

"Aren't you going to sleep with both of them?" Raina asked.

"Hadn't planned on it," I said. Every time I opened my mouth and nobody touched me, I got a little calmer. If Raina had done this to get me out of the way, then she didn't need to go any further. If it was revenge for Marcus, I was in deep shit.

Raina sat down on the end of the bed near my feet. I tensed when she did it; I couldn't help myself. She noticed and laughed. "Oh, you are going to be a lot of fun."

"You can be alpha female. I don't want the job," I said.

Raina sighed, running her hand along my leg, massaging the muscle in my upper thigh, almost absently like you'd pet a dog. "Richard doesn't want me,

Anita. He thinks I'm corrupt. He wants you." She squeezed my thigh until I thought she was going to grow claws and tear out the muscle. She forced a small sound out of my throat before she stopped.

"What do you want?"

"Your pain." She smiled when she said it.

I turned my head to Cassandra. There had to be someone sane in this room. "Why are you helping them?"

"I am Sabin's wolf."

My eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

Raina crawled up on the bed, lying beside me, insinuating her body against mine, one finger tracing over my stomach. It was an idle gesture, as if she wasn't really concentrating. I didn't want to be here when she started concentrating.

"Cassandra was a plant from the very beginning, weren't you dear?"

Cassandra nodded, coming to stand beside the bed. Her hazel eyes were calm, too calm. Whatever she was feeling was there behind that pretty face, carefully controlled. The trick was, was there anything behind that face that could help me?

"Dominic, Sabin, and I are a triumvirate. We are what you and Richard and Jean-Claude could have been."

I didn't like her using the past tense. "You're the woman he gave up fresh blood for?"

"I believe in the sanctity of life. I thought I valued that above all.

Watching Sabin's golden beauty rot away has convinced me otherwise. I will do anything, *anything* to help him recover." Something like pain crossed her eyes and she looked away. When she looked back, her face was forcibly blank, the effort trembling down her hands. She noticed and hugged her hands to her arms. She smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. "I have to make it up to him, Anita. I am sorry that you and yours have become entangled in our problems."

"How am I caught up in it?"

Raina slid her arm over my stomach, putting her face very near mine.

"Dominic has a spell to cure Sabin of the rotting disease. A transfer of magical essence, you might say. All he needed was exactly the right donor." She leaned in so close that only my turning my head kept our lips from touching. She whispered against my skin, breath warm, "A perfect donor. A vampire who shares Sabin's powers exactly, a perfect match, and a servant, either alpha werewolf, or necromancer, bound to that same vampire."

I turned and looked at her. I couldn't help it. She kissed me, pressing her mouth against mine, trying to force her tongue inside. I bit her lip hard enough that I tasted blood.

She jerked back with a startled scream. She put her hand to her mouth and stared down at me. "That is going to cost you dearly."

I spit her blood at her. It splattered along my chin. It was a stupid thing to have done. Making her angrier was not helpful, but watching the blood drip down her lovely face had almost been worth it.

"Gabriel, entertain Ms. Blake."

That got my attention. Gabriel slid onto the bed, folding himself against me as Raina had done on the other side. He was taller, six feet, so he didn't fit quite as well, but what he lacked in matching size he made up for in technique. He straddled my body and leaned over me in a sort of push-up, bringing his mouth close and closer. He licked my bloody chin, one quick flick of his tongue. I jerked my head away.

He grabbed my chin with one hand, forcing me to look at him. He held my chin like a vise, fingers digging in when I struggled. The strength in his fingers was enough to crush my jaw if he squeezed. He licked the blood off my chin and lips in slow, lingering licks.

I screamed, then mentally cursed myself. This was what they wanted. Panic would not help. Panic would not help. I kept repeating it over and over until I stopped pulling at the ropes. I would not lose it, not yet, not yet.

Cassandra crawled up on the bed. I could only see her white dress out of the corner of my eye. Gabriel still held me immobile.

"Let go of her face so she can look at me."

Gabriel glanced at her and hissed.

A low, rolling growl trickled out from behind her lips. "I'm in the mood for a fight tonight, kitty, don't make it easy for me."

"Aren't you expected at the ceremony?" Raina said. "Doesn't Dominic need you there for it to work?"

Cassandra reared back, and the voice that came was low and fell from her human lips with effort. "I will speak with Anita before I go, or I will not go."

Raina came to stand on the other side of the bed. "You'll never find another master vampire who matches your master as perfectly as Jean-Claude. Never. You'd jeopardize his one chance at a cure?"

"I will do as I wish on this one thing, Raina, for I am alpha. When Richard is gone, I will lead the pack. Do not forget that."

"That wasn't our bargain."

"Our bargain was that you would kill the Executioner before we arrived in town. You failed."

"Marcus hired the best. Who knew she would be so hard to kill?"

"I did, the first time I met her. You are always underestimating other women, Raina; it is one of your weaknesses." Cassandra leaned towards Raina. "You tried to kill Richard before Dominic could use him in the spell."

"He was going to kill Marcus."

Cassandra shook her head. "You panicked, Raina. You and Marcus. Now Marcus is dead, and you can't hold the pack. Too many of them hate you. And many of them love Richard, or at least admire him."

I wanted to ask where Jean-Claude and Richard were, but I was afraid I knew. A ceremony, sacrifice, but they needed Cassandra to make it work. I didn't want her to rush off.

"You were Dominic's alibi," I said. "Not that I'm complaining, but why am I still alive?"

Cassandra looked down at me. "Gabriel and Raina want you on film. If you would give me your word that you would seek no revenge against any of us for the deaths of your two men, then I would fight to see you go free."

I started to open my mouth and promise.

She waved a finger in front of my mouth. "No lies, Anita, not between us."

"Too late for that," I said.

Cassandra nodded. "True, and that grieves me. Under other circumstances, we might have been friends."

"Yeah." Of course, that made it hurt all the more. Nothing rubs salt in the wounds like betrayal. Richard could probably compare notes with me right now.

"Where are Richard and Jean-Claude?"

She stared down at me. "Even now you think you can save them, don't you?"

I would have shrugged, but I couldn't. "It was a thought."

"You were a lure and a hostage for the two men," Cassandra said.

Gabriel had settled on top of me, body pressing along the length of my body. He was heavy. You never noticed how heavy a man was when you were enjoying yourself. He had sunk down, so that his feet trailed off the bed, and he could fold his arms across my chest. His chin rested on his arms, and he stared at me like that, like he knew he had all day, all night, all the time in the world.

"I am very surprised that you broke up with Richard today, Anita," Raina said. "We sent him a lock of your hair with a note saying we'd send a hand next. He came alone and told no one, as we had said to do. He really is a fool."

It sounded like something Richard would do, but it surprised me, anyway. "You didn't get Jean-Claude to hand himself over for a lock of my hair."

Raina moved where I could see her better and smiled down. Her lip was already beginning to heal. "Very true; we didn't even try. Jean-Claude would have known we meant to kill you, regardless. He'd have come with all his vampires, all the wolves that are loyal to him. It would have been a bloodbath."

"How did you get him then?"

"Cassandra betrayed him. Didn't you, Cassandra?"

Cassandra just looked at us. "If Richard hadn't broken with you, you might have been able to cure Sabin. Seeking your aid was originally only an excuse to enter Jean-Claude's territory, but you were more powerful than Dominic first thought. You surprised us by bearing none of the vampire's marks. You were supposed to be part of the sacrifice, but without at least the first mark, it will not work."

Hurrah for me. "You saw me heal Damian's cut and the zombie. I can heal Sabin. You know I can, Cassandra. You saw it."

She shook her head. "The sickness has moved inside Sabin. His brain is going. If you had cured him today, it would be moot. But he must be sane for the spell to work. Even one more day might be too late."

"If you kill Richard and Jean-Claude, I won't have the power to heal Sabin. If Dominic came here planning to sacrifice all three of us, then the spell must need all three of us to work."

Something flickered across her face. I was right. "Dominic's not sure it will work without a human servant in the loop, is he?"

Cassandra shook her head. "It has to be tonight."

"If you kill them both and it doesn't cure Sabin, you've destroyed the only real chance he has. Our triumvirate can cure him. You know it can."

"I know no such thing. You would promise me the moon itself if you thought it would save you all."

"That's true, but I still think we can cure him. If you kill Richard and Jean-Claude, the chance is gone. Let us at least try. If it doesn't work, you can sacrifice them tomorrow. I'll let Jean-Claude give me the first mark. We'll either cure Sabin tomorrow or we'll be the perfect sacrifice for Dominic's spell." I willed her to listen to me. To believe me.

"Will Sabin be able to read his part of the spell tomorrow night?" Raina asked. She moved in very close to Cassandra. "Once his brain is rotted away, there will be nothing left to do but lock him in a box with crosses on it. Hide him away."

Cassandra's hands balled into fists. A fine trembling ran through her body. Raw fear showed on her face.

Raina turned to me almost conversationally. "Sabin won't die, you understand. He'll melt down into a little puddle of slime, but he won't die. Will he, Cassandra?"

"No," Cassandra almost shouted. "No, he won't die. He'll just go insane. He'll still have all the powers of the triumvirate, but he'll be mad. We'll have to lock him away and pray that Dominic's spells can hold his power in check. If we can't hold his powers prisoner, the council will force us to burn him alive. Only that would be sure death."

"But if you do that," Raina said, "you and Dominic will die, as well. All those vampire marks dragging you down to hell with him."

"Yes," Cassandra said, "yes." She stared at me, anger and helplessness in her face.

"Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?" I asked.

"No, Anita, you're just supposed to die," she said.

I swallowed hard and tried to think of something useful. It was hard to do with Gabriel lying on top of me, but if I didn't think of something, we were all dead.

Cassandra startled as if someone had touched her. A prickle of energy swept over my body from her, raising goose bumps where it touched. Gabriel ran his fingertips over the skin of my arms, making the gooseflesh stay just a little longer.

"I must go," Cassandra said. "Before the night is over, you may wish you were being sacrificed." She looked from Gabriel to Raina. "A slit throat would be quicker."

I agreed with her, but I wasn't sure what to say. We were discussing different ways to kill me. None of them seemed particularly good choices.

Cassandra stared down at me. "I am sorry."

"If you're really sorry," I said, "untie me and give me a weapon."

She smiled wistfully. "Sabin has ordered me not to."

"You always do what you're told?" I asked.

"On this one thing, yes. If you'd watched Jean-Claude's beauty rot before you, you'd do anything to help him."

"Who're you trying to convince, me or you?"

She swayed slightly, and I felt the roll of power out of her body and along mine. Gabriel licked my arm.

"I must go. The circle will be closed soon." She stared down at me, at Gabriel running his tongue up my arm. "I am truly sorry, Anita."

"If you're looking for forgiveness, pray. God may forgive you; I won't."

Cassandra stared down at me for another heartbeat. "So be it. Good-bye, Anita." She ran in a blur of white, like a fast-forward ghost.

"Good," Raina said, "now we can set up the lights and make some test shots." The lights sprang into a dazzling brightness.

I closed my eyes against the glare.

Gabriel moved up my body, and I opened my eyes. "We were going to strip you naked and tie you spread-eagled, but Cassandra wouldn't let us. But now she's too busy with the spell."

He put a hand on either side of my head, pinning some of my hair. "We did makeup on your face while you were out. We can make the body makeup part of the show. What do you think?"

I tried to think of anything useful. Anything at all. Nothing came to mind. He leaned over me, bringing his face close and closer. He opened his mouth enough to show fangs. Not vampire fangs but small leopard fangs. Richard had told me once that Gabriel spent too much time in animal form so he didn't come completely back anymore. Great.

Gabriel kissed me, lightly, then harder, forcing his tongue in my mouth. He drew back from me. "Bite me." He kissed me, then raised his lips back just enough to whisper, "Bite me."

Pain excited Gabriel. I didn't want him more excited, but with his tongue halfway down my throat, it was hard not to give him what he wanted. He ran his hand over my breasts, squeezing hard enough to make me gasp. "Bite me, and I'll stop."

I bit his lip. I bit him until he pulled back, the flesh straining between us. Blood poured from his mouth to mine. I let go and spit blood into his face. He was close enough that it splattered in a red rain.

He laughed, wiping his fingers on the bloody lip, putting them in his mouth, sucking the blood off of them.

"Do you know how I became a wereleopard?" he asked.

I looked at him.

He slapped me lightly, casually. Starbursts exploded across my vision. "Answer me, Anita."

When I could focus, I asked, "What was the question?"

"Do you know how I became a wereleopard?"

I didn't want to play this game. I didn't want to participate in Gabriel's idea of pillow talk, but I didn't want to be hit again, either. It wouldn't take much for

him to knock me unconscious. If I ever woke up again, I would be in worse shape than I was now. Hard to believe, but true.

"No," I said.

"I've always liked pain, even when I was human. I met Elizabeth. She was a wereleopard. We fucked, but I wanted her to change while we did it. She said she was afraid she'd kill me." He leaned over me. Blood dripped from his lip in slow, heavy drops.

I blinked, turning my face, trying to keep the blood out of my eyes.

"I almost died."

I had turned my head completely to the side, while his blood dropped on the side of my face. "Was the sex worth it?"

He leaned down and began to lick the blood off my face. "Best sex I ever had."

A scream started in my throat. I swallowed it, and it hurt going down. There had to be a way out of this. There had to be.

A man's voice said, "Lie on top of her like you're going to do for the shot, and let's get some light readings."

I realized that there was a crew here. A director, a cameraman, a dozen people scurrying around, not helping me.

Gabriel drew a knife out of his high, black boot. The hilt was black, but the blade had a high silver sheen. I watched that knife, couldn't help myself. I'd been scared before, but not like this. The fear burned at the back of my throat, threatened to spill out in screams. It wasn't the sight of the blade that frightened me. A moment ago I'd have done anything to have him cut the ropes. Now I would have given anything for him not to cut the ropes.

Gabriel put his hand on my stomach and slid one knee between my tied legs. There wasn't a lot of give. I was grateful. He twisted his upper body and reached downward with the knife. I knew what he was going to do before I felt the ropes give at my ankles. He cut my feet loose and collapsed his lower body against me at almost the same time. No time to struggle, no time to take advantage. He'd done this before.

He wiggled his hips against me, spreading my legs wide enough that I could feel him against me through the jeans. I didn't scream, I whimpered and hated it. My face was pressed into his naked chest just above his pierced nipple. His chest hair was coarse, scratchy against my cheek. His body covered me almost completely. They couldn't have seen much more than my hands and my legs from the camera.

I had a very strange idea. "You're too tall," I said.

Gabriel had to raise up a little to look down at my face. "What?"

"The camera will never see anything but your backside. You're too tall."

He crawled backwards, raising himself in a little push-up position. He looked thoughtful. He turned around without getting off of me. "Frank, can you see her at all?"

"Nope."

"Shit," Gabriel said. He stared down at me, then smiled. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back." He slid off me.

With my feet free, I could sit up. My hands were still above my head, but I could huddle against the headboard. It was an immense improvement.

Gabriel, Raina, and two men in scruffy clothes were talking in a huddled group. I caught snatches of the conversation. "Maybe if we hang her from the ceiling?" "We'll have to change the room setup for that."

I had bought some time, but time for what? There was a long table near the room. My weapons were on it, laid in neat lines like props. Everything I needed was right there, but how could I get to it? Raina wasn't going to hand me a knife so I could cut myself loose. No, Raina wouldn't, but maybe Gabriel would.

He walked towards the bed, moving as if he had more muscles, more something, than a human did. He moved like a cat, if a cat could walk on two legs.

He knelt on the bed and started untying the rope from the headboard, but leaving my wrists bound.

"Why not cut the rope?" I asked.

"Frank got pissed that I cut the first one. This is real silk. It's expensive."

"Nice to know that Frank's fiscally responsible."

Gabriel grabbed my face, forcing me to meet his eyes. "We're going to change the room and tie you standing up. I'm going to fuck you until you go with me inside you, then I'm going to change and I'll rip you apart. You may even survive like I survived."

I swallowed and spoke very carefully. "Is that really your fantasy, Gabriel?"

"Yes."

"Not your best fantasy," I said.

"What?"

"Raping me while I'm helpless isn't your idea of hot sex."

He grinned, flashing fangs. "Oh, yes it is."

Don't panic. Don't panic. Don't panic. I leaned into him, and he released my face so I could do it, but he jerked the rope up tight, making sure my hands stayed in sight. He had definitely done this before.

I forced myself to lean into his naked chest, my tied hands pressed against his skin. I leaned my face towards him and whispered, "Don't you want a blade inside you while you do it?" I touched the silver ring in his nipple, pulled on it until the flesh bowed outward and he gave a little gasp.

"Don't you want the feel of silver burning up inside you while you're shoving yourself inside of me?" I went up on my knees so our faces would be closer together. "Don't you want to know I'm trying to kill you while you fuck me? Your blood pouring over my body while you fuck me, isn't that your fantasy?" I whispered the last against his lips.

Gabriel had gone very, very still. I could see the pulse in his throat thudding against the skin. His heart beat fast and hard against my hands. I jerked the ring out of his nipple and he let out a low moan. Blood trickled down his chest. I raised the ring, and he let the rope go so I could move my hands. I raised the bloody ring between our lips, almost as if we'd both kiss it.

"You'll only have one chance to fuck me, Gabriel. One way or another, Rainy will see me dead tonight. You'll never get another chance at me."

The tip of his tongue curled out and caught the ring, licking it from my fingers. He rolled it in his mouth and brought it back out, clean and free of blood. He held it out to me on the tip of his tongue. I picked the ring off and wrapped my fingers around it.

"You just want me to give you a knife," he said.

"I want to shove a silver blade so deep inside you that the hilt bruises your flesh."

He shuddered, breath escaping in a long sigh.

"You'll never find anyone else like me, Gabriel. Play with me, Gabriel, and I'll be the best sex you ever had."

"You'll try and kill me," he said.

I slid my fingers along the top of his leather pants. "Oh, yeah, but have you ever really been in danger of dying since that first time with Elizabeth? Since she shapeshifted underneath you, have you ever feared for your life during sex? Did you ever ride that thin, shining line between pleasure and death again?"

He turned away from me, not meeting my eyes. I touched his face with my bound hands, turned him back to me. "Raina hasn't let you, has she? Just like she won't let you tonight. You're alpha, Gabriel, I can feel it. Don't let her steal this from you. Don't let her steal *me* from you."

Gabriel stared at me, our bodies touching, faces close enough to kiss. "You'll kill me."

"Maybe, or you'll kill me."

"You might survive," he said, "I did."

"Are you still fucking Elizabeth, now that you survived?" I kissed him softly, running my teeth along his skin.

"Elizabeth bores me."

"Would you bore me, Gabriel? If I survive, would you be boring?"

"No," he whispered. I knew I had him, just like that. I either had the beginnings of a brilliant plan, or I'd bought myself some time, some options. It was an improvement. The real question was how much time did Jean-Claude and Richard have? How long until Dominic cut them open? If I couldn't get there in time, I didn't want to get there at all. If they both died, I almost wanted Gabriel to finish me. Almost.

Chapter 43

They kept me tied to the bed, but Gabriel slipped the knives back in the wrist sheaths. He held the big knife that went down along my spine up to the

light. I thought he wouldn't give it back, but in the end, he swept my hair to one side and slipped it into the sheath.

"Don't cut the ropes until I'm in the shot. I want the camera to know why you're scared. Promise not to spoil it."

"Give me a gun and I'll wait until you're on top of me to pull the trigger."

He smiled and waved a finger in my face like you'd scold a child. "Uh, uh, uh. No rough stuff."

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Can't blame a girl for trying."

Gabriel laughed, high and nervous. "No, can't blame you for trying."

We had lights, camera, all we needed was action. Gabriel had wiped the blood off his chest and put the silver ring back into his flesh. We were starting over for the camera. They'd even cleaned the blood off my mouth and freshened the makeup. It was the young woman, Heidi, the lycanthrope that did the makeup. Her eyes were too wide. Her hands shook when she touched me.

She whispered as she dabbed at my face. "Be careful when he kisses you. He ate a girl's tongue out once."

"Can you get me a gun?"

She shivered, eyes rolling white and panicked. She shook her head. "Raina'd kill me."

"Not if she's dead."

Heidi shook her head over and over and backed off the bed.

Most of the rest of the crew walked out. When the director realized they were going to lose too many people to run things, he offered bonuses. Big bonuses, and a few people stayed. The rest left. They didn't do snuff films. They wouldn't watch Gabriel kill me, but they wouldn't stop it, either. Maybe one of them would call the police. It was a nice thought, but I didn't pin any hopes on it.

Power rushed over me in a skin-prickling wave. It tugged at something low and deep in my body. The sensation was gone almost as soon as it came, but a smell lingered over my skin like I'd walked through somebody's ghost. I smelled Richard's aftershave. Richard was trying to tell me something, either on purpose or because he was being driven by fear. Either way, time was running out. I had to save them. I had to. There was no other choice. Saving them meant bringing Gabriel in close enough to kill him. Close to me. A mixed blessing at best.

"Get on with it," I said.

"You are terribly eager for someone who's about to die a truly horrible death," Raina said.

I smiled. I made the smile everything Gabriel wanted it to be, confident, dangerous, sexual. "I don't plan to die."

Gabriel's breath sighed outward. "Let's do it."

Raina shook her head and stepped back out of the shot. "Fuck her, Gabriel, make her cry out your name before you kill her."

"My pleasure," he whispered. He stalked onto the floor of the fake bedroom.

I unsheathed a wrist knife and cut the rope that held me to the headboard. My wrists were still bound. I watched him while I turned the blade to cut between my hands. He could have jumped me then, but he didn't. He glided around the bed while I cut my hands loose.

He ended on his knees beside the bed, staring at me. I backed away from him, knife in my right hand. I was going to get off the damn bed.

Gabriel crawled up on the bed as I crawled off it. He mimicked my movements but made them graceful and painfully slow. He shimmered with contained energy. He wasn't doing a damn thing but crawling across a bed, but the promise of violence and sex rode the air like lightning.

He was faster than me. His reach was almost twice mine. He was certainly stronger than I was. The only thing I really had going for me was the fact that I planned on killing him as quickly as possible, and he planned on raping me first. It meant I was willing to do things he wasn't. At least at first. If it wasn't over quickly, I was sunk.

I dropped to one knee and braced myself, with a blade in each hand. He wanted to come in close. He even wanted to be hurt, so no feinting, no trying each other's skill. I'd make him come to me, and I'd cut him up.

Power curled inside my stomach. It burst over me in a wave of sensations. The smell of the summer woods was so strong it was choking. For a second, I couldn't see the room. I had a glimpse of somewhere else, chaotic bits and pieces like a jigsaw puzzle thrown across the ground. I came away with three thoughts; fear, helplessness, and need.

My vision cleared to Gabriel frowning down at me. "What is wrong with you, Anita? Did Cassandra hit you a little too hard?"

I shook my head and took a shaky breath. "Are you all talk and no bite, Gabriel?"

He smiled, a slow, lazy grin that showed his fangs. He was suddenly there. I slashed out without thinking, pure reaction, no thought. He leaped away, and blood seeped down his stomach in a thin, crimson line.

He rubbed his fingers in the blood slowly, sensuously, then licked them with long, slow tongue movements. Playing for the camera. He crawled onto the bed and wrapped the white sheets around his body, rolling in them until he was tangled. He leaned over backwards, exposing his neck. Almost within reach of me. "Come play, Anita."

It was tempting, and it was meant to be, but I knew better. I'd seen Richard rip sheets earlier like they were paper. "I'm staying here, Gabriel. You're going to have to come to me."

He rolled onto his stomach. "I thought I'd get to chase you. This isn't any fun."

I smiled. "Come closer, and it'll be a lot of fun."

He rose onto his knees. The sheets were smeared with blood as he crawled out of them. Gabriel was just suddenly there, too fast for me to see it. He was by me and past me before I could react.

I fell back on my butt, trying desperately to keep him in sight. But he stood there, just out of reach. A second later, a sharp pain ran through my right arm. I glanced, and found bleeding claw marks on my upper arm.

He raised one hand in front of his face, and claws sprang out from under his fingernails. "Meow," he said.

I tried to swallow my beating heart and couldn't. This meant that even if he didn't kill me, a month from now I might be sprouting fur.

It wasn't a scream that you could hear with your ears. It wasn't a sound. I had no words for it, but I felt Richard scream inside me. His power poured over me, and down that long line I felt Jean-Claude. Something tight and painful held him down. I tried to get to my feet and stumbled.

"What's wrong, Anita? I didn't hurt you that badly."

I shook my head, and got to my feet. He wasn't going to come to me. Richard was growing desperate. I reached outward with that flare of power and I could feel Dominic's spell. He'd been shielding it somehow, but he couldn't hide from me. The spell was growing. The time of sacrifice was coming. I didn't have time for Gabriel to play with me. "Stop playacting, Gabriel, or don't you want me?"

His eyes narrowed. "You're up to something."

"You bet. Now, fuck me, Gabriel, if you've got the balls for it."

I put my back to the wall and hoped it would be enough, and knew it wouldn't be. I threw a thread of power back to Richard, hoping he'd get the hint and not interrupt for the next few minutes. If he distracted me at the wrong time, it would be all over.

Gabriel stalked in front of me, daring me to come out from the wall and get him. I did what he thought I would do. I tried for him and he just wasn't there. It was like trying to cut air.

He slashed out with one hand and sliced the back of my left hand open. I slashed at him with my right hand, trying to hold onto the left-hand knife. He hit the hand again, not with claws but backhanded. My hand spasmed, and the knife went spinning.

His body hit mine full out, slamming me to the floor. I shoved the right-hand knife into his stomach before my back hit the ground. But shoving the knife in meant I took the full force of the fall. It stunned me for a heartbeat. A heartbeat was all he needed.

He ran his hands under my arms, not trying to pin them, but forcing them up away from the knife in his stomach. He pinned me to the floor with his body. I expected him to draw out the blade, but he didn't. He pressed the hilt against my body and pushed. He shoved the blade into him up to the hilt and kept pressing. The hilt bruised against my stomach and he ground it into both of us.

He shuddered over me. He raised his upper body off me, pinning me with his lower body, snuggling it between my legs so I could feel him, hard and firm. He pulled the blade out in a burst of crimson and plunged it downward so fast my arms were only halfway up to protect my face when the blade bit into

the carpet. He drove the blade hilt deep into the plywood floor, so close to my head that it pinned my hair on one side.

He undid the button on my jeans. He wasn't even trying to control my hands, but I only had one knife left. If I lost it, I couldn't kill him. We were about to find out just how good my nerves were.

Richard's power flowed over me again, but it wasn't the same. It was less frantic, more as if he was trying to whisper something to me, offer me something. Then I realized what it was. The first mark. Jean-Claude and Richard, for it was they, couldn't do it now without my permission. I was too powerful to be forced, at least psychically.

Gabriel kept my legs pinned with his hips and grabbed the front of my jeans, fingers pointing outward, away from my body. His claws sprang out through the cloth, and he ripped upward, slicing the cloth nearly to my pubic bone.

I screamed and let Richard do me. Better the monster you know than the monster about to go down your pants. A line of warmth ran through my body. It had been even simpler when Jean-Claude did it on his own, once upon a time. Even knowing what it was, it didn't feel like much.

But I felt better instantly; clearer-headed, more . . . something. Gabriel hesitated on top of me. "What the hell was that?" The skin of his bare arms was prickled with gooseflesh. He'd gotten a taste of the power.

"Didn't feel a thing," I said. I tugged on the knife in the floor, pulling at it. Gabriel ripped my jeans in both hands, and they split down the middle, leaving nothing between him and me but my panties and his leather pants. I was at a bad angle for the knife and it was only halfway out when he slid his hand down my panties.

I screamed. I screamed, "Richard!"

The power flowed over me. With Jean-Claude, I had watched his burning blue eyes enter me. With Richard as focus, there was nothing to see, but smells, the forest, his skin, Jean-Claude's perfume. I could taste them both in my mouth like drinking two strong wines one mouthful after another.

Gabriel's hand froze down the front of my body. He was staring down at me. "What did you just do?" His voice was a whisper.

"Did you think raping me would be easy?" I laughed, and it unnerved him. I saw something close to fear in his storm grey eyes. He'd moved his hand. Not having him down my underwear was too big an improvement for words. I never wanted him to touch me like that again. Never.

I had two choices. I could bluff and hope I could run, or I could reinitiate sex and kill him. The second mark didn't give me that much more power. In fact, it gave the boys more pull on my power than the other way around. So, sex it was.

"What's wrong?" Raina asked out of camera range.

"Gabriel's getting cold feet," I said. I raised up on my elbows. The knife he'd shoved in the floor held my hair pinned, and I kept raising up, tearing a hunk of my hair out. It was a small pain, but I knew it would appeal to Gabriel. It did.

I was sitting up with my legs on either side of his thighs. He picked me up, hands sliding over my undies, cupping my buttocks. He leaned back on his knees, supporting my weight. He watched me, and I saw something slide through his eyes, felt it tremble through his hands. For the first time, he thought I really might kill him, and it turned him on. Fear was the rush.

He kissed the side of my face gently. "Go for the last knife, Anita. Go for it." He leaned into me while he said it, biting gently down my face. I felt the pressure of his fangs down my jawline, onto my neck. He set his teeth into the side of my neck, bearing down, hard and harder, a slow, building pressure. His tongue licked across the skin.

I didn't go for the knife. I ran my hands through his thick hair, pulled it back from his face. His teeth continued to press into my skin. His hands slid inside my underwear, cupping my bare buttocks. I stiffened, then forced myself to relax. This would work. It had to work.

I traced my fingers along his face. His teeth bit in enough to draw the first faint blood. I gasped, and his claws dug into me. I ran my fingers along either side of his face, tracing his cheeks, his eyebrows. He came up for air, eyes wide and unfocused, lips half-parted. I caressed his face and pulled him in for a kiss. I traced his thick eyebrows. As he kissed me, he closed his eyes, and I put my thumbs over his eyelids. His eyelashes fluttered against my skin. I shoved my thumbs into both eyes, digging, trying to shove my thumbs into his brain and out the other side.

Gabriel reared back, shrieking. His claws ripped up my back. I gasped but didn't have time for screaming. I drew the big knife from the back sheath.

Raina screamed instead.

I shoved the blade under Gabriel's ribs. I shoved it into his heart. He tried to fall backwards, but my weight pinned his knees, so his back bowed backwards, but he didn't fall. I shoved the blade through him. I felt the tip of it burst out the other side.

Raina was suddenly there, grabbing me by the hair, flinging me off him. I flew through the air, smashed into the fake wall, and kept going. The wall splintered. I lay on my stomach, relearning how to breathe. My pulse was so loud in my head, I was deaf for a few seconds. My body stopped being numb in stages, and let me know it was scraped and bruised, but nothing was broken. It should have been. Two marks and I was suddenly Anita the human battering ram. When it happened the first time, I hadn't appreciated it. Now I did. I wasn't hurt badly, hurrah, but I still had to get past Raina. Everybody else would fold and run for cover if she were dead. Question was, how to get her there?

I looked up and realized I was right next to the prop table with my guns on it. Were they loaded? If I went for them and they weren't, Raina was going to kill me. Of course, if I just lay here and bled, she'd kill me anyway.

I heard her high heels coming my way. I pushed to my knees, my feet, and went for the table. She still couldn't see me through the partial wall, but she could hear me. She rushed up her side of the wall in those ridiculous high heels.

I grabbed for the Firestar and rolled over the table as I moved. I ended on my back, staring up as she leapt over the table. I hit the safety with my thumb

and pulled the trigger. The gun exploded in my hand and took her in the upper stomach. The bullet seemed to slow her in midmotion, and I had time for another shot, higher up in the chest.

Raina collapsed to her knees, honey brown eyes wide with shock. She reached out one hand, and I scooted backwards, still on my butt and lower back. I watched her eyes go, that light sliding away. She slumped over on her side, her long hair spilling like auburn water across the floor.

The crew had hightailed it. Only Heidi was crouched by the wall, crying, covering her ears as if afraid to leave or stay.

I got to my feet, using the prop table for support. I could see Gabriel's body now. Blood and clear fluid flowed down his face from his eyes. His body still hadn't fallen. It knelt in a strange parody of life, as if he would open his eyes and it would all be pretend.

Edward came in through the covered door. He had a shotgun at his shoulder. Harley followed at his side with a machine gun. He surveyed the room and finally came back to me. "Is Anita in this room?"

"Yes," Edward said.

"I can't recognize her," Harley said.

"Hold your fire. I'll go find her for you." He walked towards me, eyes taking it all in.

"How much of this blood is yours?" he asked.

I shook my head. "How'd you find me?"

"I tried to return your message. Nobody knew where you'd gone. Then nobody knew where Richard had gone, or Jean-Claude, or Raina."

I felt Richard scream through me and I didn't fight it this time, I let the scream come out my mouth. If Edward hadn't caught me, I would have fallen.

"We've got to get to Jean-Claude and Richard. Right now!"

"You can't even walk," he said.

I grabbed his shoulders. "Help me, and I'll run."

Edward didn't argue; he simply nodded and slid one arm around my waist.

Harley handed my knives and the Browning to Edward. I was inches away, but he didn't try to touch me. He looked past me as if I wasn't there. Maybe, for him, I wasn't. I cut the legs of my jeans off, which left me in nothing but underwear and Nikes from the waist down, but I could run now, and we needed to run. I could feel it. I could feel the power growing on the summer night. Dominic was preparing the blade. I could taste it. I prayed as we ran. Prayed that we'd be in time.

Chapter 44

We ran. I ran until I thought my heart would burst, jumping trees and dodging things in the dark only half-felt and not seen at all. Branches and weeds raked my legs in thin scratches. A branch caught my cheek and sent me stumbling. Edward caught me. Harley said, "What is that?"

There was a bright, white glow through the trees. It wasn't fire. "Crosses," I said.

"What?" Harley asked.

"They've hung Jean-Claude with crosses." As the words left my mouth, I knew they were the truth. I ran towards the glow. Edward and Harley followed.

I spilled out to the edge of the clearing with them at my back. I raised the Browning without thinking about it. I had a second to take it all in. Richard and Jean-Claude were bound so thick with chains that they could barely move, let alone escape. A cross had been thrown around Jean-Claude's neck. It glowed like a captive star, resting on the folds of chain. Someone had blindfolded him as if afraid the glow would hurt his eyes. Which was odd, since they meant to kill him. Considerate murderers.

Richard was gagged. He'd managed to work one hand free, and he and Jean-Claude were touching fingertips, straining to retain that touch.

Dominic stood over them in a white ceremonial robe. The hood was thrown back, his arms wide, holding a short sword half the length of my body. He held something dark in his other hand. Something that pulsed and seemed to live. It was a heart. Robert the vampire's heart.

Sabin sat in Marcus's stone chair, dressed as I'd seen him last, hood up, hiding in the shadows. Cassandra was a shining whiteness on the other side of the circle of power, forming the last point of a triangle with her two men. My two men lay bound on the ground.

I pointed the Browning at Dominic and fired. The bullet left the gun. I heard it, I saw it, but it didn't go near Dominic. It didn't seem to go anywhere. I blew my breath out and tried again.

Dominic stared at me. His dark-bearded face was calm, totally unafraid. "You are of the dead, Anita Blake, neither you, nor anything of yours may pass this circle. You have come only to watch them die."

"You've lost, Dominic, why kill them at all, now?"

"We will never find what we need again," the necromancer said.

Sabin spoke, his voice thick, awkward, as if talking was hard. "It must be tonight." He pushed to his feet and shoved the hood back. His flesh was almost completely gone, only straggles of hair and raw, putrefying tissue were left. Dark liquid oozed from his mouth. Maybe he didn't have one more night of sanity. But that wasn't my problem.

"The vampire council has forbidden any of you to fight each other until Brewster's Law is either passed or voted down. They'll kill you for disobeying them." I was half guessing on this, but I'd been around enough masters of the city to know how very seriously they took disobedience. The council was, in fact, the biggest, baddest, master of the city around. They would be less forgiving, not more.

"I will take that chance," Sabin said, every word careful, showing the effort it took to speak.

"Did Cassandra tell you about my offer? If we can't cure you tomorrow, I'll let Jean-Claude mark me. Tonight you only have part of what you need for the spell. You need me, Sabin, one way or another, you need me." I didn't tell them I was already marked. They obviously hadn't felt it. If they knew I was already marked, all I could offer was to die tonight with the boys.

Dominic shook his head. "I have searched Sabin's body, Anita. Tomorrow will be too late. There will be nothing to save." He dropped to his knees beside Richard.

"You don't know that for sure," I said.

He laid the still-beating heart on top of Richard's bare chest.

"Dominic, please!"

It was too late for lies. "I'm marked, Dominic. We're the perfect sacrifice. Open the circle, and I'll come inside."

He looked at me. "If this is true, then you are all far too dangerous to trust. The three of you together without the circle would overwhelm us. You see, Anita, I have been part of a true triumvirate for centuries. You have no dreams of the power you can touch. You and Richard are more powerful than Cassandra and I. You would have been a force to be reckoned with. The council itself might have feared you." He laughed. "They may forgive us for that alone."

He spoke words that curled power over me.

I walked to the edge of the circle and touched it. It was like my skin tried to crawl off my bones. I fell forward and slid down something that couldn't be there. Jean-Claude shrieked. It hurt too much for me to scream. I lay curled by the circle, and even when I breathed, I could taste death, old, rotting death in my mouth.

Edward knelt by me. "What is it?"

"Without your other parts, you do not have the power to force this circle, Anita." Dominic got to his feet, raising the sword two-handed for a downward blow.

Dolph had passed the circle earlier in the room where they had taken Robert's heart. I grabbed Edward's shirt. "You pass the circle. Now. And kill that son of a bitch."

"If you can't, how can I?"

"You're not magic, that's how."

It was one of those rare moments when you understand how great trust can be. Edward knew nothing about the ceremony, yet he didn't argue. He accepted what I said, and simply did it. I wasn't a hundred percent sure it would work, myself, but it had to.

Dominic brought the sword down. I screamed. Edward crossed the circle like it wasn't there. The sword bit into Richard's chest, pinning the beating heart to his body. The pain of the blade drove me to my knees. I felt it enter Richard's body. Then I felt nothing, like a switch had been turned off. Edward's shotgun blast took Dominic in the chest.

Dominic didn't fall. He stared at the hole in his chest and then at Edward. He pulled the sword out of Richard's chest and slid the still-beating heart off it. He faced Edward with the sword in one hand and the heart in the other. Edward fired again, and Cassandra leapt on his back.

Harley crossed the circle then. He grabbed Cassandra around the waist and pulled her off of Edward. They fell, rolling to the ground. A gun sounded, and Cassandra's body jerked, but her dainty fist came up and smashed downward.

Edward fired the shotgun until Dominic's face vanished in a spray of blood and bones, and he fell slowly to his knees. His outstretched hand spilled the heart onto the ground beside Richard's terribly still body.

Sabin levitated upward. "I will have your soul for that, mortal."

I ran my fingers over the circle and it was still there. Edward started to turn the shotgun towards the vampire. The naked heart pulsed and shimmered in the cross's glare.

"The heart, shoot the heart!"

Edward didn't hesitate. He turned and shot the heart, exploding it into so much meat. Sabin hit him a second later and he went flying. He ended up very still on the ground with Sabin on top of him.

I pushed my hand forward. It met empty air. I fired two-handed at Sabin as I walked towards him. I put three shots into his chest, forcing him to his feet, back from Edward.

Sabin raised a hand in front of his skeletal face, almost a pleading gesture. I stared down the barrel of the gun into his one good eye and pulled the trigger. The bullet took him just above the crumbling remains of his nose. It made a nice big exit wound like it was supposed to, spattering blood and brains on the grass. Sabin collapsed backwards onto the grass. I fired two more shots into his skull until it looked like I'd decapitated him.

"Edward?" It was Harley. He was standing over Cassandra's very still, very dead body. His eyes searched wildly for the one person he recognized.

"Harley, it's me, it's Anita."

He shook his head, as if I was a buzzing fly. "Edward, I still see monsters. Edward!" He raised the machine gun at me, and I knew I couldn't let him fire. No, it was more than that, or less. I raised the Browning and fired before I'd had time to think. The first shot sent him to his knees. "Edward!" He squeezed off a round of fire that went inches above the men's heads. I fired another into his chest, and put one through his head before he fell.

I approached him, gun at the ready. If he'd twitched, I'd have shot him again. He didn't twitch. I knew nothing about Harley except he was genuinely crazy and very good with weapons. Now I'd never know because Edward didn't volunteer information. I kicked the machine gun out of Harley's dead hand and went for the others.

Edward was sitting up, rubbing the back of his head. He watched me walk away from Harley's body. "Did you do it?"

I faced him. "Yes."

"I've killed people for less."

"So have I," I said, "but if we're going to fight, can we unchain the boys first? I don't feel Richard anymore." I couldn't say the word *dead* out loud, not yet.

Edward got to his feet, a little shaky, but standing. "We'll fight later."

"Later," I said.

Edward went to sit by his friend. I went to sit by my lover and my other boyfriend.

I holstered the Browning, slipped the cross off Jean-Claude's neck, and threw it spinning into the woods. The darkness was suddenly velvet and intense. I bent to undo his chains and one of the links went spinning by my head.

"Shit," I said.

Jean-Claude sat up, sweeping the chains down his body like a sheet. He slipped off the blindfold last. I was already crawling to Richard. I'd seen the sword pierce his heart. He had to be dead, but I searched for the big pulse in his neck, and I found it. It beat against my hand like a weak thought, and I slumped forward with relief. He was alive. Thank you, God.

Jean-Claude knelt on the other side of Richard's body. "I thought you could not bear his touch, that is what he told me before they gagged him. They were afraid he would call his pack to aid him. I have already called Jason and my vampires. They will be here soon."

"Why can't I feel him in my head?"

"I am blocking it. It is a fearful wound, and I am better practiced at dealing with such things."

I pulled the gag from Richard's mouth. I touched his lips gently. The thought of how I'd refused to kiss him earlier that day bit at me. "He's dying, isn't he?"

Jean-Claude broke Richard's chains, more carefully than his own. I helped him clear them from Richard's limp body. Richard lay on the ground in the bloodstained white T-shirt I'd last seen him in. He was just suddenly Richard again. I couldn't imagine the beast I'd seen. I suddenly didn't care. "I can't lose him, not like this."

"Richard is dying, *ma petite*. I feel his life slipping away."

I stared up at him. "You're still keeping me from feeling it, aren't you?"

"I am protecting you." There was a look on his face that I didn't like.

I touched his arm. His skin was cool to the touch. "Why?"

He turned away.

I jerked him hard, forced him to look at me. "Why?"

"Even with only two marks, Richard can try and drain us both to stay alive. I am preventing that."

"You're protecting us both?" I asked.

"When he dies, I can protect one of us, *ma petite*, but not both."

I stared at him. "You're saying that when he dies, you're both going to die?"

"I fear so."

I shook my head. "No. Not both of you. Not all at once. Dammit, you're not supposed to be able to die."

"I am sorry, *ma petite*."

"No, we can share power just like we did to raise the zombies, the vampires, like we did tonight."

Jean-Claude slumped suddenly downward, one hand on Richard's body. "I will not drag you to the grave with me, *ma petite*. I would rather think of you alive and well."

I dug my fingers into Jean-Claude's arm. I touched Richard's chest. A shuddering breath ran up my arm from him. "I'll be alive, but I won't be well. I'd rather die than lose you both."

He stared at me for a long second. "You do not know what you are asking."

"We are a triumvirate now. We can do this, Jean-Claude. We can do this, but you have to show me how."

"We are powerful beyond my wildest dreams, *ma petite*, but even we cannot cheat death."

"He owes me one."

Jean-Claude flinched as if in pain. "Who owes you?"

"Death."

"*Ma petite* . . ."

"Do it, Jean-Claude, do it. Whatever it is, whatever it takes. Do it, please!"

He slumped on top of Richard, head barely raised. "The third mark. It will either bind us forever, or kill us all."

I offered him my wrist. "No, *ma petite*, if it is to be our only time, come to me." He lay half on Richard's body, arms open for me. I lay in the circle of his arms, and realized when I touched his chest there was no heartbeat. I turned and stared into his face from inches away. "Don't leave me."

His midnight blue eyes filled with fire. He swept my hair to one side and said, "Open for me, *ma petite*, open for us both."

I did, sweeping my mind open, dropping every guard I'd ever had. I fell forward, impossibly forward, down a long, black tunnel towards a burning blue fire. Pain cut the darkness like a white knife, and I heard myself gasp. I felt Jean-Claude's fangs sink into me, his mouth sealing over my flesh, sucking me, drinking me.

A wind swept through the falling darkness, catching me like a net before I touched that blue fire. The wind smelled of growing earth and the musty scent of fur. I felt something else: sorrow. Richard's sorrow. His mourning. Not of his death, but of my loss. Dead or alive, he'd lost me, and among his many faults was a loyalty that went beyond reason. Once in love, he was a man to stay there, regardless of what the woman did. A knight errant in every sense of the word. He was a fool, and I loved him for it. Jean-Claude I loved in spite of himself. Richard I loved because of who he was.

I wouldn't lose him. I wrapped his essence like winding myself in a sheet, except that I had no body. I held him in my mind, my body, and let him feel the love, my sorrow, regret. Jean-Claude was there, too. I half-expected him to

protest, to sabotage it, but he didn't. That blue fire spilled upward through the tunnel to meet us, and the world exploded into shapes and images that were too confusing. Bits and pieces of memory, sensations, thoughts, like three separate jigsaw puzzles shaken and tossed into the air, and every piece that touched formed a picture.

I padded through the forest on four feet. The smells alone were intoxicating. I sank fangs into a dainty wrist, and it wasn't mine. I watched the pulse underneath a woman's neck and thought of blood, warm flesh, and far-off and distant sex. The memories came fast, then faster, flowing like some sort of carnival ride. Blackness gained on the images, like ink filling water. When the darkness ate everything, I floated for an impossible second, then went out like a candle flame. Nothing.

I didn't even have time to be scared.

Chapter 45

I woke in a pastel pink hospital room. A nurse in a matching pink smock smiled down at me. Fear pumped like fine champagne. Where was Richard? Where was Jean-Claude? What I finally managed to ask, was, "How did I get here?"

"Your friend brought you." She motioned with her head.

Edward sat in a chair by the far wall, leafing through a magazine. He looked up and our eyes met. His face gave away nothing.

"Edward?"

"My friends call me Ted, Anita, you know that." He had that good of boy smile that could only mean he was pretending to be Ted Forrester. It was his only legal identity that I'd ever met. Even the cops thought he was this Ted person. "Nurse, can we have a few minutes alone?"

The nurse smiled, looked curiously from one to the other of us, and left, still smiling.

I tried to grab Edward's hand and found my left hand was taped to a board and stuck with an IV. I grabbed at him with my right hand, and he held it. "Are they alive?"

He smiled, a mere twitch of lips. "Yes."

A relief like I'd never known flowed through my body. I collapsed back against the bed, weak. "What happened?"

"You came in suffering from lycanthrope scratches and a very nasty vampire bite. He almost drained you dry, Anita."

"Maybe that's what it took to save us."

"Maybe," Edward said. He sat on the edge of the bed. His jacket gaped enough to flash his shoulder holster and gun. He caught me looking. "The

police agree that the monsters might hold a grudge. There's even a cop outside your door."

We weren't holding hands now. He stared down at me and something very cold passed over his face. "Did you have to kill Harley?"

I started to say yes, but I stopped myself. I replayed it in my mind. Finally. I looked up at him. "I don't know, Edward. When you were knocked out, he couldn't see you anymore. I tried to talk to him, but he couldn't hear me. He started to raise the machine gun." I met Edward's empty blue eyes. "I shot him. You saw the body. I even put one through his head. A coupe de grace."

"I know." His face, his voice gave nothing away. It was like watching a mannequin talk, except that this mannequin was armed and I wasn't.

"It never occurred to me not to shoot, Edward. I didn't even hesitate."

Edward took a deep breath through his nose and let it out through his mouth. "I knew that's what had happened. If you'd lied to me, I'd have killed you." He walked away to stand at the foot of the bed.

"While I'm unarmed?" I tried to make light of it, but it didn't work.

"Check your pillow."

I slid my hand under and came up with the Firestar. I held it in my lap, laying it on my sheet-covered legs. "What now?"

"You owe me a life."

I looked up at that. "I saved your life last night."

"Our lives don't count, we'd back each other up, no matter what."

"I don't know what you're talking about then."

"Occasionally I'll need help, like Harley. Next time I need help, I'll call you."

I wanted to argue because I wasn't entirely sure what mess Edward would drag me into, but I didn't. Looking into his empty eyes, holding the gun he'd put under my pillow, I knew he'd do it. If I refused his bargain, his trade as it were, he'd pull down on me, and we'd find out once and for all who was better.

I stared down at the gun in my hands. "I've already got the gun out; all I have to do is point."

"You're injured. You need the edge." His hand hovered near the butt of his gun.

I laid the gun on the sheets beside me, and looked at him. I lay back on the pillows. "I don't want to do this, Edward."

"Then, when I call, you'll come?"

I thought about it for another brief second, then said, "Yeah, I'll come."

He smiled, his Ted (good ol' boy) Forrester smile. "I'll never find out how good you really are until you draw down on me."

"We can live with that," I said. "By the way, why the invitation to come monster hunting now? And don't tell me it's about Harley."

"You killed him, Anita. You killed him without thinking about it. Even now, there's no regret in you, no doubt."

He was right. I didn't feel bad about it. Scary, but true. "So you invited me to come play because I'm now as much of a sociopath as you are."

"Oh, I'm a much better sociopath," he said. "I'd never let a vampire sink his fangs into my neck. And I wouldn't date the terminally furry."

"Do you date anyone, ever?"

He just smiled that irritating smile that meant he wasn't going to answer. But he did. "Even Death has needs."

Edward dating? That was something I had to see.

Chapter 46

I got out of the hospital with no permanent scars. That was a switch. Richard had touched the wounds Gabriel gave me, his face very serious. No one had to say it out loud. In a month, we'd know. The doctors offered to put me in one of the shapeshifter halfway houses (read prisons) for the first-time furry. It has to be voluntary, but once you sign yourself in, it's almost impossible to sign yourself out. I told them I'd take care of it myself. They scolded me, and I told them to go to hell.

I spent the night of my first full moon with Richard and the pack, waiting to see if I was going to join the killing dance. I didn't. Either I'd gotten incredibly lucky or just as a vampire can't catch lycanthropy, neither could I. Richard wouldn't have much to do with me after that. I can't blame him.

I still love him. I think he still loves me. I love Jean-Claude, too. But it's not the same kind of love. I can't explain it, but I miss Richard. For brief moments in Jean-Claude's arms, I forget. But I miss Richard.

The fact that we are both bound to Jean-Claude doesn't help. Richard has accidentally invaded my dreams twice. Having him that close to me is too painful for words. Richard fought it, but he finally agreed to let Jean-Claude teach him enough control so that he doesn't leak all over both of us. He talks to Jean-Claude more than he talks to me.

The triumvirate is useless. Richard is too angry at me. Too full of self-loathing. I don't know how he's doing with the pack. He's forbidden anyone to speak of pack business with me, but he hasn't chosen a new alpha female.

Willie McCoy and the rest of the vampires I accidentally raised seem fine. Big relief there. Monica's baby is due in August. Her amnio came back clean. No Vlad syndrome. She seems to think I'm her friend now. I'm not, but I help out sometimes. Jean-Claude is playing the good master and taking care of her and the baby. Monica keeps talking about me babysitting. I hope she's kidding. Auntie Anita, she calls me. Gag me with a spoon. Funnier still, is Uncle Jean-Claude.

My dad saw me on television in Jean-Claude's arms. He called and left a very worried message on my answering machine. My family are devout Catholics. There is no such thing as a good vampire to them.

Maybe they're right. I don't know. Can I still be the scourge of vampire kind when I'm sleeping with the head bloodsucker?
You bet.

Burnt Offerings

by

Laurell K. Hamilton

Book 7 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Chapter 1

Most people don't stare at the scars. They'll look, of course, then do the eye slide. You know, the quick look, then drop the gaze, then just have to have that second look. But they make it quick. The wounds aren't like freak show bad, but they are interesting. Captain Pete McKinnon, firefighter and arson investigator, sat across from me, big hands wrapped around a glass of iced tea that our secretary, Mary, had brought in for him. He was staring at my arms. Not the place most men look. But it wasn't sexual. He was staring at the scars and didn't seem a bit embarrassed about it.

My right arm had been sliced open twice by a knife. One scar was white and old. The second was still pink and new. My left arm was worse. A mound of white scar tissue sat at the bend of my arm. I'd have to lift weights for the rest of my life or the scars would stiffen and I'd lose mobility in the arm, or so my physical therapist had said. There was a cross-shaped burn mark, a little crooked now because of the ragged claw marks that a shapeshifted witch had given me. There were one or two other scars hidden under my blouse, but the arm really is the worst.

Bert, my boss, had requested that I wear my suit jacket or long-sleeved blouses in the office. He said that some clients had expressed reservations about my ah . . . occupationally acquired wounds. I hadn't worn a long-sleeved

blouse since he made the request. He'd turned the air conditioner up a little colder every day. It was so cold today I had goose bumps. Everyone else was bringing sweaters to work. I was shopping for midriff tops to show off my back scars.

McKinnon had been recommended to me by Sergeant Rudolph Storr, cop and friend. They'd played football in college together, and been friends ever since. Dolph didn't use the word "friend" lightly, so I knew they were close.

"What happened to your arm?" McKinnon asked finally.

"I'm a legal vampire executioner. Sometimes they get pesky." I took a sip of coffee.

"Pesky," he said and smiled.

He sat his glass on the desk and slipped off his suit jacket. He was nearly as wide through the shoulders as I was tall. He was a few inches short of Dolph's six foot eight, but he didn't miss it by much. He was only in his forties, but his hair was completely grey with a little white starting at the temples. It didn't make him look distinguished. It made him look tired.

He had me beat on scars. Burn scars crawled up his arms from his hands to disappear under the short sleeves of his white dress shirt. The skin was mottled pinkish, white, and a strange shade of tan like the skin of some animal that should shed regularly.

"That must have hurt," I said.

"It did." He sat there meeting my eyes with a long steady look. "You saw the inside of a hospital on some of that."

"Yeah." I pushed the sleeve up on my left arm and showed the shiny place where a bullet had grazed me. His eyes widened just a bit. "Now that we've proven we're big tough he-men, can you just cut to the chase? Why are you here, Captain McKinnon?"

He smiled and draped his jacket over the back of his chair. He took the tea off my desk and sipped it. "Dolph said you wouldn't like being sized up."

"I don't like passing inspections."

"How do you know you passed?"

It was my turn to smile. "Women's intuition. Now, what do you want?"

"Do you know what the term firebug means?"

"An arsonist," I said.

He looked expectantly at me.

"A pyrokinetic, someone who can call fire psychically."

He nodded. "You ever seen a real pyro?"

"I saw films of Ophelia Ryan," I said.

"The old black-and-white ones?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"She's dead now, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"Burned to death in her bed, spontaneous combustion. A lot of the firebugs go up that way, as if when they're old they lose control of it. You ever see one of them in person?"

"Nope."

"Where'd you see the films?"

"Two semesters of Psychic Studies. We had a lot of psychics come in and talk to us, demonstrate their abilities, but pyrokinetics is such a rare ability, I don't think the prof could find one."

He nodded and drained the rest of his tea in one long swallow. "I met Ophelia Ryan once before she died. Nice lady." He started to turn the ice-filled glass round and round in his large hands. He stared at the glass and not at me while he talked. "I met one other firebug. He was young, in his twenties. He'd started by setting empty houses on fire, like a lot of pyromaniacs. Then he did buildings with people in them, but everybody got out. Then he did a tenement, a real firetrap. He set every exit on fire. Killed over sixty people, mostly women and children."

McKinnon stared up at me. The look in his eyes was haunted. "It's still the largest body count I've ever seen at a fire. He did an office building the same way, but missed a couple of exits. Twenty-three dead."

"How'd you catch him?"

"He started writing to the papers and the television. He wanted credit for the deaths. He set fire to a couple of cops before we got him. We were wearing those big silver suits that they wear to oil rig fires. He couldn't get them to burn. We took him down to the police station, and that was the mistake. He set it on fire."

"Where else could you have taken him?" I asked.

He shrugged massive shoulders. "I don't know, somewhere else. I was still in the suit, and I held onto him. Told him we'd burn up together if he didn't stop it. He laughed and set himself on fire." McKinnon sat his glass very carefully on the edge of the desk.

"The flames were this soft blue color almost like a gas fire, but paler. Didn't burn him, but somehow it set my suit on fire. The damn thing is rated for something like 6,000 degrees, and it started to melt. Human skin burns at 120 degrees, but somehow I didn't melt into a puddle, just the suit. I had to strip it off while he laughed. He walked out the door and he didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to grab him."

I didn't say the obvious. I let him talk.

"I tackled him in the hallway and slammed him into a wall a couple of times. Funny thing, where my skin touched him, it didn't burn. It was like the fire crawled over a space and started on my arms, so my hands are fine."

I nodded. "There's a theory that a pyro's aura keeps them from burning. When you touched his skin, you were too close to his own aura, his own protection, to burn."

He stared at me. "Maybe that is what happened, because I threw him hard up against the wall over and over. He was screaming, 'I'll burn you. I'll burn you alive.' Then the fire changed color to yellow, normal, and he started to burn. I let him go and went for the fire extinguisher. We couldn't put the fire on his body out. The extinguishers worked on the walls, everything else, but it wouldn't work on him. It was as if the fire was crawling out of his body from

deep inside. We'd dampen some of the flames, but there was just more of it until he was made of fire."

McKinnon's eyes were distant and horror-filled as if he was still seeing it. "He didn't die, Ms. Blake, not like he should have. He screamed for so long and we couldn't help him. Couldn't help him." His voice trailed off. He just sat there staring at nothing.

I waited and finally said, gently, "Why are you here, Captain?"

He blinked and sort of shook himself. "I think we've got another firebug on our hands, Ms. Blake. Dolph said that if anyone could help us cut the loss of life, it was you."

"Psychic ability isn't technically preternatural. It's just talent like throwing a great curve ball."

He shook his head. "What I saw die on the floor of the station that day wasn't human. It couldn't have been human. Dolph says you're the monster expert. Help me catch this monster before he kills."

"He or she hasn't killed yet? It's just property damage?" I asked.

He nodded. "I could lose my job for coming to you. I should have bucked this up the line and gotten permission from the chain of command, but we've only lost a couple of buildings. I want to keep it that way."

I took in a slow breath and let it out. "I'll be happy to help, Captain, but I honestly don't know what I can do for you."

He pulled out a thick file folder. "Here's everything we've got. Look it over and call me tonight."

I took the folder from him and sat it in the middle of my desk blotter.

"My number's in the file. Call me. Maybe it's not a firebug. Maybe it's something else. But whatever it is, Ms. Blake, it can bathe in flames and not burn. It can walk through a building and shed fire like sprinkling water. No accelerant, Ms. Blake, but the houses have gone up as if they've been soaked in something. When we get the wood in the lab, it's clean. It's like whatever is doing this can force the fire to do things it shouldn't do."

He glanced at his watch. "I'm running late. I'm working on getting you on this officially, but I'm afraid they'll wait until people are dead. I don't want to wait."

"I'll call you tonight, but it may be late. How late is too late to call?"

"Any time, Ms. Blake, any time."

I nodded and stood. I offered my hand. He shook it. His grip was firm, solid, but not too tight. A lot of male clients that wanted to know about the scars squeezed my hand like they wanted me to cry "uncle." But McKinnon was secure. He had his own scars.

I'd barely sat back down when the phone rang. "What is it, Mary?"

"It's me," Larry said. "Mary didn't think you'd mind her putting me straight through." Larry Kirkland, vampire executioner trainee, was supposed to be over at the morgue staking vampires.

"Nope. What's up?"

"I need a ride home." There was just the slightest hesitation to his voice.

"What's wrong?"

He laughed. "I should know better than to be coy with you. I'm all stitched up. The doc says I'll be fine."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Come pick me up and I'll tell all." Then the little son of a gun hung up on me.

There was only one reason for him to not want to talk to me. He'd done something stupid and gotten hurt. Two bodies to stake. Two bodies that wouldn't have risen for at least another night. What could have gone wrong? As the old saying goes, only one way to find out.

Mary rescheduled my appointments. I got my shoulder holster complete with Browning Hi-Power out of the top desk drawer and slipped it on. Since I'd stopped wearing my suit jacket in the office, I'd put the gun in the drawer, but outside the office and always after dark I wore a gun. Most of the creatures that had scarred me up were dead. The majority I'd done personally. Silver-plated bullets are a wonderful thing.

Chapter 2

Larry sat very carefully in the passenger seat of my Jeep. It's hard to sit in a car when your back has fresh stitches in it. I'd seen the wound. It was one sharp puncture and one long, bloody scrape. Two wounds, really. He was still wearing the blue T-shirt he'd started in, but the back of it was bloody and ragged. I was impressed he'd kept the nurses from cutting it off of him. They had a tendency to cut off clothing that stood in their way.

Larry strained against the seat belt, trying to find a comfortable position. His short red hair had been freshly cut, tight enough to his head that you almost didn't notice the curls. He was five foot four, an inch taller than me. He'd graduated with a degree in preternatural biology this May. But with the freckles and that little pain wrinkle between his clear blue eyes, he looked closer to sixteen than twenty-one.

I'd been so busy watching him squirm that I'd missed the turnoff to I-270. We were stuck on Ballas until we got to Olive. It was just before lunch, and Olive would be packed with people trying to shove food in their mouths and rush back to work.

"Did you take your pain pill?" I asked.

He tried to sit very still, one arm braced on the edge of the seat. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because stuff like that knocks me out. I don't want to sleep."

"A drugged sleep isn't the same thing as regular sleep," I said.

"No, the dreams are worse," he said.

He had me there. "What happened, Larry?"

"I'm amazed you've waited this long to ask."

"So am I, but I didn't want to ask in front of the doctor. If you start asking questions of the patient, the docs tend to wander off and treat somebody else. I wanted to know from the doctor who stitched you up just how serious it was."

"Just a few stitches," he said.

"Twenty," I said.

"Eighteen," he said.

"I was rounding up."

"Trust me," he said. "You don't need to round up." He grimaced as he said it. "Why does this hurt so much?" he asked.

It might have been a rhetorical question, but I answered it anyway. "Every time you move an arm or a leg you use muscles in your back. Moving your head and muscles in your shoulders makes muscles in your back move. You never appreciate your back until it goes out on you."

"Great," he said.

"Enough stalling, Larry. Tell me what happened." We were stopped behind a long line of traffic leading up to the light on Olive. We were stuck between two small strip malls. The one on our left had fountains and V. J.'s Tea and Spice, where I got all my coffee. To our right was Streetside Records and a Chinese buffet. If you came up Ballas at lunch time, you always had plenty of time to study the shops on either side.

He smiled, then grimaced. "I had two bodies to stake. Both vamp victims that didn't want to rise as vampires."

"They had dying wills, I remember. You've been doing most of those lately."

He nodded, then froze in mid-gesture. "Even nodding my head hurts."

"It'll hurt more tomorrow."

"Gee, thanks, boss. I needed to know that."

I shrugged. "Lying to you won't make it hurt less."

"Anybody ever tell you your bedside manner sucks?"

"Lots of people."

He made a small *hmpf* sound. "That I believe. Anyway, I'd finished the bodies and was packing up. A woman rolled in another body. Said it was a vamp with no court order attached."

I glanced at him, frowning. "You didn't do a body without paperwork, did you?"

He frowned back. "Of course not. I told them, no court order, no dead vampire. Staking a vamp without a court order is murder, and I'm not going to be up on charges because someone screwed the paperwork. I told them both that in no uncertain terms."

"Them?" I asked. I eased up the line of traffic, a little closer to the light.

"The other morgue attendant had come back in. They went out in search of the misplaced paperwork. I was left with the vampire. It was morning. He wasn't going anywhere." He tried to look away and not meet my eyes, but it hurt. He ended up staring at me, angry.

"I went out for a cigarette."

I looked at him and had to slam on the brakes when the traffic just stopped. Larry was flung into the seat belt. He groaned, and when he was finished writhing on the seat, he said, "You did that on purpose."

"No, I didn't, but maybe I should have. You left a vampire body alone. A vampire that might have had enough kills to deserve a court order of execution, alone in the morgue."

"It wasn't just the cigarette, Anita. The body was just lying there on the gurney. It wasn't chained or strapped. There were no crosses anywhere. I've done executions. They plaster the vamps with silver chains and crosses until it's hard to find the heart. It just didn't look right. I wanted to talk to the medical examiner. She has to approve all vampires before execution, or somebody does. Besides the ME smokes. I figured we could have one together in her office."

"And," I said.

"She wasn't in, and I went back to the morgue. When I got there, the woman attendant was trying to pound a stake through the vamp's chest."

It was lucky we were at a dead stop in traffic. If we'd been moving, I'd have plowed into someone. I stared at him. "You left your vampire kit unattended."

He managed to look embarrassed and angry at the same time. "My kit doesn't include shotguns like yours does, so I figured, who would bother it."

"A lot of people will steal things out of the bag for souvenirs, Larry." Traffic started to creep forward and I had to watch the road instead of his face.

"Fine, fine, I was wrong. I know I was wrong. I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her off the vampire." His eyes slid downward, not looking at me. This was the part that bothered him, or the part he thought would bother me. "I turned my back on her to check the vampire. To make sure she hadn't hurt him."

"She did your back," I said. We inched forward. We were now trapped between Dairy Queen and Kentucky Fried Chicken on one side, and an Infiniti car dealership and a gas station on the other. The scenery was not improving.

"Yeah, yeah. She must have thought I was down for the count because she left me and went back to the vampire. I disarmed her, but she was still trying to get to the vampire when the other attendant came in. It took both of us to pin her. She was crazy, manic."

"Why didn't you draw your gun, Larry?" His gun was sitting in his vampire kit because a shoulder holster and his back wound did not mix. But he went armed. I'd taken him out to the shooting range, and out on vampire hunts until I trusted him not to shoot his foot off.

"If I'd drawn my gun, I might have shot her."

"That's sort of the point, Larry."

"It's exactly the point," he said. "I didn't want to shoot her."

"She could have killed you, Larry."

"I know."

I gripped the steering wheel tight enough to mottle my skin, white and pink. I let out a long breath and tried not to yell. "You obviously don't know, or you would have been more careful."

"I'm alive, and she's not dead. The vampire didn't even get a scratch. It worked out all right."

I pulled out onto Olive and started creeping towards 270. We needed to head north towards St. Charles. Larry had an apartment over there. It was about a twenty-minute drive, give or take. His apartment looked out over a lake where geese nested in the spring and congregated in the winter. Richard Zeeman, junior high science teacher, alpha werewolf, and at that time, my boyfriend, had helped him move in. Richard had really liked the geese nesting just under the balcony. So had I.

"Larry, you are going to have to get over this squeamishness or you're going to get killed."

"I'll keep doing what I think is right, Anita. Nothing you can say will change my mind."

"Dammit, Larry. I don't want to have to bury you."

"What would you have done? Shot her?"

"I wouldn't have turned my back on her, Larry. I could have probably disarmed her or kept her busy until the other attendant arrived. I wouldn't have had to shoot her."

"I let things get out of control," he said.

"Your priorities were screwed. You should have neutralized the threat before you checked on the victim. Alive, you could help the vamp. Dead, you're just another victim."

"Well, at least I've got a scar you don't have."

I shook my head. "You'll have to try harder if you want a scar I don't have."

"You let a human shove one of your own stakes into your back?"

"Two humans with multiple bites, what I used to call human servants, before I knew what the term really meant. I had one pinned and was stabbing him. The woman came at my back."

"So yours wasn't a mistake," he said.

I shrugged. "I could have shot them when I first saw them, but I didn't kill humans as easily back then. I learned my lesson. Just because it doesn't have fangs doesn't mean it can't kill you."

"You used to be squeamish about shooting human servants?" Larry asked.

I turned onto 270. "No one's perfect. Why did the woman have a hard-on to kill the vampire?"

He grinned. "You're going to love this one. She's a member of Humans First. The vampire was a doctor in the hospital. He'd tucked himself into a linen closet. It was where he always slept the day away if he'd had to stay too late in the hospital to drive home. She just popped him on a gurney and wheeled him down to the morgue."

"I'm surprised she didn't just push him out into the sunlight. The last sunlight of the day works as well as noonday."

"The linen closet he used was on the basement floor just in case someone opened the door at the wrong time of day. No windows. She was afraid

someone would see her before she could get him up in the elevator and outside."

"She really thought you would just stake him?"

"I guess so. I don't know, Anita. She was crazy, really crazy. She spit at the vampire and us. Said we'd all rot in hell. That we had to cleanse the world of the monsters. The monsters were going to enslave us all." Larry shivered, then frowned. "I thought Humans Against Vampires was bad enough, but this splinter group, Humans First, is genuinely scary."

"HAV tries to work within the law," I said. "Humans First doesn't even pretend to care. They claimed they staked that vampire mayor in Michigan."

"Claimed? You don't believe them?"

"I think someone near and dear to his household did it."

"Why?"

"The cops sent me a description and some photos of the security precautions he'd taken. Humans First may be radical, but they don't seem very well organized yet. You'd have had to plan and be very lucky to get to that vampire during the day. He was like a lot of the old ones, very serious about his daytime safety. I think whoever did it is happy to let the right-wing radicals take the blame."

"You tell the police what you think?"

"Sure. That's why they asked."

"I'm surprised they didn't have you come down and see it in person."

I shrugged. "I can't go personally to every preternatural crime. Besides, I'm technically a civilian. Cops are sort of leery about involving civilians in their cases, but more importantly, the media would be all over it. The Executioner Solves Vampire Murder."

Larry grinned. "That's a mild headline for you."

"Unfortunately," I said. "Also, I think the killer is a human. I think it's just someone he was close to. It's like any well-planned murder except for the victim being a vampire."

"Only you would make a locked-room vampire murder sound ordinary," Larry said.

I had to smile. "I guess so." My beeper went off, and I jumped. I pulled the damn thing off my skirt and held it where I could see the number. I frowned at it.

"What's wrong? Is it the police?"

"No. I don't recognize the number."

"You don't give out your beeper number to strangers."

"I'm aware of that."

"Hey, don't get grumpy at me."

I sighed. "Sorry." Larry was slowly wearing me down on my aggression threshold. He was, by sheer repetition, teaching me to be nicer. Anybody else and I would have fed them their head in a basket. But Larry managed to push my buttons just right. He could caution me to be nicer and I didn't slug him. The basis of many a successful relationship.

We were only minutes from Larry's apartment. I'd tuck him into bed and answer the call. If it wasn't the police or a zombie-raising, I was going to be pissed. I hated being beeped when it wasn't important. That's what beepers are for, right? If it wasn't important stuff, I was going to rain all over somebody's parade. With Larry asleep, I could be as nasty as I wanted to be. It was almost a relief.

Chapter 3

When Larry was safely tucked in bed with his Demorol, so deeply asleep that nothing short of an earthquake would have woken him, I made my phone call. I still didn't have the faintest idea who it was, which bothered me. It wasn't just inconvenient, it was unnerving. Who was giving out my private numbers and why?

The phone didn't even finish a ring before it was picked up. The voice on the other end was male, soft, and panicked. "Hello, hello."

All my irritation vanished in a wash of something very close to fear. "Stephen, what's wrong?"

I heard him swallow on his end of the phone. "Thank God."

"What's happened?" I made my voice very clear, very calm, because I wanted to yell at him, to force him to tell me what the hell was going on.

"Can you come down to St. Louis University Hospital?"

That got my attention. "How bad are you hurt?"

"It's not me."

My heart slid up into my throat, and my voice came out squeezed and tight. "Jean-Claude." The moment I said it, I knew it was silly. It was just after noon. If Jean-Claude had needed a doctor, they would have had to come to him. Vampires did not travel well in broad daylight. Why was I so worried about a vampire? I happened to be dating him. My family, devout Catholics, are simply thrilled. Since I'm still a little embarrassed about it, it's hard to defend myself.

"It's not Jean-Claude. It's Nathaniel."

"Who?"

Stephen's breath went out in a long-suffering sigh. "He was one of Gabriel's people."

Which was another way of saying he was a wereleopard. Gabriel had been the leopards' leader, their alpha, until I killed him. Why had I killed him? Most of the wounds he'd given me had healed. It was one of the benefits of the vampire marks. I didn't scar quite so easily anymore. But there was a curl of scars high up on my buttocks and lower back, faint, almost dainty, but I would always have a little reminder of Gabriel. A reminder that his fantasy had been to rape me, to make me cry out his name, then kill me. Though knowing

Gabriel, he probably hadn't been so picky on when I died, after, or during—either would have worked for him. As long as I was still warm. Most lycanthropes aren't into carrion.

I sounded casual about it, even in my own head. But my fingers traced along my back as if I could feel the scars through my skirt. Had to be casual about it. Had to be. Or you start screaming, and you don't stop.

"The hospital doesn't know Nathaniel's a shapeshifter, do they?" I said.

He lowered his voice. "They know. He's healing too fast for them not to know."

"So why whisper?"

"Because I'm out in the waiting room on a pay phone." There was a sound on the other end like he'd had to take the receiver away from his mouth. He muttered, "I'll be off in just a minute." He came back on. "I need you to come down, Anita."

"Why?"

"Please."

"You're a werewolf, Stephen. What are you doing babysitting one of the kitty-cats?"

"I'm one of the names in his wallet in case of emergencies. Nathaniel works at Guilty Pleasures."

"He's a stripper?" I made it a question because he could have been a waiter, but it wasn't likely. Jean-Claude owned Guilty Pleasures, and he would never have wasted a shapeshifter off-stage. They were too damned exotic.

"Yes."

"The two of you need a ride?" It was my day for it, I guess.

"Yes, and no."

There was something in his voice that I didn't like. An unease, a tension. It wasn't like Stephen to be cagey. He didn't play games. He just talked. "How did Nathaniel get hurt?" Maybe if I asked better questions, I'd get better answers.

"A customer got too rough."

"At the club?"

"No. Anita, please, there's no time. Come down and make sure he doesn't go home with Zane."

"Who the hell is Zane?"

"Another of Gabriel's people. He's been pimping them out since Gabriel died. But he's not protecting them like Gabriel did. He isn't alpha."

"Pimping them out? What are you talking about?"

Stephen's voice rose high and far too cheerful. "Hello, Zane. Have you seen Nathaniel yet?"

I couldn't really hear the answer, just the buzz of all the people in the waiting room. "I don't think they want him to go just yet. He's hurt," Stephen said.

Zane must have stepped very close to the phone, very close to Stephen. A low, growling voice came through the wire. "He'll go home when I say he goes home."

Stephen's voice held an edge of panic. "I don't think the doctors will like that."

"I don't give a shit. Who are you talking to?"

For his voice to be that clear he had to have Stephen pinned against the wall. Threatening him, without saying anything specific.

The growling voice was suddenly very clear. He'd taken the phone from Stephen. "Who is this?"

"Anita Blake, and you must be Zane."

He laughed, and it sounded too low, as if his throat were sore. "The wolves' human lupa. Oh, I'm so scared."

Lupa was the word the werewolves used for their leader's mate. I was the first human so honored. I wasn't even dating their Ulfric anymore. We'd broken up after I saw him eat somebody. Hey, a girl's got to have some standards.

"Gabriel wasn't scared of me either. Look where it got him," I said.

Zane was quiet for a handful of heartbeats. He breathed over the phone like a dog panted, heavy, but not like he was doing it on purpose, more like he couldn't help it. "Nathaniel is mine. Keep off of him."

"Stephen isn't one of yours," I said.

"Does he belong to you?" I could hear cloth moving. A sense of movement on the other end of the phone that I didn't like. "He is sooo pretty. Have you tasted these soft lips? Has this long yellow hair swept over your pillow?"

I knew without seeing it that he was touching Stephen, caressing him to match the words. "Don't touch him, Zane."

"Too late."

I gripped the phone tight and forced my voice calm, even. "Stephen's under my protection, Zane. Do you understand me?"

"What would you do to keep your pet wolf safe, Anita?"

"You don't want to push that button, Zane. You really don't."

He lowered his voice to an almost painful whisper. "Would you kill me to keep him safe?"

I usually have to meet someone at least once before threatening to kill them, but I was about to make an exception. "Yeah."

He laughed, low and nervous. "I see why Gabriel liked you. So tough, so sure of yourself. Sooo dangerous."

"You sound like a bad imitation of Gabriel."

He made a sound that was somewhere between a hiss and a *bah*. "Stephen shouldn't have interfered."

"Nathaniel's his friend."

"I am all the friend he needs."

"I don't think so."

"I am taking Nathaniel with me, Anita. If Stephen tries to stop me, I'll hurt him."

"You hurt Stephen, I hurt you."

"So be it." He hung up.

Shit. I ran for my Jeep. I was thirty minutes away, twenty if I pushed it a lot. Twenty minutes. Stephen wasn't dominant. He was a victim. But he was also loyal. If he thought Nathaniel shouldn't go with Zane, he'd try and keep him. He wouldn't fight for him, but he might throw his body in front of the car. I had no doubts at all that Zane would drive right over him. Best case scenario. Worst case scenario was Zane would take both Stephen and Nathaniel. If Zane acted as much like Gabriel as he talked, I'd rather have taken my chances with the car.

Chapter 4

My second emergency room in less than two hours. It was a red-letter day even for me. Good news was that none of the injuries were mine. Bad news was that that might change. Alpha or not, Zane was a shapeshifter. They were able to bench-press medium-size elephants. I was not going to arm-wrestle him. Not only would I lose, but he'd probably pull the arm out of my socket and eat it. Most lycanthropes liked to try and pass for human. I wasn't sure Zane sweated little details like that.

Yet I didn't want to kill Zane if I didn't have to. It wasn't mercy. It was the thought that he might force me to do it in public. I didn't want to go to jail. The fact that the punishment worried me more than the crime said something about my moral state. Some days I thought I was becoming a sociopath. Some days I thought I was already there.

I carried silver-plated bullets in my gun at all times. Silver worked on humans, as well as on most supernatural beings. Why keep switching to normal ammo that only did humans and a very few creatures? But a few months ago I'd met a fairie that had damn near killed me. Silver didn't work on fairies, but normal lead did. So I'd taken to keeping a spare clip of regular bullets in the glove compartment. I peeled off the first two rounds of my silver clip and replaced them with lead. Which meant I had two bullets to discourage Zane with, before I killed him. Because, make no mistake, if he kept coming after I'd pumped him full of two Glazer Safety Rounds, which hurt a hell of a lot even if you could heal the damage, the first silver bullet was not going to be aimed to wound.

It wasn't until I was going through the doors I realized that I didn't know Nathaniel's last name. Stephen's name wasn't going to help me. Damn.

The waiting room was packed. Women with crying babies, children racing through the chairs belonging to no one, a man with a bloody rag around his hand, people with no visible injury staring dully into space. Stephen was nowhere in sight.

Screams, the sound of breaking glass; metal clanked to the floor. A nurse ran out of the far hallway. "Get more security, now!" A nurse behind the admittance desk punched buttons on the phone.

Call it a hunch but I was betting I knew where Stephen and Zane were. I flashed my ID at the nurse. "I'm with the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. Can I help?"

The nurse clutched my arm. "You're a cop?"

"I'm with the police, yes." Prevarication at its best. As a civilian attached to a police squad you learn how to do that.

"Thank God." She started to pull me towards the noise.

I pulled my arm free and took out my gun. Safety off, pointed at the ceiling, ready to go. With normal ammo I wouldn't have pointed at the ceiling, not with a hospital full of patients above me, but Glazer Safety Rounds aren't called safety rounds for nothing.

The back area was like every emergency area I'd ever been in. Curtains hung from metal tracks so you could make lots and lots of little individual examining rooms. A handful of curtains were closed, but patients were sitting up, staring through the curtains, watching the show. A wall divided the room down the middle to the corridor, so there wasn't much to see.

A man wearing green surgical scrubs went flying through the air from around that wall. He smacked into the opposite wall, slid down it heavily, and lay very still.

The nurse with me ran towards him, and I let her go. What lay beyond, what was tossing doctors around like toys, wasn't a job for a healer. It was a job for me. Two more figures in surgical scrubs lay on the floor, one male, one female. The woman was awake, eyes wide. Her wrist was at a 45 degree angle, broken. She saw my ID clipped to my jacket. "He's a shifter. Be careful."

"I know what he is," I said. I lowered the gun just a touch.

Her eyes flinched, and it wasn't pain. "Don't shoot up my trauma center."

"Try not to," I said and moved past her.

Zane stepped out into the corridor. I'd never seen Zane before, but who else could it be? He was carrying someone in his arms. I thought at first, a woman, because the hair was long and shining brown, but the exposed back and shoulders were too muscular, too male. It had to be Nathaniel. He fit easily into the taller man's arms.

Zane was about six foot, stretched tall and thin. He wore only a black leather vest on his thin, pale upper body. His hair was cotton-white, cut short on the sides with the top long in moussed spikes.

He opened his mouth and snarled at me. He had fangs, upper and lower, like a great cat. Sweet Jesus.

I pointed the gun at him and let out the air in my body until I was still and quiet. I was aiming for a line of shoulder above Nathaniel's still form. At this distance I'd hit it.

"I'll only ask once, Zane. Put him down."

"He's mine, mine!" He took striding steps down the hallway, and I fired.

The bullet spun him halfway around, and staggered him to his knees. The shoulder I'd hit stopped working, and Nathaniel slid out of his arms. Zane got to his feet with the smaller man tucked under his good arm like a doll. The flesh of his shoulder was already reknitting, rebuilding itself like a fast-forward picture of a flower blooming.

Zane could have tried to rush past me, to use his speed, but he didn't. He just came walking towards me as if he didn't believe I'd do it. He should have believed.

The second lead bullet took him square in the chest. Blood exploded out of his pale skin. He fell onto his back, spine bowing, struggling to breathe with a hole the size of a fist in his chest. I went for him, not running, but hurrying.

I walked wide around him, out of arm's reach, and came up a little behind him, and to the side. The shoulder I'd shot was still limp, his other arm trapped under Nathaniel's body. Zane gasped up at me, brown eyes wide.

"Silver, Zane, the rest of the bullets are silver. I'll make it a head shot and blow your freaking brains all over this nice clean floor."

He finally managed to gasp out, "Won't." Blood filled his mouth and spilled down his chin.

I pointed the gun at his face, about eyebrow level. If I pulled the trigger, he was gone. I stared down at this man I'd never met before. He looked young, nowhere close to thirty. A great emptiness filled me. It was like standing in the middle of white noise. I felt nothing. I didn't want to kill him, but I didn't care if I did. It didn't matter to me. It only mattered to him. I let that knowledge fill my eyes. That I didn't give a damn one way or the other. I let him see it, because he was a shapeshifter, and he'd understand what I was showing him. Most people wouldn't. Most sane people anyway.

I said, "You are going to leave Nathaniel alone. When the police arrive, you are going to do everything they tell you to do. No arguments, no fighting, or I will kill you. Do you understand me, Zane?"

"Yes," he said, and more blood flowed in a heavy line from his mouth. He started to cry. Tears welled down his bloodstained face.

Crying? The bad guys aren't supposed to cry.

"I'm so glad you've come," he said. "I tried to take care of them, but I couldn't. I tried to be Gabriel, but I couldn't be him." His shoulder had healed enough that he covered his eyes with his hand so we couldn't see him cry, but his voice was thick with tears, as well as blood.

"I'm so glad you've come to us, Anita. I'm so glad we're not alone anymore."

I didn't know what to say. Denying that I was going to be their leader seemed a bad idea with bodies littering the area. If I refused his offer, he might get nasty again and I'd have to kill him. I realized suddenly with something like a physical jolt that I didn't want to kill him. Was it the tears? Maybe. But it was more than that. It was the fact that I'd killed their alpha, their protector, and never given a thought what that might do to the rest of the wereleopards. It had never occurred to me that there was no second in command, no one to fill Gabriel's place. I certainly couldn't be their alpha. I didn't turn furry once a

month. But if it would keep Zane from tearing up any more doctors, I could play along for a while.

By the time the cops arrived, Zane was healed. He'd curled around Nathaniel's unconscious body like it was a teddy bear, still crying. He stroked Nathaniel's hair and muttered over and over, "She'll keep us safe. She'll keep us safe. She'll keep us safe."

I think the "she" was me, and I was in way over my head.

Chapter 5

Stephen lay in the narrow hospital bed. His curly blond hair was longer than mine, sweeping across the white pillow. Angry red and pink scars crisscrossed his delicate face. He looked like he'd been shoved through a window, which is exactly what had happened. Stephen, who didn't outweigh me by twenty pounds, had stood his ground. Zane had finally shoved him through a wire-mesh safety window. Like shoving someone through a wire cheese grater. If it had been a human being, they'd be dead. Even Stephen was hurt, badly hurt. But he was healing. I couldn't literally see the scars fading. It was like trying to watch a flower bloom. You knew it happened, but you never got to see it. I'd glance back at him, and there'd be one less scar. It was unnerving as hell.

Nathaniel was in the other bed. His hair was longer than Stephen's. Waist length, I was betting. Hard to judge since I'd only seen him prone. It was the darkest of auburns, almost brown but not. It was a rich, deep mahogany. The hair lay on the white sheets like the pelt of an animal, thick and shining.

He was pretty rather than handsome, and couldn't have been more than five foot six. The hair helped the illusion of femininity. But his shoulders were disproportionately broad, part weightlifting, but part genetics. He had great shoulders, but they belonged on someone about half a foot taller. He had to be eighteen to strip at Guilty Pleasures. His face was slender, jaw too smooth. He might have been eighteen, but he wasn't much over. Maybe someday he'd grow into the shoulders.

We were in a semiprivate room on the isolation ward. The floor that most hospitals kept for lycanthropes, vamps, and other preternatural citizens. Anything they thought might be dangerous. Zane would have been dangerous. But the cops had carted him away, wounds nearly healed. His flesh had pushed my bullets out onto the floor like rejected bits of organ. I didn't think we needed the isolation ward for Stephen and Nathaniel. I could be wrong on Nathaniel, but I didn't think so. I trusted Stephen's judgment better than that.

Nathaniel hadn't regained consciousness. I'd asked what his injuries were, and they told me, because they still thought I was a cop, and I'd saved their asses. Gratitude is a wonderful thing.

Someone had pretty much gutted Nathaniel. I don't mean just cut open his gut with a knife. I mean opened him up and let his intestines fall onto the floor; they found bits of debris on his intestines. There were signs of severe trauma to other parts of the body. He'd been sexually abused. And yes, a prostitute can be raped. All it takes is saying no. No one, not even a lycanthrope, would agree to being raped while their insides were spilling onto the floor. The rape could have been first, then they tried to kill him. It was a touch less sick done in that order. A touch.

There were marks on his wrists and ankles like he'd been chained. The marks were rubbed bloody like he'd struggled, and they weren't healing. Which meant that they'd used chains with a high silver content so it would hurt and not just hold. Whoever had done this to him knew ahead of time they'd be getting a lycanthrope. They were prepared. Which raised some very interesting questions.

Stephen said Gabriel had been pimping the wereleopards out. I understood why people would want something as exotic as a wereleopard. I knew that sadomasochism existed. Shapeshifters could take a hell of a lot of damage. So the combination even made a certain sense. But this was beyond sex games. I'd never heard of anything this brutal outside of a serial-killer case.

I couldn't leave them alone, unprotected. Even without the threat of sexual murderers, there was still the wereleopards. Zane might have cried and kissed my feet, but there were others. If they had no pack structure, no alpha, they had no one to tell them to leave Nathaniel alone. Without a leader it might be a matter of having to back down or kill each of them individually. Not a pleasant thought. Real leopards don't sweat who's in charge much. They don't have pack structures, but shapeshifters aren't animals, they're people. Which meant no matter how solitary and uncomplicated the animal form, the people half will find a way to screw things up. If Gabriel had hand-picked his people, I couldn't trust that they wouldn't come and try for Nathaniel again. Gabriel had been one sick kitty, and Zane hadn't impressed me much either. Who you gonna call for reinforcements? The local werewolf pack, of course. Stephen was a member of their pack. They owed him protection.

There was a knock on the door. I took the Browning out and held it on my lap underneath the magazine I'd been reading. I'd managed to find a three-month-old copy of *National Wildlife*, with an article on Kodiak bears. The magazine hid the gun nicely.

"Who is it?"

"It's Irving."

"Come in." I left the gun out, just in case somebody would try to push in behind him. Irving Griswold was a werewolf and a reporter. For a reporter he was a good guy, but he wasn't as careful as I was. When I saw he was alone, then I would put the gun up.

Irving pushed the door open, smiling. His frizzy brown hair encircled his head like a brown halo with the bald spot gleaming in the middle. Glasses perched on a small nose. He was short and gave the impression of being round without being fat. He looked like anything but a big bad wolf. He didn't even look much like a reporter, which was one of the things that made him such a great interviewer but would probably always keep him from being on-camera material. He worked for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and had interviewed me many times.

He closed the door behind him.

I put up the gun.

His eyes widened. He spoke low, but not in a whisper. "How's Stephen?"

"How did you get in here? There's supposed to be a cop on the door."

"Gee, Blake, I'm glad to see you too."

"Don't mess with me, Irving. There's supposed to be a guard out there."

"He's talking to a very pretty nurse at the desk."

"Dammit." I was not a real cop, so I couldn't go around yelling at them, but it was tempting. There was a law floating around Washington that might give vampire hunters federal badges soon. Sometimes I thought it was a bad idea. Sometimes, I didn't.

"Talk to me fast before I get kicked out. How is Stephen?"

I told him. "You don't care about Nathaniel?"

He looked uncomfortable. "You know that Sylvie is *de facto* pack leader while Richard is out of town working on his master's degree, right?"

I sighed. "No, I didn't know."

"I know you're not talking to Richard since you broke up, but I'd think someone else would have mentioned it."

"All the other wolves creep around me like there's been a death. No one talks about Richard to me, Irving. I thought he'd forbidden them to talk to me."

"Not to my knowledge."

"I'm surprised you didn't come in here asking for a story."

"I can't do this story, Anita. It's too close to home."

"Because you know Stephen?"

"Because everyone involved is a shapeshifter and I'm just a mild-mannered reporter."

"You really think you'd lose your job if they found out?"

"Job, hell. What would my mother say?"

I smiled. "So you can't play bodyguard."

He frowned. "You know, I hadn't thought about that. When one of the pack got hurt in public where it couldn't be hidden, Raina always used to ride to the rescue. With her dead, I don't think we have any alphas that aren't hiding what they are. No one I'd trust to guard Stephen, anyway."

Raina had been the wolf pack's old lupa before I took the job. Technically the old lupa doesn't have to die to step down, unlike the Ulfric, or King Wolf. But Raina had been Gabriel's playmate. They'd shared certain hobbies, like making pornographic snuff films starring shapeshifters and humans. She'd been

helping film while Gabriel tried to rape me. Oh, yeah, Raina had made it a real pleasure to punch her ticket.

"That's the second time you've ignored Nathaniel," I said. "What gives, Irving?"

"I told you Sylvie is in charge until Richard gets back in town."

"So?"

"She's forbidden any of us to help the wereleopards in any way."

"Why?"

"Raina used the wereleopards in her porno movies a lot, along with the wolves."

"I've seen one of the films. I wasn't impressed. Horrified, but not impressed."

Irving looked very serious. "She also let Gabriel and the cats punish wayward pack members."

"Punish?" I made it a question.

Irving nodded. "Sylvie was one of the ones who got punished, more than once. She hates them all, Anita. If Richard hadn't forbid it, she'd have used the pack to hunt the leopards down and kill them all."

"I've seen what Gabriel and Raina thought was fun and games. I think I'm on Sylvie's side for once."

"You cleaned house for us, you and Richard. Richard killed Marcus and now he's Ulfric, pack leader. You killed Raina for us, and now you're our lupa."

"I shot her, Irving. According to pack law, so I'm told, using a gun negates the challenge. I cheated."

"You're not lupa because you killed Raina. You're lupa because Richard picked you as his mate."

I shook my head. "We aren't dating anymore, Irving."

"But Richard hasn't picked a new lupa, Anita. Until he does, the job's yours."

Richard was tall, dark, handsome, honest, truthful, brave. He was perfect except for being a werewolf. Even that had been forgivable, or so I thought. Until I saw him in action. Saw the whole enchilada. The meat had been raw and squirming, the sauce a little bloody.

Now I was dating just Jean-Claude. I wasn't sure how much of an improvement dating the head vampire of the city was over dating the head werewolf, but I'd made my choice. It was Jean-Claude's pale, pale hands that held my body. His black hair that curled over my pillow. His midnight-blue eyes that I stared into while we made love.

Good girls do not have premarital sex, especially with the undead. I didn't think good girls had regrets about ex-boyfriend A, when they've chosen boyfriend B. Maybe I'd been wrong. Richard and I avoided each other when we could. Which had been for most of the last six weeks. Now he was out of town. Easy to avoid each other now.

"I won't ask what you're thinking about," Irving said. "I think I know."

"Don't be so damn smart," I said.

He spread his hands wide. "Occupational hazard."

That made me laugh. "So Sylvie's forbidden anyone to help the leopards. Where does that leave Stephen?"

"He went against her direct orders, Anita. For someone as low in the pack structure as Stephen, that took guts. But Sylvie won't be impressed. She'll tear him up, and she won't allow anyone to come down and baby-sit them. I know her that well."

"I can't do this twenty-four hours a day, Irving."

"They'll heal in a day or so."

I frowned at him. "I can't sit here for two days."

He looked away from me and went to stand beside Stephen's bed. He stared down at the sleeping man, hands clasped in front of him.

I walked over to them. I touched Irving's arm. "What aren't you telling me?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what you mean."

I turned him around, made him face me. "Talk to me, Irving."

"You aren't a shapeshifter, Anita. You aren't dating Richard anymore. You need to get out of our world, not further into it."

He looked so serious, solemn, that it scared me. "Irving, what's wrong?"

He just shook his head.

I grabbed him by both arms and resisted the urge to shake him. "What are you hiding?"

"There is a way for you to get the pack to guard Stephen and even Nathaniel."

I took a step back. "I'm listening."

"You outrank Sylvie."

"I'm not a shapeshifter, Irving. I was the new pack leader's girlfriend. I'm not even that anymore."

"You're more than that, Anita, and you know it. You've killed some of us. You kill easily and without remorse. The pack respects that."

"Gee, Irving, what a rousing endorsement."

"Do you feel badly about killing Raina? Did you lose sleep over Gabriel?"

"I killed Raina because she was trying to kill me. I killed Gabriel for the same reason, self-preservation. So no, I didn't lose any sleep."

"The pack respects you, Anita. If you could find some pack members that are already outed as shifters and convince them that you're scarier than Sylvie, they'd guard them, both of them."

"I am not scarier than Sylvie, Irving. I can't beat them to a pulp. She can."

"But you can kill them." He said it very quietly, watching my face, searching my expression.

I opened my mouth, closed it. "What are you trying to get me to do, Irving?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Forget I said it. I shouldn't have said it. Get more cops in here and go home, Anita. Just get out of it while you can."

"What's going on, Irving? Is Sylvie a problem?"

He looked at me. His usually cheerful eyes, solemn, thoughtful. He shook his head. "I've got to go, Anita."

I grabbed his arm. "You go nowhere until you tell me what's happening."
He turned back to me slowly, reluctantly. I let go of his arm and stepped back. "Talk."

"Sylvie has challenged everyone higher in the pack than she is, and won."
I looked at him. "So?"

"Do you understand how unusual it is for a woman to fight her way to second in command. She's about five foot six, small-boned. Ask how she's winning."

"You're being coy, Irving. That's not like you. I'm not going to play Twenty Questions with you. Just tell me."

"She killed the first two people she fought. She didn't have to. She chose to. The next three challenges she made just agreed she was dominant to them. They didn't want to risk being killed."

"Very practical," I said.

He nodded. "Sylvie's always been that. She finally picked one of the inner circle to fight. She's too small to be one of the enforcers; besides I think she was afraid of Jamil, and Shang-Da."

"Jamil? Richard didn't drive him out? But he was one of Marcus's and Raina's flunkies."

Irving shrugged. "Richard thought the transition would go smoother if he kept some of the old guard in power."

I shook my head. "Jamil should have been driven out or killed."

"Maybe, but actually Jamil seems to support Richard. I think it really surprised him when he wasn't killed instantly. Richard has earned his loyalty."

"I didn't know Jamil had any loyalty," I said.

"None of us did. Sylvie fought and won the place of Geri, second in command."

"She kill for it?"

"Surprisingly, no."

"Okay, so Sylvie's tearing up the pack. She's second in command. Great, so what?"

"I think she wants to be Ulfric, Anita. I think she wants Richard's job."

I stared at him. "There's only one way to be Ulfric, Irving."

"To kill the old king," Irving said. "Yeah, I think Sylvie knows that."

"I haven't seen her fight, but I've seen Richard fight. He outweighs her by a hundred pounds, a hundred pounds of muscle, and he's good. She can't beat him in a fair fight, can she?"

"It's like Richard is wounded, Anita. The heart's gone out of him. I think if she challenged and really wanted it, she'd win."

"What are you telling me? That he's depressed?" I asked.

"It's more than that. You know how much he hates being one of the monsters. He'd never killed anyone until Marcus. He can't forgive himself."

"How do you know all this?"

"I listen. Reporters make good listeners."

We stared at each other. "Tell me the rest."

Irving looked down, then up. "He doesn't discuss you with me. The only thing he said was that even you couldn't accept what he was. Even you, the Executioner, were horrified."

It was my turn to look down. "I didn't want to be."

"We can't change how we feel," Irving said.

I met his eyes. "I would if I could."

"I believe you."

"I don't want Richard dead."

"None of us do. I'm afraid of what Sylvie would do without anyone to stop her." He motioned to the other bed. "First order of business would be hunting down all the wereleopards. We'd slaughter them."

I took in a deep breath and let it out. "I can't change how I feel about what I saw, Irving. I saw Richard eat Marcus." I paced the small room, shaking my head. "What *can* I do to help?"

"Call the pack and demand that they acknowledge you as lupa. Make some of them come here and guard both of them against Sylvie's express orders. But you have to give them your protection. You have to promise them that she won't hurt them, because you'll see to it that she can't."

"If I do that and Sylvie doesn't like it, I'll have to kill her. It's like I'm setting her up to be killed. That's a little premeditated even for me."

He shook his head. "I'm asking you to be our lupa. To be Richard's lupa. To show Sylvie that if she keeps pressing, Richard may not kill her, but you will."

I sighed. "Shit."

"I'm sorry, Anita. I wouldn't have said anything, but . . ."

"I needed to know," I said. I hugged him, and he stiffened in surprise, then hugged me back.

"What was that for?"

"For telling me. I know Richard won't like it."

The smile faded from his face. "Richard has punished two pack members since he took over. They challenged his authority, big time, and he nearly killed them both."

"What?" I asked.

"He sliced them up, Anita. He was like someone else, something else."

"Richard doesn't do things like that."

"He does now, not all the time. Most of the time he's fine, but then he snaps and goes into a rage. I don't want to be anywhere near him when he loses it."

"How bad has he gotten?" I asked.

"He's got to accept what he is, Anita. He's got to embrace his beast, or he's going to drive himself mad."

I shook my head. "I can't help him love his beast, Irving. I can't accept it either."

Irving shrugged. "It's not so bad being furry, Anita. There are worse things . . . like being the walking dead."

I frowned at him. "Get out, Irving, and thanks for telling me."

"I hope you're still thankful in a week."

"Me, too."

Irving gave me some phone numbers and left. Didn't want anyone to stay too long. People might suspect him of being more than just a reporter. No one seemed to worry about my reputation. I raised zombies, slew vampires, and was dating the Master of the City. If people began to suspect me of being a shapeshifter, what the hell difference would it make?

Three names of submissive pack members who Irving thought were tough enough to play bodyguard and weak enough to be bullied. I didn't want to do this. The pack was based on obedience: punishment and reward, mostly punishment. If the pack members I called refused me, I had to punish them, or I wasn't lupa, wasn't strong enough to back Richard. Of course, he probably wouldn't be grateful. He seemed to hate me now. I didn't blame him. He'd hate me interfering.

But it wasn't just Richard. It was Stephen. He'd saved my life once and I still hadn't returned the favor. He was also one of those people that was everyone's victim, until today. Yeah, Zane had nearly killed him, but that wasn't the point. He'd put friendship above pack loyalty. Which meant that Sylvie could withdraw pack protection from him. He'd be like the wereleopards, anybody's meat. I couldn't let that happen to him, not if I could stop it.

Stephen might end up dead. Richard might end up dead. I might have to kill Sylvie. I might have to maim or kill a few pack members to make my point. Might, might, might. Damn.

I'd never killed before except in self-defense or for revenge. If I put my hat in the ring, it would be premeditated, cold-blooded murder. Maybe not in a technical sense, but I knew what I would be starting in motion. It was like dominoes. They all stayed straight and neat until you hit one of them; then there was no stopping them. I would end up with a pretty pattern on the floor: Richard solidly in power, Stephen and the wereleopards safe, Sylvie backed down, or dead. The first three things were going to happen. It was Sylvie's choice how the last bit turned out. Harsh, but true. Of course, there was one other option. Sylvie could kill me. That would sort of open things up for her again. Sylvie wasn't exactly ruthless, but she didn't let anyone get in her way. We shared that trait. No, I am not ruthless. If I was, I'd have just called Sylvie into a meeting and shot her on the spot. I wasn't quite sociopath enough to do it. Mercy will get you killed, but sometimes it's all that makes us human.

I made the calls. I chose a man's name first, Kevin, no last name. His voice was thick with sleep, gruff, like he smoked.

"Who the hell is this?"

"Gracious," I said, "very gracious."

"Who is this?"

"It's Anita Blake. Do you know who I am?" When trying to be threatening, less is more. Me and Clint Eastwood.

He was quiet for nearly thirty seconds, and I let the silence build. His breath had sped up. I could almost feel his pulse quickening over the phone.

He answered like he was used to strange phone calls and pack business.
"You're our lupa."

"Very good, Kevin, very good." Condescending is also good.

He coughed to clear his throat. "What do you want?"

"I want you to come down to St. Louis University Hospital. Stephen and Nathaniel have been hurt. I want you to guard them for me."

"Nathaniel, he's one of the wereleopards."

"That's right."

"Sylvie's forbidden us to help the wereleopards."

"Is Sylvie your lupa?" Questions are great, but only if you know the answers. If you ask questions and the answers surprise you, you look silly.

Hard to be threatening when you look ill-informed.

He was quiet for a second. "No."

"Who is?"

I heard him swallow. "You are."

"Do I outrank her?"

"You know you do."

"Then get your butt down here, and do what I ask."

"Sylvie will hurt me, lupa. She really will."

"I'll see that she doesn't."

"You're just Richard's human girlfriend. You can't fight Sylvie, not and live."

"You're right, Kevin. I can't fight Sylvie, but I can kill her."

"What do you mean?"

"If she hurts you for helping me, I'll kill her."

"You can't mean that."

I sighed. "Look, Kevin, I've met Sylvie. Trust me when I say that I could point a gun at her head and pull the trigger. I can and will kill Sylvie if she forces me to. No jokes, no bluffs, no games." I listened to my voice as I said it. I sounded tired, almost bored, and so serious it was almost frightening.

"All right, I'll do it, but if you let me down she may kill me."

"You have my protection, Kevin, and I know what that means in the pack."

"It means I have to acknowledge you as dominant to me," he said.

"It also means that if anyone challenges you, I can help you fight your battles. Seems like a fair trade."

Silence filled the phone lines again. His breathing had slowed, deepened.
"Promise me you won't get me killed."

"I can't promise that, Kevin, but I can promise that if Sylvie kills you, I'll kill her for you."

Silence, shorter this time. "I believe you would. I'll be at the hospital in forty minutes or less."

"Thanks, I'll be waiting."

I hung up and made the other two calls. They both agreed to come down. I'd drawn a line in the sand with Sylvie on one side and me on the other. She wasn't going to like it, not one little bit. Couldn't blame her. If our places were

reversed, I'd have been pissed. But she should have left Richard alone. Irving had said it was like Richard was wounded, like the heart had gone out of him. I'd helped put that wound there. I'd cut his heart into tiny little pieces and danced on them. Not deliberately. My intentions were good, but you know what they say about good intentions.

I couldn't love Richard, but I could kill for him. Killing was the more practical of the two gifts. And lately I'd become very, very practical.

Chapter 6

Sergeant Rudolph Storr showed up before the baby-sitting werewolves could arrive. I'd called him myself. He was the man in charge of the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team, RPIT, or RIP. A lot of people call us RIP, for Rest in Peace. Hey, at least they know who we are.

Dolph is six foot eight, built like a pro-wrestler, but it isn't just physical size that makes him impressive. He'd taken a squad that had been meant as a joke to appease the liberals and made it work. RPIT had solved more preternatural crimes in the last three years than any other police unit. Including the FBI. Dolph had even been invited up to lecture at Quantico. Not bad for someone who'd been given his command as a punishment. Dolph wasn't exactly an optimist, few cops are, but give him lemons and he made damn fine lemonade.

He closed the door behind him and stared down at me. "The doctor said my detective was in here. I just see you."

"I never said I was a detective. I said I was with the squad. They assumed the rest."

He shook his head. His black hair actually hid the tops of his ears. He was overdue for a hair cut. "If you were playing cop, why didn't you yell at the uniform that was supposed to be on this door?"

I smiled up at him. "I thought I'd leave that to you. I assume he knows that he was a bad boy."

"I took care of it," Dolph said.

He stayed standing at the door. I stayed sitting in my chair. I'd actually managed not to pull my gun on him. I was happy about that. He was staring at me hard enough to hurt without flashing a gun at him.

"What's going on, Anita?"

"You know everything I know," I said.

"How did you happen to be Johnny-on-the-spot?"

"Stephen called me."

"Tell me," he said.

I told him. I even put in the part about the pimping. I wanted that stopped. The cops are pretty good at stopping crime, if you tell the truth. I left out a few things, like me having killed the wereleopards' old alpha. It was the only thing I left out. For me, it was almost the same as being honest.

Dolph blinked at me and took it all down in his trusty notebook. "Are you saying that our victim allowed someone to do this to him?"

I shook my head. "I don't think it's that simple. I think he went there knowing they'd chain him up. He knew there'd be sex and pain, but I don't think he knew they'd come this close to killing him. The doctors actually had to give him blood. His body was going into shock faster than it could fix itself."

"I've heard of wereanimals healing from worse wounds than this," Dolph said.

I shrugged. "Some people heal better than others even among the shapeshifters. Nathaniel is pretty low in the power structure, so I'm told. Maybe part of being weak is not healing as well." I spread my hands wide. "I don't know."

Dolph searched back through his notes. "Someone dropped him off at the emergency entrance wrapped in a sheet. No one saw anything. He just appeared."

"No one ever sees anything, Dolph. Isn't that the rule?"

That earned me a small smile. It was nice to see the smile. Dolph wasn't too happy with me lately. He'd only recently found out that I was dating the Master of the City. He didn't like it. He didn't trust anyone that socialized with the monsters. Couldn't blame him.

"Yeah, that's the rule. Are you telling me everything you know about this, Anita?"

I raised a hand in a scout's salute. "Would I lie to you?"

"If it suited your purpose, yes."

We stared at each other. The silence grew thick enough to walk on. I let it sit there. If Dolph thought I was going to break first, he was wrong. The strain between us wasn't this case. It was his disapproval of my choice of dates. His disappointment in me was always there now. Pressing, weighted, waiting for me to apologize or say, shucks, just kidding. The fact that I was dating a vampire made him trust me less. I understood. Two months ago, even less, and I'd have felt the same way. But here I was dating who, and what, I was dating. Dolph and I, both, had to deal with it.

And yet, he was my friend, and I respected him. I even agreed with him, but if I could ever get out of this damn hospital, I had a date with Jean-Claude tonight. Regardless of my doubts about Richard, morals in general, and the walking dead, I wanted the date. The thought of Jean-Claude waiting for me made my body tight and warm. Embarrassing, but true. I don't think anything short of giving up Jean-Claude would have satisfied Dolph. I wasn't sure that was an option anymore for a lot of reasons. So I sat and looked at Dolph. He stared back. The silence grew thicker with each tick of the clock.

A knock on the door saved us. The officer, now attentively on the door, whispered something to Dolph. Dolph nodded and closed the door. The look he gave me was even less friendly, if that was possible.

"Officer Wayne says that there are three relatives of Stephen's out here. He also says that if they're all relatives, he'll eat his gun."

"Tell him to pucker up," I said. "They're fellow pack members. Werewolves consider that closer than family."

"But legally it's not family," Dolph said.

"How many of your men you want to lose when the next shapeshifter comes through that door?"

"We can shoot them just as good as you can, Anita."

"But you still have to give them a warning before you shoot them, don't you? You still have to treat them like people instead of monsters or you end up in front of the review board."

"Witnesses say you gave Zane, no last name, a warning."

"I was feeling generous."

"You were shooting him in front of witnesses. That always makes you generous."

We went back to staring at each other. Maybe it wasn't just dating a vampire. Maybe it was the fact that Dolph was the ultimate cop and he was beginning to suspect that I was killing people, murdering people. People who hurt me or threatened me did have a tendency to vanish. Not many, but enough. And less than two months ago I'd killed two people where the bodies couldn't be hidden. Self-defense both times. Never saw the inside of a courtroom. Both assassins with records longer than I was tall. The woman's fingerprints had been the answer to several political killings that Interpol had lying around. Big-time bad guys that no one really mourned, at least not the cops.

But it fed Dolph's suspicions. Hell, it did everything but confirm them.

"Why'd you recommend me to Pete McKinnon, Dolph?"

He didn't answer for so long, I thought he wasn't going to, but finally he said, "Because you're the best at what you do, Anita. I may not always approve of your methods, but you help save lives, put away the bad guys. You're better on a murder scene than some of the detectives on my squad."

For Dolph, this was a speech. I opened my mouth, closed it, then said, "Thanks, Dolph. Coming from you, that's a big compliment."

"You just spend too much time with the damn monsters, Anita. I don't mean who you date. I mean all of it. You've played by their rules so long, sometimes you forget what it's like to be normal."

I smiled. "I raise the dead for a living, Dolph. I've never been normal."

He shook his head. "Don't purposely misunderstand what I'm saying, Anita. It's not the fur or the fangs that make you a monster, not always. Sometimes, it's just where you draw the line."

"The fact that I play with monsters is what makes me valuable to you, Dolph. If I played it straight, I wouldn't be as good helping you solve preternatural crimes."

"Yeah, sometimes I wonder if I'd left you alone, not gotten you to consult with us, if you'd be . . . softer."

I frowned at him. "Are you saying you blame yourself for what I've become?" I tried to laugh it off, but his face stopped me.

"How often did you go to the monsters on one of my cases? How often did you have to make bargains with them to help put away a bad guy? If I'd left you alone . . ."

I stood up. I reached out to him, then let my hand fall back without touching him. "I'm not your daughter, Dolph. You're not my keeper. I help the police because I like it. I'm good at it. And who else you gonna call?"

He nodded. "Yeah, who else? The shifters outside can come in and . . . visit the patients."

"Thanks, Dolph."

He took in a long breath and let it out in a big rush of air. "I saw the window that your friend Stephen got shoved through. If he'd been human, he'd be dead. It's just luck that no civilians were killed."

I shook my head. "I think Zane was being careful of the humans, at least. With the strength he has, it would have been easier to kill than to maim."

"Why would he have cared?"

"Because he's in jail, and he gets a bail hearing."

"They won't let him out," Dolph said.

"He didn't kill anyone, Dolph. Since when haven't you seen someone not get bail for assault and battery?"

"You think like a cop, Anita. It's what makes you good."

"I think like a cop and like a monster. That's what makes me good."

He nodded, closed his notebook and slipped it into an inner pocket of his jacket. "Yeah, that's what makes you good." He left without another word. He sent in the three werewolves and closed the door.

Kevin was tall, dark, scruffy and smelled like cigarettes. Lorraine was neat and prim like a second-grade schoolteacher. She smelled of White Linen perfume and blinked nervously at me. Teddy, his preference not mine, weighed around three hundred pounds, most of it muscle. He'd buzzed his hair down to a fine dark prickle, and his head looked too small for his massive body. The men looked scary, but it was Lorraine's handshake that left power vibrating down my skin. She looked like a scared rabbit and had enough power to be the big bad wolf.

Within twenty minutes I was free to leave. The mismatched trio of werewolves had divided the shifts so that one of them would be with the boys at all times. Did I trust the new wolves to guard them? Yeah. Because if they abandoned their posts and let Stephen get killed, I really would kill them. If they tried their best and were simply not strong enough, fine, but if they just gave up . . . I'd given Stephen, and now, Nathaniel, my protection. I wasn't kidding. I made sure that all of them knew that.

Kevin said it best, "If Sylvie shows up, we'll send her to you."

"You do that."

He shook his head, playing with an unlit cigarette. I'd told him he couldn't smoke it, but even touching it seemed to comfort him. "You've pissed in her pond. I hope you can clean it up."

I smiled. "Eloquent, Kevin, very eloquent."

"Eloquent or not, Sylvie is going to bust your ass if she can."

The smile widened. I couldn't help it. "Let me worry about my own ass. My job is to keep your ass out of the sling, not mine."

The three werewolves looked at me. There was something on all their faces, almost the same expression, but I couldn't read it. "Being lupa is more than just fighting for dominance," said Lorraine in a small voice.

"I know that," I said.

"Do you?" she asked, and there was something childlike in the question.

"I think so."

"You kill us if we fail you," Kevin said, "but will you die for us? Will you risk the same price you ask us to pay?"

I liked Kevin better when he wasn't being eloquent. I stared at these three strangers. People I'd just met. Would I risk my life for them? Could I ask them to risk their lives for me if I wasn't willing to return the favor?

I looked at them, really looked at them. Lorraine's small hands clutching her purse so tightly her hands shook. Teddy, who stared at me with calm, accepting eyes, but there was a challenge in them, an intelligence that you might miss if you just looked at the body. Kevin, who looked like he should be in an alley looking for a fix, or in a bar drinking up his share of whiskey. There was something underneath the cynicism. It was fear. Fear that I'd be like all the rest. A user who didn't give a damn about them. Raina had been that, and now Sylvie. The pack was supposed to be their refuge, their protection, not the thing they feared most.

Their warm, electric power filled the room, flowed out of them, dancing over my body. They were nervous, scared. Strong emotions made most shapeshifters leak power. If you were sensitive to it, you'd feel it. I'd felt it a lot over the years. This time was different somehow. I didn't just sense the power, my body reacted to it. Not merely a shivering of skin, a line of goose bumps, but something deeper. It was almost sexual, but that wasn't it either. It was as if the power had found a part of me, caressed a part of me, that I never knew was there.

Their power filled me, touched something, and I felt it, whatever it was, open up like a switch being thrown. A rush of warm energy welled up inside of my body and spread out through my skin, as if every pore of my body was emitting a warm line of air. It brought a soft gasp to my throat. I knew the taste of the power, and it wasn't Jean-Claude. It was Richard. Somehow, I'd tapped into Richard's power. I wondered if he felt it all the way out of state, studying for his degree.

Six weeks ago to save both their lives, I'd let Jean-Claude bind the three of us to each other. They were dying, and I couldn't let them go. Richard had invaded my dreams by accident, but mostly Jean-Claude had kept us apart because anything else was too painful. This was the first time I'd felt Richard's

power since then. The first time I knew for certain that the tie was still there, still strong. Magic is like that. Even hate can't kill it.

I suddenly had the words, words I couldn't have known. "I am lupa, I am the all-mother, I am your guardian, your refuge, your peace. I will stand with you against all harm. Your enemies are my enemies. I share blood and flesh with you. We are lukoi, we are pack."

The warmth cut off abruptly. I staggered. Only Teddy's hand kept me from falling to the floor. "Are you all right?" he asked in a voice as deep and impressive as the rest of him.

I nodded. "I'm fine, I'm fine." As soon as I could, I stepped back. Richard had felt the pull hundreds of miles away, and he'd cut me off. He'd slammed the door shut without knowing what I was doing, or why. A rush of rage danced down inside my head like a silent scream. He was so angry.

We were both bound to Jean-Claude. I was his human servant and Richard was his wolf. It was a painful intimacy.

"You aren't lukoi," Lorraine said. "You aren't a shapeshifter. How did you do that?"

I smiled. "Trade secret." Truth was, I didn't know. I'd have to ask Jean-Claude tonight. I hoped he could explain it. He was only the third master vampire in their long history to have bound both a mortal and a shapeshifter into a single bond. I suspected strongly that there wasn't a manual, and that Jean-Claude winged it more often than I wanted to know.

Teddy went down on his knees. "You are lupa." The other two followed him. They abased themselves like good little submissive wolves, though Kevin didn't like it, and neither did I. But I wasn't sure how much was form and how much was necessary. I wanted them submissive because I didn't want to have to fight anybody, or kill anybody. So I let them crawl on the floor and run their hands along my legs, and sniff my skin like dogs. Which is when the nurse came in.

Everybody got up off the floor. I tried to explain and finally stopped. The nurse just stood there staring at all of us, a strange frozen smile on her face. She finally backed out without doing a damn thing. "I'll send Doctor Wilson in to check on them." She nodded her head too often and too rapidly and shut the door behind her. If she'd been wearing heels, I'd have bet we could have heard her run.

So much for not being one of the monsters.

Chapter 7

Tucking in the baby-sitting werewolves made me late for my date. Taking time to read McKinnon's file made me later, but if there was a fire tonight, it'd

be embarrassing not to be prepared. I learned two things from the file. One, that all the fires had been started after dark, which made me think instantly of vampires. Except that vampires couldn't start fires. It wasn't one of their abilities. In fact fire was one of the things they feared most. Oh, I'd seen a few vamps that could control existing flames to a small extent. Make a candle flame rise or fall, parlor tricks, but fire was the element of purity. Purity and the vamps didn't mix. The second thing I learned from the file was that I didn't know much about fires in general or arson in particular. I was going to need a book or a good lecture.

Jean-Claude had made reservations at Demiche's, a very nice restaurant. I'd had to run home, to my new rented house, to change. It had put me late enough that I'd arranged to meet him at the restaurant. The trouble with fancy dates was where to put my weapons. Women's dress clothes are the ultimate challenge to concealed-weapon carry.

Formals hid more but made grabbing the weapon harder. Anything form-fitting made it difficult. Tonight I was wearing a spaghetti-strap formal with slits so high on either side, I'd had to make sure that the hose were a matching off-black, and the underwear was lacy and black. I knew myself well enough to know that sometime during the evening I'd forget and flash the undies. And if I had to go for the gun, I'd certainly flash. So why wear it? Answer: I had a Firestar 9mm pistol tucked inside a bellyband.

The bellyband was an elastic strap that went over the underwear, but under the outerwear. It was designed to wear under a button-down dress shirt. Pull the shirt up with the free hand, pull the gun out, and *viola*, start shooting. The bellyband didn't work well under most formals, because you had yards of cloth to raise before you could get to the gun. It was better than nothing, but only if the bad guy was patient. But this dress, all I had to do was put my hand up through one of the slits. I had to pull the gun out, down, and out from under the dress, so it still wasn't speedy, but it wasn't bad. The bellyband also did not work with an especially form-fitting dress. Nobody gains weight in the shape of a gun.

I'd actually found a strapless bra that matched the black panties, so once I took off the gun and dress, I was wearing lingerie. The shoes were higher heels than I'd normally accept, but it was either that or hem the dress. Since I refuse to sew, heels it was.

The one major drawback to the spaghetti straps was that it showed off all my scars. I'd thought about buying a little cover-up jacket, but this wasn't a dress that was meant for a jacket. So screw it. Jean-Claude had seen the scars before, and the few people rude enough to give second glances could have an eyeful.

I was getting pretty good at makeup, eye shadow, blusher, lipstick. The lipstick was red—very, very red. But I had the coloring for it. Pale skin, black curly hair, pure brown eyes. I was all contrasts and strong colors the bright red lipstick matched. I was feeling pretty spiffy until I got a glimpse of Jean-Claude.

He was sitting at the table, waiting for me. I could see him from the entryway, though the maitre d' was two people ahead of me. I didn't mind. I enjoyed the view.

Jean-Claude's hair is black and curly, but he'd done something to it so it was straight and fine, falling past his shoulders, curled under at the ends. His face seemed even more delicate, like fine porcelain. He was beautiful, not handsome. I wasn't sure what saved his face from being feminine—some line of his cheek, bend of his jaw, something. You would never mistake him for anything other than male. He was dressed in royal blue, a color I'd never seen him in. A short jacket of a shining, almost metallic cloth was overlaid with black lace in a pattern of flowers. The shirt was his typical frilled, à la 1600's shirt, but it was a rich, vibrant blue, down to the mound of ruffles that climbed up his neck to frame his face and spill out the sleeves of the jacket to cover the upper half of his slender white hands.

He held an empty wineglass in his hand, spinning the stem of the glass between his fingers, watching the light spill through the crystal. He couldn't drink wine more than a sip at a time and mourned it.

The maitre d' led me through the tables towards him. He looked up, and seeing his face full-on made my chest tight, and it was suddenly hard to breathe. The blue so close to his face made his eyes bluer than I'd ever seen them, not the color of midnight skies, but cobalt blue, the color of a good sapphire. But no jewel ever had that weight of intelligence, of dark knowledge. The look in his eyes as he watched me walk towards him made me shiver. Not cold, not fear. Anticipation.

In the heels, and with the slits on both sides of the dress, there was an art to walking. You had to sort of throw yourself into it, a sling-back, slouching, hip-swinging walk, or the dress wrapped around your legs and the heels twisted at your ankles. You had to walk like you knew you could wear it and look wonderful. If you doubted yourself, hesitated, you'd fall to the floor and turn into a pumpkin. After years of my not being able to wear heels and dress clothes, Jean-Claude had taught me in a month what my stepmother couldn't teach me in twenty years.

He stood, and I didn't mind, though once upon a time I'd pissed off a prom date by standing every time that he did for the other girls at the table. One, I'd mellowed since then; two, I could see the rest of Jean-Claude's outfit.

The pants were black linen, clinging smooth and perfect to his body, so form fitting that I knew there was nothing under the pants but him. Black boots climbed his legs to the knees. The boots were soft, crepe-like leather, wrinkled and pettable.

He glided towards me, and I stood there watching him come. I was still half afraid of him. Afraid of how much I wanted him. I was like a rabbit caught in headlights, frozen, waiting for death to come. But did the rabbit's heart beat fast and faster? Did its breath come like a choking thing into its throat? Was there an eager rush to the fear, or was there just death?

He wrapped his arms around me, drawing me close. His pale hands were warm as they slid over my bare arms. He'd fed on someone tonight, borrowed

their warmth. But they'd been willing, even eager. The Master of the City never went begging for donors. Blood was about the only bodily fluid I wouldn't share with him. I slid my hands over the silk of his shirt, underneath the short jacket. I wanted to mold my body against his stolen warmth. I wanted to run my hands over the roughness of the linen, contrasting it to the smoothness of the silk. Jean-Claude was always a sensual feast, right down to his clothing.

He kissed my lips lightly. We'd learned that the lipstick came off. Then he tilted my head to one side and breathed along my face, down my neck. His breath was like a line of fire along my skin. He spoke with his lips just above the big pulse in my neck. "You are lovely tonight, *ma petite*." He pressed his lips against my skin, softly. I let out a shuddering breath and drew back from him.

It was a greeting among the vampires to plant a light kiss above the big pulse in the throat. It was a gesture reserved for the very closest friends. It showed great trust and affection. To refuse it meant you were angry or distrustful. It still seemed too intimate for public consumption to me, but I'd seen him use it with others and seen fights start with a refusal. It was an old gesture just coming back into vogue. In fact, it was becoming a chic greeting among entertainers and others of the same ilk. Better than kissing the air near someone's face, I guess.

The maitre d' held my chair. I waved him off. It wasn't feminism, but lack of grace. I never managed to be scooted under a table without the chair banging my legs or being so far from the table I had to finish scooting forward on my own. So the heck with it, I'd do it myself.

Jean-Claude watched me struggle into my chair, smiling, but he didn't offer to help. I'd finally broken him of that at least. He sat down in his own chair with a graceful fall. It was an almost foppish movement, but he was like a cat. Even at rest there was the potential of muscle under skin, a physical presence that was utterly masculine. I used to think it was vampire trickery. But it was him, just him.

I shook my head.

"What's wrong, *ma petite*?"

"I felt pretty spiffy until I saw you. Now I feel like one of the ugly stepsisters."

He tut-tutted at me. "You know you are lovely, *ma petite*. Shall I feed your vanity by telling you how much?"

"I wasn't fishing for compliments." I gestured at him and shook my head again. "You look amazing tonight."

He smiled, dipping his head to one side so his hair swept forward. "*Merci, ma petite*."

"Is the hair permed straight?" I asked. "It looks great," I added hastily, and it did, but I hoped it wasn't as permanent as a perm. I loved his curls.

"If it was, what would you say?"

"If it was, you'd have just said so. Now you're teasing me."

"Would you mourn the loss of my curls?" he asked.

"I could return the favor," I said.

He widened his eyes in mock horror. "Not your crowning glory, *ma petite, mon Dieu*." He was laughing at me, but I was used to it.

"I didn't know you could get linen that tight," I said.

His smile widened. "And I did not know you could hide a gun under such a . . . slender dress."

"As long as I don't hug anybody, they'll never know."

"Very true."

A waiter came and asked if we wanted drinks. I ordered water and Coke. Jean-Claude declined. If he could have ordered anything, it would have been wine.

Jean-Claude brought his chair over to sit almost beside me. When dinner came, he'd move back to his place setting, but picking out the meal was part of the night's entertainment. It had taken me several dinner dates to realize what Jean-Claude wanted—no, almost needed. I was Jean-Claude's human servant. I bore three of his marks. One of the side effects of the second mark was that he could take sustenance through me. So if we'd been on a long sea voyage, he wouldn't have had to feed off of any humans on the boat. He could live through me for a time. He could also taste food through me.

For the first time in nearly four hundred years he could taste food. I had to eat it for him, but he could enjoy a meal. It was trivial compared to some of the other things he'd gained through the bonding, but it was the thing that seemed to please him most. He ordered food with a childlike glee and watched me eat, tasting it as I did. In private he'd roll on his back like a cat, hands pressed to his mouth as if trying to drain every taste. It was the only thing he did that was cute. He was gorgeous, sensual, but rarely cute. I'd gained four pounds in six weeks eating with him.

He slid his arm over the back of my chair, and we read the menu together. He leaned close enough for his hair to brush my cheek. The smell of his perfume, oh, sorry, cologne, caressed my skin. Though if what Jean-Claude wore was cologne, then Brut was bug spray.

I moved my head away from the caress of his hair, mainly because the feel of him this close was all I could think about. Maybe if I'd taken him up on his invitation to live with him at the Circus of the Damned, some of this heat would have dissipated. But I'd rented a house in record time in the middle of nowhere so my neighbors wouldn't get shot up, which is why I moved out of my last apartment. I hated the house. I wasn't a house kinda gal. I was a condo kind of gal. But condos had neighbors, too.

The lace overlay on his jacket was scratchy against my nearly bare shoulders. He put his hand on my shoulder, smoothing his fingertips across my skin. His leg brushed my thigh, and I realized I hadn't heard a damn thing he'd said. It was embarrassing.

He stopped talking and looked at me, gazed at me from inches away with those extraordinary eyes. "I have been explaining my menu choices to you. Have you heard any of it?"

I shook my head. "Sorry."

He laughed, and it hovered over my skin like his breath, warm and sliding over my body. It was a vampire trick but low on the scale, and had become public foreplay for us. In private we did other things.

He whispered against my cheek. "No apologies, *ma petite*. You know it pleases me that you find me . . . intoxicating."

He laughed again, and I pushed him away. "Go sit on your side of the table. You've been here long enough to know what you want."

He moved his chair dutifully back to his place setting. "I have what I want, *ma petite*."

I had to look down and not meet his eyes. Heat crept up my neck into my face, and I couldn't stop it.

"If you mean what do I want for dinner, that is a different question," he said.

"You are a pain in the ass," I said.

"And so many other places," he said.

I didn't think I could blush more. I was wrong. "Stop it."

"I love the fact that I can make you blush. It is charming."

The tone in his voice made me smile in spite of myself. "This is not a dress to be charming in. I was trying for sexy and sophisticated."

"Can you not be charming as well as sexy and sophisticated? Is there some rule about being all three?"

"Slick, very slick," I said.

He widened his eyes, trying for innocent and failing. He was many things, but innocent wasn't one of them.

"Now, let's start negotiating on dinner," I said.

"You make it sound like a chore."

I sighed. "Before you came along, I thought food was something you ate so you wouldn't die. I will never be as enamored of food as you are. It's almost a fetish with you."

"Hardly a fetish, *ma petite*."

"A hobby, then."

He nodded. "Perhaps."

"So just tell me what you like on the menu, and we'll negotiate."

"All that is required is that you taste what is ordered. You do not have to eat it."

"No, no more of this tasting shit. I've gained weight. I never gain weight."

"You have gained four pounds, so I am told. Though I have searched diligently for this phantom four pounds and cannot find them. It brings your weight up to a grand total of one hundred and ten pounds, correct?"

"That's right."

"Oh, *ma petite*, you are growing gargantuan."

I looked at him, and it was not a friendly look. "Never tease a woman about her weight, Jean-Claude. At least not an American twentieth-century one."

He spread his hands wide. "My deepest apologies."

"When you apologize, try not to smile at the same time. It ruins the effect," I said.

His smile widened until a hint of fang peeked out. "I will try to remember that for the future."

The waiter returned with my drinks. "Would you like to order, or do you need a few minutes?"

Jean-Claude looked at me.

"A few minutes."

The negotiation began.

Twenty minutes later I needed a refill on my Coke, and we knew what we wanted. The waiter returned, pen poised, hopeful.

I'd won on the appetizer, so we weren't having one. I'd given up the salad, and let him have the soup. Potato-leek soup, hey, it wasn't a hardship. We both wanted the steak.

"The petite cut," I told the waiter.

"How would you like that prepared?"

"Half well-done, half rare."

The waiter blinked at me. "Excuse me, madam?"

"It's an eight-ounce cut, right?"

He nodded.

"Cut it in half, and cook four ounces of it well-done, and four ounces of it rare."

He frowned at me. "I don't think we can do that."

"At these prices you should bring the cow out and have a ritual sacrifice at the table. Just do it." I handed him the menu. He took it.

Still frowning, he turned to Jean-Claude. "And you, sir?"

Jean-Claude gave a small smile. "I will not be ordering food tonight."

"Would you like wine with dinner, then, sir?"

He never missed a beat. "I do not drink—wine."

I coughed Coke all over the tablecloth. The waiter did everything but give me the Heimlich. Jean-Claude laughed until tears trailed from the corners of his eyes. You couldn't really tell it in this light, but I knew that the tears were tinged red. Knew that there would be pinkish stains on the linen napkin when he was done dabbing his eyes. The waiter fled without having gotten the joke. Staring across the table at the smiling vampire, I wondered if I got the joke or was the butt of the joke. There were nights when I wasn't sure which way the grave dirt crumbled.

But when he put his hand out to me across the table, I took it. Definitely, the butt of the joke.

Chapter 8

Dessert was raspberry-chocolate cheesecake. A triple threat to any diet plan. Truthfully, I preferred my cheesecake straight. Fruit, except for strawberries, and chocolate just muddied the pure cream cheese taste. But Jean-Claude liked it, and dessert took the place of the wine I'd refused to order with dinner. I hated the taste of alcohol. So Jean-Claude's choice of dessert. Besides, the restaurant did not serve plain cheesecake. Not artistic enough, I guess.

I ate all the cheesecake, chased the last chocolate curl across the plate, and pushed it away. I was full. Jean-Claude had laid his arm across the tablecloth, rested his cheek on his arm, and closed his eyes, swooning, trying to savor every last taste. He blinked at me, as if coming out of a trance. He spoke, head still resting on his arm, "You have left some whipped cream, *ma petite*."

"I'm full," I said.

"It is real whipped cream. It melts on the tongue and glides across the palate."

I shook my head. "I am done. If I eat any more, I'll be sick."

He gave a long-suffering sigh and sat back up. "There are nights when I despair of you, *ma petite*."

I smiled. "Funny, I think the same thing about you sometimes."

He nodded his head, making a small bow. "Touché, *ma petite*, touché." He stared off past my shoulder and stiffened. The smile didn't fade from his face. It was wiped clean. His face was its blank unreadable mask. And I knew without turning around that someone was behind me, someone he feared.

I managed to drop my napkin, and picked it up with my left hand. With my right hand I drew the Firestar. When I sat back up, the gun was in my hand in my lap. Though shooting up Demiche's seemed like a bad idea. But hey, it wouldn't be the first bad idea I'd had.

I turned to see a couple walking towards us through the tables and crystal. The woman looked tall until you got a glimpse of the heels she was wearing. Stiletto, four inches. I'd have broken my ankle trying to walk in them. The dress was white, square necked, form-fitting, and more expensive than my entire outfit, even if you threw in the gun. Her hair was a white-blond so pale it matched the dress and the simple white mink stole curled around her shoulders. The hair was piled in a mound atop her head with a sparkle of silver and the crystal fire of diamonds to frame the hair like a crown. She was chalk-white, and despite the expert makeup I knew she hadn't fed yet tonight.

The man was human, though there was a thrumming energy to him that made me want to take back the human part. He was tanned that wonderful rich brown that olive skin can manage. His hair was a luxuriant curling brown, shaved short on the sides, but done so it fell in curls near his eyes. The eyes were pure brown and watched Jean-Claude steadily, joyously, but it was a dark joy. He was dressed in a white linen suit, complete with silk tie.

They stopped at our table like I knew they would. The man's handsome face was all for Jean-Claude. I might as well have not been there. He had very strong features, from high cheekbones to an almost-hooked nose. An inch

either direction and his face would have been homely. Instead, it was striking, compelling, handsome in an utterly masculine way.

Jean-Claude stood, hands loose at his side, face beautiful and empty. "Yvette, it has been a long time."

She smiled wonderfully. "A very long time, Jean-Claude. You remember Balthasar?" She touched the man's arm, and he obligingly slid it around her waist. He planted a chaste kiss on her pale cheek. He looked at me then for the first time. It wasn't a look I'd ever gotten from a man. If it had been a woman, I'd have said she was jealous. The vampire's English was perfect. Her accent was pure French.

"Of course, I remember him," Jean-Claude said. "Time spent with Balthasar was always memorable."

The man turned back to Jean-Claude then. "But not memorable enough to keep you with us." He, too, sounded French, but there was an undercurrent of some other language. It was like mixing blue and red and getting purple.

"I am master of my own territory. It is what everyone dreams of, is it not?"

"Some dream of a seat on the council," Yvette said. Her voice was still mildly amused, but there was an undercurrent now, like swimming in dark water when you know there are sharks.

"I do not aspire to such lofty heights," Jean-Claude said.

"Really?" Yvette said.

"Truly," Jean-Claude said.

She smiled, but her eyes stayed distant and empty. "We shall see."

"There is nothing to see, Yvette. I am content where I am."

"If that is so, you have nothing to fear from us."

"We have nothing to fear regardless," I said. I smiled when I said it.

Both of them looked at me as if I was a dog that had done an interesting trick. I was really beginning not to like either of them.

"Yvette and Balthasar are envoys of the council, *ma petite*."

"Bully for them," I said.

"She doesn't seem very impressed with us," Yvette said. She turned full-face to me. Her eyes were greyish-green, with tiny flecks of amber dancing round the pupils. I felt her try to suck me under with those eyes, and it didn't work. Her power raised goose bumps on my skin, but she couldn't capture me with her eyes. She was powerful, but she wasn't a master vampire. I could feel her age like an ache in my skull. A thousand years, at least. The last vamp I'd met who was that old had cleaned my clock. But Nikolaos had been Master of the City, and Yvette would never be that. If a vamp hadn't attained master status in a thousand years, she, or he, was never going to. A vamp gained power and abilities with age, but there was a limit. Yvette had reached hers. I stared into her eyes, let her power tickle across my skin, and wasn't impressed.

She frowned. "Impressive."

"Thanks," I said.

Balthasar stepped around her and went to one knee in front of me. He put one hand on the back of my chair and leaned into me. If Yvette wasn't a master, then he wasn't her human servant. Only a master vampire could make a human

servant. Which meant he belonged to someone else. Someone I hadn't met yet. Why did I get the feeling I'd be meeting that someone soon?

"My master is a council member," Balthasar said. "You have no idea what kind of power he wields."

"Ask me if I care."

Anger flared across his face, darkening his eyes, making his grip on my chair tight. He laid his hand on my leg just above my knee and started to squeeze. I'd played with the monsters long enough to know what supernatural strength feels like. His fingers dug into my flesh, and I knew he could keep squeezing until muscle popped and he bared my bones to the air.

I grabbed his silk tie and pulled him close, and shoved the barrel of the Firestar into his chest. I watched the surprise chase across his face from inches away.

"Bet I can blow a hole in your chest before you can crush my leg."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Why not?" I asked.

A touch of fear flowed through his eyes. "I am the human servant of a council member."

"Not impressed," I said. "Try door number two."

He frowned at me. "I don't understand."

"Give her a better reason not to kill you," Jean-Claude said.

"If you shoot me here in front of witnesses, you will go to jail."

I sighed. "There is that." I jerked him close enough that our faces almost touched. "Take your hand off my knee, slowly, and I won't pull this trigger. Keep hurting me, and I'll take my chances with the police."

He stared at me. "You would do it, you really would do it."

"I don't bluff, Balthasar. Remember that for future reference, and maybe I won't have to kill you."

His hand eased, then moved slowly away from me. I let him move back, his tie sliding through my hand like a fishing line. I eased back in my chair. The gun had never made it out from under the tablecloth. We'd been the soul of discretion.

The waiter came over anyway. "Is there a problem?"

"No problem," I said.

"Please bring our check," Jean-Claude said.

"Right away," the waiter said. He watched a little nervously while Balthasar got to his feet. Balthasar smoothed down the wrinkles in his linen pants, but there's only so much you can do with linen. It really isn't meant to be knelt in.

"You have won the first round, Jean-Claude. Be careful that it does not become a Pyrrhic victory." Yvette said. She and Balthasar left without ever taking a table. Guess they weren't hungry.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Jean-Claude sat back down. "Yvette is a council toady. Balthasar is the human servant of one of the most powerful council members."

"Why are they here?"

"I believe it is because of Mr. Oliver."

Mr. Oliver had been the oldest vampire I'd ever met. The oldest one I'd ever heard hinted at. He'd been a million years old, no joke, a million years, give or take. For all those with a head for prehistory, yes, that does mean he wasn't *Homo sapiens*. *Homo erectus*, and able to walk around during the day, though I never saw him cross direct sunlight. He'd been the only vamp to ever fool me for even a few moments into thinking he was human, which is nicely ironic, since he wasn't human at all. He'd had a plan to take out Jean-Claude, take over the vamps in the area, and force them to slaughter humans. Oliver had thought a slaughter like that would force the authorities to make vamps illegal again. He thought vampires would spread too quickly with legal rights and take over the human race. I'd sort of agreed with him.

His plan might have worked if I hadn't killed him. How I managed to kill him is a long story, but I'd ended up in a coma. A week unconscious, gone, so close to death that the doctors didn't know how I survived. Of course, they hadn't been too clear on why I was in a coma to begin with, and no one felt like explaining vampire marks and *Homo erectus* vampires.

I stared at Jean-Claude. "The crazy son of bitch that tried to take you out last Halloween?"

"*Oui*."

"What about him?"

"He was a council member."

I almost laughed. "No way. He was old, older than sin, but he wasn't that powerful."

"I told you he agreed to limit his powers, *ma petite*. I did not know who and what he was at first, but he was the council member known as the Earthmover."

"Excuse me?"

"He could cause the earth to shake by his power alone."

"No way," I said.

"Yes way, *ma petite*. He agreed not to cause the earth to swallow the city because it would be blamed on an earthquake. He wanted the bloodletting to be blamed on vampires. You remember his plan was to drive vampires back to being illegal. An earthquake would not do that. A bloodbath would. No one, not even you, believes that a mere vampire can cause an earthquake."

"Damn straight, I don't." I stared at his careful face. "You're serious."

"Deadly serious, *ma petite*."

It was too much to take in all at once. When in doubt ignore and be terribly unimpressed. "So we took out a council member, so what?"

He shook his head. "There is no fear in you, *ma petite*. Do you understand what danger we are all in?"

"No, and what do you mean the 'danger we are all in'? Who else is in danger besides us?"

"All our people," he said.

"Define 'all,'" I said.

"All my vampires, anyone that the council considers ours."

"Larry?" I asked.

He sighed. "Perhaps."

"Should I call him? Warn him? How much danger?"

"I am not sure. No one has ever slain a council member and not taken their place."

"I killed him, not you."

"You are my human servant. The council sees all that you do as an extension of my actions."

I stared at him. "You mean anyone I kill is your kill?"

He nodded.

"I wasn't your servant when I killed Oliver."

"I would keep that bit of knowledge to ourselves."

"Why?"

"They may not kill me, *ma petite*, but a vampire hunter who killed a council member would be executed. There would be no trial, no hesitation."

"Even though I'm your human servant now?"

"That might save you. It is one of our most stringent laws not to destroy another's servant."

"So they can't kill me because I'm your servant."

"But they can harm you, *ma petite*. They can harm you so very much that you may wish for death."

"You mean torture?"

"Not in a traditional sense. But they are masters at finding that which terrifies you most and using it against you. They will use your desires against you and twist everything you are into a shape of their choosing."

"I've met master vampires that could sense your heart's desire and use it against you."

"Everything you have seen of us before, *ma petite*, is like a distant dream. The council is the reality. They are the nightmare on which we are all based. The thing that even we fear."

"Yvette and Balthasar didn't seem that scary to me."

He looked at me. There was no expression on his face. It was a mask, smooth, pleasant, hidden. "If they did not frighten you, *ma petite*, it is only because you do not know them. Yvette is a toady of the council because they are powerful enough to give her a ready supply of victims."

"Victims? You aren't talking about human prey, are you?"

"It can be human. But Yvette is considered perverted even by other vampires."

I wasn't sure I wanted to know, but . . . "Perverted in what ways"

He sighed and looked down at his hands. They lay very still on the tablecloth. It was like he was pulling away from me. I could see the walls clicking back into place. He was rebuilding himself into Jean-Claude, Master of the City. It was a shock to realize that there had been a change. It had been so gradual that I hadn't realized that with me, on our dates, he was different. I don't know if he was more himself or more what he thought I wanted him to be,

but he was more "relaxed," less guarded. Watching him put on his public face while I sat across from him was almost depressing.

"Yvette loves the dead."

I frowned at him. "But she's a vampire. That's redundant."

He stared at me, and it wasn't a friendly look. "I will not sit here and debate with you, *ma petite*. You share my bed. If I were a zombie, you would not touch me."

"That's true." It took me a handful of seconds to understand what he'd just said. "Are you telling me that Yvette likes to have sex with zombies, real rotting corpses?"

"Among other things, yes."

I couldn't keep the disgust off my face. "Good Lord, that's . . ." Words failed me. Then I found a word. "She's a necrophiliac."

"She will use a dead body if nothing else is available, but her true joy is the rotted animated corpse. She would find your talent most appealing, *ma petite*. You could raise her an unending stream of partners."

"I wouldn't raise the dead for her amusement."

"Not initially," he said.

"No, not under any circumstances."

"The council has a way of finding circumstances that can force you to do almost anything."

I watched his face and wished I could read it. But I understood. He was hiding from them, already. "How deep is the hole we're in?"

"Deep enough to bury us all, if the council chooses."

"Maybe I shouldn't have put the gun up," I said.

"Perhaps not," he said.

The check came. We paid. We left. I made a stop at the ladies' room on the way out and retrieved the gun. Jean-Claude took my car keys, so I wouldn't have to handle anything but the gun. It was a short walk from bathroom to door. Black gun against a black dress. Either no one noticed, or no one wanted to get involved. What else was new?

Chapter 9

The parking lot was a dark expanse of shining blackness with pools of light spotlighting gleaming cars. Jaguars, Volvos, and Mercedes were the dominant species in the lot. I caught a glimpse of my Jeep at the far end of a line. I lost sight of it as we walked between the cars. Jean-Claude held my car keys cupped in his hand so they didn't rattle as he moved. We weren't holding hands, or anything else now. I had the Firestar in a two-handed grip, pointed at the ground, but ready. I was scanning the parking lot. My eyes flicking back

and forth. I wasn't coy about it. A cop would have known what I was doing from yards away. I was searching for danger, searching for targets.

I felt both silly and nervous. The skin across my bare shoulders was trying to crawl down my spine. It was silly, but I'd have felt better in jeans and a shirt. More secure.

"I don't think they're out here," I said softly.

"I'm sure you are right, *ma petite*. Yvette and Balthasar have delivered their message and run back to their masters."

I glanced at him before turning my attention back to the parking lot. "Then why am I in combat mode?"

"Because the council travels with an entourage. We have not seen the last of them tonight, *ma petite*. Of that, I can promise you."

"Great."

We came around the last cars between us and my Jeep. There was a man leaning against the Jeep. The Firestar was just suddenly pointing at him. No thinking, just paranoia—oh, sorry, caution.

Jean-Claude froze beside me, utterly motionless. The old vampires can do that—just seem to stop, stop breathing, stop moving, stop everything. As if, if you looked away, they might just disappear.

The man leaned on the back of my Jeep in profile. He was in the middle of lighting a cigarette. You'd have thought he hadn't seen us, but I knew better. I was pointing a gun at him. He knew we were there. The match flared, showing one of the most perfect profiles I'd ever seen. His hair shone golden in the light, shoulder-length, thick waves to frame his face. He tossed the match to the pavement with a practiced flick of his hand. He took the cigarette from his mouth and raised his face skyward. The street light played along his face and golden hair. He blew three perfect smoke rings and laughed.

That laugh trailed down my spine as if he'd touched me. It made me shiver, and I wondered how the hell I'd thought he was human.

"Asher," Jean-Claude said. That one word was spoken without emotion, empty of meaning. But it was all I could do not to look at Jean-Claude's face. I knew who Asher was, but only by reputation. Asher and his human servant, Julianna had traveled with Jean-Claude across Europe for a couple of decades. They'd been a *ménage à trois*, the closest thing Jean-Claude had had to a family since he became a vampire. Jean-Claude had been called away to his dying mother's bedside. Asher and Julianna had been taken by the Church. Read witch-hunters.

Asher turned and gave us his right profile. The street light that had caressed the perfection of his left side seemed harsh now. The right side of his face looked like melted candle wax. Burn scars, acid scars, holy water. Vampires couldn't heal damage done by holy objects. The priests had had a theory that they could burn the devil out of Asher one drop of holy water at a time.

I kept the gun on him, solid, no wavering. I'd seen worse, recently. I'd seen a vampire whose face had rotted away on one side. An eye had been rolling in a bare socket. Compared to that, Asher was a *GQ* cover boy. The thing that made

the scarring worse somehow was that the rest of him was so perfect. It made it worse somehow, more obscene. They'd left his eyes pure, and the midline of his face, so his nose, the fullness of his mouth, sat in a sea of scars. Jean-Claude had saved him before the zealots killed him, but Julianna had been burned as a witch.

Asher never forgave Jean-Claude for the death of the woman they both loved. In fact, last I'd heard, he was asking for my death. He would kill Jean-Claude's human servant as revenge. The council had refused him up until now.

"Step away from the Jeep, slowly," I said.

"Would you shoot me for leaning against your car?" He sounded amused, pleasant. The tone in his voice, the way he chose his words, reminded me of Jean-Claude when I'd first met him. Asher pushed to his feet using just his body. He blew a smoke ring at me and laughed again.

The sound slithered across my skin like the touch of fur, soft and feeling—oh, so slightly—of death. It was Jean-Claude's laugh, and that was unnerving as hell.

Jean-Claude took a deep, shuddering breath and stepped forward. He didn't block my line of sight though, and he didn't tell me to put the gun down. "Why are you here, Asher?" His voice held something I'd seldom heard, regret.

"Is she going to shoot me?"

"Ask her yourself. I am not the one holding the gun."

"So it is true. You do not control your own servant."

"The best human servants are those that come willingly to your hand. You taught me that, Asher. You and Julianna."

Asher threw the cigarette on the ground. He took two quick steps forward.

"Don't," I said.

His hands were balled into fists at his side. His anger rode the night like close lightning. "Never, never say her name again. You don't deserve to speak her name."

Jean-Claude gave a shallow bow. "As you wish. Now, what do you want, Asher? Anita will grow impatient soon."

Asher stared at me. He looked at me from head to toe, but it wasn't sexual, though that was in there. It was like he was looking me over, like I was a car he was thinking of buying. His eyes were a strange shade of pale blue. "Would you really shoot me?" He turned his head so that I couldn't see the scars. He knew exactly how the shadows would fall. He gave a smile that was supposed to melt me into my socks. It didn't work.

"Cut the charm and give me a reason *not* to kill you."

He turned his head so that a sheet of golden hair spilled over the right side of his face. If my night vision had been worse, it might have hidden the scars.

"The council extends their invitation to Jean-Claude, Master of the City of St. Louis, and his human servant, Anita Blake. They request your presence this night."

"You may put up the gun, *ma petite*. We are safe until we see the council."

"Just like that," I said. "Last I heard, Asher here wanted to kill me."

"The council refused his request," Jean-Claude said. "Our human servants are too precious to us for them to agree."

"Very true," Asher said.

The two vampires stared at each other. I expected them to try vampiric powers on each other, but they didn't. They just stood there, looking at one another. Their faces gave nothing away, but if they'd been people and not monsters, I'd have told them to hug and make up. You could feel their pain on the air. I realized something I hadn't before. They had loved each other once. Only love can turn to such bitter regret. Julianna had been their link, but it hadn't just been her they loved.

It was time to put the gun up, but irritatingly, I'd have to flash the parking lot. I was really going to have to invest in more dressy pants suits. Dresses just sucked for concealed carry.

There was no one else but the three of us in the parking lot. I turned my back on both of them and raised the dress enough to put up the gun.

"Please, don't be modest on my account," Asher said.

I smoothed the dress into place before I turned around. "Don't flatter yourself."

He smiled, and the look on his face was amused, condescending, and something else. That "something else" bothered me. "Modest. Were you also chaste before our dashing Jean-Claude found you?"

"That's enough, Asher," Jean-Claude said.

"She was a virgin before you?" He made it a question and then threw his head back and laughed. He laughed until he had to lean against the Jeep to steady himself. "You, wasted on a virgin. It is simply too perfect."

"I wasn't a virgin, not that it's any of your damn business."

The laughter stopped so abruptly, it was startling. He slid down to the ground, sitting on the dark pavement. He stared up at me through a curtain of golden hair. His eyes looked strange and pale. "Not virginal, but chaste."

"I've had enough games for one night," I said.

"The games are just beginning," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"It means, *ma petite*, that the council await us. They will have many games for us to play, none of them pleasant."

Asher rose to his feet like he'd been pulled by strings. He stood, brushing himself off. He settled his black overcoat more solidly into place. It was hot for a long coat. Not that he would necessarily care, but it was odd. Vamps usually tried to blend in better than that. Made me wonder what was underneath the coat. You could hide a pretty big gun under an ankle-length coat. I'd never met a vampire that carried a gun, but there was always a first time.

Jean-Claude had said we were safe until we reached the council, but that didn't mean Asher couldn't pull a weapon then and blow us away. It had been beyond careless to put up my gun without patting Asher down first.

I sighed.

"What is wrong, *ma petite*?"

Asher was a vampire. How much more dangerous could he be with a gun? But I couldn't do it. "Let me test my understanding. Is Asher going to ride in the car with us to the meeting?"

"I must, to give you directions," Asher said.

"Then lean against the Jeep."

He frowned at me in an amused, condescending sort of way. "Excuse me?"

"I don't care if you're the second coming of the Antichrist, you can't sit behind me in my own car until I know you're not carrying a weapon."

"*Ma petite*, he is a vampire. If he is sitting behind you in a car, he is close enough to kill you without a gun."

I shook my head. "You're right. I know you're right, but the point isn't logic, Jean-Claude. The point is that I simply can't let him in the car behind me without knowing what's under the coat. I just can't." It was true. Paranoid, but still true.

Jean-Claude knew me better than to argue. "Very well, *ma petite*. Asher would you be so kind as to face towards the Jeep."

Asher smiled brilliantly at both of us, flashing fang. "You want to pat me down? I could rip you into pieces with my bare hands, and you're worried I have a gun?" He chuckled, a low, skin-prickling sound. "That is so very cute."

Cute? Me? "Just do it, please."

He turned to face the Jeep, still laughing softly.

"Hands on the hood, feet apart." I got out the gun one more time. Maybe I should just carry it on a chain around my neck. I pressed the barrel into his spine. I felt him stiffen under my hands.

"You are serious about this."

"Absolutely," I said. "Feet further apart."

He shifted, but it wasn't enough.

I kicked his feet apart until his balance was off-center and started searching him one-handed.

"Dominant, very dominant. Does she like to be on top?"

I ignored him. More surprising, so did Jean-Claude.

"Slower, slower. Hasn't Jean-Claude taught you not to rush?" He drew in a breath at the appropriate moment. "Oooh, that's nice."

Yes, it was embarrassing, but I searched him top to bottom. There wasn't a damn thing to find. But I felt better. I stepped back until I was out of reach and put the gun up.

He was watching over his shoulder. "Do the panties match the bra?"

I shook my head. "You can stand up now."

He stayed against the car. "Don't you need to strip-search me?"

"In your dreams," I said.

He stood, smoothing his coat back into place. "You have no idea what I dream, Anita." I couldn't read the look on his face, but the look was enough. I didn't want to know what Asher saw when he closed his eyes at the break of day.

"Shall we go?" Jean-Claude said.

"Are you so eager to throw your life away?" Asher asked. The anger returned with a rush, chasing out the amused teasing gallant.

"The council will not kill me tonight," Jean-Claude said.

"Are you so sure?"

"It is their own laws that have forbidden those of us in the United States to fight amongst ourselves until the law has passed or failed to pass in Washington. The council wants us to remain legal in this country. If they break their own rules, no one else will obey them."

Asher turned full face into the light. "There are worse things than death, Jean-Claude."

Jean-Claude sighed. "I did not desert you, Asher. What can I say to convince you of the truth? You can taste the truth in my words. I came to you as soon as I knew."

"You have had centuries to convince yourself of what you want the truth to be, Jean-Claude. Wanting it to be true doesn't make it so."

"So be it, Asher. But I would undo whatever you think I have done, if I could. I would bring her back if I could."

Asher held up his hand as if he could push the thought away. "No, no, no! You killed her. You let her die. You let her burn to death. I felt her die, Jean-Claude. I was her master. She was so afraid. To the last she thought you would come save her. I was her master and I know that her last words were your name."

Jean-Claude turned his back on Asher. The other vampire closed the distance between them in two striding steps. He grabbed Jean-Claude's arm and swung him around. The street light showed tears on Jean-Claude's face. He was crying for a woman who had been dead over two hundred years. It was a long time for tears.

"You never told me that before," Jean-Claude said softly.

Asher pushed him away hard enough that he stumbled. "Save your tears, Jean-Claude. You'll need them for yourself and for her. They've promised me my revenge."

Jean-Claude touched the back of his hand to the tears. "You can't kill her. They won't allow that."

Asher smiled, and it was most unpleasant. "I don't want her life, Jean-Claude. I want your pain." He walked around me, circling like a shark. I moved with him and knew he was too close. If he rushed me, I'd never get the gun out in time.

"You've finally given me what I need to hurt you, Jean-Claude. You love someone else at last. Love is never free, Jean-Claude. It is the most expensive emotion we have, and I am going to see that you pay in full." He stood in front of Jean-Claude, hands in fists by his side. He was trembling with the effort not to strike out. Jean-Claude had stopped crying, but I wasn't sure he'd fight back. In that moment I realized he didn't want to hurt Asher. Guilt is a many splendored thing. Problem was, Asher wanted to hurt him.

I stepped between them. I took a step forward. Asher was either going to have to step back or we'd be touching. He stepped back, staring down at me as if I'd just appeared. He'd forgotten me for just a second.

"Love isn't the most expensive emotion, Asher." I said. I took another step forward, and he retreated another step. "Hate is. Because hate will eat you up inside and destroy you, long before it kills you."

"Very philosophical," he said.

"Philosophy's great," I said. "But remember this: don't ever threaten us again. Because if you do, I'll kill you. Because I don't give a fuck about your tortured past. Now, shall we go?"

Asher stared at me for a few heartbeats. "By all means. I cannot wait to introduce you to the council."

He meant it to be ominous, and it was. I didn't want to go and meet the bogeymen of vampirekind, but we were going. One thing I'd learned about master vampires. You can run, but not far enough. You can even hide, but not forever. Eventually, they catch you. And master vampires don't like to be kept waiting.

Chapter 10

I drove. Asher gave directions. He also hung on the back of the seat. I didn't ask him to buckle up for safety. Jean-Claude sat in the passenger seat next to me, silent, not looking at Asher or me.

"Something's wrong," Jean-Claude said.

I glanced at him. "You mean besides the council coming to town?" He shook his head. "Can't you feel it?"

"I don't feel anything."

"That is the problem." He turned as far as the seat belt would let him and met Asher's eyes. "What is happening to my people?"

Asher sat so his face showed perfectly in the rearview mirror, as if he wanted me to see him. He smiled. His whole face moved when he smiled. The scarred skin had muscles underneath. Everything seemed to work just fine except for the scars. The look on his face was smug, self-satisfied. The kind of joy that cats get from tormenting mice.

"I do not know what is happening to them, but you should. You are—after all—Master of the City."

"What's going on, Jean-Claude? What else is wrong?" I asked.

"I should be able to feel my people, *ma petite*. If I concentrate, it is like . . . background noise. I can feel the ebb and flow of them. In extreme duress I can feel their pain, their fear. Now I am concentrating, and it is like a blank wall."

"Balthasar's master has kept you from hearing the cries of your vampires," Asher said.

Jean-Claude's hand lashed out in a blur of speed that was almost magical. He grabbed Asher's coat collar, twisting it into a choking ring. "I-have-done-nothing-wrong. They have no right to harm my people."

Asher didn't try to get away. He just stared at him. "There is an empty seat on the council for the first time in over four thousand years. Whoever empties that seat takes that seat. That is the law of succession."

Jean-Claude released Asher slowly. "I don't want it."

"You shouldn't have killed the Earthmover, then."

"He would have killed us," I said.

"Council's privilege," Asher said.

"That's ridiculous," I said. "You're saying because we didn't roll over and die, we're going to be killed now?"

"No one has come here planning to kill anyone," Asher said. "Believe me, that was my vote, but I was the minority. The council just wants to make sure that Jean-Claude isn't trying to set up his own little council."

Jean-Claude and I both looked at him. I had to swing my attention back to the road before I was ready to stop being astonished.

"You are babbling, Asher," Jean-Claude said.

"Not everyone is happy with the current council's rules. Some say they are old-fashioned."

"People have been saying that for four hundred years," Jean-Claude said.

"Yes, but until now there was no alternative. Some see your refusal of the council seat as a blow for a new order."

"You know why I did not take it."

Asher laughed, a low roll that played along my skin. "Whatever do you mean, Jean-Claude?"

"I am not powerful enough to hold a council seat. The first challenger would sense that and kill me, then they would have my council seat. I would be a stalking-horse."

"Yet you killed a council member. How did you manage that, Jean-Claude?" He leaned on the back of my seat. I could feel him. He picked up a curl of my hair, and I jerked my head away.

"Where the hell are we going? You were supposed to give directions," I said.

"There is no need for directions," Jean-Claude said. "They have taken the Circus."

"What?" I stared at him, and the only thing that kept the Jeep from swerving was luck. "What did you say?"

"Don't you understand yet? The Traveler, Balthasar's master, blocked my powers and the powers of my vampires, and kept them from reaching out to me."

"Your wolves. You should have felt something from your wolves. They're your animal to call," I said.

Jean-Claude turned to Asher. "Only one vampire could have kept my wolves from calling out for help. The Master of Beasts."

Asher rested his chin on the back of my seat. I felt him nod.

"Get off my seat," I said.

He raised his head but didn't really move back.

"They must think me powerful indeed to send two council masters," Jean-Claude said.

Asher made a harsh sound. "Only you, Jean-Claude, would be arrogant enough to believe that two council masters came to this country just for you."

"If not to teach me a lesson, then why are they here?" Jean-Claude asked.

"Our dark queen wished to know how this legality is working for the vampires in the States. We have traveled from Boston to New Orleans to San Francisco. She chose what cities we would visit, and in what order. Our dark queen left St. Louis, and you, for last."

"Why would she do that?" Jean-Claude asked.

"The Queen of Nightmares can do anything she likes," Asher said. "She says go to Boston, we go."

"If she said, walk out into the sunlight, would you do it?" I asked. I glanced at him. He was close enough that turning my head was enough, no mirror needed.

His face was blank and beautiful, empty. "Perhaps," he said.

I turned back to the road. "You're crazy, you're all crazy."

"Too true," Asher said. He sniffed my hair.

"Stop that."

"You smell of power, Anita Blake. You reek of the dead." He traced his fingers along my neck.

I swerved the Jeep purposefully, sending him sliding around the back seat. "Don't touch me."

"The council thought we would find you stuffed with power. Bloated with new-found abilities, yet you seem much the same. But she is different. She is new. And there is that werewolf. Yes, that Ulfric, Richard Zeeman. You have him bound to you, as well."

Asher pulled himself back up to the seats, though not so close to me. "It is your servants who have the power. Not you."

"Is Padma anything without his animals?" Jean-Claude asked.

"Very true, though I might not say so in front of him." He leaned on the back of the seats again, not touching me this time. "So you admit it is your servants who have given you the power to take a council member."

"My human servant and my wolf are merely extensions of my power. Their hands are my hands; their deeds, my deeds. That is council law. So what does it matter where my power comes from?"

"Quoting council law, Jean-Claude. You have grown cautious since last we met."

"Caution has served me well, Asher."

"But have you had any fun?" It was a strange question coming from someone who was supposed to hate Jean-Claude.

"Some, and you, Asher how fares it with you? Are you still serving the council, or did you come along on this mission to torment me?"

"Yes, to both questions."

"Why have you not fled the council?"

"Many aspire to serve them," Asher said.

"You didn't."

"Perhaps revenge has changed my aspirations."

Jean-Claude laid his hand on Asher's arm. "*Ma petite* is right. Hatred is a cold fire, and it gives no warmth."

Asher jerked back, sliding as far back as the seat would let him. I glanced in my rearview mirror. He was huddled in the dark, hugging himself. "When I see you weep for your beloved, I will have all the warmth I need."

"We'll be at the Circus soon," I said. "What's the plan?"

"I am not sure there is a plan. We must assume they have all our people in thrall. So it will be only what the two of us can do alone."

"Are we going to try and take the Circus back, or what?"

Asher laughed. "Is she serious?"

"Always," Jean-Claude said.

"Fine. What are we supposed to do?"

"Survive if you can," Asher said.

"Shut up," I said. "This is what I need to know, Jean-Claude. Do we go in there kicking butt, or crawling?"

"Would you crawl to them, *ma petite*?"

"They have Willie, Jason, and who knows how many others. So, yeah, if it would keep them safe, I'd do a little crawling."

"I do not think you would be very good at it," Jean-Claude said.

"I'm not."

"But no, no crawling tonight. We are not strong enough to retake the Circus, but we go in, as you say, kicking butt."

"Dominant?" I made it a question.

"*Oui*."

"How dominant?"

"Be aggressive, but not foolish. You may wound anyone you are capable of hurting, but do not kill. We do not want to give them an excuse."

"They think you've started a revolution, Jean-Claude," Asher said from the darkness. "Like all revolutionaries, dead you become a martyr. They don't want you dead."

Jean-Claude turned so he could see the other vampire. "Then what do they want, Asher? Tell me."

"They have to make an example of you. Surely you see that."

"If I had planned on forging a second council in America, yes, I would see their point. But I know my limitations. I cannot hold a council seat against all comers. It would be a death sentence. I want simply to be left alone."

Asher sighed. "It is too late for that, Jean-Claude. The council is here, and they will not believe your protestations of innocence."

"You believe him," I said.

He was quiet for a few seconds, then said, "Yes, I believe him. The one thing Jean-Claude has always done well is survive. Challenging the council is not a good way to do that." Asher slid forward against the seats, putting his face very near mine. "Remember, Anita, that all those years ago, he waited to save me. Waited until he knew he wouldn't be caught. Waited until he could save me at the least risk to himself. Waited until Julianna was dead, because it was too great a risk to take."

"That is not true," Jean-Claude said.

Asher ignored him. "Be careful that he does not wait to save you."

"I don't wait around for anybody to save me," I said.

Jean-Claude stared out the window at the passing cars. He was shaking his head gently, back and forth, back and forth. "I tire of you already, Asher."

"You tire of me because I speak the truth."

Jean-Claude turned and faced him. "No, I tire of you because you remind me of her, and that once, a very long time ago, I was almost happy."

The two vampires stared at each other. "But now you have a second chance," Asher said.

"You could have a second chance, too, Asher. If you would only let the past go."

"The past is all I have."

"And that is not my fault," Jean-Claude said. Asher slid back into the darkness, huddling against the seat. I thought Jean-Claude had won the argument for now. But just call it a feeling; I didn't think the fight was over.

Chapter 11

The Circus of the Damned is in a converted warehouse. From the front it looks like a carnival with posters promoting the freak show, and dancing clowns twirling on top of the glowing sign. From the back, it's just dark.

I pulled the Jeep into the small parking lot reserved for employees. It was small because most of the help lived at the Circus. No need for a car if you never left. Here was hoping we'd be needing our car.

I turned off the engine, and silence swirled into the car. Both vampires had sunk into that utter stillness that made me have to glance at them to make sure they were still there. Mammals can freeze, but a rabbit frozen waiting for the fox to pass is a vibrating thing. It breathes fast and faster. Its heart pounds. Vampires are more like snakes. A snake will put a length of its body out, then freeze. There is no sense of movement stopped. No sense that movement will continue. In that moment of frozen time a snake seems unreal, more like a work of art, something carved rather than something alive. Jean-Claude seemed to have fallen into a well of silence where movement, even breath, was forbidden.

I glanced back at Asher. He sat in the back seat. Utterly still, a perfect golden presence, but not alive.

The silence filled the Jeep like icy water. I wanted to clap my hands, yell, anything to make noise, to startle them into being again. But I knew better. All I'd get would be a blink and a look. A look that wasn't human and maybe never had been.

The sound of my dress against the upholstery was loud. "Will they pat me down for weapons?" My voice seemed flat in the charged silence.

Jean-Claude blinked gracefully, then turned his neck to look at me. The look was peaceful rather than empty. I had begun to wonder if the stillness was a form of meditation for the vampires. Maybe if we lived through the night I'd ask.

"This is a challenge, *ma petite*. They will let us be dangerous. Though I would not flaunt your weaponry. Your little gun is fine."

I shook my head. "I was thinking of more."

He raised his eyebrows. "More?"

I turned to look at Asher. He blinked and raised his eyes to me. I hit the dome light and saw his eyes' true color for the first time. They were blue. But that didn't do them justice. They were as pale a blue as Jean-Claude's were a dark blue. Pale, cold, blue, the startling color of a Husky's eyes. But it wasn't just the eyes, it was the hair. It had looked golden, but the normal gold of a dark blond. In the truer light of the car, I realized it wasn't just illusion and dim light, it was gold. His hair was the truest gold I'd ever seen outside of a bottle or a can of metallic paint. The combination of hair and eyes was amazing. Even without the scars he wouldn't have looked real.

I glanced from one vampire to the other. Jean-Claude was the more beautiful, and it wasn't the scars. Asher was just a trace more handsome than he was pretty. "The same vamp made you both, right?" I asked.

Jean-Claude nodded.

Asher just stared at me.

"Where'd she go?" I asked. "Unnaturally-Beautiful-Studs-R-Us?"

Asher let out a harsh bark of laughter. He dragged his fingers down the scarred side of his face, making the skin stretch, drawing it away from his eye so you could see the pale inner flesh of the eye socket. He emphasized everything into a kind of hideous mask. "Do you think I am beautiful, Anita?" He released the skin, and it snapped back into place, resilient, perfect in its own way.

I looked at him. "What do you want me to say, Asher?"

"I want you to be terrified. I want to see on your face what I've seen on every face for the last two hundred years—disgust, derision, horror."

"Sorry," I said.

He leaned into the seats, showing the scars to the light. He seemed to have an innate sense of what any light would do to the wounds, to know just how the shadows would fall. Years of practice, I guess.

I just looked at him. I met his pale, perfect eyes, gazed on the thick waves of golden hair, the fullness of his lips. I shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a hair and eye person, and you have great hair and amazing eyes."

Asher threw himself back into his seat. He gazed at us both, and there was such rage in his eyes. Such horrible rage that it scared me.

"There," he said. "There, you're afraid of me. I can see it, smell it, taste it." He smiled, pleased with himself, triumphant somehow.

"Tell him what you fear, *ma petite*."

I glanced at Jean-Claude, then back at Asher. "It's not the scars, Asher. It's your hatred that's frightening."

He leaned forward, and I think without meaning to, his hair spilled around his face, camouflaging him. It had the look of long habit, long comfort. "Yes, my hatred is frightening. Terrifying. And remember, Anita Blake, that the hatred is all for you and your master."

I knew he meant Jean-Claude, and I couldn't argue with the title anymore, though sometimes I wanted to. "Hatred makes us all ugly," I said.

He hissed at me, and there was nothing human in the gesture.

I gave him a bored look. "Come off it, Asher. Been there, done that. If you want to play big-bad-vampire, get in line."

He stripped his overcoat off in an abrupt, violent movement. A brown tweed suit jacket ended up crumpled on the seat. He turned his head so I could see that the scars marched down his neck into the collar of his white dress shirt. He started unbuttoning the shirt.

I glanced at Jean-Claude. His face was impassive, unhelpful. I was on my own. So what else was new?

"Not that I don't appreciate the offer, but I don't usually let a man strip down on the first date."

He snarled at me. He bared his chest to the light, shirt still carefully tucked into his pants. The scars dribbled down his flesh like someone had drawn a dividing line down the center of his body. One half pale and perfect, the other half monstrous. They'd been more careful of his face and neck. They had not been careful of his chest. The scars cut deep runnels. The skin so melted that it didn't even look real anymore. The scars flowed down his stomach into the belted top of his pants.

I stared because that's what he wanted me to do. When I could finally meet his eyes, I had no words left. I'd had holy water poured on a vampire bite before. Cleansed, they called it. Torture was another word for it. I'd crawled and cursed and vomited. I couldn't imagine the pain he'd survived.

His eyes were wide and fierce and fearful. "The scars go all the way down," he said.

That left a trail of visuals that I'd been trying to avoid. I thought of a lot of things to say: "Wow," but it seemed too junior high school and cruel; "sorry" was totally inadequate. I spread my hands wide, kneeling on the seat looking at him. "I asked you once before, Asher. What do you want me to say?"

He pushed himself as far away from me as he could, back against the Jeep's door. "Why doesn't she look away? Why doesn't she hate me? Why isn't she disgusted with this body?"

Like he was disgusted. It hung unsaid on the air, but it was there in his eyes, in the way he held himself. Unspoken, the words hung in the air with the weight and push of thunder.

He yelled, "Why don't I see in her eyes what I see in everyone's eyes?"

"You do not see horror in my eyes, *mon ami*," Jean-Claude said.

"No," Asher said, "I see worse. I see pity!" He opened the car door without turning around. I would have said he fell out of the car, but that isn't true. He floated upward before he could touch the ground. There was a backwash of wind that swept over me like a storm, and he was gone.

Chapter 12

We sat in silence for a few seconds, both of us staring at the open door. Finally, I had to fill the silence. "My, people do come and go quickly here."

Jean-Claude didn't get the movie reference. Richard would have gotten it. He liked the "Wizard of Oz." Jean-Claude answered me seriously, "Asher always was very good at flying."

Someone chuckled. The sound made me reach for the Firestar. The voice was familiar but the tone was new; arrogant, profoundly arrogant.

"Silver bullets won't kill me anymore, Anita. My new master has promised me that."

Liv appeared in the open car door, peering in at us, muscular arms propped on the sides of the door. She smiled broadly enough to flash fangs. When you pass the five-hundred mark like Liv, you only flash fangs when you want to. She was grinning like the Cheshire cat, very pleased about something. She wore a black sports bra and high-cut jogging shorts so that all that body-building muscle gleamed in the street lights. She was one of the vamps that Jean-Claude had invited into his territory recently. She was supposed to be one of his vampire lieutenants.

"What canary did you eat?" I asked.

She frowned at me. "What?"

"The cat that ate the canary," I said.

She continued to frown. Liv's English is perfect, no accent of any kind. Sometimes I forget that it's not her first language. A lot of the vamps have lost their original accents but they still don't understand all the slang. But, hey, I bet Liv knew some Slavic slang that I'd never heard.

"Anna is asking why you are so pleased with yourself," Jean-Claude said, "but I think I already know the answer."

I glanced at him, then back at Liv. I had the Firestar out but not pointed. She was supposed to be on our side. I was getting the feeling that might have changed.

"Did Liv say, her new master?" I asked.

"She did," Jean-Claude said.

I raised the gun and pointed it at her. She laughed. It was unnerving. She crawled into the back seat, still laughing. Very unnerving. Liv may have been six hundred years old and some change, but she wasn't powerful. Certainly not powerful enough to laugh off silver ammo.

"You know I'll shoot you, Liv. So what's the joke?"

"Can you not feel it, *ma petite*? The difference in her."

I steadied my hand on the back of the seat, gun pointed at her impressive chest. I was less than two feet from her, at this distance the bullet would take out her heart. She wasn't worried. She should have been.

I concentrated on Liv. Tried to roll her power in my mind. I'd done her before, knew what she felt like in my head. Or thought I did. Her power beat along my skull, hummed down my bones. I could feel her power like a thrumming note so deep and low it was almost painful.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I kept the gun pointed at her. "If I pull this trigger, Liv, even with the boost in power you'll die."

Liv looked at Jean-Claude. It was a long, self-satisfied look. "You know I won't die, Jean-Claude."

"Only the Traveler could make such an extravagant promise, and hope to keep it," Jean-Claude said. "You are a little too feminine for his tastes, unless he has changed."

Her face was disdainful. "He is above such petty desires. He offered me only power and I accepted."

Jean-Claude shook his head. "If you truly believe the Traveler above the desires of the body, then he has been very . . . careful around you, Liv."

"He is not like the others," she said.

Jean-Claude sighed. "On that I will not argue, Liv. But be careful that his power does not become addictive."

"You seek to frighten me, but it will not work, Jean-Claude. His power is like nothing I have ever felt before, and he can share it. I can be what I was meant to be."

"He can fill you to bursting with his power, Liv, it will not make you a master. If he has promised you that, then he has lied to you."

She hissed at him. "You would say anything to save yourself tonight."

He shrugged. "Perhaps."

"I thought Liv took an oath of loyalty to you," I said.

"*Oui*."

"Then what's going on?"

"The council will be very careful to observe the rules, *ma petite*. The Circus is a public business, thus the council might have crossed the threshold uninvited. Instead, they found someone to invite them inside."

I stared at the smirking vamp in the back of my Jeep. "She betrayed us?"

"Yes," he said softly. He touched my shoulder. "Do not kill her, *ma petite*. The bullet would enter, but the Traveler would not allow her death. You would simply waste a bullet."

I shook my head. "She betrayed you, all of you."

"If they could not have bribed someone, they would have tortured someone else into betraying us. I much prefer this method," he said.

I stared down the barrel of the gun at Liv's smiling face. I could have pulled the trigger and not worried about it. She'd done all the damage she could do. It wasn't like I'd be killing her to save us. I didn't want, or not want, to pull the trigger. I simply thought she deserved to die for betraying us. Not anger, or even outrage, just good business. It was a bad precedent to allow anyone to betray you and survive. It set a bad example. I realized with an almost physical jolt that killing her meant nothing to me. Just good business. Sweet Jesus. I put up the gun. I didn't want to kill anyone that coldly. Killing didn't bother me, but it should mean something.

Liv leaned back in the seat, grinning, pleased I'd seen the futility of shooting her. If she only realized why I hadn't done it, she might still have been scared of me, but she was hiding behind the power of this Traveler. Confident that it was shield enough against anything. If she pissed me off enough tonight, maybe we'd test the theory.

I shook my head. If I was going to meet the bogeymen of vampirekind I needed more weapons. I had my wrist sheaths, complete with silver knives, in the glove compartment. I often carried them in the Jeep when I wore something I couldn't wear them with, like the dress. Never knew when you'd need a good knife.

"I'll tell them about any weapons I see," she said.

I finished buckling the knives in place. "Yvette and Balthasar know I have the gun. I'm not trying to be subtle here, just prepared." I opened the door and stepped out. I scanned the darkness for more company, though the really old ones could hide almost in plain sight. Some vampires had chameleons beat all to hell when it came to blending with their surroundings. I'd seen one that could wrap himself in shadows, then fling them aside like a cloak. It had been impressive.

Liv scooted out of the car to stand near me. She'd lifted a few too many weights to cross her arms comfortably but she was trying. Trying for that nonchalant bodyguard look. She was six feet tall and built like a brick outhouse; she didn't have to try hard to look intimidating.

Jean-Claude got out of the car on my side, putting himself between the two of us. I wasn't sure who he was protecting; her or me.

He had Asher's long coat in his arms. "I suggest, *ma petite*, that you wear this to cover the weapons."

"I'll tell them about the knives," Liv said.

"If the weapons are in plain sight, it is more of a challenge," Jean-Claude said. "Someone might feel compelled to take them from you."

"They can try," I said.

Jean-Claude handed me the coat, draped across his arms. "Please, *ma petite*."

I took it from him. He didn't say "please" often.

I slipped the black coat on. I was reminded of two things. One, it was too damn hot to wear a coat. Two, Asher was six foot or more, the coat was huge. I started rolling up the sleeves.

"Anita," Liv said.

I glanced at her.

She looked serious now, her strong Nordic face blank and unreadable.

"Look into my eyes."

I shook my head. "What do you guys do, sit around watching old Dracula movies and stealing the dialogue?"

Liv took a threatening step forward. I just stared up at her. "Save the big-bad-vampire routine, Liv. We've done this and you can't roll me with your eyes."

"*Ma petite*," Jean-Claude said, "do as she asks."

I frowned at him. "Why?" Suspicious, who me?

"Because if the Traveler's extra power can bespell you through Liv's eyes, it would be better to know here in relative safety than inside among our greater foes."

He had a point, but I didn't like it. I shrugged. "Fine." I stared at her face, into her blue eyes, though the color was a little washed out from the street light.

Liv turned; a spill of yellow light from the open car door hit her eyes and made them that amazing violet-blue, almost purple. Her eyes were her best feature and I'd never had any trouble meeting that flower-petal gaze.

I still could. Not even a twinge.

Liv's hands balled into fists. She spoke, but I didn't think she was talking to either of us, "You promised me. Promised me enough power to roll her mind."

There was a rush of wind, cold enough to make me shiver and huddle into the long coat.

Liv laughed, a loud bray of sound. She raised her arms to the cold wind as if it were wrapping her around like drapes in the breeze.

The cold wind raised the hairs on the back of my neck, but it wasn't the temperature, it was the power in it.

"Now," Liv said, "look into my eyes, if you dare."

"Little better on the dialogue," I said.

"Are you afraid to meet my gaze, Executioner?"

The cold wind that had come from nowhere died, then faded, a last icy caress. I waited until the summer heat slid over me like plastic wrap, waited until sweat trailed down my spine; then I looked up.

Once upon a time I'd avoided looking any vamp in the eyes. I'd had some natural immunity, but even the lesser vamps were dangerous. Their gaze was one trick that almost all of them had to a lesser, or greater, extent. My powers had grown, and the vampire marks had cinched it. I was pretty much immune to vampire gaze. So why was I afraid now?

I met Liv's violet gaze solid, no flinching. At first there was nothing but their extraordinary color. A tension went out of me, my shoulders loosened. They were just eyes. Then it was as if the violet of her eyes was water, and I was something that skated over the surface tension, until something rose from her eyes and pulled me down. Always before it had been like falling, but now something had me, something dark, and strong. It sucked me under like water under ice. I screamed, and lashed out. Lashed out against that cold film of ice, reached for a surface that wasn't physical, wasn't even metaphorical, but I fought to rise. Fought against the pull of that darkness.

I came to myself, kneeling on the parking lot with Jean-Claude's hand grasped in mine. "*Ma petite, ma petite*, are you all right?"

I just shook my head. I didn't trust my voice yet. I'd forgotten how much I hated being rolled by their gaze. Forgotten how helpless I felt. My own power was making me careless around the damn things.

Liv leaned against the side of the Jeep. She seemed tired, too. "I almost had you."

I found my voice. "You didn't have anything. It wasn't your eyes I was being sucked into. It was his."

She shook her head. "He promised me the power to do you, Anita. To take your mind."

I let Jean-Claude help me to my feet, which tells you how shaky I was feeling. "Then he lied, Liv. It's not your power, it's his."

"You fear me now," she said. "I can feel your fear in my head."

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm scared. If that makes you happy, then laugh it up." I started backing away from her. More weapons. I needed more weapons.

"It does make me happy," she said. "You'll never know how happy it makes me."

"His power has left you, Liv," Jean-Claude said.

"It will return," she said.

I was on the other side of the Jeep. I was headed for the back of it, but I didn't want to be within touching range of Liv right this second. I'd broken free, but I didn't want to keep pushing my luck.

"The power may return, Liv, but Anita has broken his bond with you. She has pushed his power aside."

"No," Liv said. "He has chosen to let her go."

Jean-Claude laughed and it chased along my body, and I knew that Liv felt it, too. "The Traveler would have kept *ma petite*, if he could have held her. But he could not. She is too big a fish even for his net."

"Liar!" Liv said.

I left Liv and Jean-Claude to argue between themselves. I'd broken free of the Traveler's power, but it hadn't been pretty, or easy. Though come to think of it, as soon as I started to struggle, it had broken. The sad truth was I hadn't tried to shield myself. I'd stared into Liv's eyes empty and waiting, confident that she couldn't roll me. It had been stupid. No—arrogant. Sometimes there isn't a whole lot of difference between the two.

I walked to the rear of the Jeep. I crawled in the cargo area. Edward, assassin of the undead, had persuaded me to let an acquaintance of his remodel my Jeep. The wheel well on one side was now a secret compartment. Inside was my extra Browning and extra ammo. I'd felt silly when he'd talked me into it. I didn't feel silly now. I opened the compartment and found a surprise. A mini-Uzi complete with shoulder strap. There was a note taped to the gun.

"You can never have too much firepower."

He hadn't signed it, but it was Edward. He'd started his career as a normal assassin, but humans became too easy so he switched to monsters. He did love a challenge. I had another mini-Uzi at home. It had been a gift from Edward, too. He had the best toys.

I took off the coat and slid the Uzi's strap across my chest. When I slipped the coat back on, the Uzi hung at my back. Not perfect but not too noticeable. The second Browning Hi-Power was in the compartment, too. I put it in my pocket and two extra clips of ammo in the other pocket. When I slid to the ground, the coat hung funny, but it was so big on me that it wasn't conspicuous.

The vampires weren't arguing anymore. Liv leaned against the Jeep looking sullen, as if Jean-Claude had had the last word, or won the argument.

I stood watching her. I wanted to shoot her. Not because she'd betrayed us, but because she'd scared me. Not a good enough reason. Besides, it had been my own carelessness that let her scare me. I tried not to punish other people for my mistakes.

"I can't let you go unpunished, Liv," Jean-Claude said. "The council would see it as a weakness."

She just looked at him. "Hit me if it will make you feel better, Jean-Claude." She pushed away from the Jeep and crossed the distance between them with three long strides. She lifted her chin like a bully daring you to take the first swing.

He shook his head. "No, Liv." He touched her face gently. "I had something else in mind." He caressed her face, rubbing his hand along her cheek.

She sighed, rubbing her face against his palm. Liv had been trying to get into Jean-Claude's pants since she hit town. She'd never hidden her plan to sleep her way to the top. She'd been very . . . frustrated that he wouldn't cooperate.

She laid a gentle kiss on his palm. "Things could have been so different if it weren't for your pet human."

I walked up behind them and it was like I wasn't there. They were in some private place that just happened to be in plain sight.

"No, Liv," Jean-Claude said, "it would not have been different. It was not Anita that kept you from my bed, it was you." His hand closed on her throat. His fingers convulsed in her flesh. He made a sharp movement and tore the front of her throat out.

Liv collapsed to the pavement, choking, blood flowing in a crimson wash down her front, out of her mouth. She rolled onto her back, hands clawing at her throat.

I came to stand beside him and stared down at her. I caught a glimpse of her spine deep in the wound. Her eyes were wide, pain-filled, frightened.

Jean-Claude was wiping his hand off on a silk handkerchief he'd pulled from somewhere. He'd flung the gobbets of flesh to the pavement, where they lay looking small and not important enough to die over.

We both watched her writhing on the pavement. Jean-Claude's face was that empty mask he wore, beautiful and distant, like trying to draw comfort from the moon. I didn't have a mirror, and my face would never be his lovely perfection, but it was just as empty. I watched Liv flop on the pavement and felt no pity.

No cold wind came to save her. I think that surprised Liv, because she reached for Jean-Claude. Reached for him, begging with her eyes for him to help her. He was motionless, sunk into that great waiting stillness, as if he was willing himself to vanish. Maybe it did bother him to watch her die.

If she'd been human, it would have been pretty fast. But she wasn't human, and it wasn't fast. She wasn't dying. I wasn't sure it was pity, but I couldn't just stand there and watch anyone in such pain, such terror.

I pulled the Browning out of the coat pocket and pointed it at her head. "I'm going to end this."

"She will heal, *ma petite*. It is a wound that her own vampire body will heal, in time."

"Why isn't her new master helping her?" I asked.

"Because he knows she will heal without his aid."

"No wasted energy, huh?"

"Something like that," he said. It was hard to tell through the blood, but it did look as if the wound was filling in; there was just so much to fill in.

"We offer our throat, or wrist, or the bend of our elbow to each other as a formal greeting. The lesser offer up their flesh to the greater as an acknowledgment of power. It is a pretty thing, a polite thing, but this is the reality, *ma petite*. Liv offered me her throat and I took it."

I stared into her wide, wide eyes. "Did she know this was a possibility?"

"If she did not, then she is a fool. Such violence is never condoned unless the lesser vampire questions the authority of the greater vampire. She questioned my dominance over her. This is the price."

Liv turned onto her side, coughing. Her breath rattled in her throat in a painful gasp. Things were re-forming. She was breathing again. When she had enough air to speak, she said, "Damn you, Jean-Claude." Then she coughed blood. Yummy.

Jean-Claude held his hand out to me. He'd wiped it off, but you never get the blood out from around the fingernails without soap and water. I hesitated, then took his hand. We'd get bloodier before the night was over, it was almost guaranteed.

We walked towards the Circus. The coat billowed behind me like a cape. The Uzi bounced lightly against my back. I'd added one extra thing from the glove compartment. A long silver chain with a cross on it. I'd gotten longer chains when I started dating Jean-Claude. The shorter ones spilled out of my

clothing at awkward moments. I was loaded for bear, uh, vampire, and ready to go kill something. Edward would have been proud.

Chapter 13

The side door of the Circus has no handle. The only way in is if someone opens the door. Security measures. Jean-Claude knocked, and the door swung inward at his touch. Open, waiting, expecting us. Ominous.

The door opened into a small storage room with a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling. A stark room with a few boxes against one wall. A door to the right led into the main part of the Circus, where people were usually riding the Ferris wheel and eating cotton candy. A smaller door led off to the left. There were no bright lights and cotton candy in that direction.

The light swung back and forth as if someone had just hit it. The naked bulb made the shadows thicker, and the light dance until it was hard to tell shadow from light. Something glinted on the left-hand door. Something attached to its surface. I didn't know what it was, except it glinted dully in the strange light.

I shoved the door flat against the wall just to make sure no one was behind it. Then I put my back to the door and trained the Browning on the room.

"Stop the bulb from swinging," I said.

Jean-Claude reached up and touched the bulb. He had to stand on tiptoe to do it. Whoever had set it swinging was over six feet.

"The room is empty, *ma petite*," Jean-Claude said.

"What's on the door?" It was flat and thin, and my mind couldn't make a shape out of it. Whatever it was, it was hammered to the door with silver nails.

Jean-Claude let out a long sigh. "*Mon Dieu*."

I crossed the room with the Browning pointed two-handed at the floor. Jean-Claude said the room was empty. I trusted that, but I trusted me more.

Liv staggered to the door. The front of her body was covered with blood, but her throat was perfect. I wondered if the Traveler had helped her after we walked away. She coughed, and cleared her throat so violently it sounded painful. "I wanted to see your faces when you saw the Master of Beasts' compromise," she said. "The Traveler refused to let him and his people greet you in person. This is the Master of Beasts' calling card. How do you like it?" She sounded eager in a predatory, unpleasant sort of way. What the fuck was on the door?

Even standing next to it, I didn't know what it was. Thin rivulets of blood were seeping down the door from it. The sweet metallic scent of blood warmed the stale air. The thing was almost paper thin, but had a consistency more like plastic. It curled at the edges, straining against the five silver nails.

I suddenly had an awful idea. So awful, my eyes couldn't see it even after I'd thought it. I took three steps back from the thing and tried to see the silhouette. There; there; two arms, two legs, shoulders. It was a human skin. Once I found the shape of it, I couldn't stop seeing it. I knew that when I closed my eyes tonight that it would haunt me. That thin stretched thing that used to be a person.

"Where are the hands and feet?" I asked. My voice sounded strange, distant, almost unattached. My lips and fingertips tingled with the pure horror of it.

"It is merely the back of someone's body, not the entire skin, *ma petite*. Besides, it is hard to take the living skin off of fingers and toes when your victim is still struggling," Jean-Claude said. His voice was utterly flat, carefully empty.

"Struggling? You mean whoever this was, was alive?"

"You are the police expert, *ma petite*."

"It wouldn't be bleeding this much if they hadn't been alive," I said.

"Yes, *ma petite*."

He was right. I did know that. But the sight of a human skin nailed to a door had thrown me. It was a first, even for me. "Sweet Jesus, do the silver nails mean the victim was vampire or lycanthrope?"

"Most likely," Jean-Claude said.

"Does that mean they're still alive?"

He looked at me. His look managed to be empty and eloquent all at the same time. "They were alive when the skin was removed. If vampire, or lycanthrope, the mere removal of the skin would not be sufficient to kill them."

A shudder ran through me from head to feet. It wasn't exactly fear. It was horror. Horror at the casualness of it, the callousness of it. "Asher mentioned Padma. Is he the Beast Master?"

"The Master of Beasts," Jean-Claude said. "You cannot kill him for this indiscretion, *ma petite*."

"You're wrong," I said. The horror was there like a coating of ice underneath my skin, but over that was anger. Rage. And under the rage was fear. Fear of anyone that would skin another person alive just to make a point. Told you something about a person. Told you how few rules they had. Told me, in no uncertain terms, that I should kill him as soon as I saw him.

"We cannot punish them for this tonight, *ma petite*. Tonight is about survival for all of us. Remember that and curb your anger."

I stared at the thing on the door. "I am way past anger."

"Then curb your rage. We must save the rest of our people."

"If they're alive."

"They were alive when I came upstairs to wait for you," Liv said.

"Who's skin is it?" I asked.

She laughed, and it was her usual bray. All healed, all better. "Guess," she said. "If you guess right, I'll tell you, but only if you guess right."

It took more control than was pretty not to point the Browning at her. I shook my head. "No games, Liv, not with you. The real games don't even begin until we get downstairs."

"Well said, *ma petite*. Let us go down."

"No," Liv said. "No, you'll guess. You'll guess who it is. I want to see your face. I want to see the pain in your eyes while you think about each of your friends, Anita. I want to watch the horror on your face while you picture it happening to each of them."

"What did I ever do to you, Liv?"

"You stood in my way," she said.

I shook my head and pointed the gun at her. "Three strikes and you're out, Liv."

She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Betraying us was one. Trying to roll me with your eyes was number two. That was partly my fault, so I would have let it go. But you took an oath to protect all of Jean-Claude's people. You swore to use that wonderful body, that strength, to protect those weaker than yourself. Whoever belongs to that skin was someone you swore to protect. Instead, you betrayed them. Delivered them over to hell. Strike three, Liv."

"You can't kill me, Anita. The Traveler will heal me, no matter what you do."

I shot her in the right kneecap. She fell to the floor, holding the shattered leg, writhing, screaming.

I felt myself smile, most unpleasant. "I hope it hurts, Liv. I hope it hurts like hell."

The temperature in the room dropped like a stone. It felt cold enough that I half expected to see my breath. Liv's screams stopped, and she stared up at me with her violet eyes. If looks could have killed, I'd have dropped on the spot.

"You cannot harm me, Anita. My master will not allow it." Liv got to her feet with the faintest of limps. She walked to the door with its awful burden. She stretched the edge of the thing, showing holes in the skin that had nothing to do with the skinning process. "I fed on him while they tortured him. I drank his blood while he screamed." Her fingers came away stained with blood. She licked them clean, sliding her fingers in and out of her mouth. "Hmm, tasty."

All I had to do was guess who it was, and she'd tell me. All I had to do was play her game. I shot her in the other knee.

She collapsed to the floor, shrieking. "Don't you understand? You can't hurt me."

"Oh, I think I can, Liv, I think I can." I shot the right knee again. She lay on her back, screaming, grabbing at her shattered knees, and recoiling, because her own touch hurt.

The Traveler's power raised the hair on my body in a shiver of goose bumps. He really was going to heal her. If I wasn't going to kill her, I needed to be somewhere else before she could walk. I knew Liv well enough to know that when she could stand she was going to be pissed. Not that I blamed her. In fact,

if I just stood there long enough for her to get to her feet, it'd be self-defense. Of course, it'd be premeditated self-defense.

"Come, *ma petite*, let her be. The Traveler does not give his blessings so easily a second time, or would this be the third? He will heal her at his own pace now. A blessing and a punishment rolled into one. As most of the council's gifts are wont to be."

He opened the door that led downstairs. His hand came away with blood on it. He held the hand out in front of him like he didn't know what to do with it. He finally walked through the door, wiping his hand along the wall, smearing the blood down the stones in a faint crimson line.

"The longer we delay, the more tortures they will think of." With that comforting line he started down the steps. I gave one last glance to Liv. She lay on her side, crying, shrieking. She was shrieking that she was going to see me dead. I should have shot her in the head until her brains leaked on the floor. If I was truly ruthless, I would have. But I didn't. I left her alive and screaming threats. Edward would have been so disappointed.

Chapter 14

The steps leading underground were taller than normal, as if whatever they were originally designed for wasn't quite human. I kicked the door shut, didn't want to touch the blood. The door cut Liv off in mid scream. I could still hear her very faintly, like the high buzzing of an insect, but the door was almost soundproof. Needed something to muffle the screams from below. Of course, tonight there was only silence on the stairs. A silence so deep that it vibrated in my ears.

Jean-Claude moved in a boneless grace, like a big cat, down the awkward steps. I had to wrap the end of the coat over my left arm to keep from tripping over it. Even then, I didn't glide down the stairs. In three-inch heels I sort of limped.

Jean-Claude waited at the bend of the stairs just before the landing. "I could carry you, *ma petite*."

"No, thanks." If I took the shoes off, the dress would be so long I'd need to hold it up. I needed one hand free for a gun. If my choices were being slow and having a gun drawn, or being fast and having my hands full of dress . . . I'd be slow.

The stairs stretched empty, wide enough to drive a small car down. The door at the base of the stairs was solid oak, iron bound like the door to a dungeon. Tonight, not a bad analogy.

Jean-Claude pulled on the heavy door, and it swung open. It was usually kept locked. He turned to me. "The council can demand that I greet every vampire within these walls, formally."

"You mean like you did with Liv?" I asked.

He gave a very small smile. "If I do not acknowledge their dominance over me, then perhaps."

"What if you do acknowledge them?" I asked.

He shook his head. "If we had gone to the council for aid of some kind, then I would not fight. I would simply acknowledge their superiority and be done with it. I am not strong enough to be council. I know that." He smoothed his hands down the ruffles his shirt, adjusting the cuffs on his jacket so the ruffles at his wrists showed to best advantage. He often fussed with his clothes when he was nervous. Of course, he fussed with his clothes when he wasn't nervous, too.

"I hear a 'but' coming," I said.

He smiled at me. "*Oui, ma petite*. But they have come to us. They have invaded our lands. Harmed our people. If we acknowledge them as greater than ourselves without a struggle, they may set up a new master in my place. They may take all I have gained."

"I thought the only way to step down as master was to die."

"They would come to that, eventually."

"Then we go in kicking butt."

"But we cannot win by violence, *ma petite*. What we did with Liv was to be expected. She had to be punished. But in a struggle to kill or be killed, the council will win."

I frowned up at him. "If we can't just say they're bigger and badder than we are, and we can't fight them, what can we do?"

"We play the game, *ma petite*."

"What game?"

"The game that I mastered at court so long ago. It is a thing of diplomacy, bravado, insults." He raised my left hand to his lips and laid a gentle kiss on it. "You will be very good at part of the game, and very bad at others. Diplomacy is not your strong suit."

"Bravado and insults are two of my best things."

He smiled, still holding my hand. "Indeed, *ma petite*, indeed. Put the gun away. I am not saying do not use it, but have a care who you shoot. Not everything you will meet tonight can be harmed by silver bullets." He cocked his head to one side as if thinking. "Though come to that, I've never seen anyone try to kill a council member with modern silver ammunition." He smiled. "It might work." He shook his head as if to rid himself of the image. "But if it comes to trying to slay the council by bullets, then all is lost and all that will be left is to take as many of them with us as we can."

"Let's save as many of our people as we can, too," I said.

"You don't understand them, *ma petite*. If we are dead, there will be no mercy for those who are loyal to us. Any good revolution kills the loyalists

first." He touched the back of my right hand lightly, reminding. I still had the gun out. Somehow, I just didn't want to put it away.

But I did. I put the safety on. I didn't want them to know the gun was there, so I couldn't keep holding it. I put the safety on because I didn't want to shoot myself in the leg. It would be embarrassing as well as painful and probably wouldn't impress the council one little bit. I didn't understand "the game," but I'd hung around vampires long enough to know that if you could impress them, sometimes you walked out alive. Of course, sometimes they killed you anyway. Sometimes a show of bravado just earned you a slower death, like it did with some American Indian tribes that only tortured enemies they thought worthy of the honor. An honor I could do without. But sometimes in the midst of being tormented you could get away. If they just tore your throat out, all options were over. We were definitely going for impressive. If we couldn't impress them, we'd kill them. If we couldn't kill them . . . they'd kill us. Liv had just been the beginning of the evening's entertainment.

The living room was a bare stone room once again. Jean-Claude's efforts at redecorating lay in piles of black and white cloth and broken wood. The only thing untouched was the portrait above the false fireplace. Jean-Claude, Julianna, and an unscarred Asher gazed down at the ruins. I expected an unpleasant surprise to be waiting for us. There was only Willie McCoy standing in front of the cold fireplace. He had his back to us, hands clasped behind him. His pea-green suit clashed with his slicked-back black hair. One sleeve was torn and bloodstained. He turned towards us. Blood seeped from a gash on his forehead. He dabbed at it with a handkerchief covered in dancing skeletons. It was silk and had been a gift from his girlfriend, a century-old vamp who had recently joined us. Hannah was as tall, leggy, and lovely as Willie was short, badly dressed, and well . . . Willie.

He smiled at us. "So good of you to join us."

"Can the sarcasm," I said. "Where is everybody?" I started walking towards him, but Jean-Claude stopped me with a hand on my arm.

Willie's smile was almost gentle. He stared at Jean-Claude with a look of expectancy. It was an expression I'd never seen on Willie's face.

I glanced at Jean-Claude's perfect mask of a face, closed and careful. No—fearful.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"*Ma petite*, may I introduce the Traveler."

I frowned at him. "What are you talking about?"

Willie laughed, and it was the same irritating bray he'd always had, but it ended in a low, chuckling growl that raised the hairs at the base of my neck. I looked at him and knew the shock showed on my face.

I had to swallow before I could talk, even then I didn't know what to say. "Willie?"

"He can no longer answer your call, *ma petite*."

Willie stood there staring at me. He had been an awkward person alive. Dead, he hadn't been much better. He hadn't been dead long enough to master

that otherworldly movement that the others had. He walked towards us in a wave of his own liquid grace. It wasn't Willie.

"Shit," I said softly. "Is it permanent?"

The stranger in Willie's body laughed again. "I am merely borrowing his body. I borrow a great many bodies, don't I, Jean-Claude?"

I felt Jean-Claude draw me backwards. He didn't want to get closer. I didn't argue. We backed up. It was odd being backed up by Willie. Normally, he was one of the least scary vamps I knew. Now, tension sang down Jean-Claude's hand. I could taste his heart beating in my own head. He was afraid, and that made me afraid.

The Traveler stopped, hands on hips, laughing. "Afraid I will use you as my horse, Jean-Claude? If you are truly strong enough to have slain the Earthmover, then you should be strong enough to withstand me."

"I am cautious by nature, Traveler. Time has not lessened the habit."

"You always did have a smooth tongue in your head and so many other places."

I frowned at the double-entendre, not sure I caught the meaning, not sure I wanted to. "Let Willie go."

"He is not being harmed," the vampire said.

"He is still inside the body," Jean-Claude said. "He still feels, still sees. You have only pushed him aside, Traveler, not replaced him."

I glanced at Jean-Claude. His face showed nothing. "You say that like you know from personal experience."

"Jean-Claude was one of my favorite bodies, once upon a time. Balthasar and I enjoyed him very much."

Balthasar walked out of the far hallway as if he'd been waiting for his cue. Maybe he had. He was smiling, but it was more a baring of teeth than pleasure. He strode into the room looking elegant and roguish in his white suit. He stood behind Willie, hands on the shorter man's thin shoulders. Willie, the Traveler, leaned back against Balthasar's chest. The bigger man wrapped his arms around him. They were a couple.

"Will he know what they're doing with his body?" I asked.

"Yes," Jean-Claude said.

"Willie doesn't like men."

"No," Jean-Claude said.

I swallowed and tried to think reasonably, and just couldn't. Vampires could not take over another vampire's body. It wasn't possible. It just wasn't. But I looked at Willie's familiar face with a stranger's thoughts flowing through his brown eyes and knew it was true.

Those brown eyes smiled into mine. I dropped my gaze. If the Traveler could do me through Liv's eyes when he wasn't inside her, then he'd suck me down now for sure. It had been a long time since I had had to practice the trick of staring at a face without meeting the eyes. It was like tag with the vamp trying to capture my gaze, and me avoiding it. It was irritating, and scary.

Jean-Claude had said that violence wouldn't save us tonight. He wasn't kidding. If a vamp had been holding Willie against his will, forcing him

sexually, I'd have shot him. But it was Willie's body, and he'd get it back. Shooting it full of holes was a bad idea. What I needed was a good idea.

"Does the Traveler like women?" I asked.

"Are you offering yourself in his place?" the vampire asked.

"No, just wondering how you'd like it if the tables were turned."

"No one else has my ability to share a body," the Traveler said.

"Would you like it if someone forced you to have sex with a woman?"

Willie's face cocked to one side, and the expression was alien to him. The sense of otherness was strong enough to make my skin crawl. "I have never felt the draw of a woman's body."

"You'd find it distasteful," I said.

Willie, the Traveler, nodded. "Yes."

"Then let Willie go. Pick someone who wouldn't mind so much."

The Traveler snuggled into Balthasar's arms and laughed at me. "Are you appealing to my sense of mercy?"

I shrugged. "I can't shoot you. You're council. I was hoping that would mean you had more rules than the rest of them. Guess I was wrong."

He looked at Jean-Claude. "Does your human servant do all your talking now?"

"She does well enough," Jean-Claude said.

"If she seeks to appeal to my sense of fair play, then you have told her nothing about your time with us at court."

Jean-Claude kept my left hand clasped loosely in his, but he stepped away from me. I felt him draw himself straighter as if he'd been hunched just a little, huddled around his panic. I knew he was still afraid, but he had rallied. Brave Jean-Claude. I wasn't that afraid yet. But then, I didn't know any better.

"I do not dwell upon the past," Jean-Claude said.

"He is ashamed of us," Balthasar said, rubbing his face against Willie's. He planted a soft kiss against Willie's temple.

"No," the Traveler said. "He fears us."

"What do you want of me, Traveler? Why has the council invaded my lands and taken my people hostage?"

Willie's body pushed away from Balthasar to stand just in front of the taller man. Willie normally looked smaller than he was, sort of hunched and rabbit-like, but now he looked slim and certain of himself. The Traveler had given Willie the grace and assurance he never had on his own.

"You slew the Earthmover but did not come to take his council seat. There is no other way to rise to the council except through the death of another. We have a vacancy that only you can fill, Jean-Claude."

"I do not want it, nor am I powerful enough to keep it."

"If not powerful enough, then how did you slay Oliver? He was a frightening force of nature." The Traveler walked towards us with Balthasar in his wake. "How did you slay him?"

Jean-Claude didn't back up this time. His hand tightened on mine, but he stood his ground. "He agreed not to call the earth against me."

The vampire and his servant circled us like sharks. One circling left, the other right, so it was hard to keep an eye on both of them.

"Why would he limit his powers?"

"He had gone rogue, Traveler. Oliver wished to bring back the days when vampires were illegal. An earthquake might have destroyed the city, but it would not have been blamed on a vampire. He wanted to possess my vampires and cause a blood bath that would bring us back to being hunted. Oliver feared we would destroy all the humans eventually, and thus ourselves. He thought we were too dangerous to be allowed legal rights and freedom."

"We received your report," the Traveler said. He stopped by me. Balthasar stopped on the other side, closest to Jean-Claude. They were mirroring each other. I wasn't sure if it was the vampire controlling his servant or just centuries of practice. "I knew Oliver's ideas."

I drew back against Jean-Claude. "Is it just vamps or can he take over humans, too?"

"You are safe from his intrusion, *ma petite*."

"Great," I said.

I stared at the Traveler, and it was frightening how easily I was beginning to think of this body as the Traveler and not Willie. "Why didn't you stop Oliver, then?" I asked.

The Traveler sidled closer and closer until only the barest inch kept us from touching. "He was council. Council cannot fight to the death among ourselves. And nothing short of true death would have stopped him."

"You let him come here, knowing what he planned to do," I said.

"We knew he had left the country but not where he fled to or what his plans were." The Traveler raised a hand towards my face. Balthasar did the same on his side for Jean-Claude. Willie's small hand hovered near my face.

"You had declared him rogue," Jean-Claude said. "Any vampire that found him could slay him without violating our laws. That is what rogue means."

The Traveler traced the barest of touches down my face. A trembling, tentative touch. "So you thought we would not come to your door because you had saved us the trouble of hunting him down ourselves."

"*Oui*."

Balthasar had stopped caressing Jean-Claude's face. He came to stand by his master. He watched the smaller man slide his hand along my face. Balthasar seemed puzzled, surprised. Something was happening, and I didn't know what it was.

The Traveler cupped my chin in his hand. He turned my face to him. He slid his hand over my jaw, behind my neck, to run fingers in my hair.

I pulled away from him. "I thought you didn't like girls."

"I don't." He stood there, staring at me. "Your power is amazing." His hand lashed out too quick to see, too quick to react. He had a handful of my hair, and his eyes, Willie's eyes, met mine. I was shielding myself this time, prepared, but my heart still fell to my feet. I waited for that cold blackness to pull me under. Nothing happened. We stood there, inches apart, and they were

just eyes. I could feel his power beating down his arm like a march of icy fingers, but it wasn't enough.

He laid his hands on either side of my face almost as if he were going to kiss me. Our faces were so close that his next words seemed intimate, even though they weren't. "I could force my gaze upon you, Anita, but it would be an expenditure of power that I might regret before dawn. You have injured Liv twice this night. I am healing her, but that too takes power."

He stepped back from me, hugging himself as if he'd gotten more from touching me than just the feel of skin. He took three gliding steps to put himself face to face with Jean-Claude. "Her power is a heady thing. Something to wrap around your cold skin and warm your heart for all eternity."

Jean-Claude let out a slow breath. "She is my human servant."

"Indeed," said the Traveler. "A hundred years ago I could invade you without touching your fair skin. Now I cannot. Has she given you this power?" He reached towards Jean-Claude's face as he had mine.

I pulled Jean-Claude back, out of reach, and stepped between them. "He's mine, no sharing."

Jean-Claude slid his arm around me, holding me loosely at his side. "If you would leave us in peace, I would let Balthasar and any person you chose use me, but I will not willingly be your horse ever again, Traveler."

Willie's brown eyes stared up at Jean-Claude. There was a shrewdness, a frightening intensity, in those familiar eyes. "I am council. You are not. You will have no choice in the matter."

"Are you saying that if he took the council seat, then you couldn't hurt him?" I asked.

"If he is powerful enough to hold a council seat, then I should not be able to invade his lovely body, even were my lips pressed to him."

"Let me test my understanding here. If he takes the council seat, you'll still try and force yourself on him, because if you can force him, then he's not powerful enough to be council? But if he doesn't take the seat, you'll do it anyway."

The Traveler smiled beautifully at me, delight shining from his eyes, Willie's eyes. "Quite true."

"Why is everything with you people a freaking Catch-22? You don't do business. You just do torture," I said.

"Are you judging us?" he asked. His voice was suddenly lower and deeper than Willie's throat should have been able to hold. He took that last step forward, and I was suddenly touching them both. Their power flared over me; it was like being in the middle of two different fires, but it didn't burn. The Traveler's power was like Jean-Claude's, cool and swimming, a breath of mortality, the touch of the grave.

The power pulled a gasp from my throat and raised every hair on my body. "Back off!" I tried to shove him away from us, but he grabbed my wrist too quick to stop, almost too quick to see. The feel of his bare skin on mine sent a wave of numbing cold through my body, like a spear of ice. He jerked me away from Jean-Claude.

Jean-Claude caught my other wrist. The moment his hand touched my skin, the cold faded. His power swept through me like a flood of warm water, and it wasn't his power. I knew the taste of this warmth. It was Richard. Jean-Claude was drawing on Richard's power as I'd done earlier.

He chased the Traveler's power out of me like summer heat on ice. It was the Traveler who released me. He stepped back rubbing his hand on his coat, as if it hurt. "Jean-Claude, you have been a very naughty boy."

Jean-Claude drew me against him, one hand resting against my neck so that his fingers touched my skin. That electric warmth was still there playing over his skin and mine, and I knew in that moment that Richard had felt our urgency, our need.

Chapter 15

A noise turned us all to the far hallway. I didn't recognize the man. He was tall, slender, dark-skinned, maybe Hispanic, maybe something more exotic. He wore nothing but a pair of black satin pants with silver embroidery along the legs. He was dragging Willie's lady love, Hannah, by one arm.

Her mascara had run in black tears down her face. Her expensive haircut still framed her face, still brought your eyes to her strong cheekbones and full lips. But her face was like a mask now, black tears, and burgundy lipstick smeared across her lower face like a wound.

The Traveler said, "Why have you brought her here, Fernando?"

"My father is as much council as you are, Traveler."

"I do not dispute that."

"Yet you forbid him come to this first meeting."

"If he is council, then let him bend me to his will." The Traveler's voice was mocking. "We are all council, but we are not all equal."

Fernando smiled. He grabbed Hannah's beaded blue dress and tore it down her back. She screamed.

The Traveler swayed, putting a hand to his face.

"I'm going to fuck her," Fernando said.

Balthasar strode towards them, but two leopards the size of ponies crawled from the hallway. One black, one yellow spotted, both big enough to tear him to pieces. They growled low and deep, moving on huge padded feet between Balthasar and Fernando.

Fernando grabbed Hannah around the waist, pulling her dress over her hips to expose pale blue garters. She turned and slapped him hard enough that he rocked back. She was as feminine as they come, but she was also a vampire and could have thrown him into the solid stone wall so that he stuck there.

Fernando hit her back. Blood spattered from her mouth in shining beads. She sat half-stunned on the floor. Fernando's power boiled through the room as if he'd been holding it in check until now. Shapeshifter. Did he match the leopards that guarded his back? Maybe, but it didn't matter what flavor he was. He picked Hannah up by the front of her dress, dragging her to her knees. He drew his hand back to hit her again.

I pulled the Browning out of the coat pocket. Willie collapsed to his knees on the floor. He stared up and said, "Angel-fangs." He tried to stand and couldn't. Jean-Claude picked him up under the arms and raised him easily.

Fernando hit Hannah again. A casual slap that rocked her head back and rolled her eyes to white. "He must truly love you to fight off the Traveler's touch every time he sees you abused."

Jean-Claude's hand on my arm brought me back to myself. I had the Browning pointed at Fernando. I had to let out a breath to keep from pulling the trigger. The safety was off, and I didn't remember doing it. Why Fernando and not the kitties? The wereleopards could close the distance in the blink of an eye, but I knew who the alpha was. Take out the leader, and the cats might go play somewhere else.

Jean-Claude supported Willie with one arm, the other still lightly on my arm, as if afraid what I'd do. "Fernando," he said, "you've done what you set out to do. The Traveler is forced out, and it will take him a little time to find a second host. You can let Hannah go."

Fernando grinned at us, white teeth bright in his dark face. "I don't think so." He dragged Hannah to her feet, arms around her waist, pinning her arms to her sides. He tried to kiss her. She turned her head and screamed.

Willie was standing on his own now. He pushed away from Jean-Claude. "No, I won't let you hurt her."

The black leopard dropped to its belly, crawling closer to Willie, to us.

"If we're going to take them out, we have to do it now," I said. Fernando first, then one of the leopards, if I had time. If not . . . one problem at a time.

"Not yet, *ma petite*. Fernando's father, Padma, will not waste precious time tormenting the little ones. The Traveler will return too soon for that."

"The Traveler won't let me taste her once he returns," Fernando said. He kept Hannah pressed to his body with one arm and raised her dress with the other.

"Does he seriously think we're going to stand here while he rapes her?" I asked.

"My father is the Master of Beasts. You won't stop me, for fear of his wrath."

"You just don't get it, do you, Fernando?" I pointed the gun very steadily at his head. "I don't give a fuck who your daddy is. Let go of her, and tell your furry buddies to back off or I'm going to make your daddy a very unhappy vampire."

"You don't want me unhappy." The voice caused my eyes to flick to the hallway beyond, but the gun didn't move.

The vampire in the doorway was Indian, as in from India. He was even wearing one of those long combo coat-tunic things. It was gold and white and shimmered on the edge of my vision as he walked further into the room. I kept my sights on his son. One monster at a time.

Jean-Claude let his hand drop away from my arm. He stepped behind me and to one side, careful not to block my shot. "Padma, Master of Beasts, greetings and welcome to my home."

"Jean-Claude, Master of the City, greetings. Your hospitality has been beyond my wildest expectations." He laughed then, but it was just a laugh. Theatrical and annoying, even sinister, but it didn't make my skin jump.

"Tell him to let Hannah go," I said.

"You must be Jean-Claude's human servant, Anita Blake."

"Yeah, nice to meet you. Now tell your son to let go of our vampire, or I'm going to put a really big hole in him."

"You wouldn't dare harm my son."

It was my turn to laugh, short, abrupt, and not very funny. "Your son said almost the same thing. You are both so wrong."

"If you kill my son, I will kill you. I will kill you all."

"Fine, let me test my understanding. If he doesn't let her go, what's he going to do with her?"

Fernando laughed, and it was low and hissing. The laugh was enough. Somewhere in that lovely body was black fur and big button eyes; wererat. "I will have her because the Traveler has forbidden it, and my father has given her to me."

"No," Willie said. He took a step forward but Jean-Claude stopped him.

"No, Willie, this is not your fight."

Fernando slid his hand over Hannah's groin. Only Jean-Claude's hand on Willie's arm kept him from rushing the shapeshifters.

Hannah said, "Master, help me."

"He can't help you, child," Padma said. "He can't help any of you."

I aimed two inches to the right of Fernando's head. The shot echoed in the big room. The bullet bit into the stone wall. Everyone froze.

"The next bullet goes in Fernando's skull."

"You wouldn't dare," Padma said.

"You keep saying that. Let's get something straight, Beast Master. Fernando is not raping Hannah. No way. I'll kill him first."

"Then I will kill you," Padma said.

"Fine, but that won't bring back your son, now will it?" I let the breath out of my body and felt that stillness spill through me. "Decide, Beast Master, decide."

"I am the Master of Beasts," he said.

"I don't care if you're Santa Claus. He lets her go or he dies."

"Jean-Claude, control your servant."

"If you can control her, Padma, be my guest. But take great care. Anita never bluffs. She will kill your son."

"Decide," I said softly, "—decide—decide—decide—decide." I wanted to shoot him. I really did, because I knew as surely as I was standing there that if I didn't shoot him now, I'd have to shoot him later. He was too arrogant to leave it alone, too blinded by his own power to leave Hannah alone, and he couldn't have her. That was a line he could not cross and live.

"Let her go, Fernando," Padma said.

"Father," the man sounded shocked.

"She will pull the trigger, Fernando. She wants to pull it. Don't you, Anita?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Silver bullets, I assume," Padma said.

"Never leave home without them," I said.

"Let her go, Fernando. Even I cannot save you from a silver bullet."

"No, she's mine. You promised."

"I'd listen to your dad, Fernando."

"Do you disobey me, my son?" There was a tone in Padma's voice that sent a rush of warm air through the room. The beginnings of anger. Something was flung over my skin, a backwash of power, but it wasn't vampiric power, not exactly. He wasn't trying to control Jean-Claude. It had a taste of warmer blood, an electric dance that said lycanthrope. Which wasn't really possible. A vampire can't be a lycanthrope, and vice-versa.

Fernando cringed, clutching Hannah to him like a doll, hiding his face in her yellow hair. "No, Father, I would never disobey you."

"Then do as I say."

Fernando flung Hannah backwards. She scrambled to Willie. He took her in his arms, touching the blood on her face, blotting at it with the silken handkerchief.

I lowered the gun.

Fernando pointed a dark hand at me. "Maybe I'll ask for you to be my pet."

"Tough talk, rat-boy. Let's see if you're man enough to back it up." I was baiting him. I realized that I wanted him to rush me. I wanted an excuse to kill him. Not good. Not good. I had to calm down or I was going to get us killed.

The black leopard, taller at the shoulders than my waist, started creeping towards me. It was belly to the ground, muscles tensed and rippling. The gun just shifted to it. "Don't try it."

"Elizabeth," Padma said.

The name startled me. I'd seen Elizabeth in human form once, sort of from a distance. She was one of the local wereleopards. I'd assumed, until that moment, that the leopards were part of the entourage that Padma had brought with him. If Elizabeth was local, the other leopard might be, too. The only thing I was sure of was that it wasn't Zane or Nathaniel. Other than that, it could have been anybody. But Zane acknowledging me as his alpha had saved him from being here. If Zane had been alpha, then beating him would have given me all the leopards, and none of them would have been here. Or that was the theory. With me being merely human and not a lycanthrope, the Master of Beasts

might still have called the kitties. But I would have tried to keep them safe. I wondered if Elizabeth had tried.

She snarled at him, at me, at everyone. Her fangs were ivory-white, and at less than ten feet, impressive as hell. This close, even a real leopard might have gotten to me before I could fire a killing shot. You aren't supposed to hunt big game with a handgun.

The leopard took another belly crawl forward. "Elizabeth." That one word flung outward burned along my skin and made me gasp. The leopard came up short like she'd hit the end of her leash. She rolled on the floor, struggling, slashing the air.

"She hates you, Anita," Padma said. His voice was normal now, conversational, but whatever he was doing to the wereleopard was still happening. I could feel it like ants marching down my skin. Ants with red hot pokers in their little hands.

I glanced at Jean-Claude, wondering if he could feel it. His face was blank, empty, unreadable. If he felt the pain, it didn't show.

I wasn't sure admitting I could feel it was a good idea. "Stop it," I said.

"She would kill you if I let her. You killed the one she loved, their leader. She would have her revenge."

"You've made your point. Let her go."

"Mercy for one who hates you so?" He glided into the room, slippered feet barely touching the floor, as if he rode always on tiny currents of his own power.

I should have been sensing his vampire powers. But he was almost a blank, as if something was keeping him in check or protecting me. I glanced at Jean-Claude again. Was he powerful enough to keep us safe now? Had the triumvirate helped him that much? His face told me nothing, and I didn't dare ask, not in front of the Master of Beasts.

The leopard lay on its side, panting heavily. It watched me with pale green eyes, and it was not a friendly look.

"When I called them," Padma said. "she tried to bargain with me. They have no alpha and yet she tried to bargain. Elizabeth would bring the leopards without a struggle to do with as I like, if I would let her kill you. Help her kill you." The Beast Master motioned behind him, and a small, slender woman stepped up beside him, like she'd been waiting in the hallway for his call. Like a well-trained dog. She was nude except for a necklace that must have weighed five pounds and burned with diamonds. Her skin was that pale shade of dark that says African-American via Ireland. Bruises decorated her face, running in purple stains down her body. She was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen, even with the bruises. She was perfectly proportioned from forehead to slender feet. Her eyes were brown and flicked from the leopard on the floor to Jean-Claude to the rat-man. Back and forth, back and forth, until finally she settled on me.

She pleaded with her eyes, and I didn't need words to know that she was saying, Help me. That I understood, but why me?

"When Elizabeth came, she brought the others with her. I chose Vivian as my present to myself." Padma stroked her hair absently, the way you'd pet a dog. "I will give her a gift for every harm I do her. She will be rich, if she survives."

The air around her trembled like the wash of heat off a summer road. Another wereleopard that I'd never met. How many of them were there? How many people had Elizabeth delivered over to the bad guys?

"What is this, a father-son rape outing?" I asked.

Padma frowned at me. "I grow tired of you, Anita Blake."

"It's mutual," I said.

"We forced the Traveler out of his host body, but his power still shields you. He was to keep you from sensing your vampires' distress. Now he seems to be protecting you from the full rush of my powers. A pity. You would tremble at the feel of them."

Jean-Claude touched my shoulder lightly. The touch was enough. I wasn't here to trade clever repartee with the Master of Beasts. Killing him sounded like a really good idea, but I've met older vamps that you couldn't take out with silver bullets. It would be just my luck that Padma was one of them.

Padma called the leopards to him. The yellow one rolled around his ankles like a big kitty-cat. Elizabeth sat like a well-trained dog.

Willie and Hannah were oblivious to the room. He touched her gently, as if she were glass. They kissed, and that one chaste touch of lips said it all, tenderness, love. Willie and Hannah were just plain gone on each other. It was beautiful.

"You see why I gave her to my son. Such anguish her abuse would have caused them both. But the Traveler needed their bodies."

I stared at him. It was bad enough when I thought the choice was just because Hannah was blond and lovely, but to know it was deliberate cruelty and not just lust—that made it worse.

"You son of a bitch," I said.

"Are you trying to make me angry?" Padma said.

Jean-Claude touched me again. "Anita, please."

He rarely used my real name. When he did, it was either very serious or something I wouldn't like. This time it was both.

I don't know what I was about to say, because suddenly the Traveler lifted his shield. Padma's power crashed over us. It thundered over me, filling my head, scrambling every thought I had. I fell to my knees like I'd been hit by a hammer between the eyes.

Jean-Claude stayed standing, but I felt him sway beside me.

Padma laughed. "He cannot re-enter another host and maintain his shield."

A voice came like a wind easing through the room. I wasn't sure if I heard the voice out loud or if it was just in my head. "He will need his powers in the hallway. I chose to lift the shield. Enough games, Padma. Let him see what lies beyond." There was a scent with the words; fresh turned earth, the smell of roots pulled from the ground. I could almost feel the crumble of rich black soil between my hands. I squeezed my hands around the Browning until they shook,

and I still couldn't shake the sense of earth between my hands on the gun. Even staring at the gun, seeing it was clean, didn't make it go away.

"What's happening?" I asked. Surprised and pleased that I could form a coherent sentence.

"They are council," Jean-Claude said. "They have taken off, how would you say, the gloves?"

"Shit," I said.

Padma laughed. He stared at me, and I knew he was concentrating just for little ol' me. His power slammed over me, into me. It was halfway between putting your hand on a live electric wire and shoving the same hand into fire. The electric heat ate through my body. The heat gathered in the center of me. It flexed like a fist growing larger, larger. If he spread his fingers inside me, he'd tear me apart, burst me from the inside out with just his power. I screamed.

Chapter 16

A cool touch slid over the heat. A wind, cool and easeful as death, swept over my body. The wind blew my hair back from my face. Blessed coolness filled me. Jean-Claude's hands caressed my shoulders. He was kneeling on the floor, cradling me in his arms. I didn't remember falling. His skin was cool to the touch. I knew that somehow he was throwing his hard-won warmth away. His warmth to cool the fire.

That awful pressure inside of me eased, then shrank. It was like Jean-Claude was a wind blowing out Padma's fire. But it cost him. I felt his heart slow. The blood in his veins flowed slow and slower. The warmth that mimicked life was leaving him, and death seeped inside to fill its place.

I turned in his arms so I could see his face. The face was pale and perfect, and you'd never have known, just by watching, what it had cost him to save me.

Hannah turned to us, her battered face set in calm lines. "My apologies, Jean-Claude. My compatriot has let your servant's defiance best his judgment."

Willie stepped away from Hannah, shaking his head. "Damn you, damn you."

Hannah's grey eyes turned to him, angry. "Do not tempt me, little one. You cannot trade insults with me and survive."

"Willie," Jean-Claude said. There was no power to the word, just a warning. It was enough. Willie stepped back.

Jean-Claude looked at the Traveler in his new body. "If he had killed Anita, I might have died with her. Is that why you have truly come? To kill us?"

"I swear it is not." Where he'd made Willie glide, Hannah was awkward on her stiletto heels. He didn't fall, but he didn't glide either. It was almost heartening. He wasn't perfect.

"To prove my sincerity," he said, "take your warmth back from your servant. We will not stop you."

"He thrust me out," Padma said. "How can you allow him to grow strong again?"

"You sound afraid," the Traveler said.

"I do not fear him," Padma said.

"Then let him feed."

I leaned into Jean-Claude's chest, resting my cheek against the mound of silken ruffles on the front of his shirt. His heart had stopped beating. He wasn't even breathing. He'd used too much of himself up.

I watched Padma from the safety of Jean-Claude's arms and knew I would kill him. I knew that Padma wanted us dead. I'd felt it. No one as powerful as he lost control that badly. He'd nearly killed me, us, and it would all have been a tragic accident. Bullshit.

The Browning lay where I'd dropped it, but I'd tasted Padma's power now. Silver might not be enough to kill him. Wounding him seemed like a really bad idea. Kill or leave him the hell alone, like any big predator. Don't fuck with it unless you can finish the job.

"Feed from your servant," Padma said. "I will not stop you. The Traveler has spoken." That last held a touch of bitterness. Council member or not, Padma feared the Traveler, or he'd have fought him more. Compatriots but not equals.

I knelt, gripping Jean-Claude's arms through the rough lace and the glittering material of his jacket. His arms felt reassuringly solid, real. "What . . ."

He stopped me with fingers on my lips, a delicate touch. "It is not blood that I need, Padma. It is her warmth. It is only a lesser master that must take blood from his servants."

Padma's face had gone empty, blank. "You have not lost your knack of insulting without being insulting, Jean-Claude."

I stared up at Jean-Claude, even kneeling he was taller. His voice eased through my mind. "No questions, *ma petite*, or they will know you are not wholly mine."

Since I had a lot of questions, that pretty much sucked. But if I couldn't ask direct questions, there were other ways. "Does the Beast Master have to sink fang to jump-start his heart?"

"*Oui, ma petite.*"

"How . . . vulgar," I said. It was one of the most civilized insults I'd ever come up with. It worked, too.

Padma hissed at us. "Do not test my patience too far, Jean-Claude. The Traveler is not the head of the council. You have enough enemies here now that a vote might not go your way. Press me too hard and I will force a vote."

"Force a vote to what end?" Jean-Claude asked. "The Traveler has promised that you are not here to kill me. What else would you vote upon, Master of Beasts."

"Get on with it, Jean-Claude." Padma's voice was low with a sound that was almost a growl. It sounded more animal than vampire.

Jean-Claude touched my face gently, turning me to look at him. "Let us show the Master of Beasts how it is done, *ma petite*."

I didn't really like the sound of that. But I knew one thing for certain, Jean-Claude needed his strength back. He'd never be able to repeat the trick of thrusting out a council member when he was so cold, so drained.

"Do it," I said. I had to trust him. Trust him not to hurt me. Trust him not to do something awful or embarrassing. I realized that I didn't trust him. That no matter how much I loved his body, I knew he was other. I knew that what he thought of as okay was not necessarily okay at all.

He smiled. "I will bathe in your warmth, *ma petite*. Roll you around me until my heart beats only for you. My breath will grow warm from your kiss." He cupped my face between the chilled skin of his hands and kissed me.

His lips were velvet, his touch light, caressing. His hands slid up the sides of my face, fingers gliding through my hair next to the scalp, kneading, massaging. He kissed my forehead and shuddered.

I tried to kiss him again, and he drew back. "Remember, *ma petite*, if any of your fair body touches mine too much, it will deaden. Do not be so eager to lose the sweet sensation of your lips for the night."

I went very still in his arms, thinking about what he'd just said. Bodies touching, bare skin needed, maybe? But if any part touched too long or too forcefully, my skin would deaden, but only for the night. Jean-Claude was really very good at giving information without seeming to. Made me wonder how often he'd had to do it in the past.

He slipped the coat off my shoulders until it hung nearly to my waist. He ran his hands over my skin, kneading his fingers into me. His hands were warm. He slid his hands over the coat, gripping my arms through it, but no bare skin. He kissed my throat butterfly light, his face rubbing up my neck, my cheek.

He drew back from me with a quick rush of breath. I put my hand over his heart, and there was nothing. I caressed his face, touching the big pulse in his throat. Nothing. I wanted to ask what we were doing wrong, but didn't dare. Didn't want the bad guys to know we didn't do things like this much. Sex we did, the otherworldly vampire shit we skipped if I could manage it.

He started unbuttoning his shirt.

I looked at him, eyes a little wide.

He bared a circle of his stomach.

I just looked at that glimpse of pale skin. "What?" I asked.

"Touch me, *ma petite*."

I glanced at the watching vampires. I shook my head. "No foreplay in front of the bad guys."

"I could simply take blood, if you would prefer," he said softly. He said it as if we did it every night. We'd done it twice voluntarily on my part. Once had been to save his life. The second time had been to save him and Richard. I did not want to donate blood. Sometimes I thought bloodletting was more intimate than sex to a vampire. I didn't want to do that in front of company either.

I stared up at him, getting angry. He was asking me to do very intimate things in front of strangers. I didn't like it, and he knew I wouldn't like it. So why hadn't he warned me? Had he really not thought we'd have to do this tonight?

"She is angry with you," Padma said. "Is she truly that modest?" He sounded doubtful. "Could it be that you cannot truly do what you say you can do?"

Hannah's body stood legs apart balancing on the unfamiliar high heels. "Are you as weak as Padma? Just another bloodsucker?" The Traveler shook his head, Hannah's hair sliding across the shoulders of her ruined dress. "What else have you been bluffing about, Jean-Claude?"

"Damn you all to hell," I said. I slid my hands inside Jean-Claude's shirt, fingers sliding over his stomach. He was cold to the touch. Dammit. I pulled his shirt out of his pants, none too gently, and ran my hands over his skin. I kneaded my fingers along the muscles of his back, and could feel heat rise up my throat into my face. Under other circumstances, in the privacy of a bedroom, it had possibilities. Now, it was just embarrassing.

He drew my arms out. "Careful, *ma petite*, or your hands will grow cold."

My fingertips were cold as if I'd been outside without gloves. I stared up at him for a second or two. "If I can't touch you with my hands, what do you suggest I use?"

Padma suggested something explicit enough to make me point a finger at him. "You stay out of this."

He laughed at me. "She is truly embarrassed. How terribly precious. Asher said she was a virgin before you. I did not believe him, until now."

I let my head drop to my chest. I was not going to say it. I did not owe the vampire council a rundown on my love life.

Jean-Claude's hand moved into view. He never touched me, but just the movement of his hand brought my face up to meet his gaze. "I would not ask this of you here and now, if it were not necessary. You must believe that."

Looking into his blue, blue eyes, I did believe him. Stupid, but true. "What do you want me to do?"

He raised his fingers and put them just above my lips, so close that if I breathed in, he'd have had to touch me. "Use your lovely mouth over my heart. If our bond is as strong as I believe it to be, there are shortcuts, *ma petite*."

I sighed and pulled his shirt up, baring his chest. In private I loved running my tongue over the cross-shaped burn scar on his chest. But this wasn't private. Hell with it.

I laid my lips against the cool skin of his stomach, and licked a quick, wet line up his chest.

He drew in a sharp hiss of breath. How could he be breathing and not have a heartbeat? No answer to that, but I'd seen it before. Vampires that breathed but did not have a pulse.

I ran my tongue over the smoothness of the cross-shaped burn scar, ending with a kiss over his heart. I felt my lips grow cold. It wasn't the tingling cold of winter, though. It was just as he'd said. His body stealing my warmth. My life seeping away into him.

I knelt back away from him, licking my lips, trying to feel them. "How's that?"

He laughed, and the sound slid down my back like an ice cube, rubbed purposefully and long to the base of my spine.

I shuddered. "You're feeling better."

He lifted me suddenly, hands on my thighs. I let out a surprised yip, putting my hands on his shoulders for balance. He wrapped his arms around my legs and stared up at me. The pupil in his eyes had bled away to a shining blue fire.

I felt his heartbeat in my throat. His pulse raced through my body. He let me slide slowly through his arms. "Kiss me, *ma petite*, as we are meant to kiss. I am warm and safe to touch."

"Warm but never safe," I said. I started to kiss him when I was inches above his forehead and continued the kiss as I slid down his body. He kissed me like he would eat me from the mouth down. Fangs pressed hard and sharp, and he had to draw away or draw blood. The kiss left me breathless, tingling, but not with cold.

I realized that he'd gotten a buzz from drinking in my warmth. That it had felt good in a more than practical way. Trust him to make a virtue out of necessity.

"Now that you have your full powers once again," the Traveler said, "I will be leaving you. You drove Padma out without my aid. Surely you can defend yourself again."

"He bested you, as well," Padma said.

Hannah's face looked at us. "Yes, he did. I would expect nothing less from the master that slew the Earthmover." Hannah turned back to Padma. "And he did what you cannot. He regained his warmth with his human servant without drawing her blood. A trick that any true master can accomplish."

"Enough of this," Padma said. He sounded angry. Having to share blood with your human servant seemed to be a real faux pas. "The night wanes. Now that you are at full strength, Jean-Claude, search for your people. See who does not answer your call."

"I will leave you now, Jean-Claude. I will await you beyond." Hannah suddenly sagged. Willie caught her and lowered her gently to the floor.

"Search, Jean-Claude, search for your people," Padma said. Jean-Claude stood, drawing me with him. His pupils swam through the shining blue of his eyes. His eyes settled into their normal color. He stared past me, past Padma. I didn't think he was seeing anything in the room. His power crept from his

hands across my skin. I think if I hadn't been touching him, I wouldn't have felt a thing. The faintest shimmer of energy, as if this was a small thing to do.

He blinked and looked at Padma. "Damian."

Damian was one of Jean-Claude's lieutenants. Like Liv, he was over five hundred, but would never be a master.

In Damian's case it was over a thousand years, but would never be a master. It was a frightening amount of time to have acquired so little power. Don't get me wrong, Damian was powerful. For a five-hundred-year-old he was scary. For a thousand years he was a baby. A dangerous, carnivorous baby, but still Damian had acquired all the power he might ever have. He could live until the sun expanded and swallowed the earth, and he'd be no more powerful than he had been at dusk today.

He was one of the few vamps to ever fool me completely about his age. I'd underestimated his age by over half. I'd judged by power and was just beginning to learn that power was not the only thing to judge by.

Jean-Claude had bargained with Damian's old master for his freedom to come here and play second banana.

"What have you done to Damian?" Jean-Claude asked.

"I, nothing, but is he dead?" Padma smiled and took Vivian's hand. "That is a question only his master may answer." He walked down the hallway, leading the wereleopard by the hand. Vivian looked back at me, watching me with wide, frightened eyes until they were lost to sight. The black leopard lingered, watching me.

I spoke before I thought, instinct almost. "How could you have given them over to that thing?"

She snarled at me, tail twitching.

"You are weak, Elizabeth. Gabriel knew that and despised you for it."

She let out a coughing roar. Padma's voice cut across the sound like a knife blade. "Elizabeth, come to me now or I shall be very angry."

The leopard gave me a last snarl and padded out of sight.

"Did Gabriel tell you she was weak, *ma petite*?"

I shook my head. "She wouldn't have brought them here if she were stronger. He called and she came, but she should have come alone."

"Perhaps she did her best, *ma petite*."

"Then her best isn't good enough." I looked at Jean-Claude's careful, unreadable face. His body was still, calm. I laid my hand above his heart underneath his shirt. His heart was pounding.

"You think Damian's dead," I said.

"I know he is dead." He stared down at me. "Whether it is permanent, that is the question."

"Dead is dead," I said.

He laughed then and hugged me to him. "Oh, *ma petite*, you above all should know that is not true."

"I thought you said they couldn't kill us tonight," I said.

"So I thought," he said.

Great. Every time I thought I understood the rules, they changed. Why was it that the damn rules always seemed to change for the worse?

Chapter 17

Willie came over to us, leading Hannah by the hand. "Thank you, master, Anita."

There were gashes in his thin face, part of the initial fight for the Circus, I guess. They were already healing. He looked awful, even more like the walking dead than usual. "You look like hell," I said.

He grinned at me, flashing fang. He hadn't been dead three years yet. It takes a little practice to smile without flashing fang. "I'm okay." He looked at Jean-Claude. "I tried to stop them. We all did."

Jean-Claude had tucked his shirt back in his pants. He smoothed his hands down the front of the shirt and touched Willie's shoulder. "You fought the council, Willie. Win or lose, you did well."

"Thanks, master."

Jean-Claude usually corrected anyone when they called him master, but tonight, I guess we were going formal.

"Come, we must attend Damian." He offered me his wrist, and when I didn't know quite what he wanted, he laid my fingertips over the pulse. "You touch me as if you were taking my pulse."

"Is there some significance to this?"

"It shows that you are more than my servant or my bed partner. It shows I consider you an equal."

"What will the council think about that?" I asked.

"It will force them to negotiate not only with me, but with you. It will complicate things for them and give us more options."

I rested my hand on his wrist. His pulse was steady under my fingers. "Confusion to our enemies, eh?"

He nodded, making it almost a bow. "Indeed, *ma petite*, indeed."

I walked beside him towards the hallway, my right hand in my pocket on the Browning, which I'd rescued from the floor. When we got a clear view of the hallway, Jean-Claude's pulse sped under my fingers.

Damian lay on his side curled around a sword. Blood had soaked around the blade into the dark material of the vest he wore as a shirt. The point came out his back. He'd been spitted. Hard to be a hundred percent sure, but it looked like a heart blow.

There was a new vampire standing beside him. He held a two-handed sword in his hands, point down, like a cane. I recognized the sword. It was the one Damian slept with in his coffin.

The new vamp was tall, six foot six or more, broad-shouldered. His hair was cut like a bowl of yellow ringlets around his face, leaving his ears bare. He wore a white tunic, white trousers, white on white in layers. He stood rigid, at attention, like a soldier.

"Warrick," Jean-Claude said. "I had hoped you escaped Yvette's tender mercies."

The tall vampire looked at us. His eyes flicked to my hand on Jean-Claude's wrist. He dropped to one knee and held Damian's sword across his hands. He bowed his head and offered the sword to us. "He fought well. It had been too long since I had such an opponent. I forgot myself and slew him. I would not have wished death on such a warrior. His final death is a great loss."

Jean-Claude took the sword from the vampire's hands. "Save your apologies, Warrick. I come to save Damian, not to bury him."

Warrick raised pale blue eyes to us. "But I have pierced his heart. If you were the master that had made him, then there would be a chance, but you did not call him from his grave to his second life."

"But I am Master of the City, and Damian took a blood oath."

Warrick laid the sword on the ground near Damian's still form. "Your blood may call to him. I pray that it will be enough."

I stared at him. I'd never heard a vampire say "I pray." Vampires, for obvious reasons, didn't pray a lot. I mean, who was going to answer? Oh, yeah, there was the Church of Eternal Life, but they were more a humanist religion, sort of New Wavey. I'm not sure they talked much about God.

Damian's hair was nearly blood-red, a startling color against the alabaster whiteness of his skin. I knew his eyes were a green that any cat would envy, but tonight his eyes were closed, and if things went badly, they'd never open again.

Jean-Claude knelt beside Damian. He laid his hand on Damian's chest, near the sword. "If I pull out the sword and his heart does not beat, his eyes do not open, then he is gone. One chance, and one chance only. We could put him in a hole somewhere for a hundred years and until the sword was pulled out of his heart, there would still be a chance. If we do it here and now, we risk losing him forever."

That last bit of lore is why you never ever remove a stake from a corpse's heart no matter how dead it appears to be.

I knelt beside them. "Is there a ritual for it?"

He shook his head. "I will invoke the blood oath he took. That will help call him back, but Warrick is correct. I did not make Damian. I am not his true master."

"No, he's older than you are by about six hundred years." I looked down at the vampire, spitted on the sword, lying in a pool of his own dark blood. He was wearing a pair of dress pants that matched the vest. Without a conservative shirt under the vest it looked strangely erotic. I could still feel Damian in my head. His power, the beat and the pulse of centuries flowed through him. He wasn't dead, or at least not completely dead. I could still feel his aura, something.

"I can still feel Damian," I said.

"What do you mean, *ma petite*?"

I had a horrible compulsion to touch Damian. To run my hands over his bare arms. I wasn't into necrophilia, no matter how close I walked the edge. What was going on?

"I can feel him. His energy in my head. It's like coming on a fresh corpse before the soul has left the body. He's still intact, I think."

Warrick was looking at me. "How can you know that?"

I reached out towards Damian and stopped myself, hands curling into fists. My hands ached to touch him, not sexual exactly but like seeing a really fine sculpture. I wanted to trace the lines of his body, to feel the flow and ebb of him. To . . .

"What is wrong, *ma petite*?"

I touched my fingertips to Damian's arm, as if afraid he would burn. My hand slid over his cool flesh, almost without me wanting it to. The force that animated Damian's body flowed through his cooling skin, flowed over my hand, down my arm, marched in goose bumps across my body.

I gasped.

"What are you doing, *ma petite*?" Jean-Claude was rubbing his arms as if he, too, felt it.

Warrick put out a hand towards me like he was holding his hand in front of fire, not sure if he could or should touch. He pulled back, rubbing his hand on his pants. "It is true. You are a necromancer."

"You ain't seen nothing yet," I whispered. I turned to Jean-Claude. "When you pull out the sword, the trick is going to be to keep the power from leaving with the opening of the wound. To keep, for lack of a better word, his soul from fleeing, right?"

Jean-Claude was watching me, as if he'd never really seen me before. Nice to know I could still surprise him. "I do not know, *ma petite*. I am not a witch or a student of magical metaphysics. I will invoke the oath, speak the ritual, and hope he survives."

"Sometimes when I call a zombie from the grave, it's easier to call them a second time." I slid my hands down to hold Damian's limp hand, but it wasn't enough. My power and the power inside the vampire needed a more immediate touch than mere hands.

"He is not a zombie, *ma petite*."

"Warrick said you hadn't called Damian from the grave, but I have." Once upon a time, nearly by accident I had raised three of Jean-Claude's vampires. It was when he, Richard, and I first invoked the triumvirate. The power had been so overwhelming that I'd raised every true corpse near us as a zombie, but there had been too much power. I'd fed it to the vampires and they'd risen for me. Necromancers were rumored to be able to call all manner of dead to do their bidding. But that was legend. As far as I knew, I was the only living necromancer to pull off this particular trick.

"What are you asking, *ma petite*?"

I crawled around Damian's body. The blood was cool through my hose. My hand trailed up his arm, never losing contact with his body, with that power

curled inside of him. The power that animated him had thrust me out once, cast me out, hurt me. But it was like once having brushed each other, we were linked.

"You're linked to Damian, but you're also linked to me. I can feel Damian in my head. I don't know if it's a link, but it's something. Use it," I said.

"You mean draw on your power to help strengthen my hold on him?" Jean-Claude said.

"Yeah." I dragged Damian into my lap, on his side, the sword still spitting him. When Jean-Claude saw what I was doing, he helped me. I cradled Damian on his side, shoulders in my lap, his head resting on my arm. I slid my hand down his chest, searching for his heart, and found the blade instead. It had pierced his heart. Even with my help, even with Jean-Claude's help, if he hadn't been over five hundred, he'd be dead. Five hundred seemed to be an age where vamps gained a great deal of power. Being over a thousand could only help him. I could feel him, through my body, my head. Through the growing power, I realized I'd turned my back to the hallway. It was hard to think, but I said, "Do we have a truce until we raise him?"

"You mean will they attack us while we save him?"

"Yes."

"I will guard you," Warrick said. He stood and took Damian's sword.

"Isn't that a conflict of interest?" I asked.

"If he does not rise, I will be punished for killing him. It is not just sorrow at my own carelessness that prompts me to help you. I fear what my mistress will do."

Jean-Claude stared down at Damian. "Padma wishes to kill us for the power the triumvirate has given us, *ma petite*. Now that he knows you have called Damian from his coffin like a zombie, he will fear you even more."

"Is Warrick going to tell him?"

Jean-Claude gave a gentle smile. "There is no need for Warrick to tell, is there, Traveler?"

A voice sighed around us. "I am here."

I stared up at the air, at nothing. "You little son of bitch, you're an eavesdropper."

Willie stumbled. Hannah jerked back from him. "I am many things, Anita." Willie turned to us with that ancient intelligence burning in his eyes. "Why have you withheld this information from us, Jean-Claude?"

"You see us as a threat without this bit of information, Traveler. Do you blame me for hiding it from you?"

He gave a small smile that was both gentle and condescending. "No, I suppose I don't."

Jean-Claude gripped the hilt of the sword. He put his hand on Damian's chest to brace himself. His fingers brushed my hand. "You might wish to move your hand, *ma petite*. The sword is sharp."

I shook my head. "I'm going to make his heart beat. I can't do that if I'm not touching it."

Jean-Claude turned his head to one side, looking at me. "The magic grips you, *ma petite*, and you forget yourself. At least use your left hand."

He was right. The magic, for lack of a better word, was building. I'd never felt my own power so strongly outside of a blood sacrifice. Of course, there was plenty of blood, just none that I'd spilt myself. But I could sense Damian's heart inside his chest. It was almost as if I could have reached inside and caressed the muscle. Like I was not seeing it, but feeling it, and that wasn't it either. I had no word for it. It wasn't touch or sight, but I could feel it just the same. I pulled my right hand away and slipped my left over Damian's still heart.

"Are you ready, *ma petite*?"

I nodded.

Jean-Claude rose on his knees. "I am the Master of the City. My blood you have drunk. My flesh you have touched. You are mine, Damian. You gave yourself willing to me. Come to me now, Damian. Rise to me now. Come to my hand." He tightened his grip on the blade. I felt Damian's body shift boneless as the dead.

I felt his heart, caressed it and it was cold, dead. "I am master of your heart, Damian," Jean-Claude said. "I will it to beat."

"We will make it beat," I said. My voice sounded distant, strange, not like my voice at all. Power breathed through me, through Damian, into Jean-Claude. I felt it spreading outward and knew that every corpse in the place would feel the rush.

"Now," I whispered.

Jean-Claude looked at me one last time, then turned all his attention to Damian. He yanked the blade out in one harsh motion.

Damian's essence tried to follow the blade out, tried to slip away through the wound. I felt it sliding away. I called to it, pressed it into the dead flesh, and it wasn't enough. I moved my hand over his heart. The sliding blade sliced my hand. Blood, fresh and warm and human, flowed over the wound. The thing inside Damian hesitated. It stayed to taste my blood. It was enough. I didn't caress his heart. I smashed it, filled it with the power that crawled over us.

The heart thudded against his chest so that I felt it in my bones. His spine bowed, raising him out of my lap, throwing his head. His mouth opened in a silent scream. His eyes flew open wide. He slumped back into my lap.

He stared up at me, wide-eyed, frightened. He grabbed my arm. He tried to talk and couldn't speak past the thundering of the pulse in his throat. I could feel the blood in his body, the beat of his heart, the rush of him.

He reached out to Jean-Claude, grabbing the sleeve of his jacket. He finally whispered, "What have you done to me?"

"Saved you, *mon ami*, saved you."

Damian slumped suddenly. His body began to quiet. I began to lose the sense of his pulse, the taste of his heart. It slid slowly away and I let it go. But I was almost sure I could have held it. I could have kept the feel and rush of his body. I could have made it rise and fall to my touch. I was almost sure.

I ran my hand through his thick red hair and knew temptation, and it was only slightly tinged with sex. I raised my still bleeding hand where I could see it. It wasn't much of a cut; two, three stitches and I'd be fine. It hurt, but not enough.

I ran the still bleeding hand through his hair. The thickness of his hair slid across the open wound, abrading it. The pain was suddenly sharper, aching and nauseating. Enough pain to bring me back to myself.

Damian stared up at me, afraid. Afraid of me.

Chapter 18

"My how terribly impressive." I turned, Damian still in my lap. Yvette was stalking down the hallway towards us. She'd lost the mink stole, and the white dress was very simple, very elegant, very Chanel. The rest of the scene was pure Marquis de Sade.

Jason, werewolf, flunky, sometimes voluntary appetizer to the undead, was with her. He was dressed in a cross between black leather pants and skin-tight chaps. Bare skin showed at his thighs, and what looked like a leather thong covered his groin. Around his neck was a metal-studded dog collar with a leash attached to it. Yvette was holding the leash. Fresh bruises marched down his face, neck, arms. There were cuts on his lower chest and stomach that looked like claw marks. His hands were bound behind his back, arms pulled so tight to his body that that alone had to hurt.

Yvette stopped about eight feet from us, posing. She shoved Jason hard enough in the back for him to let out a small sound, forcing him to his knees. She drew the leash tight so he was almost hanging.

She smoothed her hand through his yellow hair, adjusting it, like he was about to get his picture taken. "He's my gift while I'm here. Do you like the wrapping?"

"Can you sit up?" I asked Damian.

"I think so." He rolled off my lap, sitting up carefully, as if everything wasn't working quite right yet.

I got to my feet. "How you doing, Jason?"

"I'm okay," he said.

Yvette jerked the leash tighter, so he couldn't talk. I realized that the inside of the collar had metal spikes on it, a choke collar. Great.

"He is my wolf, Yvette. Mine to protect. You cannot have him," Jean-Claude said.

"I have already had him," she said. "But I will have him again. I have not hurt him yet. The bruises are not my doing. He got that in defense of this place.

In defense of you. Ask him yourself." She eased the collar, and then the leash itself.

Jason took a long breath and looked at us.

"Did she hurt you?" Jean-Claude asked.

"No," he said.

"You have shown great restraint," Jean-Claude said to Yvette. "Or have your tastes changed since last we embraced?"

She laughed. "Oh, no, my tastes are the same as they always were. I will torment him now in front of you and you will be powerless to stop me. This way I torment several people for the price of one." She smiled. She looked better than she had at the restaurant. Not quite so pale.

"Who'd you feed off of?" I asked.

Her eyes flicked to me. "You'll see soon enough." She turned her attention to Warrick. He didn't exactly cringe, but he seemed suddenly smaller, less shining. "Warrick, you failed me."

Warrick stood against the wall, Damian's sword still in his hand. "I did not mean to hurt him, mistress."

"Oh, I don't mean that. You guarded them while they brought him back."

"You said I would be punished if he died."

"So I did, but would you really have used that great sword on me?"

He dropped to his knees. "No, mistress."

"Then how could you guard them?"

Warrick shook his head. "I did not think . . ."

"You never do." She pulled Jason in against her legs, cradling his face against her thigh. "Watch, Jason, watch and see what I do to bad little boys."

Warrick got to his feet, putting his back to the wall. He dropped the sword, clattering on the stones. "Please, mistress, please do not do this."

Yvette took in a deep breath, head back, eyes closed, caressing Jason's face. She was anticipating.

"What's she going to do?" I asked.

"Watch" was all Jean-Claude would say.

Warrick was kneeling close enough for me to touch. Whatever was about to happen, we were going to have a ringside seat. Which was the point, I suppose.

Warrick stared at the far wall, past us, ignoring us as much as he could. A white film spread across his pale blue eyes, until they were cloudy, blind. If I hadn't been standing within arm's reach, it would have been too subtle to see.

His eyes collapsed inward, crumbling with rot. His face was still perfect, strong, heroic, like an engraving of St. George, but his eyes were empty, rotting holes. Thick greenish pus trailed down his cheeks, like thick tears.

"Is she doing that to him?" I asked.

"Yes," Jean-Claude said, almost too soft to hear.

Warrick made a small sound low in his throat. Black fluid burst from his mouth, pouring down his lips. He tried to scream, and all that came out was a deep, choking gurgle. He fell forward onto hands and knees. The pus-filled

liquid poured from his mouth, eyes, ears. It flowed in a puddle of liquid thicker than blood.

It should have stunk, but as so often happened with vampires that rotted, there was no odor. Warrick vomited his own rotting internal organs onto the floor.

We all began to move back from the widening pool. Didn't want to step in it. It wouldn't do us any harm, but even the other vampires stepped back from it.

Warrick collapsed onto his side. His white clothes were nearly black with gore. But underneath the mess he was still whole. His body was untouched.

His hand reached out blindly. It was a helpless gesture. A gesture that said better than words that it hurt, and he was still in there. Still feeling. Still thinking.

"Sweet Jesus," I said.

"You should see what I can do with my own body." Yvette's voice dragged our attention back to her. She was still standing there, cradling Jason against her leg. She was a white, gleaming figure, except for her hand. From the elbow down a green rot had started.

Jason noticed it. He started to scream, and she yanked the collar too tight for speech. She caressed his face with her rotting hand, leaving a smear of something thick and dark and all too real.

Jason went wild. He tore away from her. She pulled on the collar until his face turned pink, then red. He fought to stay away from her. Fought like a fish on a hook. His face turned purplish, and still he wouldn't come to her rotting hand.

Jason collapsed to the floor. He was about to choke himself into unconsciousness. "He has tasted the pleasures of rotting flesh before with other vampires, haven't you, Jason? He is so afraid. It is why Padma gave him to me." Yvette started to close the distance between herself and Jason's prone body. "I doubt his mind will survive even a night. Isn't it delicious?"

"We are so not doing this," I said. I took the Browning out of my pocket and showed it to her. "Don't touch him."

"You are a conquered people, Anita. Don't you grasp that yet?" she asked.

"Conquer this," I said. I raised the Browning towards her. Jean-Claude touched my arm. "Put away your gun, *ma petite*."

"We can't let her have Jason."

"She will not have Jason," he said. He stared down the hallway at Yvette. "Jason is mine. Mine in every way. I will not share him with you, and it is against the rules of hospitality that you do something to one of my people that will cause permanent damage. Breaking his mind is against council law."

"Padma doesn't think so," Yvette said.

"But you are not Padma." Jean-Claude glided towards them. His power began to fill the hallway like cool rising water.

"You were my toy for over a hundred years, Jean-Claude. Do you really think you can stand against me now?"

I felt her lash out, like a knife striking, but her power met Jean-Claude's and faded. It was like she was striking at mist. His power didn't fight back. It absorbed.

Jean-Claude stepped up, almost touching her, and jerked the leash out of her hand. She touched his face with her rotting flesh, smearing things worse than blood down his cheek.

Jean-Claude laughed, and it was bitter, like swallowing broken glass. It hurt to hear the sound. "I have seen you at your worst, Yvette. There is nothing new you can show me."

She dropped her hands to her side and stared up at him. "There are more delights up ahead. Padma and the Traveler await you." She didn't know that the Traveler was already among us. Willie's body remained quiet, not giving the Traveler away. Interesting.

Yvette held up her hand, and it was smooth and perfect once more. "You are conquered, Jean-Claude. You just don't know it yet."

Jean-Claude hit her, a blur of speed that sent her careening along the floor to end in a not so elegant bundle against the wall. "I may be conquered, Yvette, but not by you. Not by you."

Chapter 19

Jean-Claude untied Jason's hands and tore the collar from around his neck. Jason huddled into a little ball on the floor. He was making small noises in his throat more primitive than words and more piteous.

Yvette had gotten to her high heels and left us. Warrick was healing, if that was the right word. He sat up, still covered in the remains of his own bodily fluids, but his eyes were clear and blue, and he looked whole.

The Traveler in Willie's body walked up to stand by Jean-Claude. "You have impressed me more than once this night."

"I did none of it to impress, Traveler. These are my people. These are my lands. I defend them. It is not a game." He produced two handkerchiefs from somewhere. He handed me one. "For your hand, *ma petite*." He started to wipe the goop off Jason's face with the other handkerchief.

I stared down at my left hand. Blood was running in a nice steady line down my hand. I'd forgotten about it, watching Warrick rot. Some horrors were worse than pain. I took the bit of blue silk from Jean-Claude. "Thanks." I wrapped the makeshift bandage around the wound, but couldn't tie it one-handed.

The Traveler tried to help me tie the bandage. I pulled away from him.

"I offer you aid, not harm."

"No thanks."

He smiled, and again it was not Willie's thoughts that slid over his face. "It upsets you so much that I inhabit this body. Why?"

"He's my friend," I said.

"Friendship. You claim friendship with this vampire. He is nothing. A power not to be reckoned with."

"He's not my friend because he's powerful or not powerful. He's just my friend."

"It has been a very long time since someone has invoked friendship in my presence. They will beg for mercy, but never on the grounds of friendship."

Jean-Claude stood. "No one else would have thought of it."

"No one else would have been so naive," the Traveler said.

"It is a form of naiveté," Jean-Claude said. "That is true, but how long has it been, Traveler, since someone, anyone, had the courage to be naive before the council? They come before you asking for power, safety, vengeance, but not friendship, not loyalty. No, that they will not ask of the council."

Willie's head did that little turn to one side again, as if the Traveler were thinking. "Does she offer me friendship or ask it of me?"

I started to answer, but Jean-Claude beat me to it. "Can you offer true friendship without asking for it in return?"

I opened my mouth to say that I'd sooner be friends with a hungry crocodile, but Jean-Claude touched my arm gently. It was enough. We were winning. Don't blow it.

"Friendship," the Traveler said. "Now that is indeed something I have not been offered since I took my seat upon the council."

I spoke then, without thinking first. "That must be very lonely."

He laughed, and it was that same eerie mixture of Willie's loud bray and a slithering chuckle. "She is like a wind through a window long closed, Jean-Claude. A mixture of cynicism, naiveté, and power." He touched my face, and I let him. He cupped the side of my face in his hand in an almost familiar gesture. "She does have a certain . . . charm."

His hand trailed down my face, fingertips lingering against my cheek. He dropped his hand suddenly, fingers rubbing against each other as if he were trying to feel some invisible something. He shook his head. "I and this body will await you in the torture room." He answered me before I could even say no. "I do not plan to harm this body, Anita, but I do need it to walk about. I will leave this host if there is one that you would prefer I take."

He turned and stared at the rest of the group. His gaze came to rest at last on Damian. "I could take this one. Balthasar would enjoy that, I think."

I shook my head. "No."

"Is this one also your friend?"

I glanced at Damian. "Not my friend, no, but he's still mine."

The Traveler turned his head to one side, staring at me. "He belongs to you, how? Is he your lover?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Brother? Cousin? Ancestor?"

"No," I said.

"Then how is he . . . yours?"

I didn't know how to explain it. "I won't give Damian to you to save Willie. You said it yourself. You're not hurting him."

"And if I was? Would you trade Damian's safety for your friend?"

I shook my head. "I'm not going to debate this with you."

"I am merely trying to discern how important your friends are to you, Anita."

I shook my head again. I didn't like where this conversation was going. If I said the wrong thing, the Traveler was going to start cutting Willie up. I could see it coming. It was a trap, and everything I thought to say led right into it.

Jean-Claude interrupted, "*Ma petite* values her friends."

The Traveler held up a hand. "No, she must answer this one herself. It is her loyalty that I wish to understand, not yours." He stared at me from less than a foot away, uncomfortably close. "How important are your friends to you, Anita? Answer the question."

I thought of one answer that might not lead where the Traveler wanted to go. "Important enough to kill for," I said.

His eyes flew wide. His mouth opened in amazement. "Are you threatening me?"

I shrugged. "You asked a question. I answered it."

He threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, what a man you would have made."

I'd spent enough time around macho guys to know it was a compliment, a sincerely meant one. They never understood the implied insult. And as long as we weren't cutting up people I cared for, I wasn't going to point it out. "Thanks," I said.

His face blanked instantly, the humor gone like a bad memory. Only his eyes, Willie's eyes, were still alive, glittering with a force that crept along my skin like a chill wind. He offered me his arm like Jean-Claude had done earlier.

I glanced at Jean-Claude. He gave the barest of nods. I placed my still bleeding hand on the Traveler's wrist. His pulse beat hard and fast against my hand. It felt like the small wound had a second heartbeat, pounding in rhythm to his pulse. The blood flowed faster out of the cut, called by his power. It dripped in a tickling line down my arm to the elbow to fall inside the arm of the coat, soaking into the dark cloth. Blood spread over his wrist in crimson rivulets. My blood.

My own heart sped up, feeding the fear, driving the blood faster. I knew in that moment that he could stand there and bleed me to death out of that small wound. That he could waste all the blood in me, all the power in me, to make a point.

My heart was thudding in my ears. I knew I should move my hand, but I just never seemed to get around to moving it, as if something was interfering with the screaming in my head, before it could reach my hand.

Jean-Claude reached out to me, but the Traveler spoke before he could touch us. "No, Jean-Claude. I acknowledge her as a power to be reckoned with if she can break this hold on her own."

My voice was breathy, rushed, as if I'd been running, but I could talk, think, I just couldn't move my hand. "What do I get out of it?"

He laughed, pleased with himself. I think I'd finally asked a question he was comfortable with. "What do you want?"

I thought about that as the pulse in my hand beat fast and faster. Blood was beginning to soak the Traveler's sleeve, Willie's sleeve. I wanted Willie back. "Safe passage for me and all my people and friends."

He threw his head back and roared with laughter. The laughter stopped in mid-motion like a badly made film. He turned glittering eyes to me. "Break this hold, Anita, and I will grant you what you ask, but if you fail to break it, what do I gain?"

It was a trap, and I knew it, but I didn't know how to get out of it. If he kept bleeding me I'd pass out from blood loss, and it would all be over.

"Blood," I said.

He smiled. "I have that now."

"A willing drink from me. You don't have that."

"Tempting but not enough."

Grey spots were spreading across my vision. I was sweating and vaguely nauseous. It took a long time to pass out from blood loss, but he was speeding it up. I couldn't think what to offer him. I was having trouble thinking at all.

"What do you want?"

Jean-Claude let out a sigh, as if I'd said the wrong thing.

"The truth."

I collapsed slowly to my knees, and only his hand on my elbow kept me upright. My vision was going in large grey-white splotches. I was dizzy, and it was only going to get worse.

"What truth?"

"Who really killed the Earthmover? Tell me that and you are free."

I swallowed hard, and whispered, "Fuck you." I slid to the ground still holding onto him, still bleeding. He bent over me, but through my ruined vision it was just Willie. Willie's sharp-angled face. Willie with his loud suits and worse ties. Willie who loved Hannah with a gentle devotion that made my throat tight. I reached out and touched that face, ran my tingling fingertips through his slicked-back hair, cradled his jaw in my hand, and whispered, "Willie, come to me."

There was a jolt like a shiver of electricity, and I could see. My body still felt numb and distant, but my vision was clear. I looked into those glittering eyes and thought of Willie. There, deep inside was an answering scream.

"Willie, come to me." My voice was stronger this time.

The Traveler said, "What are you doing?"

I ignored him. Willie was one of the other vampires I'd accidentally called from their coffins, like Damian. And maybe, just maybe, he was mine in more than friendship. "With blood I call you, Willie McCoy. Rise and come to me."

The third heartbeat in my hand slowed. The Traveler was the one trying to get away now, trying to break the hold he had forged, but it was a two-edged blade. It cut both ways, and I wanted to make my point deep and sharp.

"Come to me, Willie. Rise to my voice, my hand, my blood. Rise and answer me. Willie McCoy, come now!" I watched Willie spill into those eyes like water filling a cup. I felt the Traveler forced out. I thrust him out, shoved him away, and slammed a door that I hadn't known I had in my head. In Willie's body. I forced the Traveler out, and he spun shrieking into the darkness.

Willie stared at me, and it was him, but there was a look in his eyes I'd never seen before. "What would you have of me, master?"

I collapsed on the floor, crying. I wanted to say, "I'm not your master," but the words died in my throat, swallowed by a velvet darkness that ate my vision and then the world.

Chapter 20

I'd fallen asleep with my head in my father's lap. He stroked my hair. I snuggled against his lap, my cheek resting on his bare thigh. Bare thigh? I was suddenly awake, pushing to a sitting position before I could really see. Jason sat leaning against a stone wall. It was his lap I'd woken up in. He gave me a very watered-down version of his usual come-hither smile, but it left his eyes cold and tired. He wasn't up to leering at me tonight. Things are rough when Jason stops teasing.

Jean-Claude and Padma were arguing in French. They stood on either side of a wooden table. A man was bound face-down to the table with silver bands at wrist, ankles, and neck. Bands that were bolted to the table itself. He was nude, but more than his clothes were missing. The entire back of his body was one raw bloody mess. I'd found the owner of the skin on the door. Rafael's darkly handsome face was slack, unconscious. I hoped he stayed that way for a long time.

Rafael, the Rat King, was head of the second-largest and strongest band of shapeshifters in the city. He was no one's toy. What the hell was he doing here like this? "What is Rafael doing here?" I asked Jason.

He answered, voice tired, dragging, "The Master of Beasts wants the wererats. Rafael wasn't strong enough not to come when called, but he was strong enough to not bring any of the other rats. He delivered himself over like a sacrifice." Jason leaned his head back against the wall, eyes closed. "They couldn't break him. They couldn't break Sylvie either."

"Sylvie?" I stared around the room. It was twenty by twenty, not that big. She was across the room chained to the wall. She sagged in the chains, full weight on her wrists, unconscious. Most of her was hidden from view by the table that Rafael was chained to. She didn't look hurt.

"Why is she here?"

"The Master of Beasts called the wolves, too. Richard wasn't here to answer, so Sylvie came. She protected the rest of us, just like Rafael did for his people."

"What are Jean-Claude and the Beastie-Boy arguing about?"

"The Traveler granted us our freedom, but they don't want to include Rafael in the bargain. The Master of Beasts says the Rat King is not our people, nor our friend."

"He's my friend," I said.

He smiled without opening his eyes. "I knew you'd say that."

I got to my feet, pushing against the wall. I was a little unsteady, but not bad. I walked towards the arguing vampires. The French was hot and furious.

Jean-Claude turned to me. "*Ma petite*, you are awake." His English was heavily accented. It often was after he'd been speaking a lot of French.

Padma held up a hand. "No, do not influence her."

Jean-Claude gave a sweeping bow. "As you like."

I wanted to touch Rafael. I could see his back rising and falling, but I wouldn't really believe he was okay until I touched him. My hands sort of hovered over him, but there was almost no place left to touch that wasn't raw and hurting. I finally touched his hair, then drew back. I didn't want to wake him. Unconscious was better than anything else right now.

"Who is this one to you?" Padma asked.

"He's Rafael, the Rat King. He's my friend."

Hannah walked in through the open dungeon door. The moment she appeared, I knew it was the Traveler. He leaned that very feminine body against the side of the door and managed to look masculine. "You cannot be friends with every monster in the city."

I stared up at him. "Want to bet?"

He shook his head, Hannah's blond hair bouncing back and forth just like in the shampoo commercial. He laughed, and it was girlish. "Oh, no, Anita Blake, I will not bargain with you again this night." He started down the steps. He'd taken off the high heels, and glided down the stairs in stocking feet. "But there will be other nights."

"I asked for safe passage and you gave it," I said. "You can't hurt us anymore."

"I gave safe passage for tonight only, Anita."

"I do not remember a time limit being placed on your promise," Jean-Claude said.

The Traveler waved the objection away. "It was understood."

"Not by me," I said.

He stopped on the other side of the table, by Padma. He stared at me with Hannah's grey eyes and frowned. "Anyone else would have known that I meant tonight alone."

"As you yourself have said, Traveler, she is not anyone," Jean-Claude said.

"He is one council member. He cannot bargain for all," Padma said. "He can force us to let you go tonight, but the rest he cannot do. He cannot free you all without a vote of all represented here."

"Then his promise means nothing," I said.

"If I had dreamt that you meant safety for our entire stay," the Traveler said, "I would have asked for more than merely the truth of the Earthmover's death."

"We made a deal. I kept my end of it," I said.

He tried to cross his arms over his chest, but had to settle for his stomach, arms cradling the breasts. Women are just not designed to look tough. "You have given me yet another problem, Anita. It might be wise to not be so problematic."

"Threaten all you want," I said, "but for tonight you can't touch us."

"Do not let it go to your head." His voice had crawled down a few octaves, dragging out of Hannah's throat.

I moved around to stand at Rafael's head, wanting to stroke his hair and not daring to. Tears pressed like a hand against the back of my eyes. "Unchain him. He goes with us, or your word is worth shit, Traveler."

"I will not give him up," Padma said.

"You will do as you are told," the Traveler said.

I turned away from the sight of Rafael's butchered body. I also didn't want the bad guys to see me cry. Turning away from Rafael gave me a better view of Sylvie. What I saw stopped me in my tracks.

Her pants were down around her ankles, shoes still on. I took a step towards her, then another, and was almost running by the time I got to her. I slid to my knees beside her. Blood stained her thighs. Her hands were balled into fists, eyes squeezed tight. She was whispering something, very softly, over and over. I touched her arm and she flinched. Her voice rose just enough for me to hear the one word, "No, no, no." Over and over and over like a mantra.

I was crying. I'd been talking about putting a bullet in Sylvie earlier today. Now I was crying for her. Some big tough sociopath I turned out to be. I had my problems with Sylvie, but this . . . She didn't even like men under the best of circumstances. It made what they'd done worse somehow, more insulting. Or maybe it was just that I remembered her as so proud, so confident and full of herself. To see her like this was almost more than I could bear.

"Sylvie, Sylvie, it's Anita." I wanted to pull her clothes back in place, but was afraid to touch her again until I was sure she knew it was me. "Sylvie, can you hear me?"

Jason came to stand with us. "Let me try."

"She won't want a man to touch her."

"I won't touch her." He knelt on the other side of her. "I smell like pack. You don't." He very carefully slid his arm in front of her face, trying not to touch her. "Smell the pack, Sylvie. Know the comfort of our touch."

She stopped saying no, but that was it. She wouldn't even open her eyes.

I stood up and faced the room. "Who did this?"

"She could have stopped it at any time," Padma said, "given me the pack and it would all have been over. She could have gone free."

I screamed, "WHO DID THIS!"

"I did," Padma said.

I stared down at the floor, and when I came back up, the Uzi was pointed at him. "I'm going to cut you in half."

"*Ma petite*, you will hit Rafael and perhaps me."

A machine gun was not made for one target in a crowd, but he'd survive the Browning. I shook my head. "He dies. For this, he dies."

The Traveler stepped beside Padma. "Would you slay this body?" He spread his hands wide and stepped in front of Padma. "Would you kill your Willie's lady love?"

Tears hot enough to scald trailed down my cheeks. "Damn you, damn you all."

"Padma did not personally rape your friend," the Traveler said. "Any unskilled man can rape, but it takes a true artist to skin a live shapeshifter."

"Who then?" My voice was just a little calmer. I wasn't going to use the machine gun, and we all knew it. I dropped the Uzi, letting it slide back under the coat. I wrapped my hand around the Browning and thought about it.

Jean-Claude started walking towards me. He knew me too well. "*Ma petite*, we all walk out of here in safety at least this night. You have given us this. Do not destroy us all for vengeance now."

Fernando walked through the door, and I knew. He might not be the only one, but he'd been one of them. He smirked at me. "The Traveler wouldn't let me have Hannah."

I started to tremble, a fine quivering that started in my arms and spread across my shoulders and down my body. I'd never wanted to kill anyone as badly as I wanted to kill him right that second. He glided down the steps in his bare feet, hands roving across his chest, playing in the line of hair that started on his belly. Rubbing his hands along the silk of his pants.

"Maybe I'll have you chained to a wall," he said.

I felt a smile stretch across my face. I spoke very clearly, very carefully, because if I didn't, I was going to scream, and if I lost control of my voice, I was going to shoot him. I knew that just as surely as I was standing there.

"Who helped you?"

Padma stopped his son, drawing him into the circle of his arms. I saw real fear on the master vampire's face. His son was still too arrogant or too stupid to understand.

"I did it myself."

A laugh that was bitter enough to choke me came out. "You couldn't do this much damage on your own. Who helped you?"

The Traveler touched Fernando's shoulder. "Others, unnamed others. If the woman can tell you, let her. If not, you do not need to know. You will not be hunting them, Executioner."

"Not tonight," I said. The trembling was quieting. That cold, icy center of my soul, the place where I'd given up a piece of myself, spread outward. I was

calm, deadly calm. I could have shot them all and not blinked. "But you said it yourself, Traveler: there will be other nights."

Jason was talking in a low voice and Sylvie was answering. I glanced at her. She wasn't crying. Her face was pale and strangely stiff, as if everything was held inside, tight and hard. Jason undid the locks on the chains and she slid down the wall. He tried to help her pull up her pants, but she pushed him away.

I knelt beside her. "Let me help, please."

Sylvie tried to pull the pants up herself, but her hands weren't working right. She kept fumbling and finally collapsed to the floor in tears.

I started to dress her, and she let me. She helped where she could, but her hands were shaking so badly, she couldn't do much. Her pants were pink linen. I couldn't find the underwear. It was gone. I knew she'd been wearing some, because Sylvie wouldn't go without. She was a lady, and ladies didn't do that.

When everything was covered, she finally met my eyes. The look in her brown eyes made me want to look away, but I didn't. If she could have that much pain in her face, the least I could do was look at it. No flinching. I'd even stopped crying.

"I didn't give them the pack," she said.

"I know," I said. I wanted to touch her, reassure her, and was afraid to.

She collapsed forward, sobbing; not crying, but sobbing like she'd cry out bits and pieces of herself on the floor. I put my arms around her, tentatively. She sagged against me, holding me. I held her half in my arms, half in my lap, rocking her slowly. I leaned over next to her ear and breathed a sound into it, "He's dead. They're all dead."

She quieted slowly, then looked up at me. "You swear it?"

"I swear it."

She huddled against me and said softly, "I won't kill Richard."

"Good, because I'd hate to kill you now."

She laughed, and it turned it into more crying, but softer now, quieter, not quite so desperate.

I looked up at the others. The men, dead and alive, were staring at me.

"Rafael comes with us, no more debating."

Padma nodded. "Very well."

Fernando turned to him. "Father, you can't let her do this. The wolves, yes, but not the Rat King."

"Hush, Fernando."

"He cannot be allowed to live, if he does not submit."

"You weren't rat enough to be dominant to him, were you, Fernando?" I said. "He's stronger than you'll ever be, and you hate him for it."

Fernando took a step towards me. Padma and the Traveler both held him back, a hand on each shoulder.

Jean-Claude stepped between us. "Let us be on our way, *ma petite*. The night grows long."

The Traveler stepped away from Fernando slowly. I wasn't sure who he trusted least, me or the rat-boy. He started unfastening the chains that held Rafael in place. The wererat was still unconscious, oblivious to his fate.

I got to my feet, and Sylvie came with me. She pushed away from me, tried to walk and nearly fell. I caught her, and Jason caught her other arm.

Fernando laughed.

Sylvie stumbled. She looked like she'd been slapped. The laughter cut more than any words. I laid my lips against her cheek, cradled her face against mine with my free hand, lips by her ear. "He's dead, remember that."

She leaned into me for a moment, then nodded. She straightened and let Jason help her walk towards the stairs.

Jean-Claude lifted Rafael in his arms as gently as he could, balancing the man over his shoulders. Rafael groaned, hands spasming, but his eyes stayed shut.

I stared at the Traveler. "You'll need to find another horse to ride," I said. "Hannah comes with us."

"Of course," he said.

"Now, Traveler," I said.

Arrogance spread across his face. It was a look I'd never seen on Hannah's face before. "Do not let one act of magical bravado make you foolish, Anita."

I smiled and knew it wasn't pleasant. It was bitter and arrogant and angry. "My patience is all gone tonight, Traveler. Get out of her now, or . . ." I shoved the Browning into Fernando's groin. They were all huddled that close.

Fernando's eyes widened, but he wasn't nearly as afraid as he should have been. I pressed the barrel in a little harder; makes most men back up. He gave a small grunt but leaned into me, face bending towards me. He was going to try and kiss me.

I laughed. I laughed while his lips hovered over my mouth and the gun pressed into his body. It was the laughter, not the gun, that made him draw back.

Hannah collapsed to her knees. The Traveler had gone. Someone needed to help her to the stairs. I thought of Willie and he came. He helped her to her feet without looking at me. I kept my eyes on the bad guys. One problem at a time.

"Why are you laughing?" Fernando asked.

"Because you are too fucking stupid to survive." I drew back from them, the gun still pointed at him. "Is he your only son?" I asked.

"My only child," Padma said.

"My condolences," I said. No, I didn't shoot him. But staring into Fernando's angry eyes, I knew there'd be other opportunities. Some people seek death through desperation. Some people fall into it out of stupidity. If Fernando wanted to fall, I was more than happy to catch him.

Chapter 21

Rafael lay on an examining table. We were not in the hospital. The lycanthropes had a makeshift emergency room in the basement of a building that they owned. I'd had my own wounds tended there once. Now Rafael lay on his stomach hooked up to an IV loaded with liquids and painkillers. Painkillers didn't always work well on lycanthropes but hey, they had to try something. He'd regained consciousness in the Jeep. He hadn't screamed, but the small squeezed whimperings that clawed from his throat every time I hit a bump were more than enough.

Dr. Lillian was a small woman with salt-and-pepper hair cut in a no-nonsense style. She was also a wererat. She turned to me. "I've made him as comfortable as I can."

"Will he heal?"

She nodded. "Yes. The real danger with this type of injury once you survive the shock and blood loss is infection. We can't get infections."

"Let's hear it for the terminally furry," I said.

She smiled and patted my shoulder. "I know humor is your way of dealing with stress, but don't try it on Rafael tonight. He wants to speak with you."

"Is he . . .?"

"Well enough, no, but he is my king and he won't let me put him under until he's spoken with you. I'll go look in on our other patient while you hear whatever he thinks is so important."

I touched her arm before she could move past me. "How is Sylvie?"

Lillian wouldn't look at me, then finally she did. "Physically, she'll heal, but I'm not a therapist. I'm not equipped to deal with the aftereffects of an attack like this. I want her to stay here for the night, but she's insisting that she go with you."

My eyes widened. "Why?"

Lillian shrugged. "I think she feels safe with you. I think she doesn't feel safe here." The older woman was suddenly looking very intently at my face. "Is there a reason she shouldn't feel safe here?"

I thought about that. "Have the wereleopards ever been treated here?"

"Yes," she said.

"Damn."

"Why should that matter? This is a neutral place. We have all agreed to that."

I shook my head. "For tonight you're safe, but anything that Elizabeth knew, the Master of Beasts knows. By tomorrow this may not be a safe haven."

"Do you know that for sure?" she asked.

"No, but I don't know for sure that you will be safe either."

She nodded. "Very well. Take Sylvie with you, then, but Rafael must stay here at least for one night. I will make plans to move him by tomorrow." She looked around at all the medical equipment. "We can't take it all, but we'll do what we can. Now go talk to our king." She left the room.

I was suddenly alone in the hush of the basement. I looked at Rafael. They'd arranged a sort of tent of a sheet over his body, covered but not

touching. The naked skin was covered in salve but no bandages. Anything they could put on it would hurt worse than nothing. They were treating it sort of like a burn. I didn't know everything they'd done to treat him because I'd been off getting my hand stitched up part of the time.

I walked around the table so that Rafael wouldn't have to move his head to look at me. Moving was bad. His eyes were closed, but his breathing was fast and ragged. He wasn't asleep.

"Lillian said you wanted to talk to me."

He blinked and looked at me. His eyes rolled at an awkward angle. He tried to move his head, and a sound came from low in his chest. I'd never heard a sound quite like it. I didn't want to hear it again.

"Don't move, please." I found a little stool with wheels on it and brought it over. With me sitting, we were nearly the same height. "You should let her pump you full of drugs. You need to sleep if you can."

"First," he said, "I must know how you freed me." He took a deeper breath, and the pain passed over his face in a flinching wave.

I looked away, then back. No flinching. "I bargained for you."

"What . . ." His hands spasmed, and he closed his full lips into a tight-pressed line. When he spoke again, his voice was lower, more careful, as if even a normal speaking voice hurt. "What did you give up for me?"

"Nothing."

"He would not . . . have given me up so easily." Rafael stared at me, his dark eyes willing me to tell him the truth. He thought I was lying, that was why he couldn't rest. He thought I'd done something noble and awful to save him.

I sighed and told him a very abbreviated version of the night. It was the easiest way to explain. "See, it didn't cost any extra to throw you in."

He almost smiled. "The wererats will remember what you did tonight, Anita. I will remember."

"Maybe we don't go shopping together or even out to the shooting range, but you are my friend, Rafael. I know that if I called you for help, you'd come."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I would."

I smiled at him. "I'll go get Lillian now, okay?"

He closed his eyes and some piece of tension flowed out of him. It was almost as if now he could finally give himself over to the pain. "Yes, yes."

I sent Lillian into him and went to find Sylvie. She was in a small room where Lillian had hoped she could get some sleep. Sylvie had been joined by her lady friend, significant other, lover, whatever. Jason had called her. I hadn't known she existed. Gwen's voice came very clearly down the hallway. "You have to tell her, Sylvie, you have to."

I couldn't hear Sylvie's answer, but then the high heels weren't quiet. They knew I was coming. I stepped in through the open door to find Gwen looking at me, and Sylvie decidedly not. The white pillow framed her very short, very curly brown hair. She was three inches taller than me but managed to look fragile in the small bed.

Gwen sat in a straight-backed chair beside the bed, holding Sylvie's hand in both of her own. Gwen had long softly waving blond hair and big brown

eyes in a delicate face. Everything about her was dainty, feminine, like a pale, finely made doll. But the intensity in her face, the intelligence in her eyes, was a vibrating thing. Gwen was a psychologist. She would have been a compelling person even without the trickle of lycanthropic energy that trailed around her like perfume.

"What do you need to tell me?" I said.

"How do you know I was referring to you?" Gwen said.

"Call it a hunch."

She patted Sylvie's hand. "Tell her."

Sylvie turned her head but still wouldn't meet my eyes. I leaned against the wall and waited. The machine gun pressed into the small of my back, forcing me to lean mostly shoulders against the cinderblock wall. Why hadn't I taken some of the weapons off? Lay a gun down somewhere, and that's when you'll need it most. I trusted the Traveler to keep his word, but not enough to bet my life on it.

Silence spilled into the small room until the whirr of the air conditioner was as loud as the blood in your own ears. Sylvie finally looked at me. "The Master of Beasts ordered Stephen's brother to rape me." She looked down, then up again, anger spilling into her eyes. "Gregory refused."

I didn't bother to hide the surprise on my face. "I thought Gregory was one of the stars of Raina's porno films."

"He was," Sylvie said softly.

What I wanted to ask was, when did he get to be squeamish? but that seemed crude. "Did he suddenly grow a conscience?" I asked.

"I don't know." She was staring at the sheet, holding onto Gwen's hands like there was worse to come. "He refused to help torture me. The Master of Beasts said he'd punish him. Gregory still refused. He said that Zane had told him that Anita was their new alpha. That all bargains made through Elizabeth weren't binding. That he needed to deal with you for them."

Sylvie withdrew her hand from Gwen's and stared up at me. Her brown eyes were furious, but it wasn't me she was angry with. "You can't be their leader and our lupa. You can't be both. He was lying."

I sighed. "Afraid not."

"But, how . . ."

"Look, it's late, and we're all tired. Let's just do the short version. I killed Gabriel, technically that makes me the wereleopards' leader. Zane acknowledged me after I put a couple of non-silver bullets in him."

"Why didn't you kill him?" Sylvie asked.

"It's sort of my fault. I didn't understand what leaving them without a leader would mean. Someone should have told me that they were meat for anybody with out a leader."

"I wanted them to suffer," Sylvie said.

"I was told you wanted them all dead, that if you had your way, the pack would have hunted them down and killed them all."

"Yes," she said, "yes. I want them all dead."

"I know they helped punish you and other pack members."

She shook her head, hands in front of her eyes. It took me a second to realize she was crying. "You don't understand. There's a film of me out there. A film of the leopards raping me." She brought her hands down and stared at me with tear-filled eyes. The rage and pain in her face was raw. "I was outspoken against Raina and Marcus. It was my punishment. Raina wanted to make an example of me for the others. It worked, too. Everyone was scared after that."

I opened my mouth; closed it, then said, "I didn't realize."

"Now do you see why I want them dead?"

"Yes," I said.

"Gregory had raped me once. Why wouldn't he do it again? Why did he refuse to hurt me tonight?"

"If he really believes that I'm his leader, then he knows what I'd do to him."

"Did you mean it in the room? Did you mean it about us killing them all?"

"Oh, yeah," I said, "I meant it."

"Then Gregory was right."

I frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

"He said you were their *léoparde lionné*, their rampant leopard."

"I don't know the term," I said.

Gwen answered. "*Léoparde lionné* is a term from French heraldry. It's a leopard, or even a lion, rampant in action on a crest. It symbolizes brave and generous warriors having done some brave deed. In this case it means a protector, even an avenger. Gabriel was a *lion passant*, a sleeping lion. He led but did not protect. In effect, Gregory did not merely refuse to harm Sylvie, he also told the Master of Beasts that if he was harmed, you would save him."

"How can I be their *léoparde* what-you-call-it if I'm not a leopard?"

"*Léoparde lionné*," Sylvie said. "How can you be lupa and neither be wolf nor our Ulfic's lover?"

She had me there.

Fresh tears streamed down Sylvie's face. "Padma tried to get Vivian, his personal pet while he's here, to do things to me. Said I liked women, and maybe that would loosen my tongue. She refused, and she gave the same reason that Gregory did."

I remembered Vivian staring at me, her frightened eyes pleading for me to help her. "Shit, you mean she really expected me to rescue her tonight."

Sylvie just nodded. Gwen said, "Yes."

"Shit."

"I honestly didn't think of it until after we were in the Jeep. I swear I didn't think of it sooner," Sylvie said. "But I didn't say anything, because I wanted them to suffer. I can't stop hating them just like that. Do you understand?"

I did. "Sylvie, you and I have one thing in common. We are both vindictive as hell. So, yeah, I understand, but we can't leave them there like that, not if they were expecting to be saved."

She wiped at the tears. "You can't go up against them tonight. We can't do anymore tonight."

"I'm not planning to fight anymore tonight, Sylvie."

"But you're planning something." She sounded worried.

I smiled. "Yeah."

Gwen stood. "Don't be foolish, Anita."

I shook my head. "Foolish. I'm way past foolish." I stopped in the doorway and turned back. "By the way, Sylvie, don't challenge Richard, ever."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know?"

I shrugged. "Doesn't matter. What does matter is that I'll kill you if you kill him."

"It would be a fair fight."

"I don't care."

"You haven't seen him, Anita. He's on the edge. You can forbid me from challenging him, but there are others, and they won't be nearly as good for the pack as I am."

"Then make it carte blanche," I said. "If anyone kills Richard, I'll execute them. No challenge, no fair fight, I'll just take them out."

"You can't do that," Sylvie said.

"Oh, I think I can. I'm lupa, remember."

"If you forbid fights of succession," Gwen said, "you're undermining Richard. You're saying in effect that you don't believe he can really lead the pack."

"I've been told by two pack members today that Richard is out of control, damn near suicidal. That he's pulled his self-hatred, his loathing of his beast, and my rejection, down around his ears. I won't let him die because I chose someone else. In a few months when he's healthier, then I'll step down. I'll let him take care of himself, but not right now."

"I'll pass the word," Gwen said.

"You do that."

"You're going to try and bring out the leopards tonight, aren't you?" Sylvie said.

I kept seeing the bruises on Vivian's body. The pleading in her eyes. "They expected me to save them, and I didn't."

"You didn't know," Gwen said.

"I know now," I said.

"You can't save everyone," Sylvie said.

"Everyone needs a hobby." I started to walk out again, but Gwen called me back.

I turned in the doorway.

"Tell her the rest," Gwen said softly.

Sylvie wouldn't look at me. She spoke staring down at the sheet. "When Vivian refused to hurt me, they called in Liv." She looked up, tears glittering in her eyes. "She used things on me. Did things to me." Sylvie covered her face with her hands and rolled onto her side, crying.

Gwen met my eyes. The look on her face was frightening in its hatred. "You need to know who to kill."

I nodded. "She won't leave St. Louis alive."

"And the other one? The council member's son?" Gwen asked.

"Him either," I said.

"Promise it," she said.

"I already have," I said. I walked out then, searching for a phone. I wanted to talk to Jean-Claude before I did anything. Jean-Claude had taken everyone else to my house. They were boarding up the basement windows so that the vamps could be tucked safely away before dawn. The Traveler had refused to let them take their coffins. Besides, have you ever tried to rent a truck on a weekend after midnight?

What was I going to do about the wereleopards? Damned if I knew.

Chapter 22

Jean-Claude's voice floated over the phone, my phone, my house. He'd never been there before. "What has happened, *ma petite*? Jason made it sound urgent."

I told him about the wereleopards.

He was quiet for so long. I had to say something. "Talk to me, Jean-Claude."

"Are you actually thinking of endangering us all for the sake of two people, one of whom you have never met before, and the other who you once described as a waste of skin?"

"I can't leave them there if they expected me to help them."

"*Ma petite, ma petite*, you have a sense of *noblesse oblige* that does you credit. But we cannot save them. Tomorrow evening the council will come for us, and we may not even be able to save ourselves."

"Are they here to kill us?"

"Padma would kill us if he could. He is the weakest of the council. and I think he fears us."

"The Traveler's the one we have to convince." I said.

"No, *ma petite*, the council are seven in number, always an odd number so that a vote may settle a question. Padma and the Traveler will vote against one another, this is true. It has been true for centuries. But Yvette is here to vote in the place of her lord, Morte d'Amour. She hates Padma but she may hate me more. For that matter, Balthasar could persuade the Traveler against us, and we are lost."

"What about everybody else? Do they represent anybody?"

"Asher speaks for Belle Morte. Beautiful Death. It is her line that I am descended from, as is he."

"He hates your guts," I said. "We are sunk."

"I believe the choice of four was very deliberate. They wish me to take a council seat, so I am the fifth vote."

"If the Traveler votes with you, and Yvette hates Padma more than she hates you . . ."

"*Ma petite*, if I act as a voting member of the council, then they will expect me to return to France and take my place on the council."

"France?" I said.

He laughed, and it slithered over the phone like a swarm touch. "It is not leaving our fair city that frightens me, *ma petite*. It is holding the seat. If the triumvirate were fully formed perhaps, perhaps, it would be possible to appear frightening enough to force would-be challengers to choose another."

"Are you saying without the fourth mark, the triumvirate is useless?"

Silence on his end, so long and deep, that I said, "Jean-Claude?"

"I am here, *ma petite*. The fourth mark will not make our triumvirate functional unless Richard heals himself."

"You mean his hatred of me."

"His jealousy of us together, yes, that is a problem, but not the only one, *ma petite*. His loathing of his beast is so intense, it weakens him. Weaken any link in a chain and it may snap."

"Did you know about what's been happening in the pack?"

"Richard has forbidden any of the wolves to tell me anything without his permission. I believe you are under the same restriction. It is, and I quote, none of my damn business."

"I'm surprised you didn't force Jason to tell you anyway."

"Have you seen Richard within the last month?"

"No."

"I have. He is on the edge, *ma petite*. I did not need Jason to tell me. It is plain for all to see. His torment will be viewed as a weakness among the pack. Weakness attracts them like blood to a . . . vampire. They will challenge him eventually."

"I've had two lukoi tell me that they don't think Richard will fight. That he'll just let someone kill him. Do you believe that?"

"Suicide by simply not defending himself hard enough. Hmm." He was quiet again, then finally said, "I had not thought of such a thing. If I had, *ma petite*, I would have told you of my concerns. I do not wish Richard harm."

"Yeah, right."

"He is our third, *ma petite*. It is in my own interest to make him healthy and happy. I need him."

"Like you need me," I said.

He laughed low and deep, and even over the phone I could feel it tickling along my body. "*Oui, ma petite*. Richard must not die. But to cure his despair he must embrace his beast. I cannot help him do that. I have tried and he will not hear me. He takes what limited help he needs to keep himself from invading your dreams, or you his, but beyond that he wants nothing from us. Nothing he will admit."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"It is your tender mercies that he needs, *ma petite*, not mine."

"Tender mercies?" I made it a question.

"If you could accept his beast, completely, it would mean something to him."

"I can't, Jean-Claude. I wish I could, but I can't. I saw him eat Marcus. I . . . I'd only seen Richard shapeshift once. He'd been injured from the fight with Marcus. He half-collapsed with me underneath him. I'd been trapped under him while fur flowed, muscles formed and shifted, bones broke and reknit. Clear liquid had gushed from his power, pouring over me in a near-scalding wave. Maybe if I'd just been watching, it would have been different. But trapped under him, feeling his body do things on top of me that bodies were never meant to do . . . it had been too much. If Richard had handled it differently, if I had seen him change in a nice calm way from a distance, then built up to the whole ride, maybe, maybe. But it had happened, and I couldn't forget it. I could still close my eyes and see his manwolf shape gulping down a red, bloody piece of Marcus.

I leaned my back against the wall, cradling the receiver. I was rocking ever so slightly. It reminded me of Jason in the hallway. I made myself stand very still. I wanted to forget. I wanted to be able to accept Richard. But I couldn't.

"*Ma petite*, are you all right?"

"Fine, I'm fine."

Jean-Claude let that go. He really was getting smarter, at least about me. "I do not wish to cause you distress."

"I've done what I can for Richard on my end." I told Jean-Claude what I'd told the werewolves.

"You surprise me, *ma petite*. I thought you wanted nothing more to do with the lukoi."

"I don't want Richard to die because I broke his heart."

"You would feel responsible if he died now, is that it?"

"Yeah."

He took a deep breath and let it sigh over the phone. It made me shiver, for no particular reason. "How badly do you wish to help the wereleopards?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"An important one," he said. "What are you willing to risk for them? What would you endure for them?"

"You have something specific in mind, don't you?"

"Padma might give up Vivian in exchange for you. Gregory's freedom could be won if we gave them Jason."

"I notice you're not trading yourself in," I said.

"Padma would not want me, *ma petite*. He is neither a lover of men nor of other vampires in particular. He prefers his companions warm and female."

"Why Jason then?"

"A werewolf for a wereleopard might be an acceptable trade to him."

"Not to me. We are not trading one hostage for another, and I am certainly not giving myself to that monster."

"You see, *ma petite*, you will not endure that. You will not risk Jason to save Gregory. I ask again, what will you risk for them?"

"I'll risk my life, but only if I've got a good chance of getting out alive. No sex, absolutely not. No trading one hostage for another. Nobody else gets skinned alive or raped. How's that for parameters?"

"Padma and Fernando will be disappointed, but the others might agree. I will do the best I can within the limits you have given me."

"No rape, no maiming, no actual intercourse, no hostages, does that really tie your hands that much?"

"When we have survived all this, *ma petite*, and the council has gone home, I will tell you stories of my time at court. I have seen spectacles that even in the telling would give you nightmares."

"Nice to know you think we're going to survive."

"I am hopeful, yes."

"But not certain," I said.

"Nothing is certain, *ma petite*, not even death."

He had me there. My beeper went off. It pulled a gasp from my throat. Nervous, who me?

"Are you all right, *ma petite*?"

"My beeper went off," I said. I checked the number. It was Dolph. "It's the police. I need to return the call."

"I will begin negotiations with the council, *ma petite*. If they ask too much, I will let your leopards remain where they are."

"Padma will kill Vivian now that he thinks she belongs to me. He might have killed her before, but it would have been by accident. If we don't get her out of there, he'll do it on purpose."

"One meeting with him and you are so sure of this?"

"You think I'm wrong?" I asked.

"No, *ma petite*, I think you are exactly right."

"Get them out of there, Jean-Claude. Make the best deal you can."

"I have your permission to use your name in this?"

"Yeah." My beeper went off a second time. Dolph, impatient as usual. "I've got to go, Jean-Claude."

"Very well, *ma petite*. I will bargain for us all, then."

"You do that," I said. "Wait . . ."

"Yes, *ma petite*."

"You aren't going to go back to the Circus in person tonight, are you? I don't want you in there alone," I said.

"I will use the phone, if you prefer," he said.

"I do."

"You don't trust them," he said.

"Not hardly."

"Wise beyond your years," he said.

"Suspicious beyond my years, you mean."

"That as well, *ma petite*. If they will not negotiate over the phone?" he asked.

"Then let it go."

"You said you were willing to risk your life, *ma petite*."

"I didn't say I was willing to risk yours."

"Ah," he said. "*Je t'aime, ma petite.*"

"I love you, too," I said.

He hung up first, and I dialed the police. Here was hoping whatever Dolph had in mind was some nice straightforward police work. Yeah, right.

Chapter 23

The victim had been rushed to a hospital by the time I arrived at Burnt Offerings. It's one of my favorites of the newer vampire businesses. It was far from the vampire district. The only other vamp businesses were blocks, miles away. As you walked through the doors there was a poster from the 1970's movie *Burnt Offerings*, Oliver Reed and Bette Davis staring down at you. There was a life size waxwork of Christopher Lee as Dracula in the bar. There was one wall with framed caricatures of horror stars of the sixties and seventies, floor to ceiling, no tables allowed to obstruct the view. It wasn't uncommon to see clusters of visitors trying to identify who was who. At midnight whoever had the most correct guesses got a free dinner for two.

The place was pure schlock. Some of the waiters were real vamps, but others were just wannabes. For some it was just a job, and they specialized in plastic Halloween teeth and jokes. For others it was their chance to pretend. They had dental caps over their canines and worked very hard at being the real thing. Other waiters or waitresses were dressed up as mummies, the wolf man, Frankenstein's monster. To my knowledge the only real monsters were the vamps. If a shapeshifter wanted to come out of the closet, there was better money to be made in more exotic locales.

The place was always packed. I wasn't sure whether Jean-Claude was sorry he hadn't thought of it first or if he was simply embarrassed by it. It was a little *déclassé* for him. Me, I loved it. From the haunted house soundtrack to the Bela Lugosi burgers, extra rare unless otherwise requested. Bela was one of the few exceptions to the 60's and 70's movie decor. Hard to have a horror theme restaurant without the original movie Dracula.

You haven't lived until you've been there on a Friday night for Scary Karaoke. I took Ronnie. Veronica (Ronnie) Sims is a private detective and my best friend. We had a blast.

But back to the body. All right, not a body, a victim. But if the bartender hadn't been fast with a fire extinguisher, it would have been a body.

Detective Clive Perry was the man in charge. He's tall, slender, sort of Denzel Washington without the broad shoulders. He's one of the most polite people I've ever met. I've never heard him yell, and only seen him lose his composure once—when a large white cop had pointed a gun at the "nigger

detective." Even then I was the one who pointed my gun at the rogue cop. I was the one that was ready to shoot while Perry was still trying to talk the situation down. Maybe I overreacted. Maybe I didn't. No one died.

He turned with a smile, soft voice. "Ms. Blake, good to see you."

"Good to see you, too, Detective Perry." He always affected me this way. He was so polite, so soft-spoken that I fell into the same pattern. I was never this nice to anyone else.

We were in the bar with its life-size waxwork of Christopher Lee as Dracula looming over us. The bartender was a vamp named Harry who had long auburn hair and a silver stud in his nose. He looked very young, very cutting edge, and could probably remember the Jamestown charter, though his British accent showed he was newer to the country than the 1600's. He was polishing the bar like his life depended on it. Even with his nice blank face, I could tell he was nervous. Couldn't blame him, I guess. Harry was part owner as well as bartender.

A woman had been attacked in the bar by a vampire patron. Very bad for business. The woman had thrown a drink in his face and lit him with her lighter. Ingenious in an emergency. Vamps burn really well. But the quiet bar in a family-oriented tourist trap didn't seem the place for such extreme measures. Maybe she panicked.

"Witnesses all say she seemed friendly until he got a little too close," Perry said.

"Did he bite her?"

Perry nodded.

"Shit," I said.

"But she lit him up, Anita. He's badly burned. He may not make it. What could she have thrown on him to get third-degree burns so quickly?"

"How quickly?"

He checked his notes. "Seconds and he went up."

I asked Harry. "What was she drinking?"

He didn't ask who, just said, "Straight Scotch. Best we had in the place."

"High alcohol content?"

He nodded.

"That would have been enough," I said. "Once you get a vamp burning, they burn until they're put out. They're very combustible."

"So she didn't come in here with some sort of accelerant?" he asked.

I shook my head. "She didn't need it. What I don't like is the fact that she knew to light the drink. If he'd been human and gotten out of hand, she'd have thrown the drink and yelled for help."

"He did bite her," Perry said.

"If she had that much problem with a vampire sinking fang in her, she wouldn't have been cuddling with him in a bar. Something's off about this."

"Yes," he said, "but I don't know what. If the vampire survives, he's going to be up on charges."

"I'd like to see the woman."

"Dolph took her to the emergency room to get the bite tended. He's got her down at our headquarters. He said to come on down if you think you need to see her."

It was late, and I was tired, but dammit, something was wrong. I walked over to the bar. "Was she trolling for vamps, Harry?"

He shook his head. "Came in to use the phone, then sat down. She's a beauty. Didn't take long for someone to hit on her. Just bad luck it was a vampire."

"Yeah," I said, "bad luck."

He kept polishing the bar in small round circles, while his eyes watched me. "If she sues us, it'll ruin us."

"She won't sue," I said.

"Tell that to the Crematorium in Boston. A woman got bit there and sued them out of business. They had pickets going outside."

I patted his hand, and he went utterly still under my touch. His skin had that hard almost wooden feel that vamps can have when they aren't trying to be human. I met his dark eyes, and his face was as immobile and unreadable as glass.

"I'll go talk to the supposed victim."

He just looked at me. "It won't help, Anita. She's human. We're not. Nothing they do in Washington will change that."

I took my hand away and resisted an urge to wipe it on my dress. I never liked the way vamps felt when they went hard and otherworldly. They didn't feel like flesh then, almost plastic like a dolphin, but harder, as if there was no muscle underneath, nothing but solidness like a tree.

"I'll do what I can, Harry."

"We're monsters, Anita. We'll always be monsters. I've really enjoyed being able to walk the streets like everyone else, but it won't last."

"Maybe, maybe not," I said. "Let's take care of this problem before we borrow another one, okay?"

He nodded and walked away to stack glasses.

"That was very comforting of you," Perry said. Anyone else on the squad would have said it wasn't like me to be comforting. Of course, anyone else would have already given me a hard time about the dress. I was going to have to go down to RPIT headquarters. Dolph would be there and Zerbrowski, probably. They'd know just what to say about the dress.

Chapter 24

Three o'clock found me at the headquarters for the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. Another squad had buttons made up for us with the

abbreviation RIP bleeding down the front of the button in red or green, your choice. Zerbrowski handed them out, and we all wore them, even Dolph. The first vampire we killed after the buttons arrived came through the morgue with one of the buttons pinned to its shirt. Never did find out who did it. My money was on Zerbrowski.

Zerbrowski met me on the steps leading into the squad room. "If that dress was slit any higher, it'd be a shirt," he said.

I looked him up and down. His pale blue shirt was coming untucked from a pair of dark green dress slacks, his tie so loose, it looked like a bulky necklace. "Jeez, Zerbrowski, is Katie mad at you?"

He frowned. "No, why?"

I motioned at the tie that matched neither shirt nor slacks. "She let you wear this out where people could see you."

He grinned. "I dressed in the dark."

I touched the black-figured tie. "That I believe."

But it didn't faze him. He pushed the door open to the squad room with a flourish. He beamed at me. "Beauty before age."

It was my turn to frown. "What are you up to, Zerbrowski?"

He gave me innocent eyes. "Me, up to something?"

I shook my head and walked through the door. There was a stuffed toy penguin on every desk. Everyone answered phones, filed, worked on their computers. No one paid me any attention. Just the penguins sitting on every desk. It had been almost a year since Dolph and Zerbrowski had seen my penguin collection. The teasing didn't start right away; I thought I was safe. When Zerbrowski got back off sick leave after the new year, the penguins had started showing up at every creme scene. On my car seat, in my trunk. They must have spent a couple of hundred dollars on the things by now.

I still didn't know how to react. Ignore it? Pretend that there weren't a dozen penguins sitting around the room? Collect them as I went through the room and take them home? Get mad? If I could have figured out the reaction that would stop the joke, I'd have given it to them. So far, I'd tried ignoring and collecting. Neither stopped it. In fact, it seemed to be getting worse. I suspected that they were building to some grand climax. I had no idea what and wasn't sure I ever wanted to find out.

"Glad to see everybody's so energetic at three A.M."

"No effort too great, no hour too late," Zerbrowski said.

"Where's Dolph?"

"In the interview room with our victim."

There was something about the way he said it that made me look at him. "Dolph called her the 'supposed' victim over the phone. Why doesn't anyone believe her?"

He smiled. "Dolph would be mad if I spoiled it." He crooked his finger at me. "Come along, little girl. We have someone we want you to meet."

I scowled at him. "If this is some elaborate joke, I am going to be pissed."

He held the door for me. "Did we interrupt your date with Count Dracula?"

"None of your damn business."

A chorus of "ooohs" went through the squad room. I went through the door with everyone calling after me. Some of the suggestions were rude, one physically impossible even with a vampire. Sexual harassment or just being one of the guys, it was always a thin line.

I peeked back through the door and said, "You're all just jealous." That brought more catcalls.

Zerbrowski was waiting on the stairs for me. "I don't know whether you'll flash me more leg if I walk in front of you, looking back, or behind you. I think in front."

"Push it too far, Zerbrowski, and I'll tell Katie on you."

"She knows I'm a lech." He walked down the stairs looking back at me.

I walked down the stairs and let the dress fall where it might. When you wear a dress slit nearly to your hips, even if it is to have a gun handy, you are either comfortable with men looking or you wear something else. "How did you ever convince Katie to date you, let alone marry you?"

"I got her drunk," he said.

I laughed. "I'll ask her next time I'm over for dinner."

He grinned. "She'll give you this cock-and-bull story about something romantic and stupid. Don't believe her." He stopped in front of the first interview room and knocked softly.

Dolph opened the door. He filled the doorway very completely. He isn't just tall, he's bulky like a pro-wrestler. His tie was knotted perfectly, white-starched collar tight to his neck. His grey dress slacks still had a sharp crease. His only concession to the heat and the lateness of the hour was the long white sleeves of his shirt. No jacket. I could count on one hand the times I'd seen Dolph in shirt sleeves.

All cops perfect a bored face or a blank face, some even a mildly amused face, but they all eventually have a face that keeps everything inside. An emptiness settles in their eyes that keeps all their secrets. Dolph gave great blank face when questioning suspects. The look on his face now was angry. I'd never seen him so obviously pissed questioning a suspect.

"What's up?" I asked.

He closed the door behind him, stepping into the hallway. He shook his head. "I don't know why this one's getting to me."

"Tell me," I said.

His eyes flicked to my clothing, as if he'd just noticed. The frown softened into something close to a smile. "Somebody has become a bad influence on your wardrobe."

I frowned at him. "I've got a gun in a bellyband, okay? With the slits, it's easier to get to." I would never have explained my dress to Zerbrowski, but to Dolph . . .

"Ooh," Zerbrowski said. "Flash us, flash us."

Dolph's smile widened enough that his eyes were shiny. "If you're going to flash that much leg, at least it's in a good cause."

I crossed my arms over my stomach. "Is there really a suspect in there or did you call me down here just to yank my chain?"

The smile faded, and the angry frown returned. "She's not the suspect. She's the victim. I know you talked to Perry at the scene, but I want you to hear her story, then tell me what you think." With that, he opened the door. That was Dolph, never liked to influence his people. But frankly, it was a little abrupt. I didn't have time to put my professional face on. I made eye contact with the woman while I still looked sort of surprised.

I had an impression of huge blue eyes, silky blond hair, delicate features, and yet she was tall. Even with her sitting down, I could tell that. Very few women can be both tall and dainty, but she pulled it off.

"Ms. Vicki Pierce, this is Anita Blake. I'd like you to tell her your story."

Ms. Pierce blinked big blue eyes, tears welling in them—not falling, mind you, but glittering. She dabbed at them with a Kleenex. There was a bandage on the side of her neck. "Sergeant Storr, I've told you what happened. I've told you and told you." A single tear slid down her cheek. "I'm so tired, and it's been such a traumatic night. Do I have to tell it all over again?" She leaned towards him in the chair, arms held protectively in front of her, almost pleading with him. A lot of men would have buckled under the sweet pressure of those eyes. Too bad the performance was wasted on Dolph.

"Just one more time for Ms. Blake," he said.

She looked past me to Zerbrowski. "Please, I'm so tired."

Zerbrowski leaned against the wall. "He's the boss."

She'd tried using her womanly wiles, but it wasn't working. She switched to sisterly unity with only a blink of her baby blues. "You're a woman. You know how it is, being so alone among all these—" her voice dropped to a hush—"men." She stared down at the table top, then back up with real tears trailing down her perfect skin.

It was an Oscar-worthy performance. I wanted to applaud, but I'd try sympathy first. There was always time for sarcasm later.

I walked around the table to her and leaned against it without really sitting. I was only inches from her, definitely an invasion of personal space. I patted her shoulder and smiled, though I wasn't a good enough actress for it to reach my eyes. "You're not alone now, Ms. Pierce. I'm here. Please just tell me your story."

"Are you a lawyer?" she asked.

If she asked for a lawyer and was insistent, the interview was over. I knelt in front of her, taking her still trembling hands in mine. I stared up at her. I couldn't manage to look sympathetic but I was interested. I gave her all my attention. I stared at her face like I'd memorize it and said, "Please, Vicki, let me help you."

Her hands had gone very still under mine. She stared at me with her big eyes like a deer that had scented the gun, but thought if it held very still, the gun wouldn't fire. She nodded almost to herself more than to me. She gripped my hands, and her face was utterly sincere.

"I had car trouble, and I went into the bar side of a restaurant to use the phone." She ducked her head, not meeting my eyes. "I know I shouldn't have gone in there. A woman in a bar alone is just asking for trouble. But there weren't any phones anywhere else."

"You have a right to go anywhere you want, anytime you want, Vicki. Being a woman doesn't take away that right." I didn't have to pretend to sound outraged.

She looked at me again, eyes studying my face. I could almost see the wheels in her head turning. She thought she had me. God, she was young.

Her fingers tightened on my hands, a fine tremor going up her arms. "I called a friend of mine to come look at the car. I'm in college and don't have a lot of money, so I didn't want to call a garage right away, not until my friend had seen the car. I hoped he could fix it."

She was volunteering too much information. Already justifying herself. Or maybe she'd just told the story too many times. Naw. "I'd have done the same thing," I said. And I might have.

She squeezed my hands and leaned towards me, a little eager, getting into her story. "There was this man at the bar. He seemed nice. We talked, and he asked me to sit with him. I told him I was waiting for my friend. He said, fine, we'd just talk." Again she looked down. "He said I had the most beautiful skin he'd ever seen." She looked back at me, eyes wide. "I mean, it was so romantic."

It was so rehearsed. "Go on."

"I let him buy me a drink. I know I shouldn't have." She dabbed at her eyes. "I asked if he minded me smoking, and he said no." There was a full ashtray at her elbow. Neither Dolph nor Zerbrovski smoked, which meant little Vicki was damn near a chain smoker.

"He had his arm around me and leaned in to kiss me, I thought." The tears came faster, she hunched over a little, back shaking. "He bit me, on the neck. I swear until that second I didn't realize he was a vampire." She looked at me, from inches away vibrating with sincerity.

I patted her arm. "A lot of people can't tell vampires from humans. Especially if they've fed first."

She blinked at me. "Fed first?"

"If a vampire is full of blood, then he looks more human."

She nodded. "Oh."

"What did you do when he bit you?"

"I threw my drink at him and lit it with my lighter."

"Lit it?" I said, "It, the liquor, or it, the vampire?"

"Both," she said.

I nodded. "Vamps are very combustible. He burned real good, didn't he?"

"I didn't know he'd go up in flames like he did," she said. "A person just doesn't burn like that."

"No," I said, "they don't."

"I started to scream and run away from him. My friend came in the door then. People were shouting and screaming. It was awful."

I stood up. "I bet it was."

She stared up me, blue eyes sincere but not full of horror for what she'd done. There was no remorse. She gripped my arm suddenly, very tight, as if she could will me to understand. "I had to protect myself."

I placed my hand over hers and smiled. "What made you think of lighting the liquor once you'd thrown it?"

"I remembered that vampires were afraid of fire."

"But if you threw a drink in a human's face and lit it, it would only burn until the liquor was gone. A whoosh and it would be all over. A human would leave you alone after that, though they'd be hurt. Weren't you afraid that you'd just make the vampire more angry?"

"But vampires are very combustible, you said it yourself," Vicki said.

My smile widened. "So you knew he'd go up in flames?"

"Yes," she said, clutching me, willing me to understand her plight.

Dolph said, "I thought you didn't know the vampire would go up in flames, Ms. Pierce."

"I didn't, not until he burned like that," she said.

I patted her hand. "But, Vicki dear, you just said you knew he was combustible."

"But you said it first."

"Vicki, you just said you knew he'd go up in flames when you lit him up."

"I didn't."

I nodded. "Yes, you did."

She drew her hands away from me, sitting very straight in her chair. "You are trying to confuse me."

I shook my head. "No, Vicki, you're doing that all on your own." I moved away from her while still maintaining eye contact.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked. A little bit of anger peeked through her helpless-damsel act.

"What restaurant was it?" I asked as if I hadn't been there twenty minutes earlier. Interrogations are so often repetitive.

"What?" she asked.

"What was the name of the bar?"

"I don't remember."

"Dolph?" I asked.

"Burnt Offerings," he said.

I laughed. "A notorious vampire hangout."

"It's not in the vampire district," she said. "How was I to know that it was a vampire bar?"

"How about the picture of Christopher Lee as Dracula on the sign outside?" I said.

"It was quite late and nothing else was open."

"In University City on Delmar on a Friday night? Come on, Vicki. You can do better than that," I said.

She touched the bandage on her neck with a delicate, trembling hand. "He bit me." Her voice shook, and more tears trailed down her face.

I walked back to her. I put a hand on either side of her chair and leaned my face into hers. "You're lying, Vicki."

She burst into tears, hiding her face. I put a finger under her chin and lifted her face. "Damn, you're good, but not good enough."

She jerked away from me, standing so suddenly, the chair crashed to the floor. "I was attacked, and you're making me feel like the bad guy. You're a woman. I thought you'd understand."

I shook my head. "Can the universal sisterhood appeal, Vicki. It don't wash."

She jerked the bandage from her neck and threw it to the floor. "Look, look what he did to me!"

If she expected me to flinch, she had the wrong girl. I walked up to her, turning her head to one side. It was vampire fang marks, pretty fresh. A neat, nice bite, but there was no bruising, no hickey mark spreading across her creamy flesh. It was just two neat fang marks.

I stepped back from her. "You threw your drink into his face as soon as he bit you?"

"Yes, I didn't want him touching me."

"A filthy vampire," I said.

"A walking corpse."

She had a point. "Thank you, Vicki, thank you for talking to me." I walked to the door and motioned Dolph to follow. Zerbrowski stayed behind with Ms. Pierce.

Dolph closed the door behind us. "What did you see in the bite that I didn't?" he asked.

"If a vamp plunges fang into you but doesn't have time to feed much, it leaves a hickey. Just like a human sucking on your neck. The fangs aren't hollow, they just pierce the skin so that the vamp can suck the blood. One of the reasons they're so small. If the vamp feeds long enough, he takes blood away from the area and you don't get marking. No way did a quick bite and suck leave her clean like that. She had someone else do it ahead of time, and it took a lot more time than a few seconds."

"I knew she was lying," Dolph said, and shook his head. "But I thought she'd thrown more on him than a drink. I thought she'd come into the bar with some sort of accelerant."

I shook my head. "Once you get a vamp burning, they burn until they're put out or burned to ash. You may get a few bone fragments left, but vamps burn more completely than any human. Dental records won't even help you."

"The bartender used a fire extinguisher from behind the bar. Witnesses say he was quick."

I nodded. "Yeah, good ol' Harry. It's a miracle the vamp is still alive. I know there's some hardcore opposition to a vampire business outside the vampire district. There's a petition and some sort of city meeting scheduled. Ms. Pierce will make a great witness to the dangers of vampires being outside the district."

"The restaurant owner said the bad publicity could ruin him."

I nodded. "Oh, yeah. It could also be a personal motive against the vampire. Not little Miss Blue Eyes but someone she knows that wanted him dead."

"She could be a member of Humans First. They'd love all the vamps to burn."

"A fanatical vampire hater wouldn't let a vamp do their neck like that. No. Humans First might have paid her to discredit the bar. She may be a member of Humans Against Vampires, HAV, or even Humans First, but she doesn't really believe. The bite proves that."

"Could the vamp have captured her mind?"

"I don't think so, but I've got some better questions for your other witnesses now."

"Such as?" he asked.

"Are they sure the vampire in question even got a taste of her? Are they positive that he bit her? Ask them if she smelled of blood when she came in."

"Explain," Dolph said.

"If she came in with the bite, then some of them might have smelled it. Might not, the wound was pretty clean, which was probably why the vamp did it that way. If he'd just bitten her and brought the blood to the surface, the vamps would have all scented it."

Dolph was writing it all down in his trusty notebook. "So a vamp's involved?"

"He may not know what she was planning to do. I'd check for a vamp boyfriend, maybe, or at least one she's dated. Boyfriend may be too strong a word for Ms. Pierce. I'd see if she has some background in acting. Check out her major in college, maybe."

"Already done," Dolph said. "She's got a background in theater arts."

I smiled. "Why did you need me? You had it all solved."

"The bite, the fact that vampires burn that easily . . ." He shook his head. "None of this shit is in the literature."

"The books aren't designed for police work, Dolph."

"Maybe you should do a book," he said.

"Yeah, right. Do you have enough to get a warrant for her bank records?"

"If I'm careful what judge I ask, maybe."

"You know, even if she is charged and convicted, the damage is done. The petition and the meeting are scheduled for next week. All they'll have is rumors of an attack, and it will grow in the telling."

Dolph nodded. "Nothing we can do about that."

"You could go down there and tell them what you've learned about Vicki in there."

"Why don't you do it?"

"Because I'm the whore of Babylon to the right-wingers. I'm boffing the head bloodsucker. They wouldn't believe a damn thing I said."

"I don't have time to attend civic meetings, Anita."

"You think the vampire businesses should be segregated?" I asked.

"Don't go there, Anita. You won't like the answers."

I dropped it. Dolph thought vampires were monsters that the public needed to be protected from. I even agreed with him to an extent. But I was sleeping with one of the monsters. It made it hard to stay on the same bandwagon as Dolph. We agreed to disagree. It kept the peace and kept us working together.

"If you hate vamps so much, why didn't you buy Ms. Pierce's story?" I asked.

"Because I'm not stupid," Dolph said.

"Sorry," I said. "Sorry that I thought even for a second that personal feelings might interfere with your job. You'd never allow it, would you?"

He smiled. "I don't know. You're not in jail yet."

"If you had proof of wrongdoing, I might be."

"You might," he said. The smile faded from his face. His eyes went empty, cop eyes. "What happened to your hand?"

I glanced down at the bandaged hand as if it had just appeared. "Kitchen accident," I said.

"Kitchen accident," he said.

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"Sliced my hand with a knife."

"What were you doing?" he asked.

I never cook at home. Dolph knew that. "Slicing a bagel." I gave empty eyes back to him. Once, not long ago, my face showed everything. Every thought plain to see, but not now. I stared at Dolph's suspicious face and knew my face gave him nothing. Only the blankness itself was a clue that I was lying. But he knew I was lying. I wasn't going to waste his time or mine by coming up with a really good lie. Why bother?

We stared at each other. "There's blood on your nose, Anita. That must have been some bagel," he said.

"It was," I said, then couldn't help smiling. "I would have said I was mugged, but you'd want me to fill out a report."

He sighed. "You little shit. You're wrapped up in something else right now. Right this minute." His large hands balled into fists nearly the size of my face. "I'd yell at you, but it wouldn't do any good. I'd throw you in a cell overnight." He laughed, and it was bitter. "For what's left of the night, but I don't have any charges, do I?"

"I haven't done anything, Dolph." I raised the injured hand. "I was doing a favor for a friend, raising some dead. I got cut for more blood. That's it."

"The truth?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Why didn't you just tell me?" he asked.

"Because it was a favor, no money. If Bert finds out I'm raising the dead for free, he'll have a heart attack. He'll believe the bagel story."

Dolph laughed. "He won't ask how you got hurt. He doesn't want to know."

I nodded. "Very true."

"Just in case the kitchen gets any hotter, remember to call if you need help."

"I'll keep it in mind, Dolph."

"You do that." He put up his notebook. "Try not to kill anyone this month, Anita. Even in clear self-defense you pile up too many bodies, and you're going to get locked up."

"I haven't killed anyone in over six weeks—hell, nearly seven. I'm cutting down."

He shook his head. "The last two were the only two we've ever been able to prove, Anita. Both self-defense. One with witnesses out the ass, but we've never found Harold Gaynor's body. Just his wheelchair in that cemetery. Dominga Salvador is still missing."

I smiled at him. "People say the señora went back to South America."

"There was blood all over that chair, Anita."

"Was there?"

"Your luck is going to run out, and I won't be able to help you."

"I didn't ask for help," I said. "Besides, if the new law goes through, I'll have a federal badge."

"Being a cop, no matter what kind, doesn't mean you can't be arrested."

It was my turn to sigh. "I'm tired, and I'm going home. Good night, Dolph."

He looked at me for another second or two, then said, "Good night, Anita." He walked back into the interview room and left me standing in the hall.

Dolph had never been this grumpy before he found out I was dating Jean-Claude. I wasn't sure he was aware of how much his attitude had changed towards me, but I certainly was. A little undead nookie and he didn't trust me anymore, not completely.

It made me sad and angry. What was really hard was the fact that less than two months ago I'd have agreed with Dolph. You can't trust anyone who sleeps with the monsters. But here I was, doing it. Me, Anita Blake, turned into coffin bait. Sad, very sad. It wasn't any of Dolph's business who I dated. But I couldn't blame him for the attitude. I didn't like it, but I couldn't bitch about it. Okay, I could bitch, but it wasn't fair of me to do it.

I walked out without going through the main squad room again. I wondered how long they'd keep the penguins on their desks waiting for me to come back. The thought of all those silly-looking toy birds sitting forlornly waiting for me to return brought a smile to my face. But it didn't last. It wasn't just that Dolph mistrusted me. He was a very good cop, a good investigator. If he really started digging, he might get proof. Heaven knew I'd done enough unsanctioned kills to put me in prison. I'd used my animating powers to kill humans. If it could be proved, it was an automatic death sentence. A death sentence for someone who had used magic to kill was not the same sort of sentence as, say, an axe murderer got. A guy could chop up his family and spend the next fifteen years on death row with appeals. There are no appeals for magic-induced murder. Trial, conviction, death within six weeks, usually less.

The prisons are afraid of magic and don't like to keep witches and such around long. There was a sorcerer in Maine who called down demons while in his cell. How anyone left him alone long enough for that particular ritual, I don't know. The people who had goofed all ended up dead, so they couldn't be questioned. They never did find the heads. Even I couldn't raise enough of them as zombies to get them to talk or write down what had happened. It was a mess.

The sorcerer escaped, but was later recaptured with the help of a coven of white witches and, strangely, a group of Satanists. Nobody who performs magic likes it when someone goes rogue. It gives us all a bad name. The last witch burned alive by a mob in this country was only in 1953. Her name was Agnes Simpson. I'd seen the black-and-white photos of her death. Anyone who studied preternatural anything had to have her picture in at least one textbook. The photo that stayed with me was one in which her face was untouched, pale, even from a distance terror plain on her face. Her long brown hair moving in the heat but not yet burning. Only her nightgown and robe had caught fire. Her head thrown back, screaming. The photo won the Pulitzer Prize. The rest of the photos aren't seen as often. A progression of photographs that ends with her burned and blackened and dead.

How anyone could stand there and keep taking pictures, I don't know. Maybe the Pulitzer Prize was a charm against nightmares. Then again, maybe not.

Chapter 25

I pulled into the lot of the apartment building with its secret hospital in the basement. It was nearly five. Dawn pressed like a cool hand against the wind. The sky was grey, caught between darkness and light. That trembling edge where the vampires are still moving, and you can get your throat ripped out moments from sunrise.

A taxi drew up in front of the building. A tall woman with very short blond hair got out. She was wearing a very short skirt and a leather jacket, no shoes. Zane got out next. Someone had paid his bail, and it wasn't me. Which meant he had been in the Beast Master's tender care. Just luck that he hadn't been part of Sylvie's torment. If he'd refused, he'd have been hurt worse than he appeared to be. If he'd done it, I'd have had to kill him. That would have been damned awkward.

He saw me walking towards them. I put the long coat and its weaponry back on. Zane waved to me, smiling. He was wearing nothing but shiny black vinyl pants, tight enough to be skin, and boots. Oh, and a nipple ring. Mustn't forget the jewelry.

The tall woman stared at me. She didn't look happy to see me. Not hostile exactly, but not pleased. The driver said something, and she got a wad of bills out of her jacket pocket and paid him.

The taxi drove away. Vivian, the Beast Master's pet while he stayed here, hadn't gotten out. Gregory, Stephen's brother with his new conscience, hadn't gotten out either. I was short at least two wereleopards. What was going on?

Zane walked towards me like we were old friends. "I told you, Cherry, she's our alpha, our *léoparde lionné*. I knew she'd save us." He dropped to his knees in front of me. My right hand was in my pocket, gripping the Browning, so he had to settle for my left hand. I'd spent enough time around the werewolves to know that being alpha was a touchie-feelie sort of thing. Like the animals they sometimes were, shapeshifters seemed to need the reassurance of touch. So I didn't fight it, but I did let the safety off the Browning.

Zane took my hand gently, almost reverently. He laid his cheek against my knuckles, then rolled his face from side to side like a cat chin-marking me. His tongue gave one slow lick to the back of my hand, and I gently withdrew it. It took a lot of willpower not to wipe my hand on the coat.

The tall woman, Cherry I presumed, just looked at me. "She didn't save all of us." Her voice was an almost startling low contralto. It purred, even in human form.

"Where are Vivian and Gregory?" I asked.

She pointed back the way they'd come. "Back there, they're still back there."

"The deal was that all my people got out."

Zane bounced to his feet. The movement was so quick it caught my heart and my throat, and my finger went from trigger-guard to trigger. I set the safety on the Browning and eased my hand out. They weren't going to hurt me but if Zane kept bouncing around like a punk version of Tigger I might accidentally fire the gun. My nerves were usually better than this.

"The Master of Beasts said that anyone who wished to acknowledge your dominance could leave, if they could walk out. But he'd already made sure that Gregory and Vivian couldn't walk."

Something cold and tight filled my stomach. "What do you mean?"

"Vivian was unconscious when we left." Cherry looked at the ground when she spoke the next words. "Gregory tried to crawl after us, but he was hurt too badly." She raised her eyes, and there were tears trembling in them. She kept her eyes very wide. "He cried after us. Begged us not to leave him." She wiped at the tears with an angry swipe of her hand. "But I left him. I left him screaming, because I wanted out of there more than anything else in the world. Even if it meant leaving my friends to be tortured and killed and raped." She hid her face with both her hands and cried.

Zane came up behind her and hugged her. "Gabriel could never keep us all safe either. She did her best."

"Like hell," I said.

Zane looked at me. He rubbed his cheek against the side of Cherry's neck, but his eyes were serious. He was glad to be alive, but he hadn't wanted to leave them.

"I'm going to make a phone call." I walked into the building and after a few seconds they followed me. I used the same phone I'd called Jean-Claude on earlier. I only had moments before true dawn, and he would be down for the count.

He answered the phone like he'd been expecting the call. "*Oui, ma petite.*"

"Gregory and Vivian didn't make it. I thought you negotiated for them."

"The others forced Padma to agree, but he set up one rule, that whoever wished to leave had to walk out. I knew what he meant to do, but it was the best bargain I could make. Please believe that."

"Fine, but I won't leave them. If they can split hairs this finely, so can we."

"What do you plan, *ma petite?*"

"I'm going back and help them walk out. Padma didn't say anything about walking out under their own power, did he?"

"No." Jean-Claude gave a long sigh. "Dawn is frightfully near, *ma petite*. If you must do this thing, wait at least two hours. Time enough for even the most powerful of us to be asleep, but do not wait much longer. I do not know how much sleep the council members need. They may awaken very early."

"I'll wait two hours."

"I will send some of the wolves to you. With Padma asleep they will be useful to you."

"Fine."

"I must go." The phone went dead, and I felt the sun burst above the horizon. I felt it like a great weight, and for just an instant I couldn't breathe, my body felt heavy, so heavy. Then the sensation was gone, and I knew that Jean-Claude was gone for the day. Even with three shared marks, I'd never felt anything like that before. I knew he protected me from things that the third mark would let me feel. He even protected Richard. Of the three of us, Jean-Claude knew more about the marks, how to use them, how not to use them, and what they really meant. Months into it all, and I hadn't asked many questions. Sometimes, I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Richard seemed equally reluctant, according to Jean-Claude. The vampire just seemed patient with us, like a parent with a backward child.

Cherry leaned against the wall, arms crossed over her stomach. She wasn't wearing anything under the leather jacket. Her eyes were cautious, like she'd been disappointed often and badly.

"You're going in after them. Why?"

Zane was sitting by her legs, back against the wall. "Because she's our alpha."

Cherry shook her head. "Why would you risk yourself for two people you don't know? I accepted your dominance because I wanted out of there, but I don't believe it. Why would you go back in there?"

I wasn't sure how to explain it. "They expect me to save them."

"So?" she said.

"So, I'm going to try."

"Why?"

I sighed. "Because . . . because I remember Vivian's pleading eyes and the bruises on her body. Because Gregory cried and screamed for you not to leave him. Because Padma will hurt them worse now than he would have before, because he thinks that by hurting them, he hurts me." I shook my head. "I'm going to find a bed for a couple of hours. I suggest you do the same. But you don't have to come with me. This thing is strictly volunteer."

"I don't want to go back there," she said.

"Then don't," I said.

"I'll come," Zane said.

It almost made me smile. "Somehow I knew you would."

Chapter 26

I lay in the narrow hospital bed in one of the spare rooms. The evening dress was folded on the room's only chair. The chair was shoved up under the doorknob. Flimsy lock. The chair wouldn't keep out someone truly determined, but it would give me a few seconds to aim. I'd showered and thrown the blood-soaked hose away. I was wearing just my panties. They didn't even have a spare hospital gown. I fell asleep in a strange bed with sheets clutched to my naked breasts, and the Firestar under my pillow. The machine gun was under the bed. I didn't think I'd need it, but where else was I going to stash it?

I was dreaming. Something about being lost in an abandoned house, searching for kittens. The kittens were crying, and there were snakes in the dark, eating the kittens. You didn't have to be Freud to interpret this one. The moment I thought that clearly, that it was a dream and what it meant, the dream melted away and left me awake in the dark. I woke staring upwards, sheets spilled down my body so that I was nearly nude in the blackness.

I could feel my body pulsing. It was like I'd been running a race in my sleep. There was sweat under my breast. Something was wrong.

I pulled the sheet up over me as I sat up, even though I wasn't cold. As a child I'd thought that the monsters in the closet and under the bed couldn't get me if I was covered. After waking from a nightmare I still reached for the sheet, no matter how hot it was. Of course, I was in a basement with air-conditioning. It wasn't hot. So why did my body feel almost fevered?

I reached under the pillow and got the Firestar out. I felt better with it gripped in my hand. If I'd just been spooked by a dream, I was going to feel silly.

I sat in the dark and strained to hear anything before I hit the lights. If there was someone out in the hall, they'd see the light under the door. If they were trying to ambush me, I didn't want them to see the light. Not yet.

I felt something coming down the hallway towards me. A roil of energy, heat, that played over my body like a hand. It was like a storm was rushing towards me, with that prickling brush of lightning growing like weight in the room. I clicked the safety off on the Firestar, and suddenly knew who it was. It was Richard. Richard striding towards me. Richard coming like an angry storm.

I clicked the safety back on but didn't put up the gun. He was mad. I could feel it. I'd seen him toss a solid oak four poster king-size bed around like it was nothing when he was angry. I'd keep the gun, just in case. I didn't like keeping it, but the moral dilemma didn't bother me enough to put it away. I hit the lights. I sat blinking in the sudden brightness, a hard knot forming in my stomach. I did not want to see him. I hadn't known what to say to him since the night I'd first slept with Jean-Claude. The night I'd run from Richard, run from what he was on the night of the full moon. Run from the sight of his beast.

I padded barefoot to the chair and gathered my clothes up. I was struggling into the strapless bra, gun beside me on the bed, when I smelled his after-shave. I felt the air move under the door and knew it was his body disrupting the currents of air. His aftershave wasn't that strong. I shouldn't have smelled it. I knew suddenly as if it had been whispered in my ear that Richard could smell me through the door, that he knew I'd worn Oscar de la Renta perfume for Jean-Claude.

I felt his fingertips press to either side of the door in a small push up motion, felt him draw a breath and scent my body deep into him.

What the hell was going on? We'd been bound for two months, and I'd never felt anything like this, not with Richard, and not with Jean-Claude.

Richard's voice, achingly familiar: "Anita, I need to talk to you." The anger was in his voice; in his body, rage. He was like thunder pressed against the door.

"I'm getting dressed," I said.

I heard him pace in front of the door. "I know. I can feel you in there. What's happening to us?"

That was a loaded question if ever I'd heard one. I was wondering if he could feel my hands as I'd felt his a moment ago. "We haven't been this close at dawn since we were bound. Jean-Claude isn't here to act as a buffer." I hoped that was it. The only alternative I could think of was that the council had done something to our marks. I didn't think that was it, though. But we wouldn't know for sure until we could ask Jean-Claude. Damn.

Richard tried the door handle. "What's taking so long?"

"I'm almost done," I said. I slipped the dress on. It was actually the easiest piece of clothing to get into. The shoes were not comfortable without hose, but I would have felt even less prepared barefoot. Can't explain it, but shoes make me feel better. I moved the chair and unlocked the door. I stepped back, a little too quick, until I was on the far side of the room. I put my hands behind me,

still holding the gun. I didn't think he'd hurt me, but I'd never felt him like this. His anger was like a burning knot in my gut.

He opened the door carefully, as if he was having to think before each movement. His control was a trembling line between his rage and me.

He was six foot one, broad-shouldered, with high-sculpted cheekbones, and a wide soft mouth. There was a dimple in his chin, and he was altogether too handsome. His eyes were still perfect chocolate brown; only the pain in them was new. His hair fell in thick waves around his shoulders, a brown so full of gold and copper highlights that there should have been a different word for it. Brown is a dull word, and his hair was not dull. I'd loved running my hands through his hair, grabbing fistfuls of it when we kissed.

He was wearing a blood-red tank top that left his muscular shoulders and arms bare. I knew that every inch of him you could see, and what you could not, was tanned a nice soft brown. But it wasn't really tanned, just his natural skin color.

My heart was beating in my throat, but it wasn't fear. He stared at me in the black dress. Face scrubbed clean of makeup, my hair uncombed, and I felt his body react to the sight of me. I felt it like a twist in my own body. I had to close my eyes to keep from looking at his jeans to see if what I was feeling was visible.

When I opened my eyes, he hadn't moved. He just stood there in the middle of the room, hands balled into fists, breathing a little too hard. His eyes were wild, showing too much white like a horse about to bolt.

I found my voice first. "You said you wanted to talk, so talk." I sounded breathless. It was like I could feel Richard's heart, his chest rising and falling, like it was my own. I'd had moments of this with Jean-Claude, but never with Richard. If we'd still been seeing each other, it would have been intriguing. Now, it was just confusing.

He relaxed his hands, flexing them, fighting not to make fists. "Jean-Claude said he was protecting us from each other. Keeping us from getting too close until we were ready. I didn't believe him, until now."

I nodded. "It's awkward."

He smiled, and shook his head, but the smile never took the anger out of his eyes. "Awkward? Is that all it is to you, Anita? Just awkward?"

"You can feel what I'm feeling, right now, Richard. Answer your own damn question."

He closed his eyes and pressed his hands together in front of his chest. He pressed his palms together until his arms trembled with the effort and the muscles corded, straining against his skin all the way up to his shoulders.

I felt him withdraw from me. Though that doesn't cover how it felt. It was like he built a wall between us. He was raising mental shields between us. Someone had to. I hadn't thought to try. The sight and feel of him in my mind had turned me into a pulsing hormone. It was too embarrassing for words.

I watched his body relax, a muscle at a time, until he opened his eyes, slowly, almost sleepily, his body quiet, at peace. I'd never been that good at meditation.

He lowered his arms and looked at me. "Better?"

I nodded. "Yes, thank you."

He shook his head. "Don't thank me. It was either control it or run screaming."

We stood there, staring at each other. The silence was uncomfortably thick. "What do you want, Richard?"

He gave a choking laugh that brought heat in a rush up my face. "You know what I meant," I said.

"Yes," he said, "I know what you meant. You invoked your status as lupa while I was out of town."

"You mean protecting Stephen?"

He nodded. "You had no right to go against Sylvie's express orders. She was the one I left in charge, not you."

"She'd removed pack protection from him. Do you know what that means?"

"Better than you do," he said. "Without protection of a dominant you're anybody's meat that wants you, like the wereleopards after you killed Gabriel."

I pushed away from the wall. "If you had told me what was happening to them, Richard, I'd have helped them."

"Would you?" he asked. He motioned to the gun in my hand. "Or would you just have killed them?"

"No, that's what Sylvie wanted to do, not me." But I stood there with the gun in my hand and didn't know a graceful way to put it down.

"I know how much you hate shapeshifters, Anita. I didn't think you'd give a damn, and no one else did either or they'd have told you. They all thought you wouldn't care. I mean if you could reject someone you supposedly loved because they turned into a monster once a month, what chance did strangers have?"

He was being deliberately cruel. I'd never seen him do anything just to hurt, just to try and dig the knife in a little deeper. It was petty, and that was one thing Richard was not.

"You know me better than that," I said.

"Do I?" he said. He sat down on the bed, grabbing two handfuls of sheet. He raised the cloth to his face and took a long deep breath. He watched me with angry eyes while he did it. "The smell of you still moves me like some kind of drug, and I hate you for it."

"I just spent a few minutes inside your head, remember. You don't hate me, Richard. It'd be less painful if you did."

He crumpled the sheet in his lap, hands balling the cloth into tight fists. "Love doesn't conquer all, does it?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, it doesn't."

He stood in an almost violent movement, pacing the room in a tight circle. He came to stand in front of me. There was no "magic" now, just two people. But it was still hard to stand so close to him. Still hard to know I wasn't allowed to touch him anymore. Dammit, it shouldn't have been this hard. I'd made my choice.

"You were never my lover, now you're not even my girlfriend. You are not a shapeshifter. You cannot be my lupa."

"Are you really angry that I protected Stephen?"

"You ordered pack members to guard him and a wereleopard. You told them you'd kill them if they didn't obey you. You don't have that right."

"You gave me that right when you made me lupa." I held up a hand to keep him from interrupting. "And whether you like it or whether you don't, it was a good thing that I had some clout to throw around. Stephen might be dead now if I hadn't been there for him. And Zane would have caused an even worse mess at the hospital. Lycanthropes don't need any more bad press."

"We're monsters, Anita. You can't have good press if you're a monster."

"You don't believe that."

"You believe we're monsters, Anita. You proved that. You'd rather sleep with a corpse than let me touch you."

"What do you want me to say, Richard? That I'm sorry I couldn't cope? I am sorry. That I'm still embarrassed that I ran to Jean-Claude's bed? I am. That I think less of myself for not being able to love you even after what I saw you do to Marcus?"

"You wanted me to kill Marcus."

"He was going to kill you if you didn't. So yeah, I wanted you to kill Marcus. But I didn't tell you to eat him."

"When a pack member is killed in a dominance struggle, we all feed. It's a way to absorb their energy. Marcus and Raina aren't really gone as long as the pack remains."

"You ate Raina, too?"

"Where did you think the bodies went? Did you think your friends on the police force had hidden all the corpses?"

"I thought Jean-Claude had arranged it."

"He did, but it was the pack that did the dirty work. The vampires don't care about a body once it's cold. If the blood isn't warm, they don't want it."

I almost asked if he preferred warm flesh to cold, but didn't. I didn't really want to know. This entire conversation was going nowhere that I wanted to be. I looked at the watch on my wrist. "I've got to go, Richard."

"Go rescue your wereleopards."

I looked at him. "Yes."

"That's why I'm here. I'm your backup."

"Was that Jean-Claude's idea?"

"Sylvie told me that Gregory refused to harm her. Regardless of what they did under Gabriel, they're lycanthropes and we help our own even if they aren't lukoi."

"Do the wereleopards have a fancy name for themselves?" I asked.

He nodded. "They call themselves pard. The werewolves are the lukoi. The leopards are the pard."

I walked past him, shoulder brushing his bare arm. That one touch raised the hairs on my body like he'd touched something much more personal. But I'd get used to it. I'd made my choice, and no matter how confused I was, I wasn't

that confused. So I still lusted after Richard, even loved him. I'd picked the vampire, and you can't have your vampire and your werewolf, too.

I got the machine gun out from under the bed and slid the strap across my chest.

"Jean-Claude said that we weren't supposed to kill anybody," Richard said.

"He knew you were coming here?" I asked.

He nodded.

I smiled, but it wasn't happy.

"He didn't tell you?" Richard asked.

"No."

We were left looking at each other again. "You can't trust him, Anita, you know that."

"You're the one who let him give you the first mark voluntarily. What I did, Richard, I did to save your lives, both of you. If you really thought he was so damn untrustworthy, why'd you bind us to him?"

Richard looked away then, and spoke very softly, "I didn't think I'd lose you."

"Go wait in the hall, Richard."

"Why?"

"I've got to finish getting dressed."

His gaze slid to my legs, very white against the blackness of the dress and the heels. "Hose," he said, softly.

"A new holster, actually," I said. "The hose got trashed last night. Now, please get out."

He did. He didn't even make a last cutting remark. It was an improvement. When he closed the door behind him, I sat down on the bed. I did not want to do this. Going back in for the leopards was a bad idea. Going in with Richard as backup was worse. But we'd do it. I couldn't tell him to stay home. Besides, I needed the backup. No matter how emotionally painful it was to be around him, he was one of the most powerful shapeshifters I'd ever met. If he hadn't been crippled by a conscience the size of Rhode Island, he'd have been dangerous. Of course, Marcus would probably have said Richard was plenty dangerous just as he was. And he'd be right.

Chapter 27

Richard drove his 4 X 4 to the Circus. I sat beside him, but in some ways I might as well not have been there at all. He never looked at me, let alone spoke. But the tension in his body was enough. He knew I was there.

Cherry and Zane rode in the back seat. It had surprised me when Cherry slid into the car. Her eyes flashed white, eyelids fluttering like a nervous tic.

She looked like she was going to faint. Zane was his usual self; smiling, eyes secret. His usual self? That was almost funny. I'd known him less than twenty-four hours. I didn't know what the hell was "usual" for him.

Cherry had sunk down on the seat, hugging herself. She was slowly curling into a little ball. I'd known her less time than I'd known Zane, but this wasn't normal for anybody.

I turned as far as the seat belt would allow and said, "What's wrong, Cherry?"

Her eyes rolled to me, then closed, tight. She shook her head and huddled further into herself. There was a fresh bruise forming on her cheek. She might have had it when I first saw her. I just wasn't sure.

"Zane, what's wrong with her?"

"She's scared," he said. His voice was neutral, but there was something in his face that was angry.

"I told her this was strictly voluntary. She doesn't have to come."

"Tell that to Mr. Macho," he said. He was staring at the back of Richard's head.

I turned in the seat until I was staring at his profile. He wouldn't look at me. "What's going on, Richard?"

"She's coming," he said, voice very quiet.

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"Bullshit."

He glanced at me then. He tried for it to be a cool look, but it was angry. "You're my lupa, but I am still Ulfric. My word is still law."

"Fuck that. You are not dragging her into this because you're mad at me."

The muscle in his jaw clenched tight enough for me to see it. "They both deserted their people. Now they are both going to make it right." His voice was still quiet, low, and careful, like if he wasn't very careful he'd lose control. He spoke like people talk when they want to yell.

"Look at her, Richard. She'll be worse than useless. She'll just be one more victim we have to keep safe."

He shook his head. "You don't leave one of your own behind, not for any reason. It's the law."

"Pack law, but she's not pack."

"Until you stop being my lupa, Anita, what belongs to you, belongs to me."

"You arrogant prick."

He smiled, but it was just a baring of teeth, more snarl than humor. "Everyone has to do something to take the edge off."

It took me a second to realize what he meant, then I was embarrassed. But I'd be damned if I'd sit there and explain that I hadn't meant it literally. He knew I hadn't meant it literally. He was trying to embarrass me. Fuck it. "Did you hit Cherry?"

He was suddenly very interested in the road, but his hands smoothed on the steering wheel. He didn't like that he'd hit her. Neither did I.

"You wanted me to be strong. Well, you got your wish."

"There is a difference between being strong and being cruel, Richard."

"Really? I never could tell the difference."

I think that last was meant for me. But you can only make me feel guilty for so long, and then I just get mad. "Fine, if what belongs to me belongs to you, then it works the other way too."

He glanced at me, frowning. "What do you mean?"

I liked the unease in his face. I enjoyed turning his logic back on him. In my own way, I was just as angry at him as he was at me. I didn't have his moral high ground, but I hadn't turned cannibal either. Maybe I did have some moral high ground, after all.

"If you can force Cherry to go with us, then I can order the pack to guard Stephen. I can order them to do any damn thing I'm dominant enough to make them do."

"No," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because I said so."

I laughed then, and even to me it sounded bitchy.

He screamed, a long ragged yell of frustration and anger. "God, Anita, God."

"We're going to cut each other up if we don't work something out," I said.

He glanced at me again. His eyes weren't angry anymore. They were almost panic-stricken. "You're sleeping with the vampire. There's nothing to work out."

"The three of us are bound to each other for what could be a very, very long time, Richard. We're going to have to find a way to live together."

He laughed, and it was bitter. "Live together? You want a house for three with Jean-Claude down in the basement and me chained out in the yard?"

"Not exactly, but you can't keep hating yourself like this."

"It's not me I hate. It's you."

I shook my head. "If that were true, I'd leave you alone. But you hate your beast and your beast is you."

He pulled in front of the Circus. "We're here." He turned off the engine and silence filled the car. "Cherry can wait here."

"Thank you, Richard," I said.

He shook his head. "Don't thank me, Anita." He smoothed his hands over his face into his hair, combing his fingers through it. The gesture showed his arms and chest to wonderful advantage. He'd never been aware of how much the simplest thing he did had moved me. "Don't thank me." He got out of the car.

I told Cherry to stay low. I didn't want them to get any ideas about taking her while we were inside rescuing the others. It would sort of defeat the purpose of the entire trip.

Zane kissed her on the forehead the way you'd calm a child. He told her everything would be all right, that I'd keep them safe. God, I hoped he was right.

Chapter 28

A man had walked up to meet Richard. He'd been waiting for him. I reached in the coat pocket and clicked off the safety on the Browning because I knew him.

Zane, who was very close behind me asked, "Is something wrong?"

I shook my head. "Hello, Jamil."

"Hello, Anita." He was just shy of six feet, wearing a white tank top almost the twin of the one Richard wore. Except that Jamil had cut out the neck, arms, and chopped out the middle of the shirt so that his slender waist and cobblestone abs showed. The white tank top was in startling contrast to the rich solid brown of his skin. His hair was waist-length, worked in thin corn rows intertwined with bright beads. He was wearing white sweat pants and looked like he'd just come from the gym.

The last time I'd seen Jamil he'd been trying to kill Richard. "What are you doing here?" Even to me it didn't sound friendly.

He smiled, a quick baring of teeth. "I'm Richard's enforcer."

"So?"

"They allowed us each one backup, plus the wereleopards," Richard said. He spoke without looking at me, staring at the front of the Circus rising into the bright sunlight.

"I'm short one wereleopard and a backup," I said.

He did look at me then. His face was as closed and guarded as I'd seen it. "I thought Jean-Claude had told you, and you'd just decided against any backup."

"I'd take backup into hell, Richard. You know that."

"Don't blame me if your boyfriend forgot to mention it."

"He probably thought you'd mention it."

He just looked at me with his angry eyes.

"Is there anything else you forgot to tell me?"

"He just said to tell you, don't kill anyone."

"He mention anyone in particular not to kill?" I asked.

Richard frowned then. "As a matter of fact, he did." He said the next in a bad French accent. "Tell *ma petite* not to kill Fernando no matter what the provocation."

It brought a tight smile to my face. "Fine."

Jamil was staring at me. "The look on your face, babe. That is the most evil little smile I've ever seen. What did this Fernando do to you?"

"To me personally, nothing."

"He raped your Geri, your second in command," Zane said.

Both of the werewolves stared at him, a sudden flash of hostility that made Zane step back. He moved a little behind me, which didn't quite work since he was nearly a foot taller. Hard to cower behind someone who's shorter than you are.

"He raped Sylvie?" Richard asked.

I nodded.

"He has to be punished," Richard said.

I shook my head. "I told Sylvie I'd kill him. That we'd kill them all."

"All?" Richard made it a question.

"All," I said.

He looked away then, not meeting my eyes. He asked without turning around, "How many?"

"Two that she's told me about. There may be more, but if there is, she's not ready to talk about it yet."

"You're sure there was more than just this Fernando?" Richard looked at me, eyes hopeful, almost like he wanted me to tell him it wasn't really as bad as it seemed.

"It was gang rape, Richard. They took great pride in telling me that."

"Who was the second one?" he asked.

He asked. I answered. "Liv."

He blinked at me. "She's a woman."

"I'm aware of that."

He just stared at me. "How?"

I raised eyebrows at him. "You really want me to get that technical?"

Richard shook his head. He looked ill. Jamil didn't. He met my eyes without flinching, his face thinned into tight angry lines. "If they can take one of our highest wolves and use her like that, then the pack's threat means nothing."

"That, too," I said. "But I'm not going to kill someone just to keep the pack's rep in good repair."

"Then why?" Jamil said.

I thought about that for a second. "Because I gave my word I'd do it. They dug their grave when they touched her. All I'm doing is filling in the dirt."

"Why?" Jamil said. "You hated Sylvie." It seemed important to him that I answer, as if the question meant more than it should have, at least to him.

"They didn't break her. All that they did to her, and they couldn't break her. She could have stopped the torture by giving up the pack. She didn't give them up." I tried to put it all into words. "That kind of loyalty and strength deserves the same in return."

"What do you know about loyalty?" Richard asked.

"That's it," I said. I turned to him and poked a finger in his chest. "We can have one knock-down-glorious fight after we save Gregory and Vivian. They gang-raped Sylvie. Do you really think they're doing less to two shapeshifters that they thought had no alpha to protect them?" I was spitting every word into his face, voice squeezed tight and low, because if I let go, I'd be screaming.

"We are going to get them out and take them some place safe. When we do all

that, then you can go back to being pissed at me. You can wrap your jealousy and self-hatred around us both until we choke. But right this second, we have work to do. Okay?"

He looked at me for a heartbeat or two, then gave the barest of nods.

"Okay."

"Great," I said. I'd abandoned my purse at the hospital, but I had the key to the front door in my coat pocket along with ID. What else did a girl need?

"You have a key to the front door?" Richard asked.

"Drop it, Richard," I said.

"You're right. You're right, and I'm wrong. I haven't been paying attention to business for two months. Sylvie told me that. I didn't listen. Maybe if I had, she . . . Maybe if I'd been listening, she wouldn't have gotten hurt."

"Jesus, Richard, don't pull another guilt trip on me. You could be Attila the Hun, and the council would still have come. No show of strength would have kept them out."

"What would have?" he asked.

I shook my head. "They are the council, Richard. The stuff of nightmares. Nightmares don't care how strong you are."

"What do they care about?" he asked.

I shoved the key into the lock. "Scaring you." The big double doors pushed inward. I drew the Browning out of my pocket.

"We aren't supposed to kill anybody," Richard said.

"I remember," I said, but I kept the gun out. I couldn't kill anybody, but Jean-Claude hadn't said I couldn't maim someone. It might not be as satisfying, but when you need to back up your threat, someone writhing on the floor in pain is almost as good as a body. Sometimes it's better.

Chapter 29

I stood with my back to the closed door, the others fanned out around me. Soft filtered light came down from the high, high windows. The midway looked dark and tired in the morning sunlight. The Ferris wheel towered over the haunted house and mirror maze and the game booths. It was a complete traveling carnival that didn't travel. It smelled like it was suppose to: cotton candy, corn dogs, funnel cakes.

Two men stepped out of the huge circus tent that took up one entire corner. They walked towards us side by side. The taller man was about six foot, square-shouldered, with hair that was somewhere between blond and brown. The hair was straight, thick, and just long enough to trail the edge of his shirt collar. White dress shirt tucked into white jeans, complete with white belt. He wore white loafers, no socks. He looked like he should have been walking

along a beach in a credit-card commercial, except for his eyes. Even from a distance there was something odd about his eyes. They were orange-ish. People didn't have eyes that color.

The second man was about five foot seven, with dark gold hair cut very short. A brownish mustache graced his upper lip and curved back to meet brownish sideburns. Nobody had worn a mustache like that since the 1800's. His white pants were tight and slid into polished black boots. A white vest and a white shirt peeked out from beneath a red jacket. He looked like he should have been riding to the hounds, chasing small furred animals.

His eyes were a nice normal brown. But the first man's eyes just got stranger the closer he came to us. His eyes were yellow—not amber, not brown—yellow with orange spikes radiating from the pupil like a pinwheel of color. They were not human eyes, no way, no how.

If it hadn't been for the eyes, I wouldn't have recognized him as a lycanthrope, but the eyes gave it away. I'd seen pictures of tigers with eyes like that.

They stopped a little distance from us. Richard moved up beside me, Zane and Jamil at our backs. We all stood looking at each other. If I hadn't known better. I'd have said that the two men looked uncomfortable or embarrassed.

The smaller man said, "I am Captain Thomas Carswell. You must be Richard Zeeman." His voice was British and upper-crust, but not too upper-crust.

Richard took a step forward. "I'm Richard Zeeman. This is Anita Blake, Jamil, and Zane."

"I am Gideon," the man with the eyes said. His voice was almost painfully low, as if even in human speech he growled. The sound was so low that it made my spine thrum.

"Where are Vivian and Gregory?" I said.

Captain Thomas Carswell blinked and looked at me. He didn't look happy about the interruption. "Nearby."

"First," said Gideon, "we need your gun, Miss Blake."

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

They exchanged glances. "We cannot allow you to go forward with a gun in your hand, Miss Blake," Carswell said.

"Every time someone wants to take my gun, it means either they don't trust me or they're planning to do something I don't like."

"Please," Gideon said in his gravelly voice. "Surely you must understand our reluctance. You do have a certain reputation."

"Anita?" Richard said, half-question, half-something else.

I clicked the safety on the gun and held it out to Gideon. I had two more guns and two knives left. They could have the Browning.

Gideon took the gun from me and stepped back to stand beside Carswell. "Thank you, Miss Blake."

I nodded. "You're welcome."

"Shall we go?" Carswell said. He offered me his arm as if he were escorting me to dinner.

I stared at him, then back at Richard. I raised my eyebrows, trying to ask what he thought without asking.

He gave a half-shrug.

I slid my left arm through Carswell's arm. "You're being very civilized about this," I said.

"There is no reason to lose all good manners just because things have become . . . somewhat extreme."

I let him lead me towards the tent. Gideon fell into step with Richard. They were almost the same height, and the roil of energy that came off them made the hair on my neck stand up. They were trying each other's power, tasting each other without doing anything at all but lowering their hard-won control. Jamil and Zane brought up the rear like good soldiers.

We were almost at the tent when Carswell stopped, hand tightening on my arm. I slid my right hand behind my back, under the coat, touching the machine gun.

"There is something heavy on your back, Miss Blake. Something that is not a purse." His grip on my left arm grew tighter, not hurting, but I knew he wouldn't let go, not without a fight.

I swung the machine gun around on its strap with my right hand and put the barrel into his chest, not shoving, just there, like his hand on my other arm.

"Everybody be calm," I said.

The other men were suddenly very, very still. "We are going to give you your people, Miss Blake," Gideon growled. "There is no need for this."

"Thomas here asked what I had on my back. I'm showing him."

"You do not know me well enough to call me by my Christian name, Miss Blake," Carswell said.

I blinked at him. There was no fear in him. He was human—one pull on the trigger and he was gone—but there was no fear. I stared into his brown eyes and saw only . . . sadness. A tired sorrow as if he'd almost welcome it.

I shook my head. "Sorry, Captain Carswell."

"We cannot possibly let you go inside the tent with this weapon." His voice was very calm, matter of fact.

"Be reasonable, Anita," Richard said. "If things were reversed, you'd want them without weapons."

The trouble was I had to take off the coat to take off the machine gun. If I took off the coat, they'd see the knives. I didn't want to lose the knives. Of course, I'd still have the Firestar.

I let the machine gun slide back out of sight. "I'll have to remove my coat."

Carswell released my arm cautiously and stepped back, still close enough to grab me. I stared at his careful clothing. The jacket was too tailored for a shoulder holster, the pants had no pockets, but he could have had something at the small of his back.

"I'll remove my coat if you remove yours," I said.

"I have no weapons, Miss Blake."

"Remove your coat and I'll believe you."

He sighed and slid out of the red jacket, then turned in a full circle, arms spread to his sides. "As you see, no weapons." To be really sure I'd need to pat him down, but I didn't want him returning the favor, so I let it go.

I slipped out of the coat and watched his eyes widen at the wrist sheaths. "Miss Blake, I am impressed and disappointed."

I let the coat fall to the floor and slipped the strap over my head. I hated giving up the machine gun, but . . . I did understand. They'd been doing awful things to Gregory and Vivian. I wouldn't necessarily trust me with a gun if I were in their place. I took the clip out of the gun and handed the weapon to Carswell.

His eyes widened a little. "Fearful that I will turn on you and your friends?"

I shrugged. "Can't blame a girl for being cautious."

He smiled, and it almost reached his eyes. "No, I suppose I cannot."

I slid one of the knives out of its sheath and handed it to him hilt-first.

He waved it away. "You may keep your knives, Miss Blake. They will only be protection if someone gets very close, very personal. I think a lady should be allowed to defend her honor."

Damn, he was being nice, gentlemanly. If I kept the second handgun and he found out later, he might not be so nice. "Damn," I said.

Carswell frowned.

"I have one more gun."

"It must be very well concealed, Miss Blake."

I sighed again. "Inconveniently so, yes. Do you want it or not?"

He glanced back at Gideon, who nodded. "Yes, please, Miss Blake."

"Everybody turn their backs."

Amused or bemused looks all around.

"I have to raise the dress and flash the room to get the gun. I don't want anyone peeking." All right, it was stupid and juvenile, but I still couldn't just raise the dress in front of five men. My daddy brought me up better than that.

Carswell turned without being asked a second time. I got some very amused looks, but everyone turned, except for Gideon. "I would be a poor bodyguard if I allowed you to shoot us in the back while we were defending your modesty." He had a point.

"All right, I'll turn my back." Which I did, fishing the gun out for the last time. The bellyband was a good idea, but the Firestar was going in the other coat pocket when I got it back. I was tired of messing with it.

I handed the gun to Gideon. He took it, still looking amused. "Is that everything except for the knives?"

"Yes," I said.

"Your word of honor?"

I nodded. "My word."

He nodded, too, as if that was enough. I knew already that Carswell was someone's human servant. He was the genuine article, a British soldier of Queen Victoria's army. But until that moment I hadn't known that Gideon was

as old. Lycanthropes don't age that slowly. He was getting help from somewhere or he was more than just a shapeshifter.

"Lycanthrope," I said, "but what else are you?"

He smiled then, flashing small fangs top and bottom. The only other lycanthrope I'd seen with fangs like that had been Gabriel. You get things like that if you spend too much time in animal form.

"Guess," he said in a whisper so low and rumbling it made me shiver.

Carswell said, "May we turn around, Miss Blake?"

"Sure," I said.

He slid his jacket back on, smoothing it in place, and offered me his arm once more. "Shall we, Miss Blake?"

"Anita, my name's Anita."

He smiled. "Then you may call me Thomas." He said it as if he didn't let a lot of people call him by his first name.

It made me smile. "Thank you, Thomas."

He tucked my arm more securely in the crook of his own. "I do wish . . . Anita, that our meeting could be under better circumstances."

I met his sad eyes and said, "What's happening to my people while you delay me here with your polite smiles?"

He sighed. "I am hoping he will be finished before we walk in upon them." A look almost like pain crossed his face. "It is not a sight fit for a lady."

I tried to pull my arm free, and he gripped it more tightly. His eyes weren't sad anymore. They were full of something I couldn't read. "Know that this is not my choice."

"Let go of me, Thomas."

He let me draw my arm free of him. I was suddenly afraid of what was inside the tent. I'd never spoken with Vivian, and Gregory was a perverted piece of shit, but I suddenly didn't want to see what had happened to them.

Gideon said, "Thomas, should she . . .?"

"Let her," he said. "She has only the knives."

I didn't exactly run, but I was close when I reached the closed flap of the tent. I heard Richard say, "Anita . . ."

I felt him coming up behind me, but I didn't wait. I flung the flap aside and stepped inside. The tent had just one ring, the center ring. Gregory lay in a naked heap in the center of that ring, hands bound behind his back with thick grey tape. His body was a mass of bruises and cuts. I could see bone glistening in his legs, jagged and wet where they'd broken his legs. Compound fractures are very nasty things. That was why he couldn't walk out on his own power. They'd broken his legs.

There was a small sound that drew me down the aisle to the railing around the ring. Vivian and Fernando were in the ring, too. I'd missed them because they were too close to the side of the railing, hidden from view.

Vivian raised her face up from the ground, tape across her mouth, one eye bloody and swollen shut. Fernando shoved her face back to the ground, showing her hands bound with tape. Showing what he was doing to her. He

drew himself out of her, wet and finished at last. He patted her bare butt, giving her a small slap. "That was nice."

I was already walking towards them across the sand of the ring. Which means I'd gotten over the railing in spike heels and a floor-length skirt. I didn't remember doing it.

Fernando stood, fastening his pants, smiling at me. "If you hadn't bargained for her freedom, I'd have never been allowed to touch her. My father doesn't share."

I kept walking. I had one of the knives out, held to the side of the dress. I wasn't sure if he'd noticed, or if I cared. I held my empty left hand out to him. "You're a big man when the lady's tied and gagged. How are you when the lady's armed?"

He smiled, and it was mocking. He touched Vivian with his foot, casually, like you'd poke a dog. "She's beautiful but a little too submissive for my tastes. I like them with a little more fight to them like your wolf-bitch." He finished fastening his pants, running his hands up his chest as if remembering. "*C't'une bonne bourre.*"

I knew enough French to know that he'd said Sylvie was a good lay. I balanced the knife. It wasn't made for throwing, but in a pinch it'd do.

There was the faintest shadow in his eyes, as if for the first time he realized that there was no one here to save him; then something leaped over the railings. A blur of speed and motion that hit Fernando hard enough to roll him across the ground. When they came up, Richard was on top of him.

I yelled, "Don't kill him, Richard! Don't kill him!" I ran for them, but Jamil got there first. Jamil knelt by Richard, grabbing his arm, saying something to him. Richard grabbed Jamil by the throat and flung him across the ring. I ran to Jamil, kneeling beside him, but it was too late. His throat was crushed. His eyes were wide, frightened; he tried to breathe but it wasn't working. His legs spasmed, spine bowing, as he fought to breath. He grabbed my hand, his eyes screaming at me. There was nothing I could do. Either he'd heal it or he'd die.

I screamed, "Shit, Richard, help him!"

Richard plunged his hand into Fernando's stomach. He didn't have claws yet. It was only human fingers digging in the flesh, searching for the heart. He was strong enough that he'd dig it out unless we stopped him.

I stood and Jamil's hand slid out of mine. He let me go, but his eyes would haunt me. I ran for Richard, screaming his name: "Richard!"

He looked at me with amber wolf eyes in his human face. He reached towards me with one bloody hand, and the mental shields that kept us safe from one another crashed.

My vision went black, and when I could see again, I was kneeling in the ring. I could feel my body but I could also feel Richard's fingers pushing their way through thick flesh. The blood was warm but there wasn't enough of it. He wanted to use teeth to open the belly and was fighting the urge.

Thomas knelt beside me. "Use your marks to calm him before he kills Fernando."

I shook my head. My fingers were tearing through flesh. I had to press my hands against my eyes to remember what body I was in. I found my voice and that helped separate us. Helped me know who I was, what I was. "Shit, I don't know how."

"Then take his rage, his beast." Thomas touched my hands, gripping them tight, not to hurt but to help me anchor myself in this body. I gripped his hands and stared into his face like a drowning woman.

"I don't know how, Thomas."

He made an exasperated sound. "Gideon will have to intervene until you can calm him." It was almost a question.

I nodded. Sure, I'd been about to kill Fernando myself, but I knew that if we killed him, we would never see another dawn. Padma would kill us. Kill us all.

I kept looking at Thomas's face, but I felt Gideon grab Richard. Felt him pull him off Fernando. Richard twisted and hit Gideon, knocking him to the ground, then leaped on him. They rolled over and over on the ground, each trying to get on top. The only thing that kept it from being a killing fight was that both held onto their human forms and still tried to fight like they had claws. But Richard's beast was growing inside him. If he shifted, short of killing him we'd never keep him from killing someone else.

Thomas touched my face, and I realized that I hadn't been seeing his face. I was seeing Gideon's strange eyes from inches away as my hands tried to crush his throat. But they weren't my hands.

"Help me," I said.

"Just open to his beast," Thomas said. "Simply open and it will fill you. The beast is seeking a channel of escape. Give it one and it will flow into you." I knew in that instant that Thomas and Gideon were part of a triumvirate just like we were.

"I'm not a lycanthrope," I said.

"It does not matter. Do it, or we will have to kill him."

I screamed and did what he said. But it wasn't just opening to it. I reached out to that rage. That power that he called his beast came at my touch. I smelled like home to it, somehow, and it poured into me, over me, through me, like a blinding storm of heat and power. It was similar to the times I'd raised power with Richard and Jean-Claude, but this time there was no spell to use the power on. Nowhere for the beast to run. It tried to crawl out my skin, tried to expand inside my body, but there was no beast to call. I was empty for it, and it raged inside me. I felt it growing until I thought I would burst apart in bloody fragments. The pressure built and built and had nowhere to go.

I screamed, one long, ragged shriek after another, as fast as I could get breath. I felt Richard crawling towards me, felt his hands and legs move over the ground, felt the muscles in his body that turned crawling into a sensuous art, a stalking thing. He appeared above me, just his face, staring down. His long hair fell around his face like a shadowing curtain. Blood glistened at the corner of his mouth. I felt him want to lick the blood away but stop himself, and bound

this closely, I knew why he stopped. For me. Fear that I would think he was monstrous.

His power was still trying to find a way out of my body. It wanted the blood, too. It wanted to lick the blood off his face and taste at his mouth. Wanted to wrap the warmth of his body around itself and become one. His power cried out like a frustrated lover for him to open his arms, his body, his mind, to it, and embrace it. Richard gave it a name apart from himself, his beast, but it wasn't separate. In that moment I realized why Richard ran so hard and so long from the power. It was him. Just as the furred shape of him was pulled from the matter of his own human body, so the rage, the destruction, was pulled from his very human psyche. His beast was formed of that part of our brains we bury, only dragging into our consciousness in the worst of our nightmares. Not the dreams where we are hunted by the monsters, but the dreams where we are the monsters. We raise bloody hands to the sky and scream, not from fear, but from joy. The pure joy of slaughter. The cathartic moment when we plunge our hands into the hot blood of our enemies and there is no civilized thought to stop us from dancing on their graves.

The power flared inside me like a hand stroking from the inside out, reaching out towards him as he knelt over me. Fear filled his eyes, and it wasn't fear for me or of me. It was the fear that the beast was the reality and that all the careful morals, everything he was or ever had been, was the lie.

I stared up at him. "Richard," I whispered, "we're all creatures of light and darkness. Embracing your darkness won't kill the light. Goodness is stronger than that."

He dropped from his knees, flat to the ground, only propping himself on his elbows. His hair brushed my face on either side, and I had to fight the urge to rub my face back and forth in it. This close I could smell his skin, after-shave, but underneath that was him. The warm scent that was his body. I wanted to touch that warmth, to wrap my mouth around it and try and hold it forever. I wanted him. The power flared at the thought, primitive thoughts excited it, made it harder to control.

He whispered, blood still trickling from his mouth, "How can you say goodness is stronger? I want to lick the blood off my own body. I want to press my bleeding mouth onto yours. I want you to feed off my wound. That is evil."

I touched his face, the barest trace of fingertips, and even that made power jump between us. "It's not evil, Richard. It just isn't very civilized." Blood was building into a single trembling drop on the edge of his face. It fell against my skin and it was burning hot. His power flared upward and took me with it. It wanted to—I wanted to—lick the blood off Richard's face. Part of me was still saying no while I raised my head just enough to run lips, my tongue, and lightly my teeth along his face. I lay back down with the salty taste of him in my mouth and wanted more. The more scared me. I was just as scared of this part of him, of me, as he was. That was why I ran from him the night of the full moon. It wasn't that he ate Marcus, though that hadn't helped, or that he'd handled it all so badly. The memory that haunted was the moment I'd been carried away by the pack's power, and for just an instant I'd wanted to drop to

my knees and feed with them. I was afraid that Richard's beast would take what was left of my humanity. I was afraid for the same reason Richard was afraid. But what I'd said was true. It wasn't evil, just not very human.

He laid his lips against mine in a trembling kiss. A sound came from low in his throat, and he was suddenly pressing his mouth against mine, until it either bruised or I opened my mouth to him. I opened, and his tongue plunged inside me, his lips feeding on mine. The cut inside his mouth filled my mouth with the taste of him, salty, sweet. I held his face in my hands, my mouth searching his, and it wasn't enough. A small high keening sound crawled out of my mouth into his. The sound was made up of need, frustration, a desire that wasn't civilized and never had been. We'd been playing Ozzie and Harriet, but what we wanted from each other was more Hustler and Penthouse.

We moved to our knees, mouths still pressed together. My hands slid over his chest, his back, and something deep inside me clicked and relaxed. How could I ever be this close to him and not touch him?

His power tried to spill outward, but I held it back. I held it like I could hold my own magic, letting it build until I couldn't hold any longer.

Richard's hands slid up my legs finding the lace top of the black panties. His fingers traced my naked spine and I was undone.

The power spilled upward, outward, filling us both. It flared over us in a rushing wave of heat and light, until my vision swam in pieces, and we both cried out with one voice. His beast slid inside of him. I felt it crawl out of me, pulled like a large, thick string, spilling inside of Richard, coiling into his body. I expected to feel the last bit of it spill between us, like draining the last drop of wine from a cup, but that drop remained.

Somewhere in that rush of power, I'd felt Richard take control of his beast and send that pulsing warmth outward into Jamil. I wouldn't have known how to do it, but Richard did. I'd felt Jamil heal under the thundering rush of power.

Richard knelt with me in his arms, my face pressed to his chest. His heart beat against my cheek like a living thing. Sweat had broken over his body in a light dew. I licked the sweat from his chest and stared up at him.

His eyes were heavy-lidded, dazed. You'd almost have mistaken the look for sleep, but not quite. He cupped his hands on both sides of my face. The wound on his mouth was healed. The rush of power, his beast, had healed it. He lowered his soft lips to mine and just barely brushed my mouth. "What are we going to do?"

I held his hands against my face. "We're going to do what we came to do."

"Then what?" he asked.

I shook my head, rubbing my face against his hands. "Survive first, Richard. Worry about the niceties later."

Something filled his eyes with a sudden rush of panic. "Jamil, I could have killed him."

"You also healed him."

He let that take some of the panic from his face, but he still got to his feet and went to his fallen enforcer. An apology at the very least was needed. I couldn't really argue with that.

I stayed kneeling, not sure I could walk yet, for a variety of reasons.

"Not the way Gideon and I would have done it," Thomas said, "but in a pinch it will do."

I felt heat rush up my face. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Gideon growled. "It was a lovely show." He crawled towards us, one arm cradled against his body. Blood dripped down the arm and shoulder. The red showed brilliantly against the white shirt. I had absolutely no desire to lick the blood off his body. I was grateful for that.

"Richard did that?" I asked.

"He was beginning to change form when you called him. You drank his beast and he calmed." He sat leaning to one side, bleeding a little puddle on the floor, but he never asked for help, not by word or expression. But Thomas reached out to him. Touched his shoulder in a neutral, almost brotherly gesture. Their power strengthened in a skin-prickling rush that oozed over me like a cold wind, but if I hadn't been able to sense it, I'd have never known.

"Is this just European reserve?" I asked, "or are Richard and I doing something terribly wrong?"

Thomas smiled, but it was Gideon who answered. "You do nothing wrong. In fact, I feel quite cheated." He patted Thomas's hand and smiled flashing fangs. "There are ways to share power that are quieter, and less . . . showy. But for today you did what needed to be done. It was a desperate thing and called for desperate measures."

I let it go. No need to explain how often being around Richard ended in such "desperate measures." Across the ring Jamil sat up with Richard's help. Zane had untied both the wereleopards. He'd led Vivian over to Gregory. They both knelt by him, Vivian hugging Zane and crying.

I got my feet under me and found that I could walk. Great. Richard got there before I did. He stroked Gregory's tangled hair out of his face until the wereleopard looked up at him. "We have to set these legs."

Gregory nodded, lips in a thin tight line that reminded me of Cherry.

"We need a hospital for this," I said.

Richard looked up at me. "The legs have already begun to reknit like this. Anita. Every minute the bones are out of alignment is another minute that they heal, badly."

I stared down at Gregory's legs. He was totally nude, but the wounds were so fearful that it wasn't embarrassing; it was just piteous. His legs from the knees down bent the wrong way. I had to close my eyes and look away. If it had been a corpse, I could have looked at it, but Gregory was still bleeding, still hurting. Made it worse somehow.

I looked back. "You mean the legs would heal like that?"

"Yes," Richard said.

I stared down into Gregory's frightened eyes. They were still the surprised cornflower-blue of Stephen's. They looked even bluer from the mask of blood that covered his face. I tried to think of something to say, but he spoke first.

His voice was thin, scratchy, as if he'd screamed until he was hoarse. "When you left without me the first time, I thought you were going to let them keep me."

I knelt beside him. "You're not something to keep. You're a person. You deserve to be treated . . ." To say, "better than this" seemed too obvious. I tried to hold his hand the way you'd comfort a child, but two of the fingers were broken so badly, I didn't even know how to touch him.

Vivian spoke for the first time. "Is he dead?" Her voice was breathy, husky, somewhere between that of a little girl and a seductress. She would be great on the phone. The look in her eyes was neither childish nor seductive; it was frightening. She stared past us to where Fernando lay, and her hatred was a hot, scalding thing.

Not that I blamed her. I went to check on our little rapist. Gideon and Thomas got to him first. I noticed that they hadn't gone near him until I did. Why did I think that they didn't like him much better than we did? Fernando just had a way of pissing people off. It seemed to be his only talent.

His bare stomach was a bloody mess where Richard had tried to dig his intestines out, but the wound was healing. Filling itself in like a fast-forward motion picture. You could actually see his body rebuild itself.

"He'll live," I said. Even to me, I sounded disappointed.

"Yes," Thomas said, and that one word sounded as disappointed as I felt. He visibly shook himself, and turned sad brown eyes to me. "If he had died, then Padma would have destroyed the city, seeking you. Make no mistake, Anita, Padma loves his son, but more than that, he is his only son. The only chance he has of having an heir."

"I wouldn't think a vampire would sweat that," I said.

"He comes from a time and a culture where a son is an incredibly important thing. No matter how long we live or what we are in the end, we start out as people. We never quite lose all that we were during life. It haunts us over the centuries, our humanity."

"You're human."

He smiled and shook his head. "Once, perhaps."

I opened my mouth to ask something, but he held his hand up. "If there is time, Gideon and I would enjoy speaking with you and Richard at length on what a triumvirate can be, but now, you must leave before Fernando awakes. During daylight hours he is in charge of us."

My eyes widened, and I looked at Gideon. "But he's not alpha enough to take on Gideon."

"Padma is a harsh master, Anita. We obey or we suffer."

"Which is why," Gideon said, "you must all leave as soon as possible. What the *petit bâtard* would order us to do to you if he awoke now is best left unsaid."

He had a point. Gregory screamed, a high shrieking, that ended in whimpering. Richard had said the legs had begun to heal, bent backwards. I suddenly realized what that meant. "If the legs had healed broken, Gregory would have been crippled," I said.

"Yes," Gideon said. "It was Padma's idea of punishment."

Fernando groaned, eyes still shut. We had to get out of here. "I need my guns back," I said.

They didn't even argue. They just gave them all back. Either they trusted me or they figured I wouldn't shoot Fernando while he was unconscious. They were right, though he'd earned it. I'd killed people for a lot less than what the rat-boy had done, a lot less.

Gregory had mercifully passed out. Richard held him as carefully as he could in his arms. They'd found wood from somewhere and used Richard's shirt to tie the makeshift splints to Gregory's legs. Vivian leaned heavily on Zane as if her legs weren't quite working. She was also trying to cover her lower extremities. So hurt she could barely walk and she was embarrassed about her nudity. We were sort of out of clothes to offer her. The coat I'd brought was in the outer area.

Thomas saved the day by giving her his spiffy red jacket. It was large on her and covered enough. Just making it outside the tent to the midway made my shoulders relax a notch. I picked up the coat and put a gun in each pocket. The machine gun was already across my chest.

Thomas held the door for us. I went through last. "Thank you," I said. We both knew I didn't mean the door.

"You are most welcome." He closed the door behind us, and I heard it lock.

I stood in the hot summer sunlight and felt my body sink into the heat. It was good to be outside in the daylight. But night was coming, and I still didn't know what price Jean-Claude had bargained away to get Vivian and Gregory out of there. But the thought of Gregory's lovely body deliberately crippled forever, and Vivian passed around like so much meat, made me glad we'd bargained. I wouldn't say that whatever the price, it would be worth it, but close. Jean-Claude had said no rape, no actual intercourse, no maiming, no skinning alive. The list had seemed safer and more complete an hour ago.

Chapter 30

We pulled into the driveway of my rented house with two wounded wereleopards, two unwounded wereleopards, two very silent werewolves, a partridge in a pear tree, and enough equipment for Richard to rig up a pair of traction splints in my bedroom. Gregory needed to be in traction splints for twenty-four hours according to Dr. Lillian. The hospital was being evacuated. If Fernando was in charge for the day, the evacuation wasn't just a precaution, it was a necessity. The rat-boy hadn't wanted to free Rafael, and he'd certainly want revenge on Richard for beating him, so both the wererats and the

werewolves were in danger. The thought of what he'd do if he got his paws back on Gregory and Vivian was too scary to think about. The best we could do was keep them with us and try not to be anywhere Fernando would think to go.

I was half-trusting Thomas and Gideon to keep the rat-boy from searching too hard. I don't usually trust people that easily, but Gideon had called him the *petit bâtard*. The little bastard. They didn't like him any better than we did. Hard to believe, but maybe true.

Besides, where could we go where we'd be safe? We couldn't go to a hotel. That would endanger everyone in the place. Same thing with most houses. One of the main things I'd been looking for in a rental was isolation. Frankly, I liked a little city around me, but my life had turned into a free-fire zone lately. No apartments, no condos, no neighborhoods; something with lots of ground and no neighbors to get shot up was what I'd wanted. I got it. Though the isolation was about all I'd gotten that I wanted.

The house was too big for just me. It was a house that cried out for a family with walks in the woods and a dog running circles around the kiddies. Richard had never seen the house. I would have been more comfortable with him seeing it before we'd had our little make-out, oh, umm, make-up session. Before Jean-Claude had interfered, Richard and I had been engaged. We'd been planning the kind of future that went with this kind of house. I don't know if Richard had woken up and smelled the blood-soaked coffee, but I had. The future that included a picket fence and 2.5 children just wasn't in the cards for me. I didn't think it was in the cards for him either, but I wasn't going to burst his bubble. Not as long as his bubble didn't include me. If it did . . . we had a problem.

The house had a medium-sized rectangular flower bed that got full sun almost all day. It had been a rose garden, but the last owners had dug up the plants and tried to take them with them. It looked like the far side of the moon, complete with craters. It had looked so barren that I'd spent a weekend planting the damn thing. Rose moss for the border just because I loved the bright little flowers. Zinnias behind that because the flower colors echoed each other. It was a riot of color, nothing subtle. Butterflies and hummingbirds were attracted to the zinnias. I'd planted cosmos behind the zinnias, towering, feathery and tangled at the same time, with lovely pale open flowers that the butterflies loved and the hummingbirds weren't so fond of. The colors of the cosmos were a little too pastel compared with the other colors, but hey, it still worked. In the fall the cosmos would have seed heads for the goldfinches.

The flower bed had been some sort of admission to myself that I might be here awhile. That I couldn't go back to an apartment or a condo. That my life didn't allow me the luxury of close neighbors.

Richard had remarked as we drove up, "Nice flowers."

"I couldn't just leave it bare."

He made a noncommittal noise. Nearly three months away from each other and even without the marks, he knew me well enough to know when not to say something. It bugged me that I had been unable to leave the flower bed

barren and ripped. I hated the fact that I'd been driven to make it pretty. No, I am not comfortable with my feminine side.

Richard and Jamil carried Gregory in on the stretcher that the hospital had loaned us. Lillian had pumped the wereleopard so full of painkillers that he was feeling no pain. I was grateful for that. Awake, he had a tendency to whimper and scream.

Strangely, Cherry turned out to be a nurse. She'd taken one look at Gregory and suddenly turned into a professional. A layer of confidence and competence crawled out of nowhere. She was like a different person. Once Gregory let her touch him, didn't reject her help, Cherry was calm. Though truthfully, it wasn't until Dr. Lillian had seemed to trust Cherry that I did, too. Lillian was confident that she could help us put Gregory into traction and not injure him further. I trusted Lillian's opinion, but I still didn't trust Cherry. I might not have approved of Richard smacking her around, but I agreed that anyone who left you behind to die wasn't trustworthy. No shame in being weak, but I'd never trust her at my back.

Vivian wouldn't let Zane carry her into the house, even though walking was obviously painful. She clung to my arm with both her small hands. Truthfully, her hands weren't any smaller than my own, but somehow she seemed fragile. It wasn't size, or even just the rape, but something about Vivian herself. Even wrapped in the borrowed red coat and a scruffy blue robe that Lillian had loaned her, Vivian looked delicate, feminine, lovely in an almost ethereal sort of way. It's hard to look lovely and ethereal with half your face swollen tight with bruises, but she managed it.

She stumbled on the rock walkway to the house. I caught her, but her knees buckled and I came damn near dropping her on the rocks.

Zane tried to help me, but Vivian let out a small sound and hid her face against my shoulder. Once we hit the car she hadn't wanted any man to touch her. It had been Zane who untied her, but it seemed to be me she looked upon as her rescuer. Or maybe I was just the only female rescuer, and female was safe right now.

I sighed and nodded my head. Zane backed off. If I'd been in jogging shoes or even flats, I'd have just carried Vivian into the house, but I was wearing three inch spike heels. I could not carry someone nearly my own body weight wearing these shoes. If I kicked the shoes off, then the dress would be so long I'd trip. I was beginning to really hate this outfit.

"Vivian." She didn't respond. "Vivian?" She was still sliding towards the ground. I braced my legs far enough apart to get as much leverage as I was going to get in the shoes, and was ready for her when her legs collapsed completely. I might have been able to carry her in a firemen's-carry even with the heels, but I'd seen her body and there were deep bruises on her stomach. Slinging her over my shoulders would hurt. I managed to lift her in my arms, but I knew better than to try and walk.

"Get Cherry," I said.

Zane nodded and went into the house.

I stood there holding Vivian, waiting for help to arrive. The July sun beat down on my back through the black coat. Sweat trickled down my spine. Cicadas filled the heat with their buzzing song. There was a small army of butterflies feeding on the flowers. Don't tell, but I drank at least one cup of coffee every day out here watching the stupid things. It was all very picturesque, but I was getting impatient. How long did it take for Zane to tell Cherry to get her butt out here? Of course, maybe she was busy with Gregory and his fearful injuries. If she was, it could be a while. It wasn't that I couldn't stand there holding her. It was that I felt stupid wearing heels so high that I couldn't carry her into the house. It made me feel girlish in the worst way.

I tried to wait by counting how many different species of butterflies were visible. Tiger swallowtail, spicebush swallowtail, greater fritillary, giant sulphur, black swallowtail, red-spotted purple, and painted lady. A trio of tiny blue hairstreaks spun into the air like glittering bits of sky. Beautiful, but where the hell was Cherry? Enough of this. I started very carefully forward, my ankle twisted and I had to throw myself backward to keep from dumping Vivian to the rocks. I ended up on my butt in the flower bed, crushing the border of rose moss flat and taking a few zinnias with me. The cosmos towered over me, some of them as tall as six feet.

Vivian gave a small moan, blinking her one good eye open. "It's all right," I soothed. "It's all right." I sat there holding her, half rocking her, with my butt in the flowers and my feet almost straight out in front of me. I'd managed to keep my feet through vampires, shapeshifters, human servants, and arsonists, but a pair of high heels had set me back on my ass. Vanity, thy name is woman. Though whoever wrote that had never seen an issue of *GQ*.

A tiger swallowtail nearly as big as my outstretched hand fluttered near my face. It was pale yellow with sharp brown stripes on its wings. It hovered over Vivian, then finally settled on my hand. Butterflies will lick the sweat from your skin for the salt, but usually you have to hold still for it. If you move, they float away. This insect seemed determined. Its proboscis is not much thicker than a straight pin, a long curved tube, but you can feel it like a tickling line.

It was maybe the third time in my life that I'd had a butterfly feed off my skin. I didn't try to chase it away. It was cool. Its wings pulsed up and down very slowly as it fed, its tiny feet almost weightless against my hand.

Cherry walked out the door, eyes widening when she saw me. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head, still careful not to scare away the butterfly. "Just can't get the leverage to get back up."

Cherry knelt by us, and the butterfly glided away. She watched it for a moment. "I've never seen a butterfly do that."

"It was after the salt in my skin. Butterflies will feed on dogshit or spoiled fruit, too," I said.

Cherry made a face. "Thanks for ruining another idyllic image." She took Vivian out of my arms, wobbling on one knee. Vivian moaned in her arms as Cherry stood, trying to get the balance of it all. Lifting isn't just strength. It's

balance, and an unconscious body is not the best thing for balance. "You need a hand up?" she asked.

I shook my head, getting to my knees.

Cherry took me at my word and just walked towards the house. She was smarter than I'd first thought. Of course, if I'd spent the night in Padma's tender care, maybe I wouldn't have made a good first impression either.

I was trying to fluff up the crushed flowers when the butterfly came fluttering back. With it hovering around my face I felt the first prickling brush of power. If it had been dark, I'd have said "vampire," but it was broad daylight.

I stood up and slipped the Browning out of the coat pocket. The bright yellow-and-brown insect batted at my face with paper-thin wings. What had been fun a moment before was suddenly ominous. For the first time in my life I brushed a butterfly away as if it had been something loathsome. And maybe it was.

I am not implying that the butterfly was literally a vampire. They couldn't shapechange, not to my knowledge. Of course, they couldn't be out in full daylight either. They were the council. Did I really know what they were capable of?

The butterfly floated away from me towards the woods on the far side of the driveway. It fluttered back and forth, back and forth, like it was waiting for me. I shook my head. I felt silly holding the gun with just the butterfly there by the woods. But something else was out there. I stood in the summer heat, feeling the sun beat down on the top of my head. I should have been safe. At least from vampires. It wasn't fair that they changed the rules.

I was about to go into the house and yell for backup, when I saw a figure. Tall with a thick hooded cloak pulled around him. Even with the cloak I knew it was a him. Shoulders that broad and that height, and I even knew it was Warrick. Except it couldn't be him. He wasn't even close to powerful enough to be out in daylight.

I stared at that tall shape in the shimmering white cloak. He stood so still, as if he were carved from marble. Even Mr. Oliver, the oldest vamp I'd ever seen had avoided direct sunlight. But there Warrick stood like a ghost that had learned the trick of walking about in daylight. Of course, he wasn't walking. He stood in the wavering shadows of the trees. He didn't try and come out into the direct light of the clearing. Maybe he couldn't. Maybe that thin band of shade was all that kept him from bursting into flames. Maybe.

I walked towards him. I stretched my senses, but his was the only power I felt. It could be a trap, an ambush, but I didn't think so. If they meant to trap me, it wouldn't have been this blatant. But just in case, I stopped a good distance back from the woods. If I saw any movement I'd yell for help and run for the house. Might even get off a shot or two.

Warrick stood with his head bowed so low, the hood completely hid his face. He stood immobile, as if he didn't know I was there. Only the wind making a soft folding line in the white cloth showed any movement. He was like a statue with a cloth thrown over it.

The longer he stood there motionless, the more eerie it seemed. I had to fill the silence. "What do you want, Warrick?"

A shiver went through him and he raised his head slowly. Rot had spread across that strong face. His skin was green and black as if that thin layer of tissue were holding in centuries of death. Even his blue eyes had dulled with a film, like a fish that had been dead too long to eat.

My mouth was hanging open. You'd think after what I'd seen Yvette do to him, it wouldn't have shocked me, but it did. Some sights you don't grow jaded about.

"Is Yvette punishing you?" I asked.

"No, no, my pale mistress sleeps in her coffin. She knows nothing of this visit." His voice was the only thing that remained "normal." The voice was still strong and firm. It didn't match what was happening to his body.

"What's happening to you, Warrick?"

"When the sun rose I did not die. I thought it was a sign from God. That He was giving me permission to end this foul existence. That He had given me the chance to walk into the light for one last time. I walked into the rising sun and did not burn, but this happened." He raised his hands out of the cloak, showing me the greying flesh. The fingernails were blackened, even the ends of the fingers seemed shriveled.

"Will it heal?" I asked.

He smiled and even with that horrific visage, it was a smile full of hope. His rotted face showed a light that had nothing to do with vampire powers. The butterfly hovered above his face. "God will call me to his arms soon. I am after all a dead man."

I couldn't argue with him there. "Why did you come here, Warrick?"

A second butterfly joined the first, then a third. They fluttered above his head like a carousel. Warrick smiled up at them. "I have come to warn you. Padma fears Jean-Claude and your triumvirate. He will see you dead if he can."

"That's not news," I said.

"Our master, Morte d'Amour, has given Yvette orders to destroy you all."

That was news. "Why?" I asked.

"I don't believe that any of the council truly believes that Jean-Claude means to set up his own rival council in this country. But they all see him as a part of this new legal vampirism. They see him as part of a change that may sweep away our old existence. The old ones who have power enough to be comfortable do not want any change in our status quo. When the vote is taken, Anita, there will be two against you."

"Who else gets to vote?" I asked.

"Asher has the proxy for his mistress, Belle Morte, Beautiful Death. He hates Jean-Claude with a fine, burning hate like sunlight through glass. I do not think you can count upon his help."

"So they have all come to kill us," I said.

"If they had come merely to kill you, Anita, they would have done so by now."

"Then I'm confused," I said.

"Padma's fear is too strong, but I believe our master would be content if Jean-Claude gave up his seat of power here and joined the council as he was meant to."

"The first challenger that comes along will take him out," I said. "No thanks."

"So Jean-Claude keeps saying," Warrick said. "I am beginning to think that he underestimates himself, and you."

"He's cautious, and so am I."

A host of butterflies had formed above his head. They fluttered around him in a multicolored cloud. One landed on his hand, bright wings fanning softly as it fed off the rotting flesh.

His power thrummed along my body. It wasn't council-level power, but it was master-level. Warrick was a master vampire, and he hadn't been last night. "Are you borrowing power from someone else?"

"From God," he said.

Of course.

"The longer we are away from our master, the weaker Yvette grows, and the stronger I grow. The Holy Fire of God's eternal light has entered my body once more. Perhaps He will forgive me for my weakness. I feared death, Anita. I feared the punishment of hell more than I feared Yvette. But I walk in the light. I burn with God's power once more."

Personally I didn't believe God had a private torture chamber. Hell was being cut off from God, cut off from his power, his energy, Him. We walked through his power every day of our lives until it was like white noise, something we ignored or failed to hear. But somehow lecturing Warrick on the fact that he'd let Yvette torture him for centuries because he feared eternal damnation, which I didn't in fact believe existed, seemed pointless. Nay, cruel.

"I'm happy for you, Warrick."

"I would ask one boon of you, Anita."

"A boon is a favor, right?" I asked. Didn't want to agree to something and be wrong.

"Yes," he said.

"Ask."

"Do you have a cross upon you?"

I nodded.

"Show me, please."

I didn't think this was a good idea, but . . . I pulled the silver chain up until the cross sparkled in the sunlight. It didn't glow. It just dangled.

Warrick smiled. "The Holy Cross does not reject me."

I didn't have the heart to tell him that the cross didn't always glow around all vampires. It seemed to wait for one that meant me harm, though there were exceptions both ways. I, like Warrick, didn't question God's wisdom. I figured He knew what He was doing, and if He didn't, I really didn't want to know.

Warrick walked to the edge of the tree line. He stood there in the white cloak with its black lining, hesitating. I watched the struggle on his face. He

wanted to cross into that last band of pure sunlight and was afraid to. I didn't blame him.

He stretched out his hand to the trembling edge of solid golden light, then fell back. "My courage and my faith, they still fail me. I am still not worthy. I should stride into the light and grab the Holy Cross and hold it unafraid." He covered his face with his darkened hands. The butterflies lit on every inch of naked skin, wings fanning. There was nothing to see but the white cloak and the fluttering insects. For a moment the illusion was perfect that the butterflies were all that was inside the cloak.

Warrick spread his hands slowly, carefully, so as not to disturb the insects. He smiled. "I have heard the masters speak of calling their animals for centuries but have never understood until now. It is a wondrous bond."

He seemed happy with his "animal." Me, I'd have been a little disappointed. A butterfly wasn't going to be much defense against the sort of animals that most vamps could call. But, hey, as long as Warrick was happy, who was I to bitch?

"Yvette made me swear an oath to God on some of her secrets. I have not betrayed my word, or my oath."

"Are you saying there are things I should know that you haven't told me?" I asked.

"I have told you all I am free to tell, Anita. Yvette was always clever. She manipulated me all those years ago to betray all I held dear. She bound me with oaths before we arrived on your shores. I didn't understand it at the time, but I do now. She knew I would see you as a person of honor. A person who protects the weak, and does not abandon her friends. You make the council's talk of honor and responsibility seem a pale pretense."

Saying thanks didn't seem enough, but it was all I had. "Thank you, Warrick."

"Even when I was alive there was a vast difference between the nobles that truly led and tended their people's needs, and those who just took from them."

"It hasn't changed that much," I said.

"I am sorry to hear that," he said. He glanced upward, maybe at the sun, maybe at something I couldn't see. "As the sun approaches its zenith I feel weaker."

"Do you need a place to rest for the day?" I asked. The moment I said it, I wasn't sure I should have made the offer. Did I really trust him down in the basement with Jean-Claude and the gang, without me to watch him every minute? Not exactly.

"If this would be my last day in the daylight, then I would not lose it by hiding. I will walk in your delightful woods, then I will dig among the deep leaves. I have hidden among the leaves before. They fall thick and deep in the hollows."

I nodded. "I know. Somehow I figured you for a city boy."

"I have lived in a city for many years, but my first days were among trees thicker and more lush than these. My father's lands were far from any city."

Though that has changed. There are no trees now where I fished and hunted as a boy. It is all gone. Yvette allowed me a trip home, in her company. I wish I had not gone. It has tainted my memories, and made them seem like some dreams."

"The good stuff is as real as the bad stuff," I said. "Don't let Yvette take that from you."

He smiled, then shivered. The butterflies whirled into the air like autumn leaves flung into the sky. "I must go." He moved off through the trees, followed by a line of eager butterflies. I lost sight of the white cloak as he walked down the far side of a hill, but the butterflies trailed after him like tiny vultures marking the line of death.

Chapter 31

I crossed the yard, the driveway, and was back on the sidewalk when the sound of a car coming down the gravel driveway turned me around. It was Ronnie. Shit. I'd forgotten to call her and cancel our morning jog. Veronica (Ronnie) Sims was a private detective and my best friend. We worked out together at least once a week, usually on Saturday mornings. Sometimes we went to the gym; sometimes we ran. It was Saturday morning, and I'd forgotten to cancel.

I held the gun along my side, hidden in the coat. Not that she'd care. It was just automatic. If you were privileged enough to be allowed a carry permit for your gun, you didn't flash it around. Deliberately flashing your gun in public without just cause is called "brandishment" and can get your permit revoked. It's like a new vampire flashing fangs. It's a sign of an amateur.

I was feeling guilty that I'd made Ronnie come all the way out here for nothing, when I realized she wasn't alone. Louie Fane, Dr. Louis Fane, who taught biology at Wash U. was with her. They spilled out of the car together, laughing, holding hands as soon as the car wasn't between them. They were both dressed for jogging. His shirt was untucked, coming down low enough on his five-foot-six frame that his short-shorts barely showed. His black hair was cut short and neat, and didn't match the oversized T-shirt.

Ronnie was wearing a pair of lavender biker's shorts that showed her long legs to perfection. A crop-top T-shirt in the same color showed flashes of flat stomach as she walked towards me. She never dressed this nicely just to go exercise with me. Her shoulder-length blond hair was freshly washed, blow-dried, and shiny. The only thing missing was makeup, but she didn't need it. Her face glowed. Her grey eyes had that tinge of blue they get when she wears the right color outfit. She'd chosen the color, and Louie had eyes only for her.

I stood there watching them walk hand and hand up the sidewalk and wondered when they'd notice me. They both looked up almost startled, as if I'd appeared out of thin air. Ronnie had the grace to look embarrassed, but Louie just seemed content. I happened to know for a fact that they were having sex, but just watching them together would have been enough. His fingers played lightly over her knuckles as they stood looking at me. I wasn't sure they were in love, but lust, that I was sure of.

Ronnie looked me up and down. "A little overdressed for jogging, aren't you?"

I frowned. "Sorry, I forgot to call. I just got home."

"What happened?" Louie asked. He still held Ronnie's hand, but everything else changed. He was suddenly alert, taller somehow, black eyes searching my face, noticing for the first time the bandage on my hand and other signs of wear, "You smell like blood, and"—his nostrils flared—"something worse."

I wondered if he could smell Warrick's rotted flesh on my shoes, but I didn't ask. I didn't really want to know. He was one of Rafael's lieutenants, and I was surprised he didn't know what had been happening. "Have you guys been out of town?"

They both nodded, and Ronnie's smile was gone now, too. "We were up at the cabin." The cabin had been part of her divorce settlement from a two-year marriage that ended very badly. But it was a great cabin.

"Yeah, it's nice up there."

"What's happened?" Louie asked again.

"Let's go inside. I can't think of a version short enough not to need coffee."

They followed me into the house, still touching, but some of the glow had leaked away. I seemed to have that effect on people. Hard to be bright and shiny in the middle of a kill zone.

Gregory was lying on my couch, still drugged into blissful unconsciousness. Louie stopped in his tracks. Of course, maybe it wasn't just the wereleopard. There was a large Persian rug underneath my white couch and chair. It wasn't my rug. There were bright pillows on the white furniture that echoed the colors of the rug. The colors were like jewels in the early morning sunlight.

Ronnie said, "Stephen." She even went forward as if to touch him, but Louie pulled her back.

"It's not Stephen."

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"They don't smell the same."

Ronnie was just staring. "This is Gregory?"

Louie nodded.

"I knew they were identical twins but . . ."

"Yeah," I said. "I have got to get out of this dress, but let me make one thing clear. Gregory is mine now. He's a good guy. No abusing him."

Louie turned to me, and his black eyes had bled across the pupil so that his eyes were like black buttons, rat's eyes. "He tortured his own brother."

"I was there, Louie. I saw it."

"Then how can you defend him?"

I shook my head. "It has been a long night, Louie. Let's just say that without Gabriel to force the wereleopards to be evil, they've been choosing different paths. He refused to torture one of the wolves, and that's why they broke his legs."

The look on Louie's face said he didn't believe it. I shook my head and made shooing motions. "Go in the kitchen, make coffee. Let me slip out of this damn dress and I'll tell you everything."

Ronnie pulled him towards the kitchen, but her eyes watched me, full of questions. I mouthed, "Later" to her, and she went into the kitchen. I trusted her to keep Louie busy until I got changed. I didn't really think that he'd harm Gregory, but the wereleopards had pissed off so many people. Better to be safe than sorry.

Richard was up on a stepladder drilling holes in the ceiling above my bed. So much for my security deposit. My bedroom was the only one on the first floor. I'd given it up so they wouldn't have to get Gregory up the stairs. Little flakes of ceiling covered his bare torso in a fine white powder. He looked very handy-mannish in just jeans. Cherry and Zane were on the bed, holding pieces of the traction apparatus for him, helping him measure.

The drill stopped, and I asked, "Where's Vivian?"

"Gwen took her to see Sylvie," Richard said. His eyes were very neutral as he looked at me, voice careful. We hadn't said much to each other since our moment in the ring.

"Nice to have a trained therapist in the house," I said.

Cherry and Zane were both watching me. They reminded me of golden retrievers in the obedience ring, eyes earnest, intent on every word and gesture. I didn't really like people looking at me like that. Made me nervous.

"I just came in to get clothes. I want out of this dress." I moved past them to the chest of drawers. Jean-Claude had been busy in here, too. It just wasn't as obviously not my taste. At the far end was a bay window complete with window seat. It was full to overflowing with my toy penguin collection. There was a new penguin sitting on the bed with a large red bow on its neck and a card leaning against its furry belly. Bits of ceiling had already rained down on its black fur.

The drill stopped, and Richard said, "Go ahead, check the card. That's what he meant for you to do."

I looked up at him, and there was still anger in his eyes and pain, but underneath that there was something else. Something I had no words for, or perhaps didn't want words for. I took the penguin off the bed, dusting it off, and opened the card with my back to him. The drill didn't start up again. I could feel him watching me while I read the card.

It said, "Something to sleep with when I am not with you." It was signed simply with an elegant J.

I shoved the card back in the envelope and turned to face Richard, penguin clutched to my stomach. His expression was very careful, as neutral as he could

manage it. He looked at me, fighting to keep his face empty and finally failing. A rawness spilled into his eyes, of need and words and things unsaid.

Zane and Cherry backed off the bed, gliding towards the door. They didn't leave, but they made a point of not standing between us. I didn't think we were going to have a full-out battle, but I couldn't blame them for getting out of the way.

"You can read the note if you want. But I'm not sure it will help."

He made a small abrupt sound, not quite a laugh. "Should you be offering your boyfriend's love letters to your ex-boyfriend?"

"I don't want to hurt you, Richard. I really don't. If seeing the note will make it better, you can see it. Except for that first time, I've never done anything you didn't know about. I don't intend to start now."

I watched the muscles in his jaw clench until the tension swelled his neck and shoulders. He shook his head. "I don't want to see it."

"Fine." I turned around, penguin and card in one arm, and opened the dresser drawer. I grabbed what was on top, not really paying attention. I just wanted out of the suddenly silent room, away from the weight of Richard's eyes.

"I heard someone come in with you," he said, voice quiet. "Who was it?"

I turned, penguin and clothes clutched in a mass. "Louie and Ronnie."

Richard frowned. "Did Rafael send Louie?"

I shook my head. "They were off in a love nest together. Louie doesn't know what's been happening. He seems really pissed at Gregory. Is it personal, or what he did to Stephen?"

"Stephen," Richard said. "Louie is very loyal to his friends." There was something in the way he said that last that seemed to imply that maybe not everyone in the house was as loyal. Or maybe I was just reading things into an otherwise innocent statement. Maybe. Guilt is a many-splendored thing. But meeting Richard's true-brown eyes, I didn't think I was hearing anything he didn't mean for me to hear.

If I'd known what to say to him, I'd have sent the wereleopards out of the room so we could talk. But God help me if I knew what to say. Until I had time to think about things, the talk could wait. In fact, it had better wait. I hadn't expected to still be able to feel something for Richard, or him for me. I was sleeping with another man, in love with another man. It complicated things. Just thinking that made me smile and shake my head.

"What's so funny?" he asked. His eyes were so hurt, so confused.

"Funny?" I said. "Nothing, Richard, absolutely nothing." I fled to the downstairs bathroom to change. This was the biggest bathroom in the house, the one that had a sunken marble tub. It wasn't as big as the one Jean-Claude had at the Circus, but it was close. White candles encircled the head and foot of the tub. Untouched, fresh, new, waiting for nightfall. He'd chosen peppermint candles. He loved scented candles that smelled eatable. His food fetish was showing.

There was a second card taped to the stem of a silver candlestick. There was nothing on the outside of the envelope, but call it a hunch. I opened it.

The note said, "If we were alone, *ma petite*, I would have you light them at dusk. And I would join you. *Je rêve de toi*." The last was French for "I dream of you." This one wasn't even signed. He was such a confident little thing. According to him, I was the only woman in nearly four hundred years to ever turn him down. And even I had finally lost the battle. Hard not to be confident with a track record like that. Truthfully, I'd have loved to fill the tub, light the candles, and been waiting naked and wet for him to rise for the night. It sounded like a very, very good time. But we had a house full of guests, and if Richard was staying the night, we were going to behave ourselves. If Richard had dumped me for another woman, I wouldn't have taken it quite as badly as he was taking it, but I couldn't have stayed in a house and listened to him have sex with the other woman. Even my nerve wasn't that strong. I certainly wasn't going to put Richard into that position. Not on purpose.

I had to make two trips back and forth into the bedroom from the bathroom. First, I forgot a normal bra. A strapless bra was just not meant to be worn this long. Second, I traded the shorts I'd grabbed first for jeans.

I was very aware of Richard watching me as I came and went. Zane and Cherry watched both of us like nervous dogs that expect to be kicked. The tension was thick enough to walk on and the leopards could feel it. The tension was more than physical awareness. It was like he was thinking very hard, and I could feel it, a building pressure that had a lecture at the end of it, or a fight.

I ended up dressed in a pair of new jeans in that wonderful dark blue color that never lasts, a royal blue tank top, white jogging socks, and white Nikes with a black swoosh. I shoved most of the old clothes into the dirty clothes hamper and folded the dress on top of it. The dress was, of course, "dry clean only." I tucked the Firestar down the front of the jeans. I had an inner pants holster for it, but it was in the bedroom. I didn't want it badly enough to go back in there right this second. I felt like I was tempting fate every time Richard and I passed each other. Eventually, he'd insist on talking, and I wasn't ready. Maybe for this particular talk, I would never be ready.

I folded the borrowed coat over my arm with the Browning hanging heavy in one pocket. The machine gun I kept on my shoulder like a purse. When the bedroom cleared out, I'd put the machine gun in the closet. The trick about having this many loaded guns is that you don't dare leave them lying around. Lycanthropes are great in a fight, but most of them don't seem to know one end of a gun from the other. There's something about a gun just lying around, especially one as nifty as a submachine gun that tempts people. There is an almost physical itch to pick it up, point it, go bang-bang. You either make a gun safe, unloaded or locked up, or you keep it on your body where you can control it. Those are the rules. Deviating from the rules is what lets eight-year-old kids blow the heads off their baby sisters.

I went into the living room. Gregory was gone from the couch. I started to assume he'd been carried to the bedroom, then walked into the bedroom to make sure. Be damn silly to let Gregory get snatched from my living room and not notice it.

Cherry and Richard were tucking him into the bed with Zane's help. Gregory had woken enough that he was whimpering. Richard caught me peeking in the doorway.

"Just making sure Gregory was all right," I said.

"No, you were making sure that the bad guys hadn't gotten him," he said.

I looked down, then up. "Yeah," I said.

We might have said more, but Gregory woke up as they put his legs in traction. He started screaming. Lycanthropes metabolized drugs incredibly quickly. Cherry readied a needle full of a clear liquid. I fled. I don't like needles. But truthfully, I didn't want Richard to lecture me over the guns. His being a lycanthrope wasn't our only problem. Richard thought I killed too easily. Maybe he was right, but I'd saved his ass more than once with my quick trigger finger. And he'd endangered me more than once with his squeamishness.

I went back down the stairs, shaking my head. Why did we even bother? We had too many important areas that we disagreed on. It wouldn't work. So we lusted after each other, even loved each other. It wasn't enough. If we couldn't find a way to compromise on the rest of it, we'd just end up cutting each other apart.

Better to just make the break as cleanly as possible. My head agreed with the logic. Other body parts weren't so sure.

I followed the smell of coffee into the kitchen. It was a lovely kitchen, if I ever cooked or entertained. It was all dark wood cabinets with a large island in the middle with hooks above it for cooking pots and pans. I didn't own enough kitchen stuff to fill one whole cabinet let alone the rest of the gleaming expanse. Of all the rooms in the new house this was the one that made me feel most like a stranger. It was so *not* what I would have chosen.

Ronnie and Louie were sitting at my small two-seater kitchen table. It sat on a raised platform in a three-sided bay of windows. The area was meant for a full-sized dining room table. My little breakfast-nook set looked like a temporary measure. Except for the flowers. The flowers took up most of the small table. The flowers were another addition.

I didn't have to count to know that there were a dozen white roses and one lone red one. Jean-Claude had been sending me white roses for years, but ever since we made love for the first time there had been a thirteenth rose. Red, crimson, a spot of passion lost in a sea of white purity. There was no card, because there was no need for a card.

Jamil leaned against the wall near Ronnie and Louie, sipping coffee. He stopped talking when I entered the room, which meant he'd probably been talking about me. Maybe not, but the silence was thick, and Ronnie was very busy not looking at me. Louie looked at me a little too hard. Yep, Jamil had been spilling the beans.

I didn't even want to know before I had some caffeine in me. I poured coffee into a mug that said "Warning: The Surgeon General has determined that bothering me before I've had my first cup of coffee is hazardous to your health." The mug had been at the office until my boss accused me of

threatening the clients. I hadn't picked out a new mug yet. I had to find something suitably irritating.

There was a sparkling new espresso machine on the cabinet by the coffeemaker, with another card. I took a sip of coffee and opened this one.

"Something to warm your body and fill this empty *cuisine*." The last was French for "kitchen." He often did that in notes, as if even after a hundred years in this country he still sometimes forgot the correct English phrase. His speech was flawless, but many people speak a second language better than they write it. Of course, it could be his backhanded way of teaching me French. It was working. He'd write a note, and I'd hunt him down and ask what it meant. Having French sweet-nothings whispered in your ear is great, but after a while you wonder exactly what he's whispering, so I asked. There had been other lessons, but nothing much that I could share in public.

"Nice flowers," Ronnie said. Her voice was neutral, but she'd made herself very clear on the subject of Jean-Claude. She thought he was a pushy bastard. She was right. She thought he was evil. I didn't agree on that one.

I sat down at the far end of the octagon, back to the wall, head below the level of the windows. "I don't need any more lectures today, Ronnie. Okay?"

She shrugged and sipped her coffee. "You're a big girl, Anita."

"That's right, I am." It sounded petulant even to me. I settled the submachine gun beside me on the floor with the coat. I breathed in the coffee, black and thick. Sometimes I added cream and sugar, but for the first cup of the day, black would do.

"Jamil's been filling us in," Louie said. "Did you and Richard actually raise power in the middle of the Circus?"

I took a sip of coffee before answering. "Apparently."

"There is no equivalent among the wererats for the wolves' lupa, but is it common to be able to call power like that?"

Ronnie was glancing back and forth from one to the other of us. Her eyes were a little wide. I'd been telling her what was happening in my life. She'd been hanging around with me and the monsters long enough to meet Louie, but it was still a strange new world for her. Sometimes I thought she'd be better off keeping further away from the monsters, but like she'd said, we were both big girls. Sometimes she even carried a gun. She could make her own decisions.

Jamil answered, "I have been a werewolf for over ten years. This is my third pack. I have never even heard of a lupa that could help her Ulfric raise power outside of the lupanar, our place of power. Most lupas can't even do that. Raina was the first I'd met that could call power within the lupanar. She could do small powers without the full moon to boost her power, but nothing like what I felt today."

"Jamil says you helped Richard raise enough power to heal him," Louie said.

I shrugged, carefully so the coffee wouldn't spill. "I helped Richard control his beast. It raised . . . something. I don't know. Something."

"Richard went into one of his rages, and you helped bring him back?" Louie asked.

I looked at him then. "You've seen him when he loses control?"

He nodded. "Once."

The memory made me shiver. "Once is enough."

"But you helped him control it."

"She did," Jamil said. He sounded pleased.

Louie looked at him and shook his head.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I've been telling Richard that he won't get better unless he gets you completely out of his system. I thought he had to forget you to heal himself."

"You sound like you've changed your mind," I said.

"If you can help Richard regain control of his beast, then he needs you. I don't care what arrangement you work out, Anita. But if he doesn't do something soon, he's going to end up dead. To stop that from happening, I'd do almost anything."

For the first time I realized that Louie didn't like me anymore. He was Richard's best friend. I guess I couldn't blame him. If he'd dumped Ronnie as badly as I'd dumped Richard, I'd be pissed, too.

"Even encouraging Richard to see me again?" I made it a question.

"Is that what you want?"

I shook my head and wouldn't meet his eyes. "I don't know. We're bound to each other for eternity. That's a long time to bitch at each other."

Richard appeared in the doorway. "A very long time," he said, "to watch you in his arms." He didn't sound bitter then. He sounded tired. His thick hair and muscular upper body were covered in fine white dust. Even his jeans were coated. He looked like something out of a porno movie where the handy-man consoles the lonely housewife. He walked over to stand in front of the roses. "Forever to see white roses with your name on them." He touched the single red rose, and smiled. "Nicely symbolic." His hand closed around the crimson flower; when he opened his hand, red petals scattered across the table. A drop of blood fell to the pale table top. He'd found a thorn.

Ronnie's eyes were wide, staring at the ruined rose. She glanced at me, eyebrows raised, but I didn't even know what expression to give her in return. "That was childish," I said.

Richard turned to me, hand stretched out towards me. "Too bad our other third isn't here to lick the blood off."

I felt an unpleasant smile curl my lips, and spoke before I could stop myself, or maybe I was just tired of trying. "There are at least three people in this room that would love to lick the blood off your skin, Richard. I'm not one of them."

He balled his hand into a fist. "You are such a bitch."

"Woof, woof," I said.

Louie stood. "Stop it, both of you."

"I will if he will," I said.

Richard just turned away, speaking without looking at anyone. "We changed the sheets on the bed. But I'm still a mess." He opened his hand. Blood had spread along the lines in his hand like a river following its banks. He turned

to me with angry eyes. "Can I use one of the bathrooms to clean up?" He raised the hand slowly to his mouth and licked the blood very slowly, very deliberately, off his skin.

Ronnie made a small sound, almost a gasp. I managed not to faint; I'd seen the show before. "There's a full bath with shower upstairs. Door across the hall from the bedroom."

He put one finger in his mouth in slow motion, like he'd just eaten some finger-lickin' good chicken. His eyes never moved from my face. I was giving my best blank look, empty, nothing. Whatever he wanted from me, blankness was not it.

"What about the fancy tub downstairs?" he asked.

"Help yourself," I said. I sipped coffee, the picture of nonchalance. Edward would have been proud.

"Wouldn't Jean-Claude be upset if I used your precious tub? I know how much you both like water."

Someone had told him that we'd made love in the tub at the Circus. I'd have loved to know who and hurt them. Heat rose up my face; I couldn't stop it.

"A reaction at last," he said.

"You've embarrassed me, happy?"

He nodded. "Yes, yes I am."

"Go take your shower, Richard, or your bath. Light the damn candles, have a ball."

"Are you going to join me?" There was a time when I'd wanted an invitation like that from Richard more than almost anything in the world. The anger in his voice when he said it brought something very close to tears to my eyes. I wasn't exactly crying, but it hurt.

Ronnie stood, and Louie put a hand on her arm. Everyone stood or sat and tried to pretend they weren't witnessing something painfully personal.

A couple of deep breaths and I was okay. I wasn't about to let him see me cry. No way. "I didn't join Jean-Claude in the tub, Richard. He joined me. Maybe if you hadn't been such a frigging boy scout, it'd be you I was with right now and not him."

"Was one good fuck all it would have taken? Was it just that easy for you?"

I pushed to my feet, coffee sloshing down my hand onto the floor. I set the mug on the table, which put me within touching distance of Richard.

Ronnie and Louie had moved back from the table, giving us room. I think they'd have left the room if they had been sure we wouldn't come to blows. Jamil had set his coffee down as if he was getting ready to jump in and save us from ourselves. But it was too late to save us, far too late.

"You bastard," I said. "It took us both to get where we are, Richard."

"Three of us," he said.

"Fine," I said. My eyes were hot, my throat tight. "Maybe one good fuck would have done it. I don't know. Do your high ideals keep you warm at night, Richard? Does your moral high ground make you less lonely?"

He took that last step that put us almost touching. His anger flowed over me like an electric current. "You cheated on me, but you have him in your bed, and I have no one."

"Then find someone, Richard, find anyone, but let it go. Let it the fuck go."

He stepped back so abruptly, it made me sway. He left the room striding, his rage trailing after him like the smell of disturbing perfume.

I stood there for a second, then said, "Get out, everyone out."

The men left, but Ronnie stayed. I wouldn't have cried, honest, but she touched my shoulders, hugged me from behind, and whispered, "I'm so sorry." I could have withstood anything except sympathy.

I cried with my hands covering my face, still hiding, still hiding.

Chapter 32

The doorbell rang. I moved as if to answer it, but Ronnie said, "Let someone else get it."

Zane called from the living room. "I'll get it." Which made me wonder where Jamil and Louie were. Comforting Richard, maybe?

I pushed away from Ronnie, scrubbing at my face. "Who could it be out here? We're in the middle of nowhere."

Jamil and Louie were suddenly back in the room. Either they'd heard me, or they were just as suspicious as I was. I picked the machine gun off the floor and stood in the doorway with the gun held at my left side, out of sight. The Firestar was in my right hand, also out of sight. Louie and Jamil moved into the living room to either side.

"Don't cross my line of sight," I said.

They both moved a little farther apart. Ronnie said, "I didn't bring my gun."

"The Browning is in the coat on the floor."

Her grey eyes were just a touch wide, her breathing just a little fast, but she nodded and went for the gun.

Zane was looking back at me with wide eyes. He looked a question at me, and I nodded. He checked the peephole. "Looks like a delivery guy with flowers."

"Open it," I said.

Zane did, blocking my view of the man. The man's voice was too soft to hear. Zane turned back to me. "Says you have to sign for the flowers."

"Who are they from?"

The man peered around Zane, raising his voice to say, "Jean-Claude."

"Just a minute." I laid the machine gun on the floor out of sight and kept the Firestar hidden behind my leg as I moved for the door. Jean-Claude kept me supplied with flowers, but he usually waited for the old ones to start to die, or at least fade. Of course, he had turned on the romantic overtime today.

He was a small man, holding the box of roses in his arm, his left hand on top of the box with a clipboard and a pencil with one of those strings on it.

Zane stepped away from the door to let me move up, but I got my first look in the little plastic window of the box. Yellow roses. I stopped moving forward and tried to smile. "You'll need a tip. Wait there while I get my purse."

The man's eyes flicked around the room, watching Jamil move up to his left and Louie to his right. I stepped to one side trying not to be directly in front of him. He followed me with the box, with his hand under the box.

Jamil had the best angle. I made his name a question, "Jamil?"

"Yes" was all he said, but it was enough.

"I don't need a tip," the man said, "but I'm running behind. Could you just sign for it so I could get going?"

"Sure," I said. Jamil had picked up what was going on, but Zane was still looking puzzled. Ronnie was somewhere behind me. I didn't dare look for her, but I moved just a little more off-line and the man followed me with the hand I couldn't see, with the hand that Jamil had confirmed had a gun in it.

I was almost even with Louie. He'd stopped moving, waiting for me to come to him. He'd figured it out, too. Great, now what?

It was Ronnie who decided it. "Drop the gun, or I drop you." Her voice confident—certain. I spared a glance to see her standing feet apart, Browning in a two-handed grip pointed at the man in the doorway.

Jamil yelled, "Anita!"

I turned and pointed the Firestar in one movement. The man was already raising the hand and the box. I got a glimpse of the gun. He ignored Ronnie completely, pointing the gun at me. If he'd just fired from his hip, he'd have had time for one shot, but he tried for a better shooting stance and that was that.

Zane finally reacted, when what he should have done was stay out of the way, which just goes to show that super strength and super speed are not enough. You got to know what to do with it. He slapped the box and clipboard out of the man's hand, making his first shot ring into the floor.

Ronnie's first shot went wide into the doorjamb. Zane was blocking my line of fire. I watched the gun come back up, pointed towards Ronnie this time.

Zane grabbed for the gun, and the gun went off twice more. Zane's body jerked, falling in slow motion to the floor. I had the gun pointed so that when Zane's body cleared the way, I was ready. Ronnie's second shot took the man in the shoulder, pushing him backwards. He fired at me, slumped in the doorway. His bullet went wide. Mine didn't.

Blood blossomed on his chest. He stared at me, eyes wide and almost puzzled, as if he didn't understand what was happening to him. Even with that first touch of death filling his eyes, he started to raise the gun, trying for one last shot.

Two shots went off like thunderous echoes. My shot took him in the chest. Ronnie's shot took the top of his head off. Glazer Safety Rounds will do that to unprotected flesh.

I walked up to the man, gun pointed at him, ready to shoot him again, but it was over. His chest was a mass of blood, and his head looked like someone had scalped him and gone a little too deep. Heavier fluids than blood were leaking all over my porch step.

Ronnie came up beside me, gun pointed at him. She took one look and stumbled outside, nearly tripping over the dead man's legs. She fell into the grass, retching and crying.

Zane just lay there, bleeding. Louie was checking his pulse. "He's dying." He wiped the blood on his T-shirt and went out into the sunlight to take care of Ronnie.

I stared down at Zane's pale chest. One bullet had taken him low in the lungs. Red bubbles filled the wound, making that horrible sound that sucking chest wounds make that says, without a medic or a doctor, the person is dead. Just a matter of when, not if.

Chapter 33

We'd called the ambulance and found that they weren't coming right away. Too many other emergencies ahead of us. It was Louie who pried the phone out of my hands and apologized to the nice operator.

Cherry ran to the kitchen. I could hear her opening and shutting drawers, cabinets banging.

I walked into the kitchen.

She was standing in the middle of the room with a drawer pulled all the way out in one hand. Her eyes were almost wild. Before I could say anything, she said, "I need a Ziploc bag, masking tape, and scissors."

I didn't ask stupid questions. I opened the small drawer beside the stove and handed her the tape and scissors. The Ziploc bags were one of the few things in the roomy pantry closet.

Cherry snatched them from my hands and headed for the living room. I had no idea what she had in mind, but she had the medical training. I didn't. If it would give Zane a few more minutes, then I was for it. The ambulance would come eventually. The trick was having him alive for it to matter.

As far as I could tell, she didn't use the scissors. She taped the bag over his chest, plastering it with tape except for one corner. It was very obviously meant to be left that way, but I had to ask. "Why is the one corner untaped?"

She answered without looking up from her patient. "The open corner lets him breathe, but when he sucks in air the bag collapses and seals the wound.

It's called an inclusive bandage." She sounded as if she was lecturing. I wondered, not for the first time, what Cherry was like outside the monster stuff. She was almost like two different people. I'd never meant anyone, monster or not, who seemed so divided.

"Will it keep him alive long enough for the ambulance to get here?" I asked.

She finally looked up at me—eyes very serious. "I hope so."

I nodded. It was better than I could have done. I was great at putting holes in people. Not so good at keeping them alive.

Richard brought a blanket and folded it over Zane's legs, letting Cherry take the upper part of the blanket to fix the way she wanted around the wound.

Richard was wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, his tanned skin beaded with water as if he hadn't even taken time to dry off. The towel clung in a smooth tight line to his butt as he folded the quilt over Zane. His thick hair hung in heavy strands, so wet that water trickled from it in fine lines down his back.

He stood up, and the towel flashed a lot of thigh.

"I have larger towels," I said.

He frowned at me. "I heard gunshots. I wasn't really worried about the size of the towel."

I nodded. "You're right. Sorry." My anger with Richard seemed to shrink in direct proportion to his clothes. If he really wanted to win the war, all he had to do was strip. I'd have put up a white flag and applauded. Embarrassing, but almost true.

He ran his hand through his hair, smoothing it back from his face and squeezing out the excess water. That small movement showed his arms and chest to wonderful advantage. He arched his back just a little, which stretched the rest of his body in one long muscled line. It was the back arch that did it. I knew he was showing his body off on purpose. He'd always seemed unconscious of the effect his body had on me until now. Now, staring into his angry eyes, I knew he'd shown me his body very deliberately. His way of saying, without words, see what you passed on, see what you lost. If it had just been the great body I'd lost out on, it wouldn't have hurt so much.

I missed Sunday afternoons watching old musicals. Saturday hiking through the woods, bird-watching, or entire weekends of rafting on the Meramec. I missed hearing about his day at school. I missed him. The body was just a very nice bonus. I wasn't sure there were enough roses in the world to make me forget what Richard had almost been to me.

He stalked away towards the stairs and his interrupted shower. If I'd been as strong of will as I liked to think, I wouldn't have watched him walk away. I had a sudden vivid image of licking water off his chest and jerking that tiny white towel away. The image was clear enough that I had to turn away and take a few deep breaths. He wasn't mine anymore. Maybe he never had been.

"I don't mean to interrupt the stud watch," Jamil said, "but who is the dead guy, and why did he try to kill you?"

If I thought I'd been embarrassed before, I was wrong. The fact that I'd let the shit with Richard distract me from the much more vital question of the would-be murderer just proved that I wasn't up on my game. It was too careless for words. The sort of carelessness that can get you killed.

"I don't know him," I said.

Louie lifted the sheet that someone had thrown over him. "I don't recognize him either."

"Please," Ronnie said. She was looking somewhere between grey and green again.

Louie let the sheet fall back, but it was flatter somehow and clung to the top of his head. The blood soaked up the cotton like oil to a wick.

Ronnie made a small sound and ran for the bathroom.

Louie watched her run out. I watched him watch her. He caught me looking and said, "She's killed people before." The implied "why is this worse?" went unsaid.

"Once before," I said.

He stood up. "Did she react like this?"

I shook my head. "I think it was the sight of his brains leaking all over the porch that did it."

Gwen walked into the room. "A lot of people who can take the sight of blood don't like to see other things leaking out."

"Thank you, Ms. Therapist," Jamil said.

She turned to him like a small blond storm, her otherworldly energy spiraling through the room. "You are a homophobic bastard."

I raised eyebrows. "I miss something?"

"Jamil is one of those men who believes that every lesbian is just a heterosexual woman waiting for the right man. He was persistent enough to me that Sylvie kicked his ass."

"Such language from a trained therapist," Jason said. He'd rushed up from the basement where the vampires were stored for the day when the shooting started. When the excitement died down, he'd gone back to check on everybody.

"All quiet down below?" I asked.

He gave me that grin of his that managed to be both mischievous and just a touch evil. "Quiet as a tomb."

I groaned because he expected it. But the smile left my face before it left his. "Could it be the council?" I asked.

"Could what be the council?" Louie asked.

"Whoever sent the hit man," I said.

"Do you really think he was a hit man?" Jamil asked.

"You mean was he a professional assassin?"

Jamil nodded.

"No," I said.

"Why wasn't he a professional?" Gwen asked.

"Not good enough," I said.

"Maybe he was a virgin," Jamil said.

"You mean a first timer?"

"Yes."

"Maybe." I glanced at the sheet-covered lump. "He picked the wrong career."

"If it had been some suburban housewife or an investment banker, he'd have done okay," Jamil said.

"Sounds like you know."

He shrugged. "I've been an enforcer since I was fifteen. My threat's not worth anything unless I'm willing to kill."

"How does Richard feel about that?" I asked.

Jamil shrugged again. "Richard's different, but if he wasn't, then I'd be dead. He'd have killed me right after he killed Marcus. It's standard op for a new Ulfric to kill the old leader's enforcers."

"I wanted you dead."

He smiled and it was tight, but not altogether unpleasant. "I know what you wanted. You're closer to being one of us than he is sometimes."

"I just don't have a lot of illusions, Jamil. That's all."

"You think Richard's morality is an illusion?"

"He nearly crushed your throat earlier today. What do you think?"

"I think he also healed me. Marcus and Raina couldn't have done that."

"Would they have hurt you that badly by accident?" I asked.

He smiled, a quick baring of teeth. "If Raina had gone for my throat, it wouldn't have been by accident."

"On a whim," Gwen said, "but not by accident."

The werewolves all had a moment of perfect understanding. None of them mourned Raina, not even Jamil, who had sort of been on her side.

I shook my head. "I just don't think the council would send out some amateur with a gun. They've got enough daytime muscle to do the job without hiring outsiders."

"Then who?" Jamil asked.

I shook my head again. "I wish I knew."

Ronnie came back into the living room. We all watched her as she made her shaky way back to the couch. She sat down, eyes red-rimmed from crying and other things. Louie brought her a glass of water. She sipped it very slowly and looked at me. I expected her to talk about the dead man. Maybe to accuse me of being a horrible friend. But she'd decided to ignore the dead body and work on the live ones.

"If you had slept with Richard when you first started dating, all this pain could have been avoided."

"You're so sure of that," I said. I let Ronnie change the subject. She needed something else to concentrate on. I'd have preferred the topic to be something besides my love life, but . . . I owed her.

"Yes," she said, "the way you look at him, Anita. The way he looks at you when he's not being cruel. Yeah, I'm sure."

Part of me agreed with her, part of me. . . "There'd still be Jean-Claude."

She made an impatient sound. "I know you. If you'd had sex with Richard first, you still wouldn't be sleeping with that damn vampire. You think sex is a commitment."

I sighed. We'd had this talk before. "Sex should mean something, Ronnie."

"I agree," she said. "But if I had your scruples, I'd still just be holding hands with Louie. We're having a wonderful time."

"But where is it going?"

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the back of the couch. "Anna, you make your life harder than it has to be." She opened her eyes and moved just her head so she could look at me and still slump. "Why can't a relationship just be what it is? Why does everything with you have to be so damn serious?"

I folded my arms over my stomach and stared at her. If I thought I was going to stare her down, I was wrong. I looked away first. "It is serious or should be."

"Why?" she said.

I was finally reduced to shrugging. If I hadn't been having sex with a vampire out of wedlock, I'd have had some moral high ground to stand on. As it was, I had nothing to fight back with. I'd been virtuous for so long, but when I lost it, I lost it big time. From celibacy to fucking the undead. If I'd still been Catholic, it would have been enough to get me excommunicated. Of course, being an Animator was enough to get me excommunicated. Lucky for me I was Protestant.

"You want some advice from your Auntie Ronnie?"

That made me smile, a small smile, but it was better than nothing. "What advice?"

"Go upstairs and join that man in the shower."

I looked at her, suitably scandalized. The fact that I'd been pretty much fantasizing about doing just that not ten minutes ago only made it more embarrassing. "You saw him in the kitchen, Ronnie. I don't think he's in a co-ed shower sort of mood."

A look came into her eyes that suddenly made me feel young or maybe naive. "You strip off and surprise him, and he won't kick you out. You don't get that kind of anger without heat. He wants you as badly as you want him. Just give into it, girlfriend."

I shook my head.

She sighed. "Why not?"

"A thousand things, but mainly, Jean-Claude."

"Dump him," she said.

I laughed. "Yeah, right."

"Is he really that good? So good that you couldn't give him up?"

I thought about that for a minute and didn't know what to say. It finally boiled down to one thing, and I said it out loud. "I'm not sure there are enough white roses in the world to make me forget Richard." I held up a hand before she could interrupt. "But I'm not sure there are enough cozy afternoons in all eternity to make me forget Jean-Claude."

She sat up straight on the couch, staring at me. A look almost of sorrow filled her eyes. "You mean that, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said.

Ronnie shook her head. "Jesus, Anita, you are screwed."

That made me laugh, because she was right. It was either cry or laugh about it, and Richard had gotten all the tears he was getting from me for one day.

Chapter 34

The phone rang, and I jumped. Now that the danger was over, I could be jumpy. I went into the kitchen and picked up the phone. Before I could even answer, I heard Dolph's voice. "Anita, you okay?"

"The police grapevine is even faster than I thought," I said.

"What are you talking about?"

I told him what I'd told the 911 operator.

"I didn't know," Dolph said.

"Then why did you want to know if I was okay?"

"Nearly every vampire-owned business or house in the city was hit about the same time this morning. They fire-bombed the Church of Eternal Life, and we've had one-on-one hits on non-vamps all over the city."

Fear rushed through me like fine champagne, useless adrenaline with nowhere to go. I had a lot of friends that were undead, not just Jean-Claude.

"Dead Dave's, has it been hit?"

"I know Dave resents being kicked off the force after he . . . died, but we take care of our own. His bar's got a uniformed guard until we find out what the hell is going on. We got the arsonist before he could do more than smoke up an outside wall."

I knew that only the bad vamps were at the Circus, but Dolph didn't. He might find it strange if I didn't ask. "The Circus?"

"They defended themselves against a couple of arsonists. Why didn't you ask about the love of your life, first, Anita? Isn't he home?"

Dolph asked like he already knew, which could mean he knew or it could mean he was fishing. But I was pretty sure the council flunkies wouldn't have told the whole truth. Half-truth, it was. "Jean-Claude stayed over last night."

The silence this time was even thicker than before. I let it build into something thick and unpleasant enough to choke on. I don't know how long we listened to each other breathe, but it was Dolph who broke first. "Lucky for him. Did you know this was coming?"

That caught me off guard. If he thought I'd held out on something this big, no wonder he was pissed at me. "No, Dolph, I swear I had no idea."

"Did your boyfriend?"

I thought about that for a second. "I don't think so, but I'll ask him when he gets up."

"Don't you mean when he rises from the dead?"

"Yeah, Dolph," I said, "that's what I mean."

"You think he could have known about all this shit and not told you?"

"Probably not, but he has his moments."

"Yet you still date him . . . I just don't understand that, Anita."

"If I could explain it so that it made sense to you, Dolph, I would, but I can't."

He sighed. "You got any ideas why someone's hitting all the monsters today?"

"You mean, why monsters or why this date?" I asked.

"Either," he said.

"You've got some suspects in custody, right?"

"Yes."

"They haven't talked."

"Only to ask for a lawyer. A lot of them ended up dead like yours."

"Humans Against Vampires, or Humans First, maybe," I said.

"Would either of them hit shifters?"

My stomach clenched into a nice tight knot. "What do you mean?"

"A man walked into a bar in the loop with a submachine gun with silver ammo."

For a minute I thought Dolph meant the Lunatic Cafe, Raina's old restaurant, but it wasn't an openly lycanthrope hangout. I tried to think what was up there that was openly shifter. "The Leather Den?" I made it a question.

"Yeah," he said.

The Leather Den was the only bar in the country, to my knowledge, that was a hangout for sadomasochistic gay men who happened to be shapeshifters. It was a triple threat to any hatemonger. "Geez, Dolph, if it wasn't happening with everything else, I'd say it could be almost any right-wing fruitcake. Did you get the machine gunner alive?"

"Nope," Dolph said. "The survivors ate him."

"Bet they didn't," I said.

"They used teeth to kill him, Anita. That's eating him in my book."

I'd seen shapeshifters eat people, not just attack them, but since most of those were illegal kills, i.e. murders, I let Dolph win the fight. He was still wrong, but hard to show him my proof without getting people in trouble.

"Whatever you say, Dolph."

He was quiet for long enough that I had to say, "You still there?"

"Why do I think you're holding back on me, Anita?"

"Would I do that?"

"In a heartbeat," he said.

His asking about the date had triggered some vague memory. "There is something about today's date."

"What is it?" he asked.

"I don't know—something. Do you need me to come in?"

"Since almost all this shit is preternatural-related, every uniform and his K9 is asking for us. So yeah, we need everybody in the field today. They've been hitting the monster isolation wards of most of the major hospitals."

"Jesus, Stephen," I said.

"He's all right, they all are," Dolph said. "A guy with a 9mm tried for them. The cop at the door got hit."

"He all right?" I asked.

"He'll live." Dolph didn't sound happy, and it wasn't just the hitter or a wounded cop.

"What happened to the shooter?" I asked.

He laughed, an abrupt, harsh sound. "One of Stephen's 'cousins' threw him up against a wall so hard, his skull cracked. Nurses say the shooter was about to put a round right between the uniform's eyes when he was . . . stopped."

"So Stephen's cousin saved the cop's life," I said.

"Yeah," Dolph said.

"You don't sound happy about that."

"Leave it alone, Anita."

"Sorry. What do you want me to do?"

"The detective in charge is Padgett. He's a good cop."

"No small praise coming from you," I said. "Why do I hear a 'but' coming?"

"But," Dolph said, "he gets freaked around the monsters. Someone needs to go down there and hold his hand so he doesn't get carried away with the murderous shapeshifters."

"So I'm a babysitter?"

"It's your party, Anita. I can send someone else. I thought you'd want this one."

"I do, and thanks."

"Don't stay all day, Anita. Make it as quick as you can. Pete McKinnon just called me to ask if he could borrow you."

"Was there another arson?"

"Yes, but it wasn't his firebug. I told you they bombed the Church of Eternal Life."

"Yeah."

"Malcolm is in there," he said.

"Shit," I said. Malcolm was the undead Billy Graham, founder of the fastest-growing denomination in the country. It was the vampire church, but humans could join. In fact, they were encouraged. Though how long they stayed human was debatable.

"I'm surprised his daytime retreat was that obvious."

"What do you mean?"

"Most master vamps spend a lot of time and energy hiding their daytime address so that shit like this doesn't happen to them. Is he dead?"

"You are amusing as hell today, Anita."

"You know what I mean," I said.

"No one knows. McKinnon's going to call you with more details. Hospital first, then his scene. When you get done there call me. I'll figure out where to send you next."

"Have you called Larry?"

"You think he's up to this much solo action?"

I thought about that for a second. "He knows his preternatural stuff."

Dolph said, "I hear a 'but' coming."

I laughed. "We have worked together too damn long. Yeah, but he's not a shooter. And I don't think that's going to change."

"A lot of good cops aren't shooters, Anita."

"Cops can go twenty-five years and never clear leather. Vampire executioners don't have that luxury. We go in planning to kill things. The things we're planning to kill know that."

"If all you have is a hammer, Anita, every problem begins to look like a nail."

"I read Massad Ayoob, too, Dolph. I don't use my gun as the only solution."

"Sure, Anita. I'll call Larry."

I wanted to say, "don't get him killed," but I didn't. Dolph wouldn't get him killed on purpose, and Larry was a grownup. He'd earned the right to take his chances like everyone else. But it hurt something inside of me to know he'd be out there today without me as backup. They call it cutting the apron strings. It feels more like amputating body parts.

I suddenly remembered why today's date was important. "The Day of Cleansing," I said.

"What?" Dolph said.

"The history books call it the Day of Cleansing. The vampires call it the Inferno. Two hundred years ago the Church joined forces with the military in Germany, England, oh, hell, almost every European country except France—and burned out every vampire or suspected vampire sympathizer in a single day. The destruction was complete and a lot of innocent people went up in the flames. But the fire accomplished their goal, a lot fewer vampires in Europe."

"Why didn't France join with everyone?"

"Some historians think the King of France had a vampire mistress. The French Revolutionaries put out propaganda that the nobility were all vampires at one point, which wasn't true of course. Some say that's why the guillotine was so popular. It kills both the living and the undead."

Somewhere during the mini-lecture I realized that I could ask Jean-Claude. If he missed the French Revolution, it wasn't by much. For all I knew, he'd fled the Revolution by coming to this country. Why hadn't I thought to ask? Because it still freaked me out that the man I was sleeping with was nearly three hundred years older than I was. Talk about a generation gap. So sue me if I tried to be as normal in some areas as possible. Asking my lover about events that happened when George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were still alive was definitely not normal.

"Anita, are you all right?"

"Sorry, Dolph, I was . . . thinking."

"Do I want to know about what?"

"Probably not," I said.

He let it go. Not more than a handful of months ago Dolph would have pushed until he thought I'd told him everything about everything. But if we were going to stay co-workers, let alone friends, some things were best left unsaid. Our relationship couldn't survive full disclosure. It never had, but I don't think Dolph understood that until recently.

"Day of Cleansing, okay."

"If you talk to any vampires, don't call it that. Call it the Inferno. The other phrase is like calling the Jewish Holocaust a racial cleansing."

"You've made your point," he said. "Remember while you're out there doing police work that you're still on someone's hit parade."

"Gee, Dolph, you do love me."

"Don't push it," he said.

"Watch your own back, Dolph. Anything happens to you, Zerbrowski's in charge."

Dolph's deep laughter was the last thing I heard before the phone clicked dead. I don't think in the nearly five years I'd known Dolph that he'd ever said goodbye on the phone.

The phone rang as soon as I put it down. It was Pete McKinnon. "Hi, Pete. Just got off the phone with Dolph. He told me you wanted me down at the main branch of the Church."

"He tell you why?"

"Something about Malcolm."

"We've got nearly every human member of his Church screaming for us to make sure their big cheese didn't get toasted. But we opened the floor up to check on some vamps on the west side and they weren't in coffins. Two of them went up in smoke. If we let Malcolm get cooked, trying to save him . . . Let's just say I don't want to do the paper work."

"What do you want me to do?" I seemed to be asking that a lot lately.

"We need to know if it's safe to leave him alone until he can rise on his own, or if we need to figure out how to rescue him. Vampires can't drown, can they?"

I thought the last was a strange question. "Except for holy water, vamps don't have any problem with water."

"Even running water?" he asked.

"You've been doing your homework. I'm impressed," I said.

"I'm big into self-improvement. What about running water?"

"To my knowledge, water isn't a deterrent, running or otherwise. Why do you ask?"

"You've never been to a building after a fire, have you?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Unless the basement is airtight, it'll be full of water. A lot of water."

Could vampires drown? It was a good question. I wasn't sure. Maybe they could, and that was why some of the folklore talked about running water. Or

maybe it was like saying that vampires could shapechange, not true at all. "They don't always breathe, so I don't think they'd drown. I mean, if a vampire woke with his coffin underwater, I think they could just not breathe and get out of the water. But, truthfully, I'm not a hundred percent sure."

"Can you tell if he's okay without going down there?"

"Truth is, I'm not sure. I've never tried anything like that."

"Will you try?"

I nodded, realized he couldn't see it, and said, "Sure, but you're second on my list, not first."

"All right, but hurry. The media is all over this thing. Between them and the Church members, we are not having a good time."

"Ask them if Malcolm is the only vamp down there. Ask them if the basement is steel-reinforced."

"Why would it be?"

"A lot of the basements where vamps sleep have concrete ceilings reinforced with steel beams. The church's basement doesn't have any windows, so it could mean that the lower area was specially designed with vamps in mind. I think you'd need to know that even if you decide to open the floor up."

"We do."

"Take some of the bitching faithful aside and ask them questions. You need to know the answers either way, and it'll at least give them the illusion that something's happening until I can get there."

"That is the best idea I've heard in two hours."

"Thanks. I'll be there as soon as I can, promise." I had a thought. "Wait, Pete. Does Malcolm have a human servant?"

"A lot of the people here have vampire bites."

"No," I said. "I mean a true human servant."

"I thought that was just a human with one or two vampire bites."

"So did I once," I said. "A human with just a couple of bites is what the vamps call a Renfield, as in the character from the novel *Dracula*." I'd asked Jean-Claude what they called them before the book came out. He'd said, "slaves." Ask a silly question.

"What's a human servant, then?" Pete asked. It reminded me of Dolph.

"A human who's bound to the vampire by something called marks. It's sort of mystical and magical shit, but it gives the servant and the vamp a tie that we could use to see if Malcolm is okay."

"Can any vampire have a servant?"

"No, only a master vampire, and not even all of them. I've never heard of Malcolm having one, but he could if he wanted to. Ask the faithful, though I think if he had one, the servant would be yelling louder than the rest. It's still worth a shot. If you solve it before I get there, call. Dolph says there's plenty of other shit to go around."

"He's not kidding. The city is going nuts. So far we've managed to contain the fires to just a few buildings, but if the crazies keep this up, it's going to get out of hand. There's no telling how much of the city could go up."

"We need to know who's behind this," I said.

"Yes, we do," Pete said. "Get here as soon as you can." He sounded so sure I could help. I wished I was as certain. I wasn't sure I could do shit in broad daylight. I'd been told once that the only reason I couldn't raise the dead at high noon was that I thought I couldn't. I was about to put it to the test. I still didn't think I could do it. Doubt is the greatest enemy of any magic or psychic ability. Self-doubt is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Great. I won't lie. I'm relieved that somebody with vampire experience is going to be on-site. The cops are starting to get some training on how to handle the preternatural, but no one trains firemen for this kind of shit."

It had never occurred to me that firemen have to deal with the monsters almost as much as the police. They don't hunt them down, but they enter their houses. That can be just as dangerous, depending on if the monster in question realizes you're there to help or not.

"I'll be there, Pete."

"We'll be waiting. See ya."

"Bye, Pete."

We hung up. I went for my shoulder holster and a different shirt. The shoulder holster would chafe with just a tank top on.

Chapter 35

I changed into a navy polo shirt and didn't run into Richard. The water had stopped running, but he hadn't come out. I did not want to see him again, especially not half naked. I wanted away from him. Lucky for me the shit had hit the fan, professionally speaking. Police work, lots of it, maybe enough to keep me out of the house all day. Fine with me. The ambulance arrived, and Zane was loaded in. Cherry went with him. I felt guilty not going with him, but she could do more good than I could. The police had still not shown up for the corpse. I hated leaving the others to talk to the cops without me, but I had to go. The fact that I was relieved to go caused me a few moments of guilt, but not much.

Ronnie had gone back to sitting on the couch. She asked just before I walked out the door, "Am I going to jail tonight?"

I knelt in front of her, taking her strangely cold hands in mine. "Ronnie, you didn't kill him."

"I shot the top of his head off. What kind of ammo do you have in that gun of yours anyway?"

"I shot him twice in the chest. There isn't enough left of his heart to scrape up with a spoon," I said.

She closed her eyes. "His brains are leaking out all over the porch. Don't tell me that wouldn't have killed him all by itself."

I sighed and patted her hands. "Please, Ronnie, you did what you had to do. Maybe it will take a medical examiner to decide which bullet did him in, but when the cops get here, make sure you don't take credit."

"I've been here before, Anita, remember. I know what to say and what not to say." She looked at me and it wasn't an entirely friendly look.

I released her hands and stood. "I'm sorry, Ronnie."

"I've only shot two people and both times I was with you."

"Both times you did it to save my life," I said.

She looked up at me with bleak eyes. "I know."

I touched her face and wanted to pat her on the head or something, comfort her the way you'd comfort a child, but she wasn't a child. "I am sorry this happened, Ronnie. Truly, but what else could you have done?"

"Nothing," she said, "and that makes me wonder if I'm in the right business."

Something inside of me tightened. "Don't you mean, wondering if you have the right friends? This didn't happen because of your business. It happened because of mine."

She gripped my hand tight. "Best friends, Anita, forever."

"Thanks, Ronnie, more than you'll ever know. I don't think I'd ever get over losing you as a friend, but don't decide to stay with me because of loyalty. Think about it, Ronnie, really think about it. My life doesn't seem to be getting any safer. If anything, it's getting more dangerous. You might want to think about whether you want to be in the line of fire." Just making the offer made my eyes burn. I squeezed her hand and turned away before she could see that the scourge of vampirekind was tearing up.

She didn't call me back and profess undying friendship. I'd half wanted her to, but the other half was glad she was really thinking about it. If Ronnie got herself killed because of me, I just might pull the guilt down over my ears and crawl into a hole. I caught Richard watching me from the doorway below the stairs. Maybe he and I could share a hole together. That'd be punishment enough.

"What's happened now?" he asked. He'd dried his hair into a shining mass of waves that slid over the top of his shoulders as he moved into the room. He'd put his jeans back on and found a shirt that fit him. It was a large T-shirt with a caricature of Arthur Conan Doyle on it. I used it for sleeping. It was a little snug on Richard through the shoulders and chest. Not small, mind you, just tight. On me the shirt hung nearly to my knees.

"See you found the blow dryer and the T-shirt drawer. Help yourself," I said.

"Answer my question," he said.

"Ask Jamil. He's got all the details."

"I asked you," Richard said.

"I don't have time to stand here and tell it twice. I've got to go to work."

"Police or vampire?"

"You used to ask that because you worried more if I was out on a vampire execution. You were always relieved if it was just police work. Why the hell do you want to know now, Richard? What do you care?" I walked out without waiting for an answer.

I had to step over the dead man on my porch. I hoped the cops got there soon. It was a typical July day in St. Louis—hot and claustrophobically humid. The body would start to smell if it didn't get carried away soon. Just another of the many joys of summer.

My Jeep was in the garage, where it should have been. I'd let Jean-Claude use it to ferry everyone here. Though he hadn't driven. I'd never met an older vamp that drove. The older ones tended to be a bit technophobic. I was actually backing out of the garage when I saw Richard in the rearview mirror. He looked angry. I thought very seriously about just continuing out. He'd move. But just in case he'd be stupid enough not to, I waited for him to come up to the driver's-side window.

I pressed the button and the window whirred down like it was supposed to. "What?" I asked. I let that one word be as hostile as his eyes.

"Three of my pack in danger. Three of my people may be under arrest, and you didn't tell me."

"I'm taking care of it, Richard."

"It's my job to take care of my wolves."

"You want to go down there in person and announce that you're their Ulfric? You can't even go down there and be their friend because that might jeopardize your precious secret."

He gripped the edge of the window hard enough for his fingers to grow pale. "Most pack leaders have secret identities, Anita. You know that."

"Raina was your public alpha, Richard. She would have gone down to the hospital for them. But she's dead. You can't go. Who's left?"

Something popped in the door.

"I will be pissed if you break my car," I said.

He moved his hands slowly as if he needed something to hold just to keep his hands busy. "Don't get too comfortable as lupa, Anita. I am going to replace you."

We stared at each other from less than a foot away. Once he'd have come out to the car for one last goodbye kiss. Now it was one last fight.

"Fine, but until you find someone else, I'm all you've got. Now I've got to go and see if I can keep our wolves out of jail."

"They wouldn't be in police custody if you hadn't put them in harm's way."

He had me there. "If I hadn't put guards on Stephen and Nathaniel, they'd be dead right now." I shook my head and started easing the Jeep back. Richard stepped out of the way so I could do it without risking his toes.

He stood there and watched me drive away. If he'd asked, I would have found him a shirt, but it wouldn't have been that one. One, it was a favorite; two, it reminded me of a particular weekend. There'd been a Sherlock Holmes movie marathon, starring Basil Rathbone. Not my favorite, mainly because they make Dr. Watson out to be a buffoon, but still good. I wore the shirt that

weekend even though it was too big to wear outside the house. The fashion police didn't get me, but Richard loved the shirt. Had he just grabbed a shirt and not even remembered? Or had he worn it to remind me of what I'd given up? I think I preferred it as a vindictive gesture. If he could wear the shirt and not remember that weekend, I didn't want to know. We'd managed to spill popcorn all over me and the couch. Richard wouldn't let me get up and dust myself off. He'd insisted on cleaning me up himself. Cleaning up seemed to involve no hands at all and a lot of mouth. If the memory meant nothing to him, then maybe we'd never been in love. Maybe it had all been lust and I just confused the two. God, I hoped not.

Chapter 36

Another crime scene, another show. At least, the body had been removed. That was an improvement from my house. I'd left three werewolves behind to guard Stephen and Nathaniel. Two of those werewolves were in the hallway. Lorraine was still dressed like the ideal second-grade school teacher except for the handcuffs, which didn't seem to match the outfit. She was sitting in one of those straight-backed chairs that all hospitals seem to have. This one was in a horrid orange color which matched none of the soft pastel walls. She was sobbing with her hands covering her face. Her wrists looked small in the handcuffs. Teddy knelt beside her like a small weightlifting mountain, patting her thin back.

There was a uniformed cop on either side of them, at attention. One of the uniforms had his hand sort of casually resting on the butt of his gun. The strap that held the gun in the holster was already unsnapped. It pissed me off.

I walked up to the cop in question, way too close, invading the hell out of his personal space. "Better snap up the weapon there, Officer, before someone takes it away from you."

He blinked pale eyes at me. "Ma'am?"

"Use your holster the way it's meant to be used or get away from these people."

"What's the problem here. Murdock?" A tall, lanky man with a headful of dark curls walked towards us. His suit hung so loose on his thin body that it looked borrowed. His face was taken up by a huge pair of blue eyes. Except for the height, he looked like a twelve-year-old who had borrowed his daddy's clothes.

"I don't know, sir," Murdock said, eyes front. I was betting that he'd been in the military or wanted to be. He just had that taste to him of a wannabe.

The tall man turned to me. "What seems to be the problem, Detective . . .?" He left a long blank space for me to put a name in.

"Blake, Anita Blake. I'm with the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team."

He held out a large-knuckled hand to me. He pumped my hand a little too vigorously but he didn't squeeze hard. He wasn't trying to test me, just glad to see me. His touch made my skin tingle. He was psychic. A first among the police I'd met, except for a witch they'd hired on purpose.

"You must be Detective Padgett," I said.

He nodded and dropped my hand, smiling wonderfully. Smiling made him look even younger. If he hadn't been nearly Dolph's height, he'd have had real trouble with being authoritative. But a lot of people mistake height for in charge. I've struggled against the opposite reaction most of my life.

He put a hand across my shoulders and led me away from the werewolves. I didn't much care for the hand on my shoulders. If I'd been a guy, he wouldn't have done it. I let him herd me to one side, then stepped out of the circle of his arm. Didn't make a point of it, just did it. Who says I haven't mellowed?

"Fill me in," I said.

He did. It was pretty much what Dolph had told me. The only addition was that it had been Lorraine who slammed the man into the wall, which explained her tears. She probably thought she'd be going to jail. I couldn't promise she wouldn't be. If she'd been a human female that had just saved a policeman's life by inadvertently killing a bad guy, she wouldn't go to jail, not today. But she wasn't human, and the law isn't even-handed, or blind, no matter what we'd like to believe.

"Let me test my understanding here," I said. "The officer on the door was down. The shooter had the gun pointed at the officer's head and was about to deliver the coup de grâce when the woman dived into him. Her momentum carried them both back into the far wall, where he hit his head. That about right?"

Padgett glanced at his notes. "Yeah, that's about right."

"Why is she in handcuffs?"

His eyes widened, and he gave me his best little boy smile. Detective Padgett was a charmer. Didn't matter that he looked like a scarecrow, he was accustomed to getting by on charm. At least with women. I was betting his act had worked even less well on Lorraine.

"She's a lycanthrope," he said smiling, as if that explained it all.

"She tell you that?" I asked.

He looked startled. "No."

"You assumed she was a shapeshifter because why?"

The smile wilted, replaced by a frown that made him look petulant rather than angry. "She threw a man into a wall hard enough to crack his skull."

"Little old ladies lift cars off their grandchildren. Does that make them lycanthropes?"

"No, but . . ." His face closed down, defensive.

"I'm told you don't like shapeshifters much, Padgett."

"How I feel personally doesn't interfere with my job."

I laughed, and it startled him. "Padgett, how we feel personally always affects our job. I came here pissed because I'd had a fight with an ex-boyfriend, so I got in Murdock's face about his holster. Why don't you like lycanthropes, Padgett?"

"They give me the creeps, okay."

I had an idea. "Literally?" I asked.

"What do you mean, literally?"

"Does being around shapeshifters actually make your skin creep?"

He glanced up towards where the other cops were clustered. He bent forward and lowered his voice, and I knew I was right. "It's like bugs crawling on my skin every time I'm around them." He didn't look twelve now. The fear and the loathing in his face showed lines that put him closer to thirty than twenty.

"You're feeling their energy, their aura."

He jerked back from me. "The hell I am."

"Look, Padgett, I knew you were psychic the second I shook your hand."

"You're full of shit," he said. He was scared, scared of himself.

"Dolph's put the word out for any cops that have talent in this area. Why didn't you apply?"

"I am not a freak," he said.

"Ah, the truth comes out. You're not afraid of lycanthropes. You're afraid of you."

He raised a large fist, not to hit me, but just somewhere for his anger to go, "You don't know anything about me."

"They make my skin crawl, too, Padgett."

That calmed him, a little. "How can you stand to be near them?"

I shrugged. "You get used to it."

He shook his head, almost shivering. "I'd never get used to this."

"They aren't doing it on purpose, Detective. Some shapeshifters are better at hiding what they are than others, but all of them give off more energy during strong emotions. The more you questioned them, the more distressed they got, the more energy they gave off, and the creepier you felt."

"I had the woman in a room alone and I thought my skin was going to crawl off my body."

"Wait, alone? Did you Mirandize her?"

He nodded.

"Did she tell you anything?"

He shook his head. "Not a damn word."

"What about the others?"

"The men didn't do anything."

"Are they free to go?"

"The big one won't leave her and the other one is in the room with the two injured ones. Says he can't leave them unguarded. I told him that we could take care of it. He said, apparently not."

I agreed with Kevin. "You've got witnesses that say she didn't mean to hurt the man. He isn't even dead yet. Why is she still here in handcuffs?"

"She has already killed one man today. I think that's enough," he said.

"Two things, Detective. First, she could snap those cuffs any time she wanted to. Second, if she were human, you'd have let her go home by now."

"That's not true," he said.

I looked at him. He tried to stare me down, but he flinched first. He said, looking at a spot above my head, "The man is dying. If I let her go, she could skip out."

"Skip out on what? She saw a cop about to get his head blown off and jumped an armed man to save him. She didn't cut him up. She pushed him into a wall. Trust me, Detective, if she'd meant to kill him, it would have been a more thorough job. She risked her life to save one of your own."

"She didn't risk anything. Bullets don't hurt lycanthropes."

"Silver bullets do. They work just like real ammo on a human. Every hit that they've investigated today had silver ammo, Padgett. Lorraine could have been killed, but she didn't hesitate. If she had, we'd have a dead cop on our hands. How many citizens would risk their lives to save a cop?"

He finally looked at me, eyes so angry they'd darkened two shades of blue. "You've made your point."

"Have I?"

He nodded. "Yes." He walked back down towards the waiting uniforms and the sobbing werewolf. "Uncuff her."

Murdock said, "Sir?"

"Do it, Murdock," Padgett said.

He didn't question it again, just knelt in front of Lorraine and unlocked the cuffs. His partner on the other side unsnapped his holster and took two big steps back. I let it go. We were winning, no need to fight.

As soon as her hands were free, Lorraine threw herself at me. I knew she didn't mean any harm, but I could hear the leather clearing down the hallway. I raised my voice and said, "It's okay, guys. She's okay. Ease down."

Lorraine was on her knees, arms locked around my legs, sobbing full out, loud and messy. I held a hand pointed palm out to either end of the hallway. Teddy stood and half the guns swiveled to cover him. We were on the verge of having things go really wrong.

"Padgett, get hold of your men." I spared a glance back at him and found his gun out, pointed at Teddy. Shit.

"Padgett, put up your gun and they'll follow your lead."

"Have him sit down," Padgett said, voice even and very serious.

"Teddy," I said softly, "sit back down, very slowly, no sudden moves."

"I haven't done anything," he said.

"Doesn't matter, just do it, please."

He sat back down under the watchful eyes of half a dozen guns. He put his big hands on his knees, palms down showing he was unarmed. Like he'd had practice trying to look harmless.

"Now put your gun up, Detective," I said.

Padgett looked at me for a second. I thought he wasn't going to do it. I looked into those big blue eyes and saw something dangerous. A fear so deep

and wide that he needed to destroy the thing he feared. He put the gun up, but that one moment of nakedness in his eyes had been enough. I'd talk to Dolph and see if Padgett had any shapeshifter kills to his credit. I'd almost have bet that he did. Cleared of charges didn't always mean innocent.

I patted the top of Lorraine's head. "It's all right. Everything's all right." I had to get them out of here. The good guys were almost as big a threat as the bad ones.

She looked up at me, eyes puffy, nose running. Real crying is like real sex. If you really do it, it isn't pretty. "I didn't mean to hurt him," she whispered.

"I know." I glanced at the police up and down the hallway. Some of them avoided my eyes. I shook my head and helped her stand. "I'm taking them into Stephen and Nathaniel's room with me, Detective Padgett. Any objections?"

He just shook his head.

"Great. Come on, Teddy."

"I can stand up?" he asked.

I looked at Padgett. "You think you and your people can hold the Rambo routine?"

"If he behaves himself, sure." Padgett wasn't trying to be charming anymore. I think he was embarrassed about the show. I knew he was still angry, maybe at me, maybe at himself. I didn't care as long as he didn't start shooting.

"You got a uniform inside the room?" I asked.

He gave one curt nod.

"Is he as trigger-happy as the rest of you, or can I open the door without being shot at?"

Padgett strode to the door and knocked on it. "Smith, it's Padgett. Detective coming in." He opened the door with a flourish and ushered Lorraine and me in.

I looked at the young uniform seated just inside the door. Kevin was slumped down in a chair across from him, an unlit cigarette in the corner of his mouth. The werewolf looked at me, and one look was enough—not a happy camper. It wasn't just nicotine withdrawal either.

I half-pushed Lorraine into the room, then walked back to Teddy. I held my left hand out to him, and he took it. I helped him stand, though he didn't need the help. "Thank you," he said, and he didn't mean for helping him stand up.

"No problem," I said. I escorted him back to the room. Once they were both safely inside, I turned to Padgett.

"We need to talk. I'd prefer private if I could be guaranteed no one will get shot while I'm gone."

"You okay in here, Smith?" he asked.

The young cop said, "I'm fine. I like animals."

The look on Teddy's face was scary even to me. That otherworldly energy was rising like a warm, stinging tide. "If the nice policeman behaves himself, then so do the rest of you," I said.

Teddy stared right at me. "I know how to follow orders."

"Great, shall we find some place private, Detective Padgett?"

His breath was coming fast, almost a pant. He was feeling the rising energy, too. "We can talk right here. I'm not leaving one of my men alone with these things."

"I'm okay, boss," the young cop said.

"You're not afraid?" Padgett asked. It was a question that cops seldom ask each other. They ask, are you all right. They admit to being nervous. Never scared.

Officer Smith's eyes widened a little, but he shook his head. "I know Crossman. He's a good guy. She saved his life." Smith sat up a little straighter in his chair, said softly, "These aren't the bad guys."

A tic started in Padgett's cheek. He opened his mouth, closed it, then turned abruptly on his heel and left. The door slid shut behind him. We all stood in the suddenly thick silence.

Stephen said, "Anita." He held his hand out to me. His face was flawless, no scars, no marks of any kind. I took his hand and smiled.

"I know you guys heal fast, but it's still impressive. You looked pretty bad last time I saw you."

"I looked worse," a soft male voice said. Nathaniel was awake in the other bed. His long auburn hair hung like a shining curtain around his face, maybe longer than waist-length. I'd never seen a man with hair that long. I couldn't see his face because I was too busy staring at his eyes. They were the color of lilacs, a wonderful pale lavender that was a genuine show-stopper. It took me a few seconds of staring to be able to see the rest of his face. He looked a few years older awake than he had unconscious—nineteen instead of sixteen, maybe. He still looked drawn and tired, ill, but there was a vast improvement.

"Yeah, you looked worse," I said.

Stephen turned to Officer Smith like they were old friends.

"Can we have a few minutes alone?"

Smith looked at me. "Okay with you?"

I nodded.

He stood. "I don't know how Padgett's going to like it, so if you want to exchange secret codes or anything, make it fast."

"Thanks," I said.

"Don't mention it." He stopped in front of Lorraine before he left. "Thank you. Crossman has a wife and two daughters. I know they'd thank you if they could."

Lorraine blushed and nodded, mumbling, "You're welcome."

Smith left, and I walked over to Nathaniel's bed. "Nice to meet you while you're conscious."

He tried to smile, but the effort showed. He held out his left hand to me, the right hand was still hooked up to an IV drip.

I took his hand. His grip was tremblingly weak. He drew my hand towards his mouth as if to kiss it. I let him do it. The effort made his hand shake.

He pressed his lips to my hand, eyes closed, almost as if he were resting. For a second I thought he'd passed out, but his tongue flicked out, a quick wetness.

I jerked back, fighting the urge to wipe my hand on my jeans. "Thanks, a handshake would have been fine."

He frowned up at me. "But you're our *léoparde lionné*," he said.

"So people keep telling me," I said.

He turned his head so he could see Stephen. "You lied to me." Tears trembled in his pale, pale eyes. "She won't feed us."

I looked at Stephen. "I have missed part of this conversation, haven't I?"

"Have you seen Richard share blood with the pack?"

I started to say no, then, "I saw him let Jason feed off of a knife wound once. Jason seemed almost drugged from it."

Stephen nodded. "That's it. Gabriel could share blood."

My eyes widened. "I didn't think he was strong enough to do that."

"Neither did we." This from Kevin. He came to stand near me, cigarette transferred, still unlit, to his left hand. "It's been very interesting listening to Nathaniel talk about Gabriel. Nathaniel was addicted to heroin and a street whore when Gabriel rescued him, gave him a second life."

"Bully for him, getting him off drugs, but Gabriel still pimped him out. To a sicker clientele."

Kevin patted Nathaniel's leg under the sheet, a casual gesture, like you'd pat a dog. "But Nat here likes it, don't you, boy?"

Nathaniel looked at him and said softly, "Yes."

"Please, tell me you didn't enjoy being gutted."

He closed his eyes. "No, not that. But until then it was . . ."

"That's all right," I said. Something occurred to me. "Have you told the police who did this to you?"

"He doesn't know," Kevin said. He put the ever-present cig back in his mouth, as if just the taste of the paper was sweet.

"What do you mean, he doesn't know?" I asked.

Stephen answered, "Zane chained and blindfolded him, then left. That was the deal. Nathaniel never saw them."

"Them?" I made it a question.

Stephen nodded. "Them."

I took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Do you remember anything unique or different that might help identify them?"

"Perfume like gardenias, and a sickly smell."

Great, I thought, that was helpful.

He looked full at me, and suddenly his eyes weren't just dull with illness. I realized they were dull with experience. It went beyond jaded, as if Nathaniel had looked into the lower rungs of hell. He'd lived to tell the tale, but he hadn't really survived, not intact.

"I remember the perfume. I'd recognize it again if I smelled it."

"Okay, Nathaniel, okay." In the bottom of the awful emptiness of his eyes was panic. He was scared, unbelievably scared. I patted his hand, and when his fingers curled around mine, I held on. "No one will ever hurt you like that again, Nathaniel. I promise you that."

"You'll take care of me?" He looked up at me with a need in his eyes that was so raw, so primitive, I would have promised him anything to chase that look away.

"Yes, I'll take care of you."

His whole body relaxed. A tension running out of him like water from a cracked cup. I felt it run down his arm into his hand into me like a jolt of energy. It made me jump, but I didn't pull away.

He smiled up at me, lying back against the pillows. He looked a little better somehow, stronger.

I slid my hand out of his slowly, and he let me go. Great. I turned to the rest of the room. "We need to get you all out of here."

"I could go home now," Stephen said, "but Nathaniel still can't be moved."

"I don't trust the cops without me here to act as a buffer."

"Padgett is very afraid of us," Teddy said.

I nodded. "I know."

"Feed me," Nathaniel said. "Give me your strength, and I will go with you."

I frowned at him, then looked back at Stephen. "He's not seriously suggesting I open a vein for him, is he?"

"Richard could do it," Stephen said.

"Richard couldn't feed one of the leopards," Lorraine said, "only us."

"Raina could have fucked him back to health," Kevin said.

That earned him a long stare from me. "What are you talking about?"

"Raina could share energy without sharing blood," he said. His face registered both distaste and lust, as if he'd enjoyed some of Raina's shows in spite of himself. "She'd run her hands over you, then her body. It always ended with her fucking you. The more hurt you started out, the better she liked it, but you'd be healed when she was finished."

I turned to Stephen, because I didn't believe it. He nodded. "I've seen her do it."

"You're not suggesting that she . . ." Lorraine let the awful thought go unsaid, but I was with her.

"I am not opening a vein, and I am most certainly not going to have sex with him."

"You don't want me." Nathaniel's voice was tear-filled, heartbroken.

"It's nothing personal," I said. "I'm just not into casual sex." This entire conversation was too weird even for me.

"Then Nathaniel has to stay here at least another twenty-four hours," Kevin said. He rolled the cigarette between his fingers while he talked.

Stephen nodded. "That's what the doctor said. We asked when he told me I could go home today."

"Don't leave me, Stephen." Nathaniel reached out across the space between them, as if he could touch him.

"I won't leave you alone, Nathaniel, not without someone to take care of you."

Teddy spoke. "Just because it ended in sex for Raina doesn't mean it has to end that way."

We all looked at him. "What do you mean?" Kevin asked.

"Everything ended in sex for Raina. But it was the touching that healed. I think my injuries were healed before we got down to basics." Just listening to him talk like that with a sixty-inch chest of pure muscle made my brain hurt. It was like finding out your golden retriever talked. You just didn't expect to get brains in such a bulky package.

Kevin shrugged. "I don't know. All I know is she healed me. I don't remember when I was better. I just remember her."

"Is there anyone in this room that didn't sleep with Raina?" I asked.

The only person who raised their hand was Lorraine, and knowing Raina, that had been debatable. "Sweet Jesus."

"I think Anita could heal him without sex, just bare skin," Teddy said.

I started to say no, then remembered sharing energy with Jean-Claude. Bare skin had been important there, too. Maybe it was the same. "Did Raina seem to feel tired after healing you?"

All the men shook their heads. The consensus was it seemed to energize her, not weaken her. Of course, that was Raina and she had been an unusual puppy even for a werewolf.

I didn't want to leave Nathaniel here, not even with werewolves to guard him. I didn't trust Padgett. There was also no guarantee that the zealots, whoever they were, wouldn't try for another hit. Either we all went or we all stayed. I had more crime scenes to visit. I couldn't sit here all bloody day.

"Okay, let's try it, but I don't have the faintest idea how to begin."

Nathaniel settled back into the pillows with something like a smile of expectation on his face. Like a child who's about to get the ice cream he was promised. Trouble was, I was the ice cream.

Chapter 37

Kevin put a chair under the door handle and we were as secure as we were likely to get. I'd told Smith, who was now manning the door, that I needed to get a feel for things, and I'd be done when I was done. I was being treated like a detective, so the uniforms would stay out. The only worry was Padgett. He'd only stay out until his ego recovered. I half expected him to try and barge in on us. The only thing that might save us from him was the fact that he'd want to break the door in because he'd be sensing what we were doing, and he wouldn't want to admit that.

I stood by the bed. Nathaniel looked up at me with a look that was so trusting, it made me nervous. I turned away and found everyone else looking at me, too. "Okay, guys, now what? I've never even seen this done."

There was an exchange of looks all the way around. Stephen said, "I don't know if we can explain it to you."

I nodded. "I know, magic is like that. You either get it, or you don't."

"Is this magic?" Teddy asked. "Or is it just psychic ability?"

"I'm not sure there is a difference," I said. "Sometimes I think the only difference is that psychic ability is something you do without thinking about it, and magic requires a ritual to get your juices going."

"You do more of this kind of shit than we do," Kevin said. "We're just werewolves, not witches."

"I'm not a witch. I'm a necromancer."

He shrugged. "Same diff to me." He sat down in the chair he'd started out in, crushing the cigarette into the palm of his hand as if it were lit and his flesh were an ashtray. He scowled up at me. I didn't know him well enough to be sure, but he seemed nervous.

Me, too. I only knew two ways to raise energy: ritual or sex. The sex took the place of ritual when I was with Jean-Claude or Richard. But I had no bond with Nathaniel. No marks, no emotion, nothing. I wasn't his *léoparde lionné*, not really. It was all lies. I couldn't do this without some feeling towards him. Pity wasn't enough.

Teddy loomed up behind me. "What's wrong, Anita?"

I would have walked across the room and whispered, but I knew Nathaniel would hear anywhere in the small room. "I need some emotion to work from, something."

"Emotion?" he asked.

"I don't know Nathaniel. I don't feel anything for him except pity, obligation. Neither of those is enough to even get started."

"What do you need?" His eyes were very serious. The intelligence in them was almost touchable.

I tried to put it into words and ended up saying, "I need something to take the place of a ritual."

"Raina didn't use a ritual," Kevin said from the chair.

"She used sex. Sex can take the place of the ritual."

"You raised power at the lupanar that one night with Richard," Stephen said. "You didn't have sex, but you still raised power."

"But I . . . I wanted Richard sexually. It's a sort of energy all of its own."

"Nathaniel is handsome," Stephen said.

I shook my head. "It's never been that easy for me. I need more than a pretty face."

Stephen slid out of the bed in one of those wraparound gowns, but it didn't gape as he moved. It was wrapped around him like a sheet, more cloth than he needed, just like it would have been on me. One size never really fits all.

He tried to take my hand, and I wouldn't let him. "Let me help you."

"Define help." Suspicious, who me?

He smiled, and it was almost condescending. The smile men get around girls when they're doing something sort of cute and girlish. The smile alone pissed me off. "What is your problem?" I asked.

"You," he said softly. "You know I would never hurt you, don't you?"

I looked into his cornflower-blue eyes and nodded. "Never on purpose." I said.

"Then trust me now. Let me help you call the power."

"How?" I asked.

He took my hand in both of his, and this time I let him. He drew my hand to Nathaniel. He rested my fingertips on Nathaniel's forehead. His skin was cool. Just the touch of his skin, and you knew he wasn't well.

"Pet him," Stephen said.

I looked at him, shaking my head. I drew my hand back, "I don't think so."

Nathaniel started to say something, but Stephen put his fingers across his mouth. "No, Nathaniel." It was almost like he knew what the other man was going to say. But he couldn't know, not for sure, could he? I might have believed it if Nathaniel was pack, but he wasn't.

"Close your eyes," Stephen said.

"Uh-huh," I said.

"We don't have time for this," Kevin said.

"He's right," Teddy said. "I understand your natural reluctance, but the police are going to knock on the door eventually."

If Nathaniel couldn't leave with us, that meant leaving people behind to guard him, which put people in danger again. If we were all somewhere together, at least we wouldn't be endangering innocent policemen, though most cops would wince at being called innocent.

I took a deep breath and blew it out. "Fine, what's your idea?"

"Close your eyes," Stephen said.

I frowned at him. He looked patient, long-suffering even, and I closed my eyes. He took my hand in his, and it wasn't until he began to gently open my fist that I realized I'd clenched up. He started to massage my hand.

I said, "Stop that."

"Then loosen up," he said. "It won't hurt."

"I'm not afraid it will hurt," I said.

He moved around to stand in back of me, so close the hem of his gown brushed my legs. "But you're still afraid." His voice had dropped almost to a whisper. "Can you use that fear to call power?"

My pulse was hammering in my throat, and I was afraid, but it wasn't the right kind of fear. The fear that overwhelms you in the midst of an emergency can call power almost without effort. This was the kind of fear that keeps you from jumping out of perfectly good airplanes even though you'd decided to do it. Not an unhealthy fear, but it would hold you back.

"No," I said.

"Then let go of the fear," he said. He touched my arms gently and sat me on the edge of the bed.

Nathaniel made a small protesting sound, as if it had hurt.

I opened my eyes and Stephen said, "Close them." It was the closest thing to an order I'd ever heard him give. I closed them.

He took my hands and laid the tips of my fingers on either side of Nathaniel's face. "The skin just over the temples is so soft." He drew my fingers in a soft feathery line down Nathaniel's face, fingers gliding on either side, as if I were blind and trying to memorize his features.

He slid my hands into Nathaniel's hair. It was silken, unbelievably soft. His hair had the texture of satin. I balled my hands into that soft warmth, lowered my face towards his hair and smelled it. There was a faint medicinal smell. I buried my face in the satin brush of his hair and found his scent under it all. He smelled like vanilla, and under that was the scent of wood and field and fur. He wasn't pack, but the scent was similar. He smelled like home. Something clicked deep inside me, like a switch being thrown.

I opened my eyes and knew what to do, how to do it, wanted to do it. Like a distant thought, I realized that Stephen's hands had fallen away long ago.

I stared down into Nathaniel's lilac eyes and bent towards that amazing gaze. I touched his lips with mine, a chaste kiss, and that one soft brush brought the power in a warm, skin-tingling rush. It spilled out of me like water, warm, soothing, filling. But power alone wasn't enough. It needed direction, guidance, and I knew how to do it, as if I'd done it before. I didn't question it, didn't want to.

I tried to run my hand down his chest, but the gown covered him. He was like Stephen, like me, small. The gown was fastened in front, not in back. My hand sought the opening and slid along bare skin. Slid until I felt the incision.

I straddled Nathaniel's legs. He made another small hurting sound and I liked it. I rose up on my knees so only the sides of my legs touched his body. I slid the sheet down around his body and opened the gown, exposing him. The stitches were a thin dark line across the paleness of his skin that ran nearly from one hip to the other. A fearful wound, a killing wound.

He wore nothing below the waist. Hospitals are always stripping us down, leaving us as vulnerable as possible. The sight of him naked should have stopped me in my tracks. Dimly, it shocked me. I hadn't expected it, but it was too late. The power didn't care. I ran my fingers lightly over the stitches.

Nathaniel cried out, only half from pain. He was half-erect before I lowered my face to the stitches. I licked the wound like a dog would, long, slow caresses. He was more than half-erect when I raised my face to see his eyes staring down at me. I knew in that moment that I could have him, that he wanted me to take that last step.

I could feel the others in the room like a hum of energy, a vibrating backdrop to the energy inside me. I'd never been interested in casual sex, but the smell and feel of Nathaniel's body was almost overwhelming. I'd never been so tempted by a stranger. But temptation is just tempting. You don't have to give in. I rose on my knees over him, placing my hands on the smooth bones of his hips, drawing my hands towards the middle of the incision. When my hands touched, I put one on top of the other and pressed. Not with muscle or flesh but with power. I thrust that warm, rising power into his body.

He gasped, spine bowing underneath me, hands grabbing my arms, fingers convulsing against my bare skin.

It was like smoothing out the imperfections in a zombie except this flesh was warm and alive, and I couldn't see what I was fixing with my eyes. But I could feel it. I could feel his body smooth and firm, caressing places that no hand was meant to touch. Rolling them between my fingers, filling him up with the rising, rushing heat inside me. It spilled down my arms, my hands, into him. The heat spread through his body, through my body, until it was like fever, running over the skin, through the body, forming our bodies into a single thing of heat and flesh, and a rush of power that just kept building. It built until I closed my eyes, but even the darkness was shot with brightness, white flowers exploding on my vision.

My breath came in pants, too quick, too shallow. I opened my eyes and watched Nathaniel's face. His breathing matched mine. I forced us slower, forced his breathing to slow. I could feel his heart as if I caressed it, held in my hands. I could touch any part of him. I could have any part of him. I could smell the blood under his skin and wanted a taste.

He was healed when I lowered myself on top of him, pressed my mouth to his. I turned his face to one side and ate down the side of his neck until I felt the pulse under his skin. I licked the skin, but it wasn't enough. I laid my mouth over the beating pulse, bit gently into the skin until I could hold the throbbing of him in my mouth. I wanted to bite down harder and harder until blood flowed. I wanted it. Dimly, I knew that Jean-Claude had awakened for the day. It was his hunger that I felt, his need. But it wasn't his need that had me straddling Nathaniel's body. It wasn't even mine.

I remembered Nathaniel's body, and I'd never met him before. I knew the taste of him. The feel of him as only an old lover can. Not my memories. Not my energy.

I slid off Nathaniel, tried to crawl out of the bed, and fell to my knees. I couldn't stand, not yet. Richard had said as long as the pack existed, Raina wasn't gone. I hadn't understood what he meant, until now. I was channeling the bitch from hell, channeling her, and having a very good time doing it.

But I knew something else, something that Raina hadn't done. Couldn't blame her for this one. I knew how to heal Nathaniel's body, but I also knew how to tear it apart. Anything that you can fix, you can break. When I held his heart in my metaphysical hand, I'd had a split second, a dark urge, to close that hand, to crush that pulsing, throbbing muscle until blood flowed and his life stopped. A moment, the blink of an eye, of an urge so evil, it scared even me. I'd have liked to blame the bitch from hell, but something told me that this little bit of darkness was all mine. Stephen's hand on my mouth was all that kept me from screaming out loud.

Chapter 38

Stephen's hand held the screams to a whimper. He held me against his body, hard, as if afraid of what I'd do if I got loose. I wasn't so sure myself. Running seemed like good idea. Running until I outran the thought of it, the feel of it, all out of me. But like Richard, I couldn't run from myself. That thought made me stop struggling and just sit in the circle of Stephen's arms.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

I nodded.

His hand slid away from my mouth, slowly, as if he wasn't sure I'd heard him or understood him.

I sagged against him, almost sliding to the floor.

He stroked my face, over and over, like you'd comfort a sick child. He didn't ask what was wrong. None of them did.

Nathaniel knelt beside us. He didn't just look healed, he looked healthy. He was smiling, handsome in a boyish, unfinished sort of way. If you cut the hair and changed the eyes, he looked like he should have been playing halfback on the high-school football team and dating the homecoming princess.

The fact that I'd almost gone down on him two minutes ago brought a rush of heat that made me hide my face against Stephen's shoulder. I did not want to look into that youthful, handsome face and realize how close I'd come to doing him. The fact that I could still remember his body in details that I'd personally never touched, didn't help. Raina was gone, but not forgotten.

I felt movement. The vibrating energy of the shapeshifters was getting closer. I knew without looking that they were crowding around me. The energy tightened like a circle drawing closed. It was hard to breathe.

I felt someone's cheek brush my face. I moved my head enough to see Kevin inches from me. I'd expected Nathaniel. Teddy's large hands stroked down my bare arms. He brought his hands to his face. "You smell like pack."

Lorraine was on her back staring up at me with eyes gone strange and wolfish. "She smells like Raina." She rolled her face so that her lips brushed the knee of my jeans.

I knew that if I allowed it, we could sleep in one big communal heap like a litter of puppies, that touching was part of what kept the pack together, like the mutual grooming that primates do. Touching, comforting. it didn't have to be sexual. That had been Raina's choice. They were wolves but they were also people and that made them primates. Two animals really, not just one.

Kevin laid his head in my lap, cheek resting on my leg. I couldn't see his eyes, to tell if they'd gone wolf on me. His voice came thick and low. "Now I do need a cigarette."

It made me laugh. Once I started laughing, I couldn't stop. I laughed until tears ran down my face. The werewolves ran their hands up and down me, faces rubbing my bare skin. They were taking my scent, rolling in the lingering scent of Raina. Marking me with their scent.

Stephen kissed my cheek, the way you'd kiss your sister. "Are you all right?" It was hard to remember, but I think he'd asked that before.

I nodded. "Yes." My voice sounded tinny and distant. I realized I was on the edge of shock. Not good.

Stephen shooed the wolves away from me. They moved languorously, as if the energy we'd raised had been some sort of drug, or maybe sex was a better analogy. I didn't know. I wasn't even sure I wanted to know.

"Richard said that Raina wasn't truly gone as long as the pack lived. Is this what he meant?" I asked.

"Yes," Stephen said, "though I've never heard of a non-pack member being able to do what you just did. The spirits of the dead should only be able to enter lukoi."

"Spirits of the dead," I said. "You mean you don't have a fancy name for them?"

"They are munin," Stephen said.

That almost started me laughing again. "Memory, Odin's raven."

He nodded. "Yes."

"What exactly was it, *is* it? It wasn't a ghost. I know what a ghost feels like."

"You've felt one of them," Stephen said. "It's the best explanation I can give you."

"It's energy," Teddy said. "Energy is neither created nor destroyed. It exists. We have the energy of everyone that has ever been pack."

"You don't mean all lukoi, do you?"

"No," he said, "but from the first member of our pack to now, we have them all."

"Not all," Lorraine said.

He nodded. "Sometimes one of us will be lost to accident and the body cannot be recovered and shared. Then all they were, all their knowledge, their power, is lost to us."

Kevin had gone back to the chair, still sitting on the floor, leaning his shoulders against the chair seat. "Sometimes," he said, "we decide not to feed. It's sort of like excommunication. The pack rejects you in death as in life."

"Why didn't you reject Raina? She was a twisted sadistic bitch."

"It was Richard's choice," Teddy said. "By rejecting her body that last time, he thought it would have angered some of the other pack members who aren't wholeheartedly on his side yet. He was right, but . . . now we have her inside us."

"She's powerful," Lorraine said, and she shivered. "Powerful enough to possess a lesser wolf."

"Old wives' tales," Kevin said. "She's dead. Her power survives but only when called."

"I didn't call her," I said.

"We might have," Stephen said softly. He lay back on the floor, hands covering his eyes as if it was too horrible to look at.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we've never seen anyone but Raina do what you just did. I was thinking about her, remembering."

"So was I," Kevin said.

"Yes," Teddy said. He had moved back to the far wall, as if he didn't trust himself near me.

Lorraine had moved back with him, sitting so that their bodies touched lightly. A comforting closeness. "I, too, was thinking about her. Glad she was not here. Happy it was Anita." She hugged her arms as if cold, and Teddy put a muscular arm around her, hugging her close, resting his chin in her hair.

"I wasn't thinking about Raina," Nathaniel said. He crawled towards me.

"Don't touch me," I said.

He rolled onto his back, for all the world like a big pussy cat wanting its belly rubbed. He stretched, straining from toes to finger tips. He laughed and rolled onto his stomach, propped on his elbows. He looked up at me, long, rich brown hair like a curtain across his face. His lilac eyes stared out at me, feral and almost frightening. He lay down in a pool of hair and energy. His gaze stayed on my face, and I realized he was being playful. Not exactly seductive, but playful. It was different and almost more disturbing. Nathaniel managed to be childlike, catlike, and still be an adult. You didn't know whether to pat him on the head, rub his belly, or kiss him. All three seemed to be up for grabs. It was too confusing for me.

I used the far bed to get to my feet. When I was sure I could walk without falling down, I let go of the bed. I swayed just a touch, but not too bad. I could walk. Great, because I wanted out of here.

"What do you want us to do?" Stephen asked.

"Go to my house. Jean-Claude's there, and Richard was there."

"What about him?" Kevin asked.

Nathaniel raised his head enough to look at us all. He said nothing, asked for nothing, but I could taste his pulse in my mouth. I knew he was scared. Scared to be left alone again. I hoped this empathy with me wasn't permanent. I had quite enough men running around in my head without adding another one.

"Take him with you," I said. "The leopards are mine as you are mine."

"He is to be protected and treated as pack?" Kevin asked.

I rubbed my temples. I was getting a headache. "Yes, yes. I've given him my protection. Any of the leopards that want my protection can have it."

"As our lupa that binds us to protect them," Lorraine said, "even to give our life for them. Will they do the same?"

I wasn't getting a headache, I had one.

Nathaniel rolled to his feet in a movement that was too graceful to be real and almost too quick to see. He sat on the foot of Stephen's bed, watching me with bright, eager eyes. He said, "My body is yours. My life, if you want it, is yours to take." He said it almost matter-of-factly—no, joyously, like it was a good thing.

I stared at him. "I don't want anyone's life, Nathaniel, but if the pack is willing to risk their lives to protect you, I expect you to do the same."

"I will do anything you want," he said. "All you have to do is tell me."

He didn't say, "ask me." He said, "tell me." I'd never heard it phrased quite like that. It implied he didn't have the right to say no. I asked, "Does everyone here know they have the right to argue a point with me? I mean, when I say jump, you don't just say how high, right?"

"We don't," Stephen said. His face was guarded, careful.

"How about you?" I asked, turning to Nathaniel.

He rose to his knees, leaning his upper body out towards me, but with both hands still on the bed railing. He didn't try to touch me, just get closer. "How about me, what?" he asked.

"You do understand that you have the right to refuse me? That my word is not like from on high?"

"Just tell me what you want me to do, Anita, and I'll do it."

"Just like that, no questions, you'll just do it?"

He nodded. "Anything."

"Is this a custom among the leopards, the pard?" I asked.

"No," Stephen said, "it's just Nathaniel's way."

I shook my head, literally waving my hands in the air as if I'd just erase it all. "I don't have time for this. He's healed. Take him with you."

"Do you want me to wait in your room?" Nathaniel asked.

"If you need to rest, help yourself to a bed. I won't be there."

He smiled happily and I had the oddest feeling that what I was saying wasn't what he was hearing. I wanted out of the room, away from them all. I'd tell Padgett I was sending them all to a safe house, and he'd buy it because he wanted off this detail. He wanted away from them more than I did.

The doctor was amazed at Nathaniel's recovery. They released him, though they started talking about wanting to run more tests. I vetoed that. We had places to go, people to meet. They all piled into Kevin's and Teddy's cars, and I went for my Jeep. Happy to be rid of them for a while. Happy even if it meant another crime scene. Happy even if I still didn't know how to tell if Malcolm was alive down there in the dark. Nathaniel watched me through the back window of the car, his lilac gaze on me until the car turned a corner. He'd been lost, and now he thought he'd been found. But if he expected me to be more than friends, he was still lost.

Chapter 39

I felt like shit and didn't have a bruise to show for it. I concentrated on the next problem, pushing what I'd done, and almost done, to the back burner. Nothing I could do about it until I talked to Richard and Jean-Claude. I'd worried about tying myself to the vampire, but I'd never really worried about being tied to the werewolf. I should have known I'd get shit from both sides.

I got beeped three times in about three minutes. McKinnon first, Dolph second, and an unknown number. The unknown number called back twice in ten minutes. Damn. I pulled off into a service station. I called Dolph first.

"Anita."

"How do you always know it's me?"

"I don't," he said.

"What's up?"

"We need you at a new location."

"I'm on my way to the church site for McKinnon."

"Pete's here with me."

"That sounds ominous."

"We've got a vamp on his way to the hospital," he said.

"In his coffin?"

"No."

"Then how . . .?"

"He was on the stairs covered in blankets. They don't think he's going to make it. But this is one of the halfway houses for the Church. We've got a two-biter here that says the vamp we took was the guardian for the younger vamps still inside. She seems worried about what the vamps will do when they wake and the guardian isn't there to calm them down or feed them."

"Feed them?" I asked.

"Says that they each take a small drink from the guardian to start the night. Without it, she says the hunger grows too strong, and they may be dangerous."

"Isn't she a font of information."

"She's scared, Anita. She's got two freaking vampire bites on her neck, and she's scared."

"Shit," I said. "I'm on my way, but frankly, Dolph, I don't know what you want me to do."

"You're the vampire expert, you tell me." A little hostility there.

"I'll think about it on the way. Maybe I'll have come up with a plan by the time I get there."

"Before they became legal, we'd have just burned them out ourselves."

"Yeah," I said, "the good old days."

"Yeah," he said. I don't think he got the sarcasm. But with Dolph it was always hard to tell.

I dialed the third number. Larry answered, "Anita." His voice sounded strained, pain-filled.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my throat suddenly tight.

"I'm all right."

"You don't sound all right," I said.

"I've just been moving around too much with the stitches and stuff. I need to take a pain pill, but I won't be able to drive."

"You need a lift?"

He was quiet for a second or two, then, "Yes."

I knew how much it had cost him to call me. This was one of his first times in the field on a police job without me. The fact that he needed my help

for anything must have griped his ass. It would have bugged the hell out of me. In fact, I wouldn't have called. I'd have toughed it out, until I passed out. This wasn't a criticism of Larry, it was a criticism of me. He was just smarter than I was sometimes. This was one of those times.

"Where are you?"

He gave me the address, and it was close. Lucky us. "I'm less than five minutes away, but I can't take you home. I'm on my way to another crime scene."

"As long as I don't have to drive, I'll be okay. It's starting to take all my attention just to stay on the road. Time to stop driving when it's this hard."

"You really do have a higher wisdom score than I do."

"Which means you wouldn't have asked for help yet," he said.

"Well . . . yeah."

"When would you have asked for help?"

"When I drove off the road and had to call a tow truck."

He laughed and took a sharp breath as if it hurt. "I'll be waiting for you."

"I'll be there."

"I know," he said. "Thanks for not saying you told me so."

"I wasn't even thinking it, Larry."

"Honest?"

"Cross my heart and . . ."

"Don't say it."

"You getting superstitious on me, Larry?"

He was quiet for a space of heartbeats. "Maybe, or maybe it's just been a long day."

"It'll be a longer night," I said.

"Thanks," he said. "Just what I wanted to hear." He hung up then without saying goodbye.

Maybe I'd trained Dolph never to say goodbye. Maybe I was always the bearer of bad tidings, and everyone wanted to get off the phone with me as soon as possible. Naw.

Chapter 40

I expected Larry to be sitting in his car. He wasn't. He was leaning against it. Even from a distance I could tell he was in pain, back stiff, trying not to move any more than necessary. I pulled in beside him. Up close he looked worse. His white dress shirt was smeared with black soot. His summer-weight dress pants were brown, so they'd survived a little better. A black smudge ran across his forehead to his chin. The blackness outlined one of his blue eyes so

that it seemed darker, like a sapphire surrounded by onyx. The look in his eyes was dull, as if the pain had drained him.

"Jesus, you look like shit," I said.

He almost smiled. "Thanks, I needed that."

"Take a pill, get in the Jeep."

He started to shake his head, stopped in mid-motion and said, "No, if you can drive, I can go to the next disaster."

"You smell like someone set your clothes on fire."

"You look pristine," he said, and he sounded resentful.

"What's wrong, Larry?"

"Other than my back feels like a red-hot poker is being shoved up it?"

"Besides that," I said.

"I'll tell you in the car." Underneath the sulkiness, he sounded tired.

I didn't argue with him, just started walking for the Jeep. A few steps and I realized he wasn't keeping up. I turned and found him standing very still, eyes closed, hands in fists at his sides.

I walked back to him. "Need a hand?"

He opened his eyes, smiled, "A back, actually. Hands work fine."

I smiled and took his arm gently, half expecting him to tell me not to, but he didn't. He was hurting. He took a stiff step, and I steadied him. We made slow but sure progress to the Jeep. His breath was coming in small, shallow pants by the time I got him around to the passenger side door. I opened the door, wasn't sure how to get him inside. It was going to hurt any way I could do it.

"Just let me hold your arm. I can do it myself," he said.

I offered my arm. He got a death grip on it and sat down. He made a small hissing noise between his teeth. "You said it would hurt worse the second day. Why are you always right?"

"Hard to be perfect," I said, "but it's a burden I've learned to cope with." I gave him my best bland face.

He smiled, then started to laugh, then almost doubled over with pain, which hurt more. He ended up writhing on the seat for a few seconds. When he could sit still again, he grabbed the dashboard until his fingers turned colors. "God, don't make me laugh."

"Sorry," I said. I got the aloe-and-lanolin Baby Wipes from the trunk of my car. They were great for getting blood off. They'd probably work on soot. I handed him the wipes and helped him buckle his seat belt. Yes, his wounds would have hurt less if he hadn't had the belt, but no one rides with me without a seat belt. My mom would be alive today if she'd been wearing a belt.

"Take a pill, Larry. Sleep in the car. I'll take you home after this next scene."

"No," he said, and he sounded so stubborn, so determined, that I knew I couldn't talk him out of it. So why try?

"Have it your way," I said. "But what have you been doing that you look like you've been trying to hide your spots?"

He moved just his eyes to look at me, frowning.

"Rolling in soot," I said. "Don't you ever watch Disney movies or read children's books?"

He gave a small smile. "Not lately. I've had three fire scenes where I just had to confirm the vamps were dead. Two of the scenes I couldn't find anything, just ashes. The third one looked like black sticks. I didn't know what to do, Anita. I tried to check for a pulse. I know that was stupid. The skull just exploded into ashes all over me." He was sitting very stiff, very controlled, yet his body gave the impression of hunching from pain, avoiding the blow of what he'd seen today.

What I was about to say wouldn't help things. "Vamps burn to ashes, Larry. If there were skeletal remains left, it wasn't vampire."

He looked at me then, the sudden movement bringing tears to his eyes. "You mean that was human?"

"Probably—I'm not sure, but probably."

"Thanks to me we'll never know for sure. Without the fangs in the skull you can't tell the difference."

"That's not entirely true. They can do DNA. Though truthfully I'm not sure what the fire does to DNA sampling. If they can gather it, they can at least know if it's human or vamp."

"If it's human, I've destroyed any chance they have of using dental records," he said.

"Larry, if the skull was that fragile, I don't think anything could have saved it. It certainly wouldn't have stood up to dental imprinting."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I licked my lips and wanted to lie. "Not a hundred percent."

"You'd have known it was human. You wouldn't have touched it, thinking it was alive, would you?"

I let silence fill the car.

"Answer me," he said.

"No, I wouldn't have checked for a pulse. I would have assumed it was human remains."

"Dammit, Anita, I've been doing this for over a year, and I'm still making stupid mistakes."

"Not stupid, just mistakes."

"What's the difference?" he asked.

I was thinking that what he'd done to get his back ripped up was a stupid mistake, but decided not to say it out loud. "You know the difference, Larry. When you get over feeling sorry for yourself, you'll know the difference."

"Don't be condescending, Anita."

The anger in his voice stung more than the words. I didn't need this today. I really didn't. "Larry, I'd love to soothe your ego and make it all better, but I am all out of sugarplums and puppy-dog tails. My day hasn't been exactly a barrel of laughs either."

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Come on. I'm sorry. I'll listen."

I wasn't even sure where to start, and I wasn't ready to tell anybody about what had happened in the hospital room, least of all Larry.

"I don't even know where to start, Larry."

"Try," he said.

"Richard is being nasty."

"Boyfriend trouble," he said; he sounded almost amused.

I glanced at him. "Don't be condescending, Larry."

"Sorry."

"It's not just that. Before this emergency came up, they wanted me at the Church of Eternal Life. Malcolm is bedded in the basement. His followers want him to be rescued. The firemen want to know if they can leave him until nightfall when he'll rise on his own."

"So?" Larry asked.

"So, I don't have the faintest idea how to find out if Malcolm is alive or dead."

He stared at me. "You're kidding."

"Wish I was."

"But you're a necromancer," he said.

"I raise zombies and an occasional vamp, but I can't raise a master vamp of Malcolm's power. Besides, what if I could? Would that prove he was alive or prove he was dead? I mean if I could raise him, it might just mean he was ready to be a zombie. Hell, Jean-Claude's awake for the day, maybe Malcolm is, too."

"A vampire zombie?" Larry said.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I'm the only person who can raise vamps like zombies, that I know of. There aren't a lot of books on the subject."

"What about Sabitini?"

"You mean the magician?"

"He raised zombies as part of his act, and he had vampires that did his bidding. I've read eyewitness accounts of it."

"First, he died in 1880. A little before my time. Second, the vampires were just dupes who went along with him. It was a way for vampires who would have normally been killed on sight to walk freely among the people. Sabitini and his pet vampires, they called them."

"No one's ever proved that he was a fraud, Anita."

"Fine, but he's dead and he didn't leave any diaries behind."

"Raise him and ask," Larry said.

I stared at him long enough that I had to hit the brakes fast to keep from ramming a car in front of me. "What did you say?"

"Raise Sabitini and find out if he could raise vampires like you can. He's just a little over a hundred years dead. You've raised zombies a lot older than that."

"You missed the case last year where a vaudun priestess had raised a necromancer. The zombie got completely out of control and started killing people."

"You've told me about it, but the priestess didn't know what he was. If you knew going in, you could take precautions."

"No," I said.

"Why not?" he said.

I opened my mouth, closed it, because I didn't have a good answer. "I don't approve of raising the dead for curiosity's sake. You know how much money I've been offered to raise dead celebrities?"

"I'd still like to know what really happened to Marilyn Monroe," he said.

"When her family comes and asks, maybe I'll do it. But I am not raising the poor woman because a tabloid waved money at our boss."

"Waved a lot of money at our boss," Larry said. "Enough money that he sent Jamison out to try it. He couldn't raise her. Too long dead without a bigger sacrifice."

I shook my head. "Jamison is a weenie."

"Everyone else at Animators Inc. turned it down."

"Including you," I said.

He shrugged. "I might raise her and ask how she died, but not in front of cameras. The poor woman was hounded alive. Dead, she's still being hounded. Doesn't seem fair."

"You're a good guy, Larry."

"Not good enough to know that vampires burn to ash and skeletal remains are human."

"Don't start, Larry. It's just experience. I should have told you before you went out today. Truthfully, you're getting so good at the job, I didn't think to tell you."

"You assumed I knew?" he said.

"Yeah."

"I have noticed the daily lectures have been in short supply lately. I used to take more notes at work with you than I ever did in college."

"Not so many notes lately, huh?" I said.

"No, I hadn't really thought about it, but no." He grinned suddenly and it lit up his eyes, chased away the horrors of the day. For a moment he was the bright-eyed, optimistic kid who had first shown up on my doorstep. "You mean I'm finally learning how to do the job?"

"Yeah," I said, "you are. In fact, if you were quicker on the trigger, I'd say you were good at it. It's just hard to learn everything, Larry. Something comes up and you find out you really don't know what the hell's going on after all."

"You, too?" he said.

"Me, too."

He took a deep breath and let it out. "I've seen you surprised a time or two, Anita. When the monsters get so strange that you don't know what's going either, it usually gets real nasty, real fast."

He was right. I wished he wasn't, because right now I didn't know what the hell was going on. I didn't understand what had happened with Nathaniel. I didn't know how the marks worked with Richard. I didn't know how to find out if Malcolm was still among the undead, or if he'd crossed into that more permanent state of true death. In fact I had so many questions and so few answers that I just wanted to go home. Maybe Larry and I could both take a

pain pill and sleep until tomorrow. Surely tomorrow would be a better day. God, I hoped so.

Chapter 41

The house was still smoking when we got there. Thin greyish wisps of smoke rose from the blackened beams like miniature ghosts. Some trick of the fire had left the high cupola on top of the building intact. The lower stories were gutted and blackened, but the cupola rose like a white beacon above the wreck. It looked like a black-toothed giant had taken a great bite out of the house.

The fire truck took up most of the narrow street. There was a spread of water seeping along the street like a shallow lake. Firefighters waded through the water, rolling up miles of hose over their shoulders. A uniformed police officer stopped us well back from the action.

I eased down my window and flashed my ID. It was a little plastic clip-on card and looked official, but it wasn't a badge. Sometimes the uniforms would let me through, and sometimes they had to go ask permission. Brewster's Law was going around Washington and would give vamp executioners what amounted to federal marshal status. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. It takes a hell of a lot more to make a cop than just a badge, but for me personally I'd love to have had a badge to flash.

"Anna Blake, Larry Kirkland, to see Sergeant Storr."

The officer frowned at the ID. "I'll have to clear this with someone."

I sighed. "Fine, we'll wait here."

The uniform went off in search of Dolph, and we waited.

"You used to argue with them," Larry said.

I shrugged. "They're just doing their job."

"Since when has that stopped you from bitching?"

I looked at him. He was smiling, which saved him from the scathing comeback I had ready. Besides, it was nice to see him smiling about anything right now. "So I'm mellowing—a little. So what?"

The smile widened to a grin, a shit-eating grin, my uncle would have called it. It was like the next thing out of his mouth was almost too funny to say. I was betting I wouldn't think it was funny at all.

"Is it being in love with Jean-Claude that's mellowed you or the regular sex?"

I smiled sweetly. "Speaking of regular sex, how is Detective Tammy?"

He blushed first. I was happy.

The uniform was walking down the wet street towards us with Detective Tammy Reynolds in tow. Oh, life was good.

"Well, if it isn't your little sugarplum now," I said.

Larry saw her then. The red flush brightened to something the color of raw flame, redder than his hair. His blue eyes were a little bulgy with the effort to breathe. The soot had been wiped away, which saved his face from looking like a reddish bruise. "You won't say anything, will you, Anita? Tammy doesn't like to be teased."

"Who does?" I said.

"I'm sorry," he said, speaking very fast before they could get to us. "I apologize. It will never happen again. Please do not embarrass me in front of Tammy."

"Would I do that to you?"

"In a hot second," he said. "Please don't."

They were almost at the car. "Don't pull my leg and I won't pull yours," I whispered.

"Deal," he said.

I eased down the window, smiling. "Detective Reynolds, how good to see you."

Reynolds frowned because I was seldom glad to see her. She was a witch and the first police detective ever with preternatural abilities beyond psychic gifts. But she was young, bright, shiny, and tried just a little too hard to be my friend. She was just sooo fascinated with the fact that I raised the dead. She wanted to know all about it. I'd never had a witch make me feel like such a damned freak. Most witches were nice understanding souls. Perhaps it was the fact that Reynolds was a Christian witch, a member of the Followers of the Way. A sect going back to the Gnostics, who embraced almost all magical ability. They were all but wiped out during the Inquisition due to the fact that their beliefs don't allow them to hide their light under a bushel, but they survived. Fanatics have a way of doing that.

Reynolds was tall, slender, with straight brown hair falling around her shoulders, and eyes that I would have said were hazel but she called green. Greyish-green with a large circle of pale brown around the pupil. Cats have green eyes. Most people don't. She'd tried to be my friend, and when I wouldn't tell her about raising the dead, she'd turned to Larry. He'd been reluctant at first for the same reasons I was, but she hadn't offered me sex. It pushed Larry over the edge and into her arms.

I'd have complained about his choice of sweeties if I'd any moral high ground to stand on. It wasn't the witch part that bothered me or the cop. It was the religious-fanatic part. But when you share the sheets with the walking dead, you don't get a lot of room to bitch.

I smiled sweetly at her.

Reynold's frown deepened. I'd never been this happy to see her before. "Good to see you, too, Anita." Her greeting was cautious, but seemed sincere. Always willing to turn the other cheek. A good little Christian.

I was beginning to wonder if I was still a good Christian. I didn't doubt God. I doubted me. Having premarital sex with a vampire had shaken my faith in a lot of things.

She bent her five foot ten frame to peer in the window past me at Larry. "Hi, Larry." Her smile was genuine, too. Her eyes sparkled with it. I could feel the waves of lust, if not love, going from her to him like a warm, embarrassing current.

The blush had left Larry's face milk-pale with the sprinkling of freckles like brown ink spots. He turned large blue eyes to her, and I didn't like the way he looked at her. I wasn't sure it was just lust on Larry's part. Maybe it wasn't for Reynolds, either, but I didn't worry about her feelings the way I did Larry's.

"Detective Reynolds," he said. Was it my imagination or was his voice just a touch deeper? Nah.

"Larry." That one word was full of too much warmth.

"Where do you want us to park?" I asked.

She blinked hazel eyes at me, as if for a second she'd forgotten I was there. "Anywhere back here."

"Great."

She stepped back and let me park, but her eyes lingered on Larry. Maybe it was more than lust. Damn.

We parked. Larry undid his seat belt carefully, grimacing. I'd gotten the door for him at the gas station.

"You want me to get the door?"

He turned stiffly towards the door, trying to keep his upper body immobile. He stopped with his hand on the handle. His breath came in little gasps. "Yes, please."

Me, I'd have gotten the door myself, just from pure stubbornness. Larry really was the wiser of the two of us.

I held the door for him and offered him a hand. I pulled, he pushed with his legs, and we got him standing. He started to hunch from the pain, but that bent his back, which made the pain worse. He ended standing as straight as he could, leaning against the Jeep, trying to get his breath back. Pain will leave you breathless.

Reynolds was suddenly beside us. "What's wrong?"

"You tell her. I'll go talk to Dolph."

"Sure," Larry said, voice strained. He needed to be in bed, knocked out on painkillers. Maybe he wasn't that much smarter than me.

It wasn't hard to spot Dolph. Pete McKinnon was standing with them. It was like walking towards two small mountains.

Dolph's dark suit looked freshly pressed, white shirt crisp, tie knotted against the collar. He couldn't have been out in the heat long. Even Dolph sweats.

"Anita," he said.

"Dolph."

"Ms. Blake, nice to see you again," Pete McKinnon said.

I smiled. "Good to know someone's happy to see me."

If Dolph got the dig, he ignored it. "Everyone's waiting for you."

"Dolph always was a man of few words," Pete said.

I grinned at him. "Good to know it's nothing personal."

Dolph frowned at us. "If you two are through, we've got work to do."

Pete and I grinned at each other and followed Dolph across the wet street. I was happy to be back in my Nikes. I could walk as good as any of the men, in the right shoes.

A tall, thin fireman with a grey mustache watched me stride across the street. He was still wearing helmet and coat in the July heat. Four others had stripped down to T-shirts with just the rubbery-looking pants on. Someone had sprayed them down with a water. They looked like an ad for a beefcake wet T-shirt contest. They were drinking Gatorade and water like their lives depended on it.

"Did a Gatorade truck just roll by or is this some arcane post-fire ritual?" I asked.

Pete answered, "It's damned hot in a fire with full gear on. You dehydrate. Water to rehydrate and Gatorade for the electrolytes so you don't pass out from the heat."

"Ah," I said.

The fireman who'd been rolling up the hose came over to us. A delicate triangle of face peered out from under the helmet. Clear grey eyes met my gaze. There was a lift to the chin, a way that she held herself that was a challenge. I recognized the symptoms. I had my own mountain-sized chip on my shoulder. I felt like apologizing for assuming she was a man, but didn't. It would have been insulting.

Pete introduced me to the tall man. "This is Captain Fulton. He's Incident Commander on this site."

I offered my hand while he was still thinking about it. His hand was large, big-knuckled. He shook hands like he was afraid to squeeze too hard, and dropped contact as soon as he could. I bet that he was just pleased as punch to have a female fireperson on his unit.

He introduced the fireperson in question. "Corporal Tucker." She offered her hand.

She had a nice firm handshake and eye contact so sincere it was aggressive.

I smiled. "Nice not to be the only woman on the scene for a change."

That brought a very small smile to her face. She gave the barest of nods and stepped back, letting her captain take over.

"How much do you know about a fire scene, Miss Blake?"

"It's Ms. Blake, and not much."

He frowned at the correction. I felt Dolph shift beside me, unhappy with me. His face wouldn't show it, but I could almost feel him willing me not to be a pain in the butt. Who, me?

Corporal Tucker was staring at me, eyes wide, face very still as if she was trying not to laugh.

One of the other firemen joined us. His damp T-shirt clung to a stomach that had required far too many sit-ups, but I enjoyed the view anyway. He was tall, broad-shouldered, blond, and looked like he should have been carrying a

surfboard or visiting Barbie in her Malibu dream house. There was a smear of soot on his smiling face, and his eyes were red-rimmed.

He offered his hand without being introduced. "I'm Wren." No rank, just his name. Confident.

He held my hand just a little longer than necessary. It wasn't obnoxious, just interested.

I dropped my eyes. Not out of shyness, but because some men mistake direct eye contact as a come-on. I had about as much beefcake on my plate as I could handle without adding amorous firemen.

Captain Fulton frowned at Wren. "Do you have any questions, Ms. Blake?" He emphasized the *Ms.* so it sounded like three z's at the end.

"You've got a basement full of vampires that you need to rescue without exposing them to sunlight or getting any of your people eaten, right?"

He stared at me for a second or two. "That's the gist of it."

"Why can't you just leave them in the basement until full dark?" I asked.

"The floor could cave in at any minute," he said.

"Which would expose them to sunlight and kill them," I said.

He nodded.

"Dolph said one vamp was covered with blankets, and rushed to the hospital. Is that why you think the others may not be in their coffins?"

He blinked. "There's also a vampire on the stairs leading down. It's . . ." His gaze fell, then came up suddenly to grab mine, angry. "I've seen burn victims but nothing quite like this."

"Are you sure it's a vampire?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because vamps exposed to sunlight or fire usually burn completely down to ash and a few bone fragments."

"We doused it with water," Wren said. "Thought it was a person at first."

"What changed your mind?"

It was his turn to look away. "It moved. It was like third-degree burns down to cartilage and muscle, bone, and it held out its hand to us." His face looked pale, haunted. "No person could have done that. We kept coating it with water, thinking maybe we could save it, but it stopped moving."

"So you assumed it was dead?" I asked.

All three of them exchanged glances. Captain Fulton said, "You mean it might not be dead?"

I shrugged. "Never underestimate a vamp's ability to survive, Captain."

"We've got to go back in there and get it to a hospital," Wren said. He turned as if he'd walk back into the house. Fulton caught his arm.

"Can you tell if the vampire is alive or dead?" Fulton asked.

"I think so."

"You think?"

"I've never heard of a vamp surviving fire. So yeah, I *think* I can tell if it's alive. If I said otherwise, I'd be lying. I try not to do that when it's important."

He nodded twice, briskly, as if he'd made up his mind about me. "The arsonist threw accelerant all over the floor that we're going to be walking on top of, and once we're down in the basement that same floor will be above us."

"So?"

"That floor is not going to hold, Ms. Blake. I'm going to make this a strictly voluntary job for my people."

I looked up into his serious face. "How likely is the floor to fall and how soon?"

"No way of knowing. Frankly, I'm surprised it hasn't caved in by now."

"It's a halfway house for the Church of Eternal Life. If it's like the last basement I saw at a Lifer's place, the ceiling is concrete reinforced with steel beams."

"That would explain why it hasn't fallen in," Fulton said.

"So we're safe, right?" I asked.

Fulton looked at me and shook his head. "The heat could have weakened the concrete, or even weakened the tensile strength of the steel beams."

"So it could still fall down," I said.

He nodded. "With us in it."

Great. "Let's do it."

Fulton grabbed my arm and gripped it too tight. I stared at him, but he didn't flinch and he didn't let me go. "Do you understand that we could be buried alive down there or crushed to death, or even drowned if there's enough water?"

"Let go of me, Captain Fulton." My voice was quiet, steady, not angry. Point for me.

Fulton released me and stepped back. His eyes looked a little wild. He was spooked. "I just want you to understand what could happen."

"She understands," Dolph said.

I had an idea. "Captain Fulton, how do you feel about sending your people in to a potential deathtrap to save a bunch of vampires?"

Something passed through his dark eyes. "The law says they're people. You don't leave people hurt or trapped."

"But," I prompted.

"But my men are worth more to me than a bunch of corpses."

"Not long ago I'd have brought the marshmallows and wieners for the roast," I said.

"What changed your mind?" Fulton asked.

"Kept meeting too many human beings that were as monstrous as the monsters. Maybe not as scary, but just as evil."

"Police work will ruin your view of your fellow man," Detective Tammy said. She and Larry had joined us at last. It had taken Larry a long time to cross those yards. He was far too hurt to insist on going inside the house. Good.

"I'll go in because it's my job, but I don't have to like it," Fulton said.

"Fine, but if we do have a cave-in, we better get dug out before nightfall, because without the vamp chaperone we'll be facing a basement full of new vamps that may not have perfect control over their hunger."

His eyes widened, showing too much white. I would have bet money that Fulton had had a close encounter of the fanged kind once upon a time. There were no scars on his neck, but that didn't prove anything. Vamps didn't always go for the neck, no matter what the movies say. Blood flows near the surface in lots of places.

I touched his arm lightly. Tension sang down his muscles like a string pulled too tight. "Who'd you lose?"

"What?" He seemed to be having trouble focusing on me.

"Who did the vampires take away from you?"

He stared at me, dark eyes focusing on me. Whatever horrible image was floating behind his eyes retreated. His face was almost normal when he said, "Wife, daughter."

I waited for him to say more, but the silence gathered round us in a still, deep pool made up of all the horror in those two whispered words. Wife, daughter. Both lost. No—taken.

"And now you have to go into the dark and save some bloodsuckers and risk yourself and your people. That really sucks."

He took a deep breath through his nose and let it out slowly. I watched him gain control of himself, watched him build his defenses back piece by piece. "I wanted to let it burn when I found out what was inside."

"But you didn't," I said. "You did your job."

"But the job's not done," he said softly.

"Life's a bitch," I said.

"And then you die," Larry finished for me.

I turned and frowned at him, but it was hard to argue. Today, he was right.

Chapter 42

The two-biter, as Dolph so poetically put it, was a small woman in her thirties. Her brown hair was back in a tight ponytail leaving her neck and the vampire bites painfully visible. Vampire freaks, people who just liked vamps for sexual turn-ons, hid their fang marks unless at one of their hangouts. Human members of the Church of Eternal Life almost always made sure the bites were visible. Hair worn just right, short sleeves if the marks were at wrist or elbow bend. They were proud of the bites, saw them as signs of salvation.

The upper set of fang marks were larger, the skin redder and more torn. Someone hadn't been neat with their food. The second mark was almost dainty, surgically neat. The two-biter's name was Caroline, and she stood hugging herself as if she were cold. Since you could probably fry eggs on the sidewalk, I didn't think she was cold, or at least not that kind of cold.

"You wanted to see me, Caroline?"

She nodded, head bobbing up and down like one of those dogs you used to see in the backs of cars. "Yes," she said, voice breathy. She stared at Dolph and McKinnon, then back at me. The look was enough. She wanted privacy.

"I'm going to take Caroline for a little walk. If that's okay?"

Dolph nodded. McKinnon said, "The Red Cross have coffee and soft drinks." He pointed to a small truck with a camper shell. Red Cross volunteers giving coffee and comfort to the cops and firemen. You didn't see them at every crime scene, but they hit their share.

Dolph caught my gaze and gave a very small nod. He was trusting me to question her without him, trusting me to bring him back any info that pertained to the crime. The fact that he still trusted me that much made the day a little brighter. Nice that something did.

It was also nice to be doing something useful. Dolph had been hot to get me to the scene. Now everything was stalled. Fulton just wasn't eager to risk his people for corpses. But that wasn't it. If there'd been six humans down there, we'd have already been suited up and going in. But they weren't human, and no matter what the law said, it made a difference. Dolph was right, before *Addison v. Clark*, they'd have gotten a fire crew in here to make sure it didn't spread to the other houses, but they'd have let it burn. Standard operating procedure.

But that was four years ago, and the world had changed. Or so we told ourselves. If the vamps weren't in coffins and the roof collapsed, they would be exposed to sunlight, and that would be it. The firemen had used an axe on the wall next to the stairs so I could see the second vamp corpse. It was crispy-critttered but not dust. I had no explanation for why the body had remained so intact. I wasn't even a hundred percent sure that come nightfall it wouldn't heal. *It*—even I still did it. But the body was so badly burned, like black sticks and brown leather, the muscles in the face had pulled away leaving the teeth, complete with fangs, in a grimace that looked like pain. Firemen Wren had explained to me that the muscles contract with the heat enough to break bones sometimes. Just when you think you know every awful thing about death, you find out you're wrong.

I had to think of the body as an "it" or I couldn't look at it. Caroline had known the vampire. I think she was having a lot more trouble thinking of the body as an it.

She got a soft drink from the nice Red Cross lady. Even I got a Coke, which meant it was pretty damn hot for me to pass on the coffee.

I led her to the front yard of a neighboring house where no one had come out to check the scene. The drapes were all closed, driveway empty. Everyone gone for the day. The only sign of life was a triangular rose bed and a black swallowtail butterfly floating over it. Peaceful. For a moment I wondered if the butterfly was one of Warrick's pets, but there was no feel of power. It was just a butterfly floating like a tiny tissue-paper kite over the yard. I sat down on the grass. Caroline joined me, smoothing her pale blue shorts down in back as if she was more accustomed to wearing skirts. She took a drink of soda. Now that she had me to herself, she didn't seem to know how to start.

It might have worked better if I'd waited for her to begin, but my patience had been used up long ago. It wasn't one of my cardinal virtues to begin with. "What did you want to tell me?" I asked.

She sat her can of soda carefully on the grass, thin hands smoothing along the hem of her shorts. She had pale pink nail polish on her short nails that matched the pink stripes in her tank top. Better than pale blue, I guess.

"Can I trust you?" she asked in a voice as fragile and pale as she seemed.

I hate being asked questions like that. I wasn't in the mood to lie. "Maybe. It depends on what you want to trust me with."

Caroline looked a little startled, as if she'd expected me to just say, sure. "That was very honest of you. Most people lie without thinking about it." Something in the way she said it made me think that Caroline had been lied to often, by people she'd trusted.

"I try not to lie, Caroline, but if you have information that'll help us here, you need to tell me." I took a drink of my own soda and tried to appear casual, forced my body not to tense up, not to show how much I wanted to simply scream at her until she told me whatever it was. Short of torture, you can't make people talk, not really. Caroline wanted to tell me her secrets. I just had to be calm and let her do it. If I was overeager or abusive, she'd either fold and tell all, or clam up and let us rot. You never knew which way it would go, so you try patience first. You can always browbeat them later.

"I've been the human liaison for this halfway house for three months now. The guardian who oversaw the younger ones was Giles. He was strong and powerful, but he was trapped in his coffin until true darkness. Then two nights ago he woke in the middle of the day. The first time for him. The one on the stairs has to be one of the younger vampires."

She looked at me, brown eyes wide. She leaned into me, lowering her soft voice even further. I had to lean into her just to catch her voice, close enough that my hair brushed her shoulder.

"None of the younger ones has been dead two years. Do you understand what that means?"

"It means that they shouldn't have risen during daylight hours. It means that the one on the stairs should have been burnt to ashes."

"Exactly," she said. She sounded relieved to finally find someone who understood.

"Was this early waking restricted to your halfway house?"

She shook her head, whispering now. We had our heads together like first-graders talking in class. I was close enough to see the fine red lines in her eyes. Caroline had been losing sleep over something. "Every house and all the churches were suddenly having vampires rise early. The hunger seemed worse on the young ones." Her hand went to her neck and the messy wound. "They were harder to control, even by the guardians."

"Anyone have any theories as to why this was happening?" I asked.

"Malcolm thought someone was interfering with them."

I had several candidates for who might be interfering with the vamps, but we weren't here to get my answers. We were here to get Caroline's answers. "He have any ideas about who?"

"You know about our illustrious visitors?" she asked, voice even lower, as if she were afraid to say the last.

"If you mean the Vampire Council, I've met them."

She jerked back from me then, shocked. "Met them," she said. "But Malcolm has not met them yet."

I shrugged. "They paid their . . . respects to the Master of the City first."

"Malcolm said they would contact us when they were ready. He saw their coming as a sign that the rest of vampirekind was ready to embrace the true faith."

I wasn't about to sit there and tell her why the council had really come to town. If the Church didn't know, they didn't need to know. "I don't think the council thinks much about religion, Caroline."

"Why else would they come?"

I shrugged. "The council has its reasons." See, not a lie, cryptic as hell, but not a lie.

She seemed to accept the statement. Maybe she was used to cryptic bullshit. "Why would the council want to hurt us?"

"Maybe they don't see it as hurting."

"If the firemen go down in there to save the young ones and they wake without a guardian . . ." She drew her knees to her chest, hugging her legs. "They'll rise like revenants, mindless beasts, until they've fed. People could be dead before they come to themselves."

I touched her shoulder. "You're scared of them, aren't you?" I'd never met a human church member who was scared of vampires, especially not one that was donating blood as a human liaison.

She lowered the neckline of her tank top until I could see the tops of her small breasts. There was a bite mark on the pale flesh of one breast that looked more like a dog bite than one made by a vampire. The flesh had bruised badly, as if the vamp had been pulled off her almost as soon as he'd started sucking.

"Giles had to pull him off of me. He had to restrain him. Looking into his face, I knew that if Giles hadn't been there, he'd have killed me. Not to bring me over or embrace me, but just because I was food." She let her top slide back over the wound, hugging herself tight, shivering in the hot July sunshine.

"How long have you been with the Church, Caroline?"

"Two years."

"And this is the first time you've been scared?"

She nodded.

"They've been very careful around you, then."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

I unbent my left arm, showing the scars. "The mound of scar tissue at the crook is where a vamp gnawed on me. He broke the arm. I was lucky not to lose the use of it."

"What about that?" She touched the claw marks that trailed down the lower part of the arm.

"Shapeshifted witch."

"How did the cross get burned into your arm?"

"Humans with a few bites like you thought it was amusing to brand me with the cross. Just amusing themselves until their master rose for the night."

Her eyes were wide. "But the vampires in the Church aren't like that. We aren't like that."

"All vamps are like that, Caroline. Some of them control it better than others, but they still have to feed off humans. You can't really respect something that you see as food."

"But you are with the Master of the City. Do you believe that of him?"

I thought about that and answered truthfully. "Sometimes."

She shook her head. "I thought I knew what I wanted. What I was going to do for all eternity. Now I don't know anything. I feel so . . . lost." Tears trailed out of her wide eyes.

I put my arm across her shoulders, and she leaned into me, clinging to me with her small, carefully painted hands. She cried soundlessly, only the shakiness of her breathing betraying her.

I held her and let her cry. If I took the nice firemen down into the darkness and six newly dead vampires rose as revenants, either the firemen were dead or I'd be forced to kill the vampires. Either way, not a win-win situation.

We needed to find out if the vamps were alive, needed some control over them. If the council was causing the problems, maybe they could help fix it. When big bad vampires come to town to kill me, I don't generally turn to them for help. But we were trying to save vampires lives here, not just human. Maybe they'd help. Maybe they wouldn't, but it couldn't hurt to ask. All right, it could hurt to ask, and probably would.

Chapter 43

Even over the phone, I could tell Jean-Claude was shocked at my idea of turning to the council for help. Call it a guess. He was literally speechless. It was nearly a first.

"Why not ask for their help?"

"They are the council, *ma petite*," he said, voice almost breathy with emotion.

"Exactly," I said. "They are the leaders of your people. Leadership doesn't just mean privileges. It has a price tag."

"Tell that to your politicians in Washington in their three-thousand-dollar suits," he said.

"I didn't say that we did any better. That's beside the point. They've helped make this problem. They can, by God, help fix it." I had a bad thought. "Unless they're doing it on purpose," I said.

He gave a long sigh. "No, *ma petite*, it is not on purpose. I did not realize that it was happening to the others."

"Why isn't it happening to our vampires?"

I think he laughed. "Our vampires, *ma petite*?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, *ma petite*, I know what you mean. I have been protecting our people."

"Don't take this wrong, but I'm surprised you had the juice to keep the council from messing with your people."

"In truth, *ma petite*, so am I."

"So you're more powerful than Malcolm now?"

"It would appear so," he said quietly.

I thought about that for a minute. "But why the early rising? Why the increased hunger? Why would the council want that to be happening?"

"They do not want it, *ma petite*. It is merely a side effect of their proximity."

"Explain," I said.

"Their very presence will give unprotected vampires extra power: early rising, perhaps other gifts. The more voracious appetite and lack of control of the younger ones could mean that the council has decided not to feed while in my territory. I know the Traveler can take energy through lesser vampires without possessing them."

"So he takes part of the blood they drink?"

"*Oui, ma petite.*"

"Are the others feeding?" I asked.

"If all of the Church's members are experiencing this difficulty, I would think not. I think the Traveler has found a way to drain energy for all of them, though I cannot imagine Yvette going for even a night without causing pain to someone."

"She has Warrick to pick on." The moment I said it, I realized I hadn't had a chance to tell Jean-Claude about Warrick's little daytime excursion, or his warning. Jean-Claude had woken from his sleep while I was at the hospital surrounded by wereanimals. Since then I'd been moving from one emergency to another.

"Warrick came to visit me while you were out for the day," I said.

"What do you mean, *ma petite*?"

I told him. All of it.

He was silent. Only his soft breathing let me know he was still there. Finally, he spoke. "I knew that Yvette gained power through her master, but I did not realize he was dampening Warrick's abilities." He laughed suddenly. "Perhaps that is why I did not realize I was a master vampire while I was with the council that first time. Perhaps my master, too, was preventing my powers from blossoming."

"Does Warrick's warning change our plans?" I asked.

"We are committed to a formal entertainment, *ma petite*. If we refuse to pay the price for your wereleopards, then we will give Padma and Yvette the very excuse they need to challenge us. Breaking faith once your word is given is an almost unforgivable sin among us."

"I've endangered us," I said.

"*Oui*, but being who you are, you could not do less. Warrick a master vampire, who would have thought it? He has been Yvette's plaything for so very long."

"How long?" I asked.

Jean-Claude was quiet for a heartbeat or two, then, "He was a knight of the Crusades, *ma petite*."

"Which crusade? There were several," I said.

"So nice to talk to someone who knows their history, *ma petite*. But you have been near him. What age is he?"

I thought about it. "Nine hundred, give or take."

"Which would mean?"

"I don't like being quizzed, Jean-Claude. The First Crusade in the late 1000s."

"*Exactement*."

"So Yvette was old even then," I said.

"Do you not know her age?"

"She's a thousand years old. But it's a soft one thousand. I've met vamps her age that scared the hell out of me. She doesn't."

"Yes, Yvette is terrifying but not because of her age, or her power. She can live until the end of the world and she will never be a master among us."

"And that gripes her ass," I said.

"Crudely but accurately put, *ma petite*."

"I'm going to ask the Traveler for help."

"We have bargained for all the aid we will ever get from them, *ma petite*. Do not put yourself further in their debt. I beg this of you."

"You've never begged anything of me," I said.

"Then heed me now, *ma petite*. Do not do this."

"I'm not going to bargain," I said.

He let out a breath as if he'd been holding it. "Good, *ma petite*, very good."

"I'm just going to ask."

"*Ma petite, ma petite*, what have I just told you?"

"Look, we're trying to save vampire lives here, not just human. Vampires are legal in this country. It doesn't just mean you get privileges. It comes with a price. Or it should."

"You are going to appeal to the council's sense of justice?" He didn't bother to keep the incredulity out of his voice. In fact, he played on it.

Put that way it sounded silly, but . . . "The council is partially to blame for what's happening. They've endangered their own people. Good leaders don't do that."

"No one has ever accused them of being good leaders, *ma petite*. They just are. It is not a question of good or bad. We fear them, and that is enough."

"Bullshit. That isn't enough. It isn't even close to enough."

He sighed. "Promise me only that you will not bargain with them. Make your request but do not offer them anything for their aid. You must swear this to me, *ma petite*. Please."

It was the "please" that did it, and the fear in his voice. "I promise. It's their job to do this. You don't bargain to get someone to do what they're supposed to do in the first place."

"You are a wondrous combination of cynicism and naiveté, *ma petite*."

"You think it's naive to expect the council to help the vampires of this city?"

"They will ask what is in it for them, *ma petite*. What will you say?"

"I'll tell them it's their duty, and call them honorless bastards if they don't do it."

He did laugh then. "I would pay to hear this conversation."

"Would it help for you to listen in?"

"No. If they suspect it is my idea, they will demand a price. Only you, *ma petite*, could be this naive before them and hope to be believed."

I didn't think of myself as naive, and it bugged me that he did. Of course, he was nearly three centuries older than I was. Madonna probably seemed naive to him. "I'll let you know how it goes."

"Oh, the Traveler will make very certain that I know the outcome."

"Am I about to get you in trouble?"

"We are already in trouble, *ma petite*. It cannot get much deeper."

"Was that meant to be comforting?" I asked.

"*Un peu*," he said.

"That meant 'a little,' right?"

"*Oui, ma petite. Vous dispose a apprendre.*"

"Stop it," I said.

"As you like." He lowered his voice to a seductive whisper, as if it wasn't already the voice of wet dreams. "What were you doing when I awoke today?"

I'd almost forgotten about my little hospital adventure. Now it came rushing back hard enough to bring heat to my face. "Nothing."

"No, no, *ma petite*, that is not correct. You were most certainly doing something."

"Did Stephen and Nathaniel arrive at the house?"

"They did."

"Great. I'll talk to you later."

"You refuse to answer my question?"

"No, I just don't know a short version that doesn't make me feel like a slut. I don't have time for a longer version right now. So, can you wait?"

"I will wait for all eternity, if my lady asks it."

"Can the crap, Jean-Claude."

"If I wish you luck with the council, would that please you more?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"It is all right to be a lady, Anita. It is not a bad thing being a woman."

"You try being one, then talk to me," I said. I hung up. "My lady" sounded like *my dog*. Ownership. I was his human servant. Short of killing him, I couldn't change that. But I didn't belong to him. If I belonged to anybody, I belonged to me. And that was how I was going to approach the council, as me: Anita Blake, vampire executioner, police liaison for the monsters. They wouldn't listen to Jean-Claude's human servant, but they might listen to me.

Chapter 44

Thomas answered the phone at the Circus. "They have you doing flunky work?" I asked.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"Sorry, this is Anita Blake."

He was quiet for a second, then, "I'm sorry, we are not open for business until nightfall."

"Is Fernando there?"

"Yes, that's right. Nightfall."

"I need to talk to the Traveler, Thomas. I'm asking this on police business, not as Jean-Claude's human servant. We've got some vampires in trouble, and I think he can help."

"Yes, we do take reservations," he said.

I gave him the number of Dolph's car phone. "We don't have a lot of time, Thomas. If he won't help me, I've got to go in with cops and firemen on my own."

"I look forward to seeing you tonight." He hung up.

Life would be so much easier if Fernando were dead. Besides, I'd promised Sylvie we'd kill him. I always tried to keep my promises.

Dolph was leaning in the door wanting to know what was taking so long, when the phone rang. I looked at him. He nodded and moved away. I picked up.

"Yes."

"I am told you needed to speak with me."

I wondered whose lips he was using, whose body. "Thank you for calling me back, Traveler." A little politeness couldn't hurt.

"Thomas was surprisingly eloquent on your behalf. What do you wish of me?"

I explained as briefly as possible.

"And what do you wish me to do about this problem of yours?"

"You can stop taking energy through them. That would help."

"Then I must feed on live humans. Is there someone you would offer in their place for each of us?"

"No, no offers, no bargains. This is police business, Traveler. I'm speaking with the authority of human law behind me, not Jean-Claude."

"What is human law to me? To us?"

"If we go down there and they attack us, I'll end up killing some of them. They may kill policemen, firemen. That's bad publicity with Brewster's Law to be decided this fall. The council has stopped all vampires in this country from fighting amongst themselves until the law is finalized. Surely slaughtering policemen is forbidden, too?"

"It is," he said. His voice was so careful. He gave me nothing. I couldn't tell if he was angry or amused or gave a damn either way.

"I'm asking you to help me save the lives of your vampires."

"They belong to this Church of yours. They are not mine," he said.

"But the council is the overall leadership of the vampires, right?"

"We are their ultimate law."

I didn't like the phrasing, but I plowed ahead. "You could find out case by case if the vampires were alive or dead in the burned-out buildings. You could keep the vamps from rising early and attacking us here."

"I think you overestimate my powers, Anita."

"I don't think so," I said.

"If Jean-Claude will supply us with . . . food, I will be more than happy to cease borrowing from the others."

"No, you get nothing for this, Traveler."

"If you give me nothing, I give you nothing," he said.

"Dammit, this isn't a game."

"We are vampires, Anita. Do you not understand what that means? We are apart from your world. What happens to you does not affect us."

"Bullshit. Some fanatics are out here trying to duplicate the Inferno all over again. That affects you. Thomas and Gideon have had to repel invaders while you slept. It does affect you."

"It doesn't matter. We are in your world, but not of it," he said.

"Look, that may have worked in the 1500's or whenever, but the minute vampires became legal citizens, it changed. A vampire got taken to the hospital in an ambulance. They are doing their best to keep him alive, whatever the hell that means for you guys. Firemen are risking their lives to go into burned-out buildings to save vampires. The fanatics are trying to kill you, but the rest of us humans are trying to save you."

"Then you are fools," he said.

"Maybe," I said, "but we poor humans have taken oaths to protect and serve. We honor our promises."

"Are you implying I do not?"

"I'm saying that if you don't help us here, today, then you aren't worthy to be council. You aren't leaders. You're just parasites feeding on the fear of your followers. True leaders don't leave their people to die, not if they can save them."

"Parasites. May I tell the rest of the council your so high opinion of us?" He was angry now. I could hear it like heat across the line.

"Yeah, tell them all. But mark me on this, Traveler, vampires can't just gain privileges with legal citizenship. They also gain responsibilities to the human law that made them legal."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's so. This mysterious 'in your world but not a part of it' may have worked in the past. But welcome to the twentieth century, because that's what legal status means. Once you're citizens who pay taxes, own businesses, marry, inherit, have children, you can't hide in some crypt somewhere and count the decades. You are a part of our world now."

"I will think upon what you have said, Anita Blake."

"When I get off the phone with you, I'm going inside the house. We're going to start bringing out the vamps in body bags to protect them in case the floor caves in. If they rise as revenants while we're doing it, it'll be a bloodbath."

"I am aware of the problems," he said.

"Are you aware that it's the presence of the council that's giving them the energy to possibly rise this early in the day?"

"I cannot change the effect our presence has on the lesser vampires. If this Malcolm wishes to claim the status of master, then it is his duty to keep his people safe. I cannot do it for him."

"Can't or won't?" I asked.

"Can't," he said.

Hmmm. "Maybe I have overestimated your powers. My apologies if I have."

"Accepted, and I understand how rare it is for you to apologize for anything, Anita." The phone went dead.

I hit the button that turned off the buzzing line.

Dolph walked back as I got out of the car. "Well?" Dolph asked.

I shrugged. "Looks like we go in without vampire backup."

"You can't depend on them, Anita, not for backup." He took my hand, something he'd never done, squeezing it. "This is all you can count on. One human to another. The monsters don't give a shit about us. If you think they do, then you are fooling yourself." He dropped my hand and walked away before I could think of a comeback. Just as well. After talking to the Traveler, I wasn't sure I had one.

Chapter 45

An hour later I was dressed in a Hazardous Materials suit—Haz-Mat for short. It was bulky, to say the least, and turned into a portable sauna in the St. Louis heat. Heavy tape was wrapped around my elbows and wrists, securing the seal between gloves and sleeves. I'd walked out of the boots twice, so they taped my legs, too. I felt like an astronaut who had gone to the wrong tailor. Insult to injury, there was a Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus, SCBA, strapped to my back. Add Underwater and you got SCUBA, but we weren't planning to go underwater. I was grateful for that.

There was a mask that covered the entire face instead of a mouthpiece with regulator, but other than that, it was damn close to SCUBA gear. I had my diving certification. Got it back in college and keep it updated. If you let it slide, you have to take the whole damn training course over again. Updating was less painful. I was delaying putting on the mask as long as possible. Due to a diving accident in Florida, I've got claustrophobia now. Not bad enough for elevators to be a problem, but enclosed in the suit, with a mask about to cover my face and the Haz-Mat helmet going over my entire head—I was panicking and didn't know what to do about it.

"Do you really think all this is necessary?" I asked for the dozenth time. If they'd just give me a regular fire helmet with the SCBA, I could handle it.

"If you go in with us, yes," Corporal Tucker said. Her three inches of extra height didn't help much. We both looked like we were wearing hand-me-downs.

"There's the possibility of disease contamination if there are bodies floating in the basement," Lieutenant Wren said.

"Will there really be that much water in the basement?"

They exchanged glances. "You've never been in a house after a fire, have you?" Tucker asked.

"No."

"You'll understand once we're in," she said.

"Sounds ominous."

"It's not meant to," she said.

Tucker didn't have much of a sense of humor, and Wren had too much. He'd been entirely too solicitous while we were wriggling into the suits. He'd made sure he taped me up and was even now wasting a brilliant smile on me. But it was nothing too overt. Nothing obvious enough for me to say, look I have a boyfriend. For all I knew, he was always like this and I'd look an ass for taking it personally.

"Put the mask on, and I'll help you fit the hood over it," Wren said.

I shook my head. "Just give me a regular helmet and I'll use the SCBA."

"If you fall in the water without the hood sealed, Anita, you might as well not have the suit at all."

"I'll take my chances," I said.

Tucker said, "You had trouble walking from the Haz-Mat truck to here. You'll get better with practice, but in deep water, even we'll have trouble keeping our feet."

I shook my head again. My heart was pounding so hard, I was having trouble breathing. I put the mask on my face. I took a breath, and that horrible sound began. It was like Darth Vader breathing except it was yours. In the water, in the dark, your breath was the only sound. It could become thunderously loud while you waited to die.

"Strap needs tightening," Wren said. He started to adjust the strap as if I were five and being bundled off to play in the snow.

"I can do it." My voice came over the open radio line in the mask.

He raised his gloved hands skyward, still smiling. He was a hard man to insult, because I'd been trying. He had this sort of cheerful goodwill that seemed to deflect everything. Never trust people who smile constantly. They're either selling something or not very bright. Wren didn't strike me as stupid.

Insult to injury, I couldn't get the strap adjusted on the damned mask. I always hated trying to work with anything bulkier than surgical gloves. I pulled the mask off and my first breath of real air was too loud, too long. I was sweating, and it wasn't just the heat.

I had the Browning and the Firestar lying on the side of the fire truck. There were enough pockets on the outside of the suit to hold half a dozen guns. I had a sawed-off shotgun from my vampire kit in a makeshift pack across my back. Yeah, it's illegal, but Dolph had been with me once upon a time when we went after a revenant vampire. They were like PCP users: immune to pain, stronger even than a normal vamp. A force of hell with fangs. I showed him the shotgun before I got it out. He okayed it. We'd ended with two dead security guards and one rookie officer spread all over the hallway the last time. At least Dolph and his men had silver ammo now. He and Zerbrowski nearly getting killed because they didn't have it was what pushed the paperwork through. I gave them a box of ammo for Christmas before they got official silver ammo. I never wanted to watch any of them bleed their lives away for lack of it.

I'd left the knives in their wrist sheaths. Carrying naked blades in the pockets of a suit that was air-and water-tight seemed sort of defeatist. If I lost both handguns and had to scramble for the knives under the suit, then we were probably toast. No need to worry about it. My silver cross hung naked around my neck. It was the best deterrent I had against baby vamps. They couldn't force their way past a bare cross, not when it was backed up by faith. I'd only met one vamp that could force his way past a blazing cross and harm me. And he was dead. Funny how so many of them ended up that way.

Tucker came over to me. "I'll help you adjust the mask."

I shook my head. "Leave me till last. The less time I'm in this get-up the better."

She licked her lips, started to say something, stopped, then said, "Are you all right?"

Normally, I would have said sure, but they were depending on me, maybe for their lives. How scared was I? Scared. "Not exactly," I said.

"You're claustrophobic, aren't you?" she said.

I must have looked surprised, because she said, "A lot of people want to be firemen, but in the middle of a fire with the mask down and smoke so thick

you can't see your hand in front of your eyes, you don't want to be claustrophobic."

I nodded. "I can understand that."

"There's a part of training where they cover your eyes completely and make you do the equipment by touch as if the smoke had blacked out the world. You learn who doesn't like it close."

"I could take the suit without the SCBA. It's the combination of the suit and listening to myself breathe. I had a diving accident just after college."

"Can you do this?" No accusations, just honesty.

I nodded. "I won't leave you stranded."

"That's not what I asked," she said.

We stared at each other. "Give me a few minutes. I just didn't understand what Haz-Mat was. I'll be okay."

"You sure?"

I nodded.

She didn't say anything else, just walked away to let me gather my scattered wits.

Wren had finally wandered over to talk to Fulton. Wren and Tucker were going in because they were both paramedics and we might need their medical training. Also, frankly, I didn't want Fulton in the dark with me and a bunch of vamps. He was simply too freaked. I didn't blame him, but I didn't want him at my back either. Of course, if I'd been watching me sweat and struggle to breathe calmly, I might not want me in there. Dammit. I could do this. I had to do this.

Detective Tammy Reynolds came slogging up in her own suit. They didn't have one big enough to fit Dolph, so she was my armed backup. Oh, joy. I couldn't send them in with Tammy as their only backup.

Tammy had managed to get her shoulder rig over the suit. She had one of those that just rode across the shoulders, no belt to put through straps. When I'd been shopping, all the holsters that just crossed the shoulders moved around on me too much. Part of it is having narrow shoulders. I'd have had to have the holster cut down. I don't buy things that have to be fussed with. Not dresses or holsters.

Reynolds smiled at me. "Larry's really disappointed that he can't come along."

"I'm relieved," I said.

She frowned at me. "I thought you'd want him to back you up."

"Yeah, but a gun can't help him if the ceiling caves in on us."

"You think it will?" she asked.

I shrugged. I'd concentrated on getting suited up, on small details, on Wren's quiet teasing. I'd managed not to dwell on the thought that we were about to walk across a floor that might collapse underneath us, then walk under it and wait for it to collapse on top of us, while wading through water full of coffins and vampires. What could be better?

"Let's just say I'm cautious."

"And you don't want to risk Larry."

"That's right. I don't like the idea of Larry getting hurt, by anything." I stared at her while I said it.

She blinked hazel eyes at me, then smiled. "Neither do I, Anita, neither do I."

I nodded and let it go. I'd done my parenting bit. I wasn't even sure why I didn't trust Tammy, but I didn't. Women's intuition, or maybe I just didn't trust much of anybody anymore. Maybe.

Tucker came back to us. "Time to suit up." She looked right at me.

I nodded. I let her help me adjust the mask over my face. I closed my eyes and concentrated on my breathing—in, out, in, out. In diving if you breathed too fast, you could blow your lungs. Now it was just a way to keep from hyperventilating.

She fitted the suit's hood over my head. I watched her do it and knew my eyes were a little too wide.

Wren's cheerful voice came over the radio in the mask. "Breathe normally, Anita."

"I am breathing normally," I said. It sounded odd to be able to talk normally while my own breathing was wheezing, loud and ominous in my ears. With a regulator in, you couldn't talk, though I'd learned you could scream with a regulator clenched between your teeth. Sounds echo like a son of a bitch under water.

With the helmet over the mask, visibility was not the best. I practiced turning my head, seeing just how big the blind spots were. My peripheral vision was almost gone.

Tammy's voice came over the radio. "It's hard to see in this thing."

"You'll get used to it," Tucker said.

"I hope we're not in this get-up long enough to get used to it," I said.

"If we say 'run,' run like hell," Tucker said.

"Because the floor will be caving in, right?" I said.

I think she nodded, but it was hard to tell through the layers. "Right."

"Fine, but when we get to the stairs, I have to take the lead, and if I say 'run like hell,' it means the vampires are going to eat us."

Wren and Tucker exchanged glances. "You tell us to run," Wren said, "we'll ask how fast."

"Agreed," Tucker said.

"Great," I said. Truthfully, it was a damn relief not to have to argue with anyone. No debate. What a relief. If I hadn't been sweating like a pig, listening to my own breathing echoing horrifically like *The Tell-Tale Heart*, having to relearn how to walk in metal-lined boots, I'd have said working with the fire department was a break. But it wasn't. I'd have rather rappelled down on ropes with Special Forces into a free-fire zone than shuffle along in the mummy suit trying not to lose it. It was just a phobia, dammit. Nothing was wrong. Nothing was hurting me. My body didn't believe the logic. Phobias are like that. Reason doesn't move them.

Wren stepped onto the floor. It made a noise like a giant groaning in its sleep. He froze, then stomped his feet so hard I thought my pulse was going to spill out my mouth.

"Shouldn't we be quieter?" I asked.

Wren's voice came in my ear. "Walk exactly where I walk. Don't deviate, don't spread out."

"Why?" I asked.

"Just because the floor is solid where I'm walking doesn't mean it's solid anywhere else."

"Oh," I said.

I went right behind Wren, so I got a closeup view of his little stomping dance. It was not comforting. Tucker came behind me, then Detective Reynolds bringing up the rear.

I'd given everybody a cross to put in the pockets of their suits. Why wasn't everyone wearing one like I was? Because Tucker and Wren were carrying a pack of opaque body bags apiece. Plan was to put the vamps in the bags and take them back up. Inside an ambulance in the body bags they'd be safe until nightfall. If we pulled this off and the ceiling didn't collapse before darkness, I was going to be pissed. As long as it didn't fall while we were down here. That I could pass on.

I walked where Wren walked, religiously. Though I did have to say, "Even out of this suit my stride isn't as big as yours. In the suit I'm damned near crippled. Can I take smaller steps?"

"Just as long as the steps are directly in line with mine, yes," Wren said.

Relief. The floor was covered with debris. Nails were everywhere in the blackened boards. I understood the metal insoles now. I was grateful for them, but it didn't make them any easier to walk in.

There was a line to one side going down a hole in the floor. It was a hard suction hose attached to a loud pump some distance away. They were draining the water out of the basement. If the place was watertight, it could be full to the ceiling. Comforting thought.

Fulton had called in a Haz-Mat tanker for the water. He seemed to be treating vampirism like a contagious disease. It was contagious but not in the way he seemed to think. But he was Incident Commander. I was learning that that title equated with God at a fire scene. You couldn't argue with God. You could get mad at him, but it didn't change anything.

I concentrated on moving my feet. Watching for debris. Stepping in Wren's footsteps. I let the world slide away except for moving forward. I was aware of the sun beating down, sweat trickling down my spine, but it was all distant. There was nothing but moving forward, no thinking required. My breathing was normal when I bumped into Wren's back.

I froze, afraid to move. Was something wrong?

"What's up?" I asked.

"Stairs," he said.

Oh, I thought. I was supposed to take the lead now. I wasn't ready. Truthfully, I wasn't sure how good I could walk on stairs in the damn suit. I just hadn't appreciated how hard it would be to walk in it.

"Stairs are the most dangerous part of a building like this," Wren said. "If anything is going to collapse it'll be the stairs."

"Are you trying to make us feel better?" Reynolds asked.

"Just prepared," he said. "I'll test the first few steps. If it seems solid, I'll move back and let Blake take it." He wasn't teasing anymore. He was all business, and we were suddenly on a last-name basis.

"Watch the body on the stairs," he said. He moved onto the first step, stomping hard enough that I jumped.

The body on the stairs was black, charcoaled. The mouth gaped open in a soundless scream. You had to look close to see the fangs. Real vamp fangs just aren't that big. Tendons were stretched naked looking like they'd snap if you touched them. The body looked fragile, as if one touch and it would be dust. I remembered Larry and the skull that had turned to powder at his touch. This body looked tougher than that, but not by much. Could it be alive? Was there some spark inside it that with nightfall it would move, live? I didn't know. It should have been ash. It should still have been burning in the sunlight, no matter how much water they poured on it.

Wren's voice startled me. "You can take the lead now, Anita."

I looked down the steps and found Wren several steps below, almost halfway. The darkness down below spilled around his feet like a pool. He was far enough down that a really ambitious vamp might have grabbed a leg and pulled him down. I hadn't been concentrating. My fault.

"Come back up, Wren," I said.

He did, and he was oblivious to the possible danger. Damn. "The stairs are concrete, which makes it safer. You should be okay."

"Do I still have to stomp every step?"

"It'd be safer," he said.

"If I feel it going, I yell?"

"Yes," he said. He brushed past me.

I stared down into the Stygian depths. "I need a hand for the railing in this suit. A hand for the gun. I'm out of hands for a flashlight," I said.

"I can try and shine a light in front of you, but it won't be where you need it."

"Don't worry about it, unless I ask." It took me over a minute, maybe two, to fumble the Browning out of its pocket. The gun was definitely going in one hand. I had to use two hands to click off the safety in the bulky gloves. I slid my hand inside the trigger guard on the trigger. I'd never have carried a gun like this normally. But my gloved finger didn't want to fit inside the trigger guard. I was ready to go now. If I put safety first, I'd never get a shot off in time. I'd practiced with winter gloves on, but I'd never dreamed of having to shoot vamps in a Haz-Mat suit. Hell, I didn't know what a Haz-Mat suit was until today.

"What's the holdup?" Fulton's voice. I'd forgotten he was monitoring everything we said. Like being spied on.

"These damn gloves aren't exactly made for shooting."

"What's that mean?" he asked.

"It means, I'm ready to go down now," I said. I kept the Browning pointed up and a little forward. If I fell in the suit and accidentally fired a shot, I was going to try very hard not to shoot anyone behind me. I wondered if Detective Tammy had her gun out. I wondered how good a shot she was. How was she in an emergency? I said a short prayer that we wouldn't be finding out, got a death grip on the banister, and stomped the first step. It didn't fall down. I stared ahead into the thick blackness at the middle of the stairs. The sunlight cut across the darkness like a knife.

"Here we go, boys and girls," I said. And down we went.

Chapter 46

Water lapped at the last few steps. The basement had turned into a lake. Wren's flashlight passed over the dark water like a tiny searchlight. The water was a solid blackness, holding all its secrets close and quiet. A coffin floated about ten feet from the stairs, bobbing gently in the dark, dark water.

Even over the wheezing and whoosh of my own breathing, I could hear the water lapping. There was the sound of wood rubbing together like boats tied up at a dock. I pointed, and Wren's light followed my hand. Two coffins were bumping against one another near the far wall.

"Three coffins visible, but there should be four more. One for the guardian, one for the vamp on the stairs, and two more."

I took that last step into the water. Even through the suit I could feel the liquid like a distant coolness, a liquid weight lapping at my ankles. The feel of the water was enough to speed my breathing, send my heart pounding in my throat.

"You're going to hyperventilate," Wren said. "Slow your breathing."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, counting to make it slower. A count of fifteen, then another breath.

"You okay?" he asked.

"What's going on?" Fulton asked.

"Nothing," Wren said.

"I'm okay," I said.

"What's happening?" Fulton said.

"We're missing four coffins. Two could have sunk, but we still have two missing. Just wondering where they are," I said.

"Be careful down there," he said.

"Like a virgin on her wedding night," I whispered.

Someone laughed. Always good to be amusing.

I tried stomping on the next step, knee-deep in water, and my feet went out from under me. I was suddenly sliding down the steps, only my grip on the banister keeping me from going under. I sat in water up to my chin, feeling stupid and scared. A combination I'm not fond of.

Wren came to stand over me, light sliding over the water while he helped me to my feet. I needed the help. I raised the Browning dripping wet into the light.

"Will your gun work now?" he asked.

"I could fire it underwater and it would still work," I said. It still amazes me how many people think a little water ruins a gun. You have to clean it really well afterwards but during the shooting, water is fine. The days of having to keep your powder dry are long past.

I eased down the remaining steps and slid slowly down into the cool water. My breathing grew ragged. Fuck it, I was scared. Flat-footed in the water, I could have gone for the flashlight in one of the pockets, or I could have slid the shotgun out of the bag across my back. But before I started changing guns, I'd let Detective Tammy get down here with her gun to cover me. I still didn't know how good she was, but it was better than nothing.

The water slid around my upper chest, not quite armpit depth, but almost. I slid very carefully out into the water, more swimming than walking, gun held two-handed and ready. Or as ready as you can be half-floating in a borrowed astronaut suit.

I didn't like the fact that we were missing two coffins with vamps inside them. They probably just sank, but my gut was tense, waiting for hands to slide over my ankles, and yank me under. My foot brushed something solid, and I couldn't breathe for a second. My foot scooted against it. Paint can maybe. I guess even vamps have crap in their basement just like the rest of us.

"I've got some debris over here," I said.

"You sound like a real fireman," Wren said.

"Coffin?" Detective Tammy asked from the stairs. She slid into the water last.

"No, just a can of some kind."

The coffin had almost floated to me. No effort. I put a hand out to touch it, keeping it floating gently in the small waves. "When Wren and Tucker get up to the coffin, I'm going to back off. Cover me while I pull out the shotgun."

"You got it," Tammy said. She had her flashlight and gun in two hands, one above the other, so the light moved with the barrel of her gun. She was sweeping the water for movement. Just seeing her do that made the tension in my shoulders ease a bit.

"Don't open the coffin until I'm ready," I said. I had a moment to realize that I wasn't worried about my breathing. The suffocating closeness had receded under the pure adrenaline rush of being chest-deep in water with vampires all around. I could be phobic later, after we survived.

Wren and Tucker took either end of the coffin. Even they were having trouble moving in the water in full suits. "I'm going for the shotgun now, Reynolds."

"You're covered," she said.

I backed off and swung the bag around. I had a moment to decide whether to try to put the Browning back in a pants pocket or in the bag where the shotgun was now. I chose the bag. I kept the bag in front though, where I could put a hand in if I needed the gun. I swung the shotgun around, settling the butt of it against my shoulder. I braced myself as much as I could in the water and said, "Open it."

Tucker steadied it, and Wren swung the lid back. He crossed my line of fire while he did it. "You've crossed my line of sight, Wren."

"What?"

"Move to your right," I said.

He did it without any more questions but that one delay could have been enough to get him hurt or dead. The vampire lay on her back, long hair spread around her pale face, one hand clasped on her chest like a sleeping child.

"Okay to move her?" Wren asked.

"Stay out of my line of fire and you can do anything you want," I said.

"Sorry," he said. Even over the mikes he sounded embarrassed.

I didn't have time to soothe his ego. I was too busy watching for vamps. I kept my attention mainly on the one in the open coffin, but I had no peripheral vision in the suit. My hearing was cut in half or more. I felt totally unprepared.

"Why aren't our crosses glowing?" Reynolds asked from just behind me.

"They don't glow around dead bodies," I said.

Wren and Tucker were having trouble getting the body into the bag. Wren finally threw the body across one shoulder and Tucker started squirming the legs into the bag. The vampire lay utterly limp across Wren's back. Her long hair trailed into the water, turning black as it absorbed the water. When they slid her the last bit into the bag, I got a glimpse of her death-pale face, strands of wet hair clinging to it, like a drowning victim.

Tucker zipped the bag and said, "There's water in the bag. I don't know how to avoid it."

Wren got the body as balanced as he could and started for the stairs. "This is going to take a long time with just two of us carrying," he said.

Fulton's voice came over the radios. "We've got two more suits, Ms. Blake. Is it safe to send more men down?"

"Speaking as one of the sacrificial lambs," I said, "yeah. Why should we have all the fun?"

Wren got to the stairs and started climbing up, one hand on the banister. He tried to do the little stomping routine like we did on the way down and nearly fell back into the water. "I'm just going up the stairs. If they collapse, try not to leave me buried until my air runs out."

"Do our best," I said.

"Thanks," he said, sarcasm traveling just fine over the mikes.

Tucker had isolated one of the other coffins. Reynolds slogged over to steady it while Tucker got the lid. She didn't have enough height to swing it back nicely like Wren had. She just shoved. The lid fell back smacking the other coffin with a loud, echoing thunk. The sound made the tips of my fingers tingle.

"Shit," Reynolds breathed.

"Everything okay?" Fulton asked.

"Yeah," I said, "just a little case of nerves."

"You okay down there, Tucker?" he asked.

"It was me," Reynolds said. "Sorry."

The second vamp was male with short brown hair and a sprinkling of freckles still clinging to his white skin. He was over six foot. He was going to be even harder to bag.

Tucker came up with the idea of dragging the coffin to the stairs and using the stairs to help leverage the body. Sounded good to me. The bottom of the stairs wasn't in sunlight, so the vamp shouldn't mind.

Reynolds and Tucker had dragged the coffin to the foot of the stairs by the time Wren came back down. He laid an unzipped bag over the length of the body. "If Reynolds and Tucker steady the coffin, I think I can just roll him into the bag."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Tucker said. She stepped lower in the water.

Reynolds looked to me, and I said, "Sure." She moved to the other side of the coffin, her gun not pointed at anything anymore, flashlight held beam-down into the water like a distant golden ball of light in the dark pool.

Wren leaned in over the body to roll it on its side. "You're in my line of sight again, Wren," I said.

"Sorry," he said, but his arms were half under the body, rolling it. He didn't move out of the way.

"Move, dammit," I said.

"I've almost got him in the bag."

The vampire's head spasmed. It happens sometimes even in their "sleep," but I didn't like it now. "Drop him and step back Wren, now." My cross and Reynolds's cross flared to life like two small white suns.

Wren did what I asked, but it was too late. The vampire turned on him, mouth wide, fangs straining. It bit into the suit with a loud hiss of released air. They were too close to trust the shotgun. "Reynolds, it's yours," I said.

Wren screamed.

Reynolds's gun made sparks in the near darkness. The vampire jerked back from Wren, a hole in its forehead. But it wasn't dead, not even close. Revenants don't die that easy. I fired into that pale face. The face exploded into blood and bits of meat; small heavy pieces rained down into the water with soft plops. It fell back against the raised coffin lid, head gone, hands still spasming in the white satin interior. Legs kicking. Wren fell to his butt on the stairs.

Tucker was saying, "Wren, Wren, answer me."

"I'm here," he said, voice hoarse. "I'm here."

I came two careful steps closer on the water-covered stairs and put another shell in the vampire's chest, blowing a hole in it and the coffin lid behind it. I pumped another shell in the shotgun and said, "Up the stairs, now!"

I knelt by Wren, hand under his arm, the other full of shotgun. Over the ringing in my ears from the guns I heard Tucker say, "Something brushed my leg."

"Out, now!" I tried to force them up the stairs with my voice. I dragged Wren to his feet and pushed him up the stairs. He didn't need much urging. When he reached sunlight, he turned back, waiting for the rest of us.

Reynolds was almost with us. Two wet, dripping arms came up on either side of Tucker.

I yelled, "Tucker!"

The arms closed and she was suddenly airborne, backwards, under the water. It closed over her like a black fist. There'd never been anything to shoot at.

Her voice was crystalline over the radio, breathing so ragged it hurt to hear it. "Wren! Help me!"

I slid down the steps, falling into the water, letting the blackness close over me. My cross flared through the water like a beacon. I saw movement but wasn't sure it was her.

I felt movement in the water seconds before arms grabbed me from behind. Teeth tore into the suit, hands ripping the helmet off like wet paper. It rolled me in the water, and I let it. I let its eager hands carry me around until I shoved the shotgun against its chin and fired. I watched its head vanish in a cloud of blood by the glow of my cross. I still had the breathing mask on, which was why I wasn't drowning.

Tucker's screams were continuous now. Her screaming was everywhere, in the radio, in the water, echoing and constant.

I stood up, the remnants of the suit sliding down my body. I lost some of the echoes of Tucker's screams. The water was conducting the screams like an amplifier.

Reynolds and Wren were both in the water. A bad idea. He was struggling towards something, and I saw it. Tucker's Haz-Mat suit was floating on the other side of the basement. He threw himself into the water trying to swim to her. Reynolds was trying to stay with him, gun in hand. Her cross was blindingly bright.

I yelled over the radio, "Everyone out! Out, dammit, out!" No one was listening.

Tucker's screams stopped abruptly. Everyone else screamed more. Everyone but me. I went quiet. Screaming wouldn't help. There were at least three vamps down here with us. Three revenants. We were going to die if we stayed down here.

The vampire exploded out of the water in front of me. The shotgun fired before I realized I'd done it. The vampire's chest exploded, and it grabbed for me anyway. I had time to jack another shell in, but not to fire. At moments like this the world goes too fast and too slow. You can't stop anything from

happening, but you can see it all in excruciating detail. The vampire's fingers dug into my shoulders, painfully tight, holding me still while he reared back to strike. I had a glimpse of fangs framed by a dark beard. My cross's glow was almost frantically bright, highlighting the vampire's face like a Halloween flashlight. I fired the shotgun straight up under the chin, no time to brace, just to pull the trigger. The head exploded in a red rain all over my face mask. I was blinded by blood and thicker things. The recoil of the shotgun sat me down in the water. I went under without knowing if the thing was still coming or if it was dead.

I struggled to the surface. The water had streaked the face mask clean of blood, but heavier things clung to it, so I was still blind. I jerked the mask off my face, losing the radio but gaining my vision.

The vampire was floating in front of me, not face down, or face up. Faceless. Goody.

When Reynolds's gun fired, the shots sounded strange, and I realized I was deaf in the ear I'd fired the shotgun next to. The vampire's body reacted to the bullets, staggering, but not stopping. She was hitting it full middle body like they teach you on the range.

I yelled, "Head shot."

She raised the gun, and the gun clicked empty. I think she was going for extra ammo in a pocket when the thing jumped her and they both vanished into the water.

I slid out of what remained of the suit. Even with the taped joints it slipped off me like a shed skin. I exchanged hands to keep the shotgun ready and dived into the water. Swimming was faster, and if there was anything to catch, I'd caught it by now. The cross lit my way like a beacon. But it was Reynolds's cross that I swam for. That was my beacon.

I had seconds to reach her or it was all over. I had a sense of movement a second before the last vamp slammed into me. I turned, starting to point the shotgun at it, and it grabbed the gun. I think it was just grabbing anything, but it tore the gun from my hand and grabbed for me.

She was almost pretty with her long pale hair streaming behind her like a mermaid straight out of a fairy story. The cross made her skin glow as she reached for me. I had a knife ready and shoved it up under her chin. It slid in easily but didn't reach the brain. It wasn't a killing blow, not even close. She stood in the water, hands clawing at the knife. I don't think it was pain. She just couldn't open her mouth enough to feed.

I shoved the second blade under her ribs, up into her heart. Her body shuddered, eyes impossibly wide. Her mouth opened enough for me to see my knife blade impaling her. She screamed wordlessly and hit me with the back of her hand. The only thing that kept me from being airborne was the water. It absorbed some of the shock. I fell backwards, and the water closed over me. I had a second of floating, then I tried to breathe, got a mouthful of water and staggered to my feet, coughing, falling down as soon as I stood. I got my feet under me and felt something warmer on my face than water. I was bleeding. My vision was going grey with little white flowers in it.

The vampire was still coming for me with my last two knives in its body. There was no more screaming from across the room. I couldn't see that far, but it could only mean one thing. Reynolds, Wren, and Tucker were gone.

I was backing up in the water. I tripped over something and went down, water pouring over me. It was harder to get up this time, slower. I'd tripped over the Haz-Mat suit, and the bag with the Browning in it. My vision was full of holes. It was like watching the vampire through a strobe light. I closed my eyes, but the white flowers ate the back of my eyelids. I let myself sink into the water and found the bag by my foot. Was I holding my breath, or had I just stopped breathing? I couldn't remember. I got the Browning out without opening my eyes. I didn't need to see to use it.

She grabbed a handful of my hair and dragged me to the surface. I fired as I came up, blowing holes in her body like a zipper until I came to that pale face. She put a hand out, over the muzzle of the gun, and that delicate hand blew into bits of bone, a bloody stump. I fired into that face until it was a red ruin and I was deaf in both ears.

The vampire fell backwards into the water, and I slid to my knees. The water poured over me. I tried to push to the surface again and couldn't. I think I got one last mouthful of air, then the grey and white spots were everywhere. I couldn't see the glow of the cross or the black water. When darkness swallowed my vision, it was smooth and perfect. I had a moment of floating, a dim thought that I should be scared, then nothing.

Chapter 47

I woke up on the grass where Caroline and I had been sitting. Vomiting water and bile, feeling like shit, but alive. Alive was good. Almost as good was Detective Tammy Reynolds standing over me, watching the EMTs work on me. Her arm was taped to her side, and she was crying. Then nothing, like someone changed the channel, and I woke up to a different show.

Hospital this time, and I was afraid I'd dreamed Reynolds, and that she was really dead. Larry sat in a chair by my bed, head back, asleep or knocked out on painkillers. I took his presence as a sign I hadn't hallucinated Reynolds. If his sweetie had been dead, I didn't think he'd be sitting here, at least not asleep.

He blinked awake, eyes unfocused, from drugs I think. "How are you?"

"You tell me."

He smiled, tried to stand and had to take a deep breath before he could do it. "If I wasn't hurt, I'd be out helping Tammy rescue vamps right now."

Something tight in my chest loosened. "She is alive, then. I thought I'd dreamed it."

He blinked at me. "Yeah, she's alive. So is Wren."

"How?" I asked.

He grinned at me. "A vampire known as the Traveler seems able to inhabit bodies of other vamps. Says he's a member of their council and he's here to help. Says you enlisted his aid." Larry was watching me very closely, the painkillers sliding away from his eyes as he tried to will me to tell the truth.

"That's essentially it," I said.

"He took over the body of the vamp attacking Tammy and Wren. He saved them. She shoved her arm into the vamp's mouth, and it's broken, but it'll heal."

"What about Wren?"

"Okay, but he's pretty broken up over Tucker."

"She didn't make it," I said.

He shook his head. "She was torn up, nearly yanked in half. All that was holding her together was the Haz-Mat suit."

"So you didn't have to stake her," I said.

"The vamps did the job themselves," he said. "They got Tucker's body up but not the vamps you did in. They're still down there."

I looked at him. "Let me guess, it caved in—didn't it?"

"Not five minutes after they pulled Tucker's body out, and laid you on the grass, the whole thing went. The vamp body that the Traveler was using started to burn. I've never seen one of them burn before. It was impressive and scary. The rubble covered the vamp. They couldn't dig him out until dark because that would have exposed him to sunlight again. He dug his own way out while they were still getting started."

"He attack anyone?" I asked.

Larry shook his head. "He seemed pretty calm."

"You were there?"

"Yep."

I let it go. No sense worrying over what might have happened if the vamp had clawed his way to freedom pissed. I also found it very interesting that the Traveler couldn't stand the sunlight, and Warrick could. Surviving sunlight, even dim sunlight, was the rarest of talents among the walking dead. Or maybe Warrick was right. Maybe it was God's grace. Who was I to know?

"Is it my imagination or are you just moving better, with less pain?" I asked.

"It's been another twenty-four hours. I'm starting to heal."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"You've been out for over a day. It's late Sunday afternoon."

"Shit," I said. Had Jean-Claude met with the council without me? Had the "dinner," whatever it was, already happened? "Shit," I said again.

Still frowning, he said, "I've got a message from the Traveler for you. Tell me why you suddenly look so scared and I'll give it to you."

"Just give it to me, Larry, please."

Still frowning, he said, "The dinner is postponed until you feel well enough to attend."

I settled back against the pillows and couldn't keep the relief off my face, my body.

"What the hell is going on, Anita?"

Maybe it was the concussion. Maybe it was the fact that I didn't like to lie to Larry face to face. Whatever it was, I told him truth. I told him all of it. I told him about Richard and the marks. He knew about that, but not what I'd discovered recently. I left out a few things, but not much. When I was done, he sat back in the chair looking stunned.

"Well, say something."

He shook his head. "Sweet Mary Mother of God, I don't know where to start. Jean-Claude had a press conference last night with the Traveler at his side. They talked about vampire and human unity in the face of this awful event."

"Whose body did the Traveler use?" I asked.

Larry shivered. "That is one of the creepiest vamp powers I have ever seen. He used some vamp from Malcolm's Church. Malcolm was at the press conference, too. The Traveler used his powers to help rescue the other vamps, including Malcolm."

"Who acted as interpreter while the sun was up?" I asked.

"Balthasar, his human servant."

"Balthasar as a public servant, that is creepy," I said.

Larry frowned. "He told me he had a thing for men with red hair. Was he kidding?"

I laughed, and it made my head hurt. I was suddenly very aware of a growing headache, as if it had been there all the time, just masked by drugs. Modern chemistry, there is no substitute.

"Probably not, but don't worry. You're not on the menu."

"Who is?" Larry asked.

"I don't know yet. Has Dolph found out who's behind the bombings and stuff?"

"Yes." He said that one word like it was enough.

"Tell me or I will get out of this bed and hurt you."

"It was Humans First. The police raided their headquarters earlier today, got most of the leaders."

"That is wonderful." I frowned, which hurt, then closed my eyes and said, "How did Humans First know where all the monsters were? They hit private homes, secret daytime lairs. They shouldn't have known where everyone was."

I heard the door open a moment before Dolph's voice said, "The vampires had a traitor in their midst."

"Hey, Dolph."

"Hey, yourself. Good to see you awake."

"Good to be awake," I said. "What traitor?"

"Remember Vicki Pierce—and her little scene at Burnt Offerings?"

"I remember."

"She had a boyfriend that was with Humans First. She gave him up when we questioned her a second time."

"Why'd you bring her in?"

"Seems she got paid for her little acting assignment. We threatened to charge her with assault and attempted murder. She folded like a cheap card table."

"What does little Miss Blue Eyes have to do with a vampire traitor?"

"She's been dating Harry, the bartender and part owner of Burnt Offerings."

I was confused. "Then why stage the scene at his business? Why give himself grief?"

"Her human boyfriend wanted to pay her to do it. She didn't want him to know she was seeing Harry. Harry went along with it because he thought it would look funny if his place was the only vamp-owned business not hit by the fanatics."

"So Harry knew what she was using the information for?" I said. I was finding it hard to believe that any vamp would do it, let alone one as old as Harry.

"He knew. He took his cut of the money," Dolph said.

"Why?"

"When we find him, we'll ask."

"Let me guess. He's vanished."

Dolph nodded. "Don't tell your boyfriend, Anita."

"The vampires may be your only hope of catching Harry now."

"But will they turn him over to us or kill him?"

I looked away, not meeting his eyes. "They're going to be pretty pissed."

"I can't blame them for that, but I want him alive, Anita. I need him alive."

"Why?"

"We didn't get every member of Humans First. I don't want them out there with some new nasty surprise waiting."

"You have Vicki. Won't she tell you?"

"She asked for a lawyer, finally, and now she's suddenly developed amnesia."

"Damn."

"We need him to tell us if there's one last big nasty coming our way."

"But you can't find him," I said.

"That's right."

"You don't want me to tell Jean-Claude."

"Give us twenty-four hours to locate Harry. If we fail, then you can put out a vampire all-points. Before they kill him, try to get information from him."

"You say that like I'll be there when he dies," I said.

Dolph just looked at me.

I met his eyes this time. "I don't kill for Jean-Claude, Dolph, no matter what the street says."

"I wish I believed that, Anita. You don't know how much I wished I believed that."

I lay back against the pillows. "Believe what you like, Dolph. You will anyway."

He walked out then without another word, as if what he wanted to say was too painful, too final. Dolph kept pushing against us, against me. I was beginning to worry that he was going to keep pushing until he pushed us apart. We'd be working together but we wouldn't be friends. The headache was getting worse, and it wasn't just the drugs wearing off.

Chapter 48

I was given a clean bill of health. The doctors were amazed at my recuperative powers. If only they knew. Pete McKinnon called late in the day. He'd found that there were fires similar to those set by our firebug in New Orleans and San Francisco. It took a moment for me to remember why those particular cities were important. When I remembered, I asked, "How about Boston?"

"No, no fires in Boston. Why?"

I don't think he believed me when I said, "nothing," but unlike Dolph, he let it go. I wasn't ready to point the finger at the Vampire Council. Just because the mysterious fires happened in cities they'd been visiting didn't mean it had to be them. There'd been no fires in Boston. Just because there were now mysterious fires in St. Louis, and the council was here, didn't prove anything. Yeah, and the Easter Bunny brings me goodies every year.

I told Jean-Claude about my suspicions. "But why would the council wish to burn empty buildings, *ma petite*? If one of them could call fire to their hands, they would not waste it on empty real estate. Not unless the real estate being burned gained them something."

"You mean a financial motive?" I said.

He shrugged. "Perhaps, though a personal motive would suit them better."

"I can't find out much more information without giving the council up to the authorities as suspects," I said.

He seemed to think about that for a second or two. "Perhaps you could wait upon committing absolute suicide for us until after we have survived this evening."

"Sure," I said.

True darkness found me in a short form-fitting black velvet dress with a V-neck and no sleeves. The waist of the dress was open lace. My skin showed pale and enticing through it. Black thigh-high hose that actually came up a bit higher than mid-thigh, like all the way up until the black lace stretch top brushed against the black satin panties with their lace edgings. The hose were a size too large. Jean-Claude had purchased them, and done it deliberately. I'd tried thigh-highs before and had to agree that the longer length was more flattering for my shorter legs. It sort of framed the right area. If we'd been

planning extracurricular activities, I'd have loved to see his face when I was standing in nothing but the stockings. As it was, it was just frustrating, and a little scary.

I'd vetoed the high velvet heels he'd picked out. Instead I used my own black pumps. Not as spiffy. Maybe not even more comfortable, but the heels were low enough that I could run in them, or carry fainting wereleopards if the need arose.

"You are perfection, *ma petite*, except for the shoes."

"Forget it," I said. "You're lucky to have gotten me in the hose. The thought that I'm dressing just in case the rest of the party sees my underwear is just creepy."

"You talked to the Traveler of price and responsibility. Well, tonight we pay the price for your wereleopards. Are you regretting it now?"

Gregory was still trussed up in my bedroom, pale and fragile looking. Vivian was tucked in a guest room speaking in monosyllables.

"No, no I don't regret it."

"Then let us gather the rest of our party and be on our way." But he didn't move. He stayed lying on his stomach on the white couch, head resting on his folded hands. If it had been anyone else, I'd have said they were sprawled on the couch, but Jean-Claude did not sprawl. He posed, he lounged, but he did not sprawl. He lay full length, his long body stretched out, only the tips of his black boots over the edge of the couch.

He was wearing an outfit I'd seen before, but repetition didn't make it less lovely. I loved his clothes; loved watching him dress, and undress.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"I wish we were staying home tonight. I want to undress you one piece of clothing at a time, enjoying your body between every unveiling."

Just the suggestion made my body tight. "Me, too," I said, and knelt on the floor in front of him. I folded the short skirt under so it wouldn't wrinkle or ride up. He didn't teach me that, my Grandma Blake did, over a lifetime of Sunday church services where what I looked like seemed more important than the sermon.

I laid my chin on the couch near his face. My hair spilling around me, brushing the sides of his folded hands, curling against his face.

"Do your undies look as nice as mine?" I asked.

"Brushed silk," he said softly.

I had a sensory memory so strong it made me shiver. The feel of him through the thick silk, the almost living texture that the brushed fabric had over the hardness of his body. I had to close my eyes to keep from letting him see it in my face. The image was so vivid it made me clench my hands.

I felt him move a second before he kissed my forehead. He spoke with his lips still touching my skin. "Your thoughts betray you, *ma petite*."

I raised my face upward, sliding his lips down my face. He was utterly passive as I moved against him, until our lips met. Then his mouth pressed against mine, lips and tongue working. Neither of us used our hands, only our mouths touching. Our faces pressed together.

"Can I cut in?" The familiar voice was so heavy with anger that it made me draw back from Jean-Claude.

Richard stood at the end of the couch staring down at us. I hadn't heard him come up. Had Jean-Claude? I was betting he had. Somehow I never thought that even in the throes of passion Jean-Claude would ever let anyone sneak up on him. Or maybe I just didn't think I was that distracting. Poor self-esteem, who me?

I sat back on my heels and looked up at Richard. He was dressed in a black tux, complete with tails. His long hair slicked back into a ponytail so tight it gave the illusion of short hair. You always knew Richard was handsome but it was only when you got rid of the hair that you realized how perfect his face was. The high-sculpted cheekbones, the full mouth, the dimple. He stared down at me with that handsome, familiar face, and he looked arrogant. He knew the effect he had on me, and wanted to turn the knife a little more.

Jean-Claude sat up on the couch, his mouth smeared with my lipstick. The red so vivid against his pale skin it looked like the surprised scarlet of blood. He ran his tongue around the outside of his mouth, then ran his finger across his upper lip, slowly, until it came away red. He put the finger in his mouth and sucked the lipstick off of it, very slowly, very deliberately. His eyes were on me, but the show was for Richard.

I was both grateful for it, and angry about it. He knew Richard was trying to hurt me, so he was hurting Richard. But he was also baiting him, rubbing the proverbial salt in the wound.

The look on Richard's face was so raw I had to look away. "That's enough, Jean-Claude," I said, "that's enough."

Jean-Claude looked amused. "As you like, *ma petite*."

Richard looked down at me again. I met his eyes. Maybe there was something in my face that was too raw to look at, too. He turned abruptly and left the room.

"Go freshen your tasty lipstick, then we must leave." Jean-Claude's voice held regret, the way it sometimes held joy, or sex.

I took his hand, raising it gently to my mouth. "Are you still frightened of them, even after all the good publicity? Surely if they were planning to kill us, they wouldn't have appeared on camera with you." I touched his leg, running my fingers over the cloth, feeling his thigh underneath. "The Traveler shook hands with the mayor of St. Louis, for heaven's sake."

He touched my face, cradling my cheek in his hand. "The council has never before tried to be, what you would call, mainstream. It is their first foray into a very new arena. But they have been the stuff of nightmares for thousands of years, *ma petite*. One day of human politics does not make them into something else."

"But . . ."

He touched fingers to my lips. "It is a good sign, *ma petite*. That I will agree to, but you do not know them as I do. You have not seen them at their worst."

My mind flashed on Rafael's raw, bloody body; Sylvie sagging in the chains, voice small and broken; the sight of Fernando using Vivian. "I've seen them do some pretty awful things since they hit town," I said. "You set up the rules, Jean-Claude. They can't maim us, or rape us, or kill us. What's left?"

He kissed me lightly on the lips, and stood, offering me his hand. I took it, let him pull me to my feet. He was wearing his amused mask, the one that once upon a time I'd thought was his normal face. Now I knew it meant he was hiding things. He looked like that a lot when he was scared and didn't want people to know.

"You're scaring me," I said softly.

He smiled. "No, *ma petite*, they will do that for me, for us all." With that comforting shot, he went off to round up the others. I went for my purse and the tasty lipstick. The council had laid down some conditions of their own. No weapons tonight. Which was why I was dressed like I was; one glance was enough to know I wasn't carrying anything. Jean-Claude thought this would keep them from having an excuse to pat me down. When I asked what the big deal was, all he would say was, "You don't want to give them a reason to touch you, *ma petite*. Trust me on this."

I did trust him. I didn't want any of the council touching me, ever. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 49

What had once been Jean-Claude's living room and Nikolaos's throne room before that, had been turned into a banquet room. They'd found a table that was over ten feet long. What you could see of the table was heavy clawed feet with lions' mouths carved in bold relief. A tablecloth so thick with gold embroidery that it shimmered under the lights covered the table. If they had meant for us to actually eat off it, I'd have been worried we'd trash it, but there was no food. There were no chairs. There were no plates. There were white linen napkins with gold rings, crystal wineglasses, and one of those industrial-size warmers with blue gas flames under its gleaming surface. There was a man hanging by his wrists, feet dangling helplessly over the gleaming table. He was hanging directly over the empty warming pan. His name was Ernie. His muscular upper body was bare. A gag cut across his face, trapping part of his long ponytail. His hair was shaved to nothing on either side of his face. The council hadn't done it as torture. He'd done it to himself. He was one of Jean-Claude's newest hangers-on, a human who wanted to be a vampire and was serving his apprenticeship acting as a sort of maid and errand boy. Now, apparently, he was the appetizer.

Richard, Jean-Claude, and I stood with Jamil, Damian, Jason, and surprisingly, Rafael, at our backs. The Rat King had insisted on accompanying us. I hadn't argued too hard. We were allowed one person apiece plus Jason. Yvette had requested him especially. By taking him, we gained a werewolf, but his blue eyes were wide and his breathing a little too quick. Yvette was Jason's idea of hell, and hell had sent out an invitation.

Ernie stared at us all, kicking his feet and struggling, trying to talk through the gag. I think he was trying to say, "Get me down," but I couldn't swear to it.

"What is the meaning of this?" Jean-Claude said. His voice filled the huge room, hissing and tumbling until the shadows gave his words back in harsh, sibilant echoes.

Padma stepped out of the far hallway. He was dressed in a suit that glittered as gold as the tablecloth. He was even wearing a golden turban with peacock feathers and a sapphire bigger than my thumb. He looked like someone had called down to central casting for a maharaja.

"You have offered us no hospitality at all, Jean-Claude. Malcolm and his people have offered us refreshment. But you, the Master of the City, have offered us nothing." He motioned upward at Ernie. "This one walked in without our permission. He said he was yours."

Jean-Claude walked until he stood by the table and could look up into Ernie's face. "You came home two days early from your family visit. The next time, if there is a next time, call first."

Ernie stared at him, eyes wide, making small *hmmm* sounds through the gag. He kicked his legs enough that he started to swing.

"Struggling will just make your shoulders hurt more," Jean-Claude said. "Be at peace." As he said it, Ernie slowly grew limp. Jean-Claude had captured him with his eyes and was lulling him to, if not sleep, peace. The tension drained from him, and he stared at Jean-Claude, brown eyes empty, waiting. At least he wasn't scared anymore.

Gideon and Thomas came up to stand on either side of Padma. Thomas was in full uniform, boots polished like a black mirror. The helmet was white with a long tassel on top that was probably horsehair. The coat was red, the buttons brass, white gloves, even a sword.

Gideon was pretty close to naked. A white thong was all he wore on his body. It barely covered him. A heavy gold collar encrusted with small diamonds and huge emeralds covered almost his entire neck. His carefully combed golden hair fanned over it. A chain led from the collar to Thomas's hands.

Padma put his hand out, and Thomas gave the chain to him. Neither Thomas nor Gideon exchanged so much as a glance. They'd seen the show before.

The only thing that kept me from making some scathing remark was that I'd pretty much given my word to let Jean-Claude do the talking tonight. He thought I might say something to piss someone off. Who me?

Jean-Claude walked around the table. Richard and I fell two steps back, mirroring Padma and his pets. The symbolism wasn't lost on anyone. Thing was, Richard and I were pretending. I didn't think the others were.

"I suppose you mean to slit his throat into the warmer, then serve his blood to all?" Jean-Claude said.

Padma smiled and gave a gracious nod of his head.

Jean-Claude laughed that wonderfully touchable laugh of his. "If you really meant to do that, Master of Beasts, you'd have hung him by his ankles."

Richard and I did exchange glances behind his back. I turned and looked at Ernie's peacefully hanging figure. How had Jean-Claude known you'd have to hang him by his ankles? Ask a silly question.

"Are you saying we are bluffing?" Padma asked.

"No," Jean-Claude said, "merely grandstanding."

Padma smiled, and it almost reached his eyes. "You always did play the game well."

Jean-Claude gave a small bow, never taking his eyes from the other vampire. "I am honored that you think well of me, Master of Beasts."

Padma gave a sharp laugh. "A honeyed tongue, Master of the City." The humor died abruptly, gone, poof. His face was suddenly harsh, empty, except for anger. "But the point remains you have been a poor host. I have fed through my servants." He slid a dark hand caressingly down Gideon's bare shoulder. The weretiger never reacted. It was as if Padma were not there. Or maybe as if he, Gideon, were not there.

"But there are others who are not so blessed as I. They hunger, Jean-Claude. They stand in your territory as your guests and know hunger."

"The Traveler was feeding them," Jean-Claude said. "I thought he was feeding you as well."

"I do not need his cast-off energy," Padma said. "He was sustaining the others until that one"—he pointed at me with his free hand—"told him to stop."

I started to say something, almost asked permission, and thought, screw it. "Asked him to stop," I said. "No one tells the Traveler what to do." There, that was so diplomatic, my teeth hurt.

His laughter entered the room ahead of him. The Traveler's new body was young, male, handsome, and so newly dead he still had a good tan. Balthasar came at his side, hands sliding over the other man's body possessively. A new toy to explore. I'd been told that Malcolm was loaning the Traveler a church member. I wondered if Malcolm really knew what the Traveler and Balthasar were doing with the body.

I would have said they were both wearing togas, but that wasn't quite it. The Traveler wore a rich purple cloth pinned at one shoulder with a ruby-and-gold brooch. His left shoulder was bare, showing the smooth tanned skin to good advantage. The garment was gathered at the waist with two woven red cords. It fell nearly to his ankles, giving glimpses of sandals tied around his ankles.

Balthasar wore red with an amethyst-and-silver brooch at one shoulder. His bare shoulder showed just enough chest to prove he was muscular, as if

there'd been any doubt. The red garment was bound at the waist with purple cords.

"You guys look like the Bobbsey Twins," I said.

Jean-Claude cleared his throat.

I stopped talking, but if everyone had such nifty clothes, I wasn't sure I could stop myself from making remarks. I mean, it was just too easy.

The Traveler threw his head back and laughed. It was a joyous laugh with an edge underneath like the hissing of snakes. He turned brown eyes to me, but down in the depths it was him. I'd have known him no matter whose eyes he was looking out of.

Balthasar was actually shorter than the new body by an inch or two. He stood close enough for the Traveler to take him under his arm, like a tall man will walk with a woman, cradled against his body, protected.

"I saved your humans today, Anita. I saved many vampires. Is that not enough for you?"

"Jean-Claude?" I made his name a question.

He let his breath out in a long sigh. "It was pointless to make you promise. Be yourself, *ma petite*, but try not to be too insulting." He stepped back so that we were all even with each other. Maybe he hadn't liked the symbolism either.

"I'm thrilled that you saved my friends today," I said. "I'm ecstatic that you saved all the trapped vampires. But you got a lot of good press out of it without any risk to yourself. I thought you agreed that you guys needed to modernize a little, come into the twentieth century."

"But I do agree, Anita, I do agree." The Traveler rubbed his cheek against Balthasar's face, staring at me hard enough that I was glad he wasn't heterosexual.

"Then what is this medieval shit?" I jabbed a thumb backwards at Ernie.

His eyes flicked to the man, then back to me. "I would have let it go, but the others voted and it is true that Jean-Claude has been a lax host."

Jean-Claude touched my arm. "If you had come at my invitation or even requested permission to enter my territory, I would have been more than happy to grant you hunting rights. Though you will find one of the other benefits to legality is an amazing number of willing victims. People will even pay you to quench your thirst on their bodies."

"It is an old law among us," The Traveler said, "not to feed in another's lands without their permission. I sustained the others, but then your human servant showed me that my powers were having serious side effects on your local population." He stepped away from Balthasar, coming within touching distance of Jean-Claude.

"But none of your vampires were affected. I could not steal their energy, or give them extra energy. You prevented that. That has surprised me more than anything else you have done, Jean-Claude. It smacks of a power that I would never have credited you with, not now, not a thousand years from now." He paced to stand in front of Richard. And the new body was still taller, six foot four at least.

He stood so close that the purple cloth brushed the length of Richard's body. He moved around him so closely that the cloth never stopped touching, sliding over the tailored tux like a cloth hand. "Padma has not gained such power from his joining." He ended standing between Jean-Claude and Richard. He raised a hand to stroke Richard's face, and Richard caught his wrist.

"That's enough," Richard said.

The Traveler drew his wrist slowly downward so that his hand brushed Richard's. He turned to Balthasar with a smile. "What do you think?"

"I think Jean-Claude is a lucky man," Balthasar said.

A red flush crept up Richard's face, his hands curled into fists. He was placed in the position usually reserved for women. If you deny that you're sleeping with someone, they won't believe you. The harder you deny it, the surer everyone is that you're guilty.

Richard was smarter than I was. He didn't try to deny it. He just turned and looked at the Traveler. He stared him nearly eye to eye and said, "Get away from me."

All the bad guys laughed. None of us did. Us included Gideon and Thomas, strangely enough. What were they doing with Padma? What series of events had trapped them with him? If we all survived, maybe I'd get a chance to ask them, but it was doubtful. If we killed Padma, they would probably die, too. If Padma killed us, well, there you go.

The Traveler walked over to me in a cloud of purple cloth. "Which brings us to you, Anita." His new body towered over me, over a foot taller, but hey, you get used to it.

"What?" I said, staring up at him.

He laughed again. He was so damn happy. I realized what it was—afterglow. He and Balthasar had been polishing the family jewels.

I stared up into that smiling face and said, "Is this new body double-jointed or something, or does Balthasar just like a change of menu?"

The laughter faded from his eyes, his face, like the sun sinking below the horizon. What was left was cold and distant and nothing you could talk to.

Maybe I did talk too much.

Jean-Claude touched my shoulders and moved me back. He started to move in front of me, but I stopped him. "I pissed him off. Don't protect me from him."

Jean-Claude let me stay in front, but at some unseen signal the rest of our entourage moved up, fanning out behind us.

Yvette and Warrick came out of the hallway with Liv. "You all look good enough to eat." She laughed at her own joke. She was dressed in a simple white formal. Her bare shoulders were whiter than the cloth. As soon as I saw her, I knew she hadn't fed. Sleeves that were not attached to the dress covered her from armpit to wrist. The fitted bodice flared into a full white skirt with layers that were mirrored in the layers of the strange unattached sleeves. Her white-blond hair fell in braided loops and whorls around her face. No period costume for Yvette, only the cutting edge of fashion would do. Her makeup was just a

little dark against the paper whiteness of her skin, but it was hard to get that understated look when you were so terribly drained.

Warrick wore a white suit with one of those round collars so there was no place to put a tie. It was a lovely suit that matched Yvette's dress so well, they looked like the top of a fashion wedding cake.

Yvette wore the dress like it had been made just for her. Warrick looked chokingly uncomfortable.

Liv glared at all of us impartially. She was dressed in a blue formal that was meant for a woman with softer edges and less muscle. It had been cut down or up for her, and she wore it badly.

This was the first time I'd seen Liv since I learned that she'd helped torture Sylvie. I expected to regret not having killed her when I had the chance. But there was an uncertainty in her eyes, an unease in her body, that said, maybe, she'd seen another side of the council since then. She was afraid. I was glad.

"You look like you're wearing hand-me-downs, Liv," I said. "Like someone's poor relative."

"Has the Traveler given you to Yvette as her handmaiden?" Jean-Claude asked. "Has he given you away so quickly?"

"Yvette merely helped me dress," she said, head high, but her hands were trying to smooth the dress into place. Nothing helped.

"You had much more attractive outfits in your own closet," Jean-Claude said.

"But no dresses," Yvette said. "For a formal occasion you must have dresses for the women." She smiled sweetly.

It made me regret wearing a dress. "I know what you did to Sylvie, Liv. I was regretting not blowing your head off when I did your knees. But you know what, Liv, a few years with the council and you may be regretting it too."

"I regret nothing," she said. But there was a tightness around the eyes, a flicker through those lovely eyes. Something had spooked her good and solid. Part of me wanted to know what had been done to her, but it was enough just to see how scared she was.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, Liv," I said.

Asher walked out in the middle of the scene. His hair had been pulled back in a tight braid. His hair was still nearly the color of the metallic thread in the tablecloth, an unearthly color even if he'd been human. The hair pulled back left the scars on his face naked. It was hard not to look at them, hard not to stare. The rest of the outfit didn't make it any easier.

His naked upper body was a wonderment of contrasts. It was like his face, half angelic beauty, half melted nightmare. His pants were black leather with a line of bare flesh showing from hip to mid-calf, where boots covered the rest. The flesh glimpsed on the right side of his thigh was scarred. The scars seemed to stop about mid-thigh. It left the big question. Had his torturers made him a eunuch or left him whole? It was like a car crash. You wanted to know, and you didn't.

"Jean-Claude, Anita, so good of you to join us." He made the polite words a mockery, filling them with a hissing warmth of threat.

"Your presence is the same pleasure it has always been," Jean-Claude said. Those words were blank, utterly neutral, compliment or snide putdown. It was the listener's choice.

Asher glided towards us, a smile curling his perfect lips. Again both sides of his mouth worked. The muscles were still whole underneath all the scars. He came to stand directly in front of me. He was about two steps closer than was comfortable, but I didn't back up or complain. I just met his smile with one of my own. Neither smile touched our eyes.

"Do you like my outfit, Anita?"

"A little aggressive, don't you think?"

He traced a fingertip down the lace at my waist. The fingertip slid inside the open lace, touching my bare skin. It brought a small gasp from my throat.

"You can touch me, anywhere you like," he said.

I moved his hand. "I can't return the offer, sorry."

"I think you can," the Traveler said.

I looked at him. "No," I said. "I can't."

"Jean-Claude was very clear on your rules," the Traveler said. "Asher needs to feed. It is within the rules for him to feed off of you, Anita. He would prefer to sink something else into you, but he will have to be content with fangs."

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"*Ma petite*," Jean-Claude said softly.

I didn't like the way he said my name. I turned, and one look was enough. "You have got to be kidding me."

He stepped close, taking me to one side. "The guidelines you gave me said nothing against sharing blood."

I stared up at him. "Do you really want him to feed off of me?"

He shook his head. "It is not a matter of want, *ma petite*. But if they cannot torture us or rape us, we leave them little else."

"If you wish to trade back one of my wereleopards," Padma said, "Vivian, perhaps, I would grant you safe passage for the return of my so sweet Vivian."

Fernando entered the room as if on cue. He was bruised but walking. More's the pity. He was wearing a jeweled vest and something like harem pants. The Arabian Nights maybe, instead of a maharaja.

"Did Fernando tell you he raped her?"

"I know what my son has done."

"That doesn't spoil her for you?" I asked.

Padma looked at me. "What I do with her once she is mine again is no concern of yours, human."

"No way," I said.

"Then you have no choice. You must feed one of us. If there is one among us who would please you more, someone . . . less hideous, we could arrange something. Perhaps I could take you myself. Among our own people only Yvette finds Asher attractive, but then her tastes have always run to the strange and grotesque."

Asher's face betrayed nothing, but I knew he'd heard. He was meant to hear. He'd spent the last two centuries being treated like a circus freak. No wonder he was cranky.

"I'd let Asher sink the whole thing into me before I'd let you touch me."

Surprise showed for a heartbeat on Padma's face, then arrogance. But he hadn't liked the insult. Goody. "Perhaps before the night is over, Anita, you will get your wish."

Not comforting, but Asher was having trouble looking at me, as if he were afraid. Not of me, exactly, but that this was some elaborate game to hurt him. He had that casual tension that victims get when they are slapped too often for too many different things.

Jean-Claude whispered, "Thank you, *ma petite*." I think he was relieved. I think he'd thought I might go down in flames rather than submit. Before Padma had made his little joke, I would have put up more of a fight. I was going to do this. If I drew the line here and refused, that meant we fought them. We would lose. If donating a little blood would keep us all alive come morning, I could spare it.

A leopard screamed. It raised the hairs on my arms. Two leopards padded into the room, jeweled collars sparkling around their necks. The black one, Elizabeth I assumed, snarled at me as they went past. The leopards were just leopard-size, not as tall as a Great Dane but longer. They paced like velvet over muscle, their energy and anger filling the room, prickling along the other shapeshifters like a drug. The leopards sprawled at Padma's feet.

I felt Richard's power swell. It flowed out of him in a soothing wash, willing the leopards quiet, calling them back to human form.

Padma said, "No, no, they are mine. I will keep them in whatever form I choose, however long I choose."

"They will begin to lose human characteristics," Richard said. "Elizabeth is a nurse. She cannot do her job if she has fangs or eyes that do not change back."

"She has no other job than to serve me," Padma said.

Richard took a step forward. Jean-Claude touched his shoulder. "He is baiting us, *mon ami*."

Richard shook his hand off, but nodded. "I don't think the Master of Beasts could stop me if I forced them back to human form."

"Is that a challenge?" Padma asked.

"The wereleopards don't belong to you, Richard," I said.

"These two don't belong to anybody," he said.

"They can be mine if they want to be," I said.

"No," Padma said. "No, I will give up nothing else. No one else to you." He stepped back against the wall, dragging Gideon with him by the jeweled collar. Thomas followed almost as closely. "Asher take her."

Asher tried to grab my arm, but I backed up. "Hold your horses. Hasn't anyone told you anticipation adds to the experience?"

"I have been anticipating this for over two hundred years, *ma cherie*. If anticipation adds, then it will be wondrous indeed."

I stepped away from his eager eyes and went to Jean-Claude. "Any advice?"

"He will try to make it rape, *ma petite*." He stopped me before I could say anything. "Not actual rape, but the effect is surprisingly similar. Make it a seduction, if you can. Turn necessity into a pleasure. It will be the last thing he expects, and it will unnerve him."

"How unnerved?" I asked.

"That will depend, I think, upon how strong your nerve is."

I glanced back at Asher. The eagerness on his face was frightening. I was sorry he'd been picked on for centuries, but it wasn't my fault. "I don't think it's that good."

Richard had been listening. He came close enough to whisper, "You're donating blood to one vampire, what's one more?"

"*Ma petite* and I do not have to share blood to share power," Jean-Claude said.

Richard frowned at him, then at me. "Still holding back? Don't you know how to give yourself completely to anyone?"

Jean-Claude's face was very neutral, blank and beautiful. I looked from his impassive face to Richard's angry one, and shook my head. "If I could find someone else to fill our third spot, I would, Richard. But we're stuck with each other, so stop being such an ass." I pushed past him hard enough for him to stumble, and it was all I could do not to slap him as I went by. Being nasty in private was one thing. Doing it in front of the bad guys was against the rules.

Chapter 50

Asher dragged me to a corner, and the others gathered around on the floor like story time in elementary school. Or maybe show-and-tell was a better analogy. He jerked me roughly against him, one hand in my hair controlling my head. He kissed me roughly enough to bruise unless I opened my mouth. I did better than that. I closed my eyes and French kissed him, running my tongue between his fangs. I'd perfected the art of French kissing a vampire without bleeding, and apparently I was good at it because Asher drew back first. There was a look of astonishment, total and complete. He couldn't have looked more surprised if I'd slapped him. No, less surprised. He expected the slap.

Jean-Claude was right. If I could just outmaneuver Asher, be bolder than he was, he might never sink fang into me. It was worth a try. I didn't even let Jean-Claude feed off of me. I wasn't sure it was the lesser evil, but a girl's got to draw the line somewhere.

Asher put his face so near mine, our noses almost touched. "Look at me, girl, look at me. You don't want to touch this."

The startling pale blue of his eyes, almost a white-blue, framed by golden eyelashes, was lovely. I concentrated on the eyes. "Undo your hair," I said.

He pushed me away from him, hard enough that I stumbled. I was pissing him off, stealing his revenge. Can't rape the willing.

I went to him, stalking around him, half wishing for the heels Jean-Claude had wanted me to wear. Asher's back was pure and untouched. Only a few dribbling scars where the holy water had trailed down his side. I ran my hands up that smooth skin, and he jumped as if I'd bit him.

He whirled, grabbing my arms, holding me away from him. He searched my face almost frantically. Whatever he saw, it didn't please him. He moved his hands upward until he held my wrists, then placed one of my hands on the scarred side of his chest. "It's easy to close your eyes and pretend. Easy to touch that which is not spoiled." He pressed my hand against the rough ridges that had been his chest. "This is the reality. This is what I live with every night, what I will live with for all eternity, what he did to me."

I stepped in close, pressing my upper arm against the scars, as well as my hands. The skin was rough, ridged, like frozen, fleshy water. I looked up into his face from inches away, and said, "Jean-Claude did not do this to you. Men who are long dead did this to you." I rose up on tiptoe and kissed his scarred cheek.

He closed his eyes, and a single tear slid from his eye to trail down that rough cheek. I kissed the tear away, and when he opened his eyes, they were suddenly startlingly close. In his eyes I saw a fear, loneliness, a need so overwhelming that it had eaten his heart as surely as the holy water had eaten his skin.

I wanted to take away the hurt I saw in his eyes. I wanted to hold him in my arms until the pain eased. I realized in that moment that it wasn't me. It was Jean-Claude. He wanted to heal Asher's pain. He wanted to take away that awful emptiness. I looked at Asher through a film of emotions that I'd never had for him, a patina of nostalgia for better nights, of love and joy and warm bodies in the cold darkness.

I kissed my way down his chin, careful to touch only the scars, ignoring the perfect skin as I'd ignored the wounded skin earlier. Strangely, his neck was whole, untouched. I kissed his collar bone and its white ridge of scars. His hands eased but didn't release me. I pulled out of his grip as I moved down his body, one soft kiss at a time.

I ran my tongue across his belly where it vanished into his pants. He shuddered. I moved to the open skin on his hip and worked down. When the scars ended at mid-thigh, so did I. I stood, and he watched me, watched me almost afraid of what I would do next.

I had to stand on tiptoe to reach behind him to the braid of his hair. It would have been easier from behind, but he'd have taken it as a rejection. I couldn't turn away from the scars, not even if that wasn't what I was doing at all. I loosened the braid. I separated the strands of hair, then had to lean my body against his just to steady myself while I combed my fingers through the golden strands. There is something very personal to touching a person's hair in

the right situation. I took my time, enjoying the feel of it, the extraordinary color, the thick richness of it between my fingers. When his hair fell in waves around his shoulders, I lowered myself flat-footed. My calves were cramped, too long on point.

I put into my eyes what I saw, that he was beautiful.

Asher kissed me on the forehead, a light touch. He held me against him for a moment, then stepped back. "I cannot capture you with my eyes. Without that or the throes of passion, it would only cause you pain. I can feed on anyone. What I saw in your face, no one else could give me." He looked out at Jean-Claude. They stared at each other for a long moment, then Asher stepped out of the circle, and I made my way back to Jean-Claude.

I sat down beside him, knees tucked under, skirt smoothed back. He hugged me and kissed me on the forehead as Asher had done. I wondered if he was trying to taste Asher's mouth on my skin. The thought didn't bother me. Maybe it should have, but I didn't ask him. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

The Traveler came to his feet as if by magic, just suddenly standing. "I don't think we could be more astonished if Anita had conjured a dragon from thin air. She has tamed our Asher and paid no blood for it." He glided to the open floor space. "Yvette is not so easily sated." He smiled at her as she rose to her feet. "Are you, my dear?"

She ran her hands through Jason's hair as she glided past. He jumped as if she'd stung him, which amused the hell out of her. She was still laughing when she turned with a swoosh of white skirts and held her arms out to him. "Come to me, Jason."

He huddled in on himself, curling into a little ball of arms and elbows and knees. He just shook his head.

"You are my choice, my special one," Yvette said. "You are not strong enough to refuse me."

An awful thought occurred to me. I was willing to bet that Jean-Claude hadn't covered rotting on people as a no-no. Jason might not recover from another embrace from the messily dead. I leaned into Jean-Claude and asked, "You did cover torture, no outright torture, right?"

"Of course," he said.

I stood. "You can feed on him, but you can't rot on him."

She turned cool eyes to me. "You have no say in this."

"Jean-Claude negotiated for no torture. Rotting on Jason while you feed is torture to him. You know that. It's why you want him."

"I want my bit of werewolf blood, and I want it exactly the way I like it best," she said.

Richard said, "You can feed off of me."

"You don't know what you're offering, Richard," I said.

"I know that Jason is mine to protect, and he can't endure this." He got to his feet, splendid in his new tux.

"Has Jason told you what happened to him in Branson?" I asked. Jason had been having a forced tryst with two female vamps when they began to rot. They turned into long-dead corpses while he was still lying naked with them. It

was his worse nightmare, almost a phobia now. I'd witnessed the event, even had those dead hands on my body when I waded in to to rescue him. I couldn't blame him for being terrified.

"Jason told me," Richard said.

"Hearing about it isn't the same thing as being there, Richard."

Jason had hidden his face against his knees. He was saying something low. I had to kneel to hear it. He was saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over and over and over. I touched his arm, and he screamed, eyes wide, mouth open in astonishment.

"It's okay, Jason. It's okay." Richard was right. Jason couldn't do this.

I nodded. "You're right, Richard."

"No," Padma said. "No, the Wolf King is mine. I will not share him."

"I will take nothing less than a shapeshifter," Yvette said.

Jamil stood.

Richard said, "No, it's my job to protect Jason, not yours, Jamil."

"It's my job to protect you, Ulfric."

Richard shook his head and started undoing the black bow tie. He undid the top few buttons on the pleated shirt, baring the strong, perfect line of his neck.

"No," Yvette said. She stamped her foot, hands on hips. "He is not afraid. I want someone who's afraid."

In my head I thought, he will be afraid. He'll be very afraid. Notice I wasn't jumping up and offering myself in Jason's place. I'd seen this particular show. I had no desire to star in it.

"And I have my own plans for the Ulfric," Padma said.

The Traveler tsked at them like naughty children. "It is a fair offer, Yvette. The Ulfric himself for one of his lesser wolves."

"It is not the potency of the blood I want. It is the terror."

"It is too generous an offer for someone who is not council," Padma said.

"Do they always squabble like this?" I asked.

"*Oui*," Jean-Claude said.

Near-eternal life, frightening power, and they were petty. How disappointing. How typical. I touched Jason's face, made him look at me. His breath was coming in short gasps. I touched his hands; his skin was cold.

"Jason, if she didn't rot on you, could you let her feed?"

He swallowed twice before he could talk. "I don't know."

A truthful answer. He was terrified. "I'll go with you."

He looked at me then, looked at me and not at the screaming in his head.

"She won't like that."

"Fuck her. She can take it or leave it."

That got me the ghost of a smile. He gripped my hands where they lay on top of his. He nodded.

I looked at Jean-Claude still sitting by us. "You're not being much help."

"I too have seen the show, *ma petite*." He was echoing my thoughts so closely, I wondered whose thoughts were which. But what he was saying was frightening. He wouldn't offer himself to Yvette, not just to save Jason.

I stood up, drawing Jason to his feet. He clung to my hand like a kid on the first day of kindergarten afraid Mommy would leave him alone with the bullies.

"If you give your word of honor that you won't rot on him, you can feed off of him."

"No," Yvette said. "No, that spoils it all."

"It's your choice," I said. "You can have Richard, if Padma will let you, but he won't be afraid. You can rot on him though, but you won't get Jason's horror of you." I moved so she could see him clearly.

Jason flinched but stayed standing, but he wouldn't or couldn't meet her eyes. He stared at me. I think he was actually looking down my dress. But for once I didn't make him stop. Distraction was just what he needed. Knowing Jason, I wasn't surprised that a peek-a-boo show was what he chose.

Yvette licked her lips. Finally, she nodded.

I led Jason towards her. He was dressed for his own peek-a-boo show. He was wearing a pair of leather pants dyed a blue two shades darker than his eyes. The pants looked painted on, sliding seamlessly into boots dyed to match. He wore no shirt, only a vest that matched the pants, fastened with three leather thongs.

He stumbled as we entered the cleared space. Yvette glided towards him, and he hung back. Only my hand kept him from bolting. "Easy, Jason, easy."

He just kept shaking his head, straining against my hold on his wrist. He wasn't exactly struggling, but he wasn't cooperating either.

"It's too much to ask," Richard said. "He is my wolf, and I will not see him tormented."

I looked at Richard, proud, arrogant. "He's my wolf, too." I released Jason's wrist slowly and put a hand on either side of his face. "If this is too much to ask, say so, and we'll do something else."

He gripped my wrists, and I watched him collect himself. I watched his hard-won control fill his eyes, his face. "Don't leave me."

"I'm right here."

"No," Yvette said, "you cannot hold his hand while I feed."

I turned to her, Jason so close our bodies touched without hands. "Then it's over. You don't touch him."

"First you tame Asher. Now you seek to tame me. You have nothing I want, Anita."

"I have Jason."

She hissed at me, all that careful beauty breaking down and showing the beast inside. She snatched at him around me, and he jerked back. She pawed at him like a cat, and I kept my body between them, moving us into the center of the circle. I felt Jason's back hit the wall, and I grabbed Yvette's arm.

"Feel his terror, Yvette. I can feel his heart pounding against my back. My holding his hand won't make him unafraid. Nothing I could do would make him not fear your touch."

Jason hid his face against my back, hands sliding around my waist. I patted his arm. His body was one throbbing beat as his heart, his blood,

pumped through his body so hard I could feel it. His terror rode the air like a hot, invisible mist.

"Agreed," she said. She backed away to the center of the cleared floor. She held one pale hand out to us. "Come, Anita, bring our prize."

I slid in his arms until I was leading him by the hand again. His palms were sweating. I led him to stand with his back to her. He gripped my hands in both of his. His hands trembled. He stared at my face as if it were the only thing left in the world.

Yvette touched his back.

He whimpered. I drew him into me until our arms were touching, our faces only inches apart. I had no words of comfort. I could offer nothing but a hand to hold and something else to think about.

Yvette trailed her fingers around his shoulders until she came to the thongs that tied the vest. Her hands brushed the front of my body as she fumbled with the ties. I started to step back, and Jason's hands sang with tension. I stayed where I was, but my own pulse was beating in my throat. I was afraid of her, too, afraid of what she was.

She had to slide her hand around his waist to get the last tie, molding her body against his back. She licked his ear, a quick flick of her pale pink tongue.

He closed his eyes, bowing his head until our foreheads touched.

"You can do this," I said.

He nodded his head, eyes still closed, forehead still touching mine.

Yvette ran her hands up his back under the vest, then curved them around to his naked chest, running her nails down his flesh in a quick rush.

Jason gasped, and I realized in that instant that it wasn't just fear. He had slept with her before he knew what she was. She knew his body, knew how to bring him to passion as only a lover can. She'd use that against him now.

Jason drew his face back from mine. He looked at me, and he seemed lost.

She shoved the vest up around his shoulders and licked a long wet line up his spine.

He turned his face from me, so I wouldn't see his eyes. "It's all right if some of it feels good, Jason."

He turned back to me, and there were other things in his eyes beside fear. I'd been more comfortable with the fear, but he was the one hurting.

Yvette knelt and did something low on his back with her mouth. His knees buckled suddenly, taking us both to the floor. I ended up flat on my back with Jason on top of me. I had one leg free, which was a help and a hindrance, since it put him perfectly on top of me. I could tell his body was happy to be there. I wasn't sure about the rest of him. He was making small sounds low in his throat.

I scooted out from under him enough so that his groin wasn't pressing mine and I could sit up to see what Yvette had done to him. There were fangs marks low on his back near the spine. The blood beaded on the blue leather like it had been Scotch-garded.

His arms locked around my waist. "Don't leave me, please." His cheek was pressed against my waist. The tension in his body made my heart thud.

"I won't leave you, Jason." I stared at Yvette over his body.

She was kneeling with the white skirt pooled around her, as if a wandering photographer would be coming by. She smiled, and it reached her eyes, filling them with a dark, joyous light. She was enjoying the hell out of herself.

"You've fed. It's over," I said.

"That wasn't a feeding, and you know it. I've tasted him, but I haven't fed."

It had been worth a try. She was right. I knew she hadn't fed. "Then just do it, Yvette."

"If you had let me rot, then it would be quicker, but I want his terror and his pleasure. That takes longer."

Jason made a small sound, like a child crying in the dark. I looked out at Richard. He was still standing, but he wasn't angry with me now. There was real pain in his eyes. He'd have rather it be him than Jason. Like a true king he'd have taken the pain.

I smelled forest, rich and green, leaf mold so wet and new it made my throat tight. I stared at Richard and knew what he was suggesting. We'd had our little fight about the munin. He'd truly thought I was safe from them because I wasn't a shapeshifter. He hadn't known the marks I shared with him would put me at risk. But now it had possibilities. Not channeling Raina, I never wanted to do that again, but the power of the pack. Their warmth, their touch—that could help.

I closed my eyes and felt the mark open like curtains parting in my body. Jason raised his head, staring up at me. His nostrils flared, scenting me, scenting the power.

Yvette ripped the vest down his back like it was paper.

Jason gasped.

She licked along his body, then suddenly her mouth closed over his ribs. I saw the muscles in her jaw tense as Jason's body spasmed against me. He collapsed against me, hands scrambling along the floor as if he didn't know what to do with his them, or with his body.

Yvette drew back leaving neat red holes. Blood dripped from the wound. She licked her lips and smiled at me.

"Does it hurt?" I asked Jason.

"Yes," he said, "and no."

I started to raise him up.

Yvette put a hand in the middle of his back. "No, I want him on the ground. I want him below me."

I smelled the sharp musk of fur. Jason tried to look at me, but Yvette forced his head down into my lap. She used him to support her body while she peered into my face. "What are you doing?"

"I am his lupa. I call the pack to his aid."

"They cannot help him," she said.

"Yes," I said, "they can." I slid down, wriggling under Jason's body. The little black dress ended up about waist level. Everyone was getting a great view of the hose and undies. Good that everything matched. But I could see Jason's

face. I could feel his body a little more than I wanted to. But it was his eyes I wanted, his face. I wanted him looking at me.

I'd never tried missionary position with a man exactly my height. The eye contact was incredibly intimate. He gave a nervous laugh. "I've had fantasies like this."

"Funny," I said. "I haven't."

"Ooh, too cruel." His spine bowed, body pressing against mine. Yvette had taken another taste. The fear was back in full force, filling his eyes with panic.

"I'm here. We're here."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He drew in the scent of leaves, and fur, and dark places full of bodies that all smelled like pack. And Yvette struck again.

Jason screamed, and I raised myself up enough to see that the vampire had pulled a strip of skin loose so it flapped. Blood poured down his skin.

Jean-Claude came to the edge of the circle. "That is torture, not feeding. It stops here."

"No," Yvette said, "I will feed."

"Then feed," Jean-Claude said, "but do it quickly before our patience is at an end."

She crawled up his body, putting her weight on top of his, grinding me into the floor. The leather stitching over his groin was ground so hard against me that it hurt. His breath came in quick pants, fast and faster. He was going to hyperventilate.

"Look at me," I said.

Yvette jerked his head back by the hair. "No, look at me. Because I will hurt you, Jason. I will haunt your dreams."

"No," I said. The power swelled inside of me, and I spit power into her pale face. Blood flew in a long, shallow cut down her cheek.

Everything froze. Yvette raised a hand to her bleeding cheek. "How did you do that?"

"If I said I wasn't really sure, would you believe me?"

"No," she said.

"Then believe this, bitch. Finish this now or I will cut you up." I believed it when I said it, even though I wasn't sure I could ever repeat the performance. Only master vampires could cause cuts like that from a distance. I'd never even seen Jean-Claude do it.

Yvette believed me. She leaned close enough that the blood from the cut dripped onto Jason's blond hair. "As you like, *putain*, but know this, I will not put him under. For this—" she showed the cut to me by a turn of her face—"he will suffer."

"Ain't it always the way," I said.

She frowned at me, not the response she was expecting apparently. I put a hand on either side of Jason's face, forced his eyes to meet mine. There was puzzlement under the fear now, because Jason knew I'd never done anything

like what had just happened to Yvette. But we couldn't say, golly, gee whiz, how'd I do that in front of the bad guys?

Yvette shifted until her body was pressed along the length of Jason's. He moved against me. There was nothing between Jason and me but the leather of his pants and some satin. My body reacted. It was my turn to close my eyes so he wouldn't see. Maybe it was the physical reaction, but I was suddenly drowning in the scent of fur, and the warm, close knowledge of his body. The munin was here in a warm, building rush.

I lifted my face and kissed him. The moment our lips touched, the power flowed between us. It was a binding of a different sort, better than with Nathaniel, and I knew why. Nathaniel wasn't pack.

Jason didn't kiss me back at first; then he sank into my mouth, into the warm power, and the power grew until I could feel it like a small hot wind across my body, across our bodies. The power flowed over Yvette and made her cry out. She plunged fangs into Jason's neck. He screamed into my mouth, body stiffening, but the pain rode on the warm, building power and was washed away.

I could feel Yvette's mouth like a siphon, sucking the power away. I thrust it into her and sent her reeling from us, drunk on more than blood.

Freed of Yvette's body, Jason moved against me. He kissed me as if he'd climb inside and pull me around him, and I kissed him back. I'd welcomed Raina's munin, and I didn't know how to turn it off.

I felt his lower body react, felt him come, and that was enough to help me swim back into control. What a nice embarrassing moment to be driving again.

Jason collapsed on top of me, panting, but not from fear. I turned my face away so that I wouldn't catch a glimpse of anyone gathered around us. Yvette lay on her side near us, curled into a ball, blood trailing down her chin. She licked the blood, almost halfheartedly as if even that small effort were too much. She spoke French to me: "*Je reve de toi.*" I'd heard a version of this before from Jean-Claude. She said she'd dream of us.

I heard myself say, "Why do the French always know exactly what to say at times like this?"

Jean-Claude knelt beside us. "It is genetic, *ma petite.*"

"Ah," I said. I had trouble meeting his eyes with Jason still sprawled across my body.

"Jason," I said, tapping his bare shoulder. He said nothing, just rolled off me to lie on the floor, closer to Yvette than I'd have ever thought he'd be willing to get.

I suddenly realized that my skirt was still up around my waist. Jean-Claude helped me sit up while I wiggled the dress down.

Richard knelt with us. I expected a scathing remark. I'd certainly given him enough ammo for one. He surprised me by saying, "Raina, gone, but not forgotten."

I said, "No joke."

"I'm sorry, Anita. When you told me, I didn't realize it was an almost complete melding. I understand why you're afraid of it now. There are things

you can do to keep it from happening again. I was too angry at you to believe it was this bad." A look crossed his face, part pain, part confusion. "I am sorry for that."

"If you can keep that from happening again, apology accepted."

Padma was suddenly looming over us. "You and I will dance next, Ulfric. After the show your lupa gave us, I am more eager than ever to taste you."

Richard glanced at me, then at Jason and Yvette, both still lying on the ground as if any movement was too much. "I don't think I'm that good."

"I think you underestimate yourself, wolf," Padma said. He offered Richard a hand, but he stood on his own. The two men were almost the same height. They stared at each other, and I could already feel the power flaring between them, testing each other.

I lay against Jean-Claude's chest and closed my eyes. "Get me out of here before they start. I can't stand to be near this much power so soon." He helped me to stand, and when my legs wouldn't hold me, he scooped me up in his arms, holding me effortlessly. He just stood there holding me, as if expecting me to protest.

I put my arms around his neck and said, "Just do it."

He smiled, and it was wondrous. "I have wanted to do this for a very long time." Was it romantic to be carried in his arms at last? Yes. But when Jason managed to stagger from the floor, the front of his blue leather pants was stained, and that wasn't romantic at all.

Chapter 51

Padma and Richard faced each other just out of reach. Each was letting his power out like a lure at the end of a line, to see who took the bait first. Richard's power was as it always was, an electric heat. But Padma's power was similar. More than any other vamp I'd been around, his power was warm, alive, for lack of a better word. It did not have the electric shimmer of Richard's, but it had heat.

Their power filled the room as if the very air were charged with their energy. It was everywhere and nowhere. Richard's power bit along my skin, drew a gasp from my throat that Jean-Claude echoed. Padma's power flared along the skin like being too close to an open flame. The two energies combined were almost painful.

Rafael came to stand beside us. Jean-Claude was still holding me in his arms, which lets you know how shitty I was feeling. The Rat King wore a very ordinary navy blue suit, white shirt, understated tie. His black loafers were polished to a gloss, but he could have been going anywhere, from a business

meeting to a funeral. Yeah, it had the look of one of those suits that only came out for deaths and marriages.

"They feel evenly matched," he said, "but it is a lie." He said it softly as if just talking to us, but we were close enough that Richard could hear. "He did much the same with me; then he crushed me."

"He didn't crush you," I said. "You won."

"Only because you rescued me."

"No," I said. "You didn't give him the wererats. You won." I touched Jean-Claude's shoulder, and he put me down. I could stand. Yippee.

"Very impressive, Ulfric," Padma said, "but let's see just how impressive you can be, shall we? Thank you, Rafael, for spoiling the surprise. I will return the favor someday." The gloves, as they say, were off. Padma's power thundered through the room. I staggered, and only Jean-Claude's hand kept me from going to my knees.

Richard screamed and did fall to his knees. We were just getting the backwash of Padma's power. Richard was getting the full treatment. I expected him to do with Richard what he'd done with me, but he didn't. He had other plans.

"Change for me, Richard. I like my food with fur."

Richard shook his head. His voice came out strangled, as if the words were being dragged through his throat. "Never."

" 'Never' can be a very long time," Padma said. I felt his power like insects marching over my skin, ants with red-hot pokers taking bites. It was what he'd done to the wereleopard, Elizabeth, when he punished her.

Richard didn't writhe on the floor like she had. He said, "No." He got his feet under him and took a staggering step towards the vampire.

The burning got worse, the red-hot bites closer together like a continuous sheet of tiny fires. I made a small sound, and still Richard stood. He took another staggering step.

The rush of power stopped so abruptly that the absence of pain brought Richard to his knees nearly at Padma's feet. His breathing was loud in the sudden silence.

"Pain will not bring you to me," Padma said. "Shall we dispense with the games, Ulfric? Shall I feed now?"

"Just get it over with," Richard said.

Padma smiled, and there was something in his smile that I didn't like. As if he had everything under control, and everything was going as planned.

He stood behind Richard and dropped gracefully to his knees. He smoothed his hand down the side of Richard's neck, turning his head to the side for a good clean strike. One arm slid across Richard's chest, pinning him to his body; the other hand pressed his face to one side.

Padma leaned over him and whispered something in his ear. A spasm ran the length of Richard's body. He tried to break free of Padma, but the vampire was amazingly quick. He slid both arms under Richard's, fingers clasped behind Richard's neck. A classic full Nelson. Richard's struggles ended with him on the ground and the vampire on top of him. If it had been a wrestling

match, Richard would have been pinned, lost. But no referee was coming to say "time."

"What's happening?" I asked.

"I warned Richard," Rafael said, "but he's always been so strong."

"What?" I asked.

"He is calling Richard's beast, *ma petite*," Jean-Claude said. "I have seen him do it before."

Richard's body spasmed so violently, his head hit against the floor with a sharp crack. He rolled on his side, but the vampire stayed on him, whispering, whispering.

"Did he manage to call your beast like this?" I asked Rafael.

"Yes."

I looked at him.

He stared at the show, not meeting my eyes. "He called my beast like water pouring over my skin, then drained it away. He did it over and over, until I passed out. I woke as you found me on the rack, being skinned." His voice was neutral as he told it all, as if it were a story about someone else.

"Help him," I said, turning to Jean-Claude.

"If I enter that circle, Padma will use it as an excuse to challenge me. If it is a duel, I will lose."

"He's baiting you, then," I said.

"He is also enjoying himself, *ma petite*. Breaking the strong is his greatest joy in this existence."

A scream poured from Richard's mouth. A scream that ended in a howl.

"I'm going to help him."

"How, *ma petite*?"

"Padma can't challenge me to a duel, and he can't call my beast. Touch makes the marks stronger, right?"

"*Oui*."

I smiled and started walking towards Richard. Jean-Claude didn't try to stop me. No one did. Richard had managed to get to his knees with the vampire still molded to his back. Richard's eyes were amber wolf eyes, and he was close to panicking. This near, I could feel his beast like a huge shape just below the surface of some dark lake. When it broke the surface, it would take him with it. Rafael seemed to have accepted his loss, but Richard wouldn't. Richard would take the defeat and beat himself with it.

"What are you doing, human?" Padma asked, staring up at me.

"I'm his lupa and his third. I'm doing my job." I held Richard's face in my hands, and that was enough. The physical touch was all it took to strengthen his control. I felt his heart slow, the pulsing of his body ease. I felt that great shape sink back into the depths. Richard drew on my mark like a drowning man with a rope, coiling it around himself.

"No," Padma said. "He is mine."

I smiled at him. "No, he's mine. Whether we like it or whether we don't, he's mine."

Richard's eyes bled back to their normal brown, and he mouthed the words, "Thank you."

Padma stood in a rush, so quick it was almost like magic. He grabbed my wrist, hard enough to bruise, and I said, "You can't challenge me, because I'm not a vampire. You can't feed off of me, because I can only play victim once tonight, and Asher was my once."

Richard lay on the floor, one arm braced so he wasn't actually lying down, but I had a flash of how bone-weary he was, so tired, so weak.

"You know our rules well, Anita," Padma said. He jerked me close to him, bodies almost touching. "You are not vampire, or food, but you are still his lupa."

"You going to try and call my beast?" I said. "You can't call what's not there."

"I felt your power with the little werewolf." He raised my hand to his face and sniffed along my skin like he was smelling some exotic perfume. "You smell of pack, Anita. There is something in you to call. Whatever it is, I will have it."

"She is not part of the bargain," Jean-Claude said.

"She interfered," Padma said. "That makes her part of this bacchanal. Do not worry. I will not hurt her. Too much."

He leaned into me and spoke low, soft. It was French, and I didn't speak enough French to follow it. I caught the word for wolf, and power, and moon, and I felt the power rise inside of me. It was too soon after Jason. The power was too close to the surface, too near. Padma called to it, and I didn't know how to stop it. The power burst over my skin in a hot wash. My knees buckled and he caught me, as I collapsed against his body.

Richard touched my leg, but it was too late. He tried to strengthen my control, as I'd done for him, but I didn't have any control yet. Padma called and the munin answered. I was channeling Raina for the second time in an hour.

The power filled my skin, and I stood, pressing my body into Padma, staring at him from inches away. The power wanted to touch someone, anyone. It didn't care. I cared, and I had enough control this time to refuse it. I said, "No." I pushed away from him, falling to the ground as I did it.

Padma followed me, touching my hair, my face, as I crawled away from him. "The power is sexual in nature, a mating urge perhaps. How very interesting."

Jean-Claude said, "Leave her alone, Master of Beasts."

He laughed. "What do you think would happen if I kept calling her beast? Do you think she would give in? Do you think she would fuck me?"

"We will not find out," Jean-Claude said.

"If you interfere with my fun, then it is challenge between us."

"That is what you have wanted all along."

Padma laughed again. "Yes, I think you should be killed for the Earthmover's death. But I cannot kill you just for that. The council has voted that down."

"But if you kill me in a duel, then no one will blame you, is that it?"

"That is it."

I huddled on the floor, hugging myself, trying to swallow the power back, but it wasn't going anywhere. Richard crawled to me, touching my bare arm. I recoiled from him as if his touch had burned, because I wanted him, wanted him in a way so raw and primitive it made my body hurt.

"Don't touch me, please."

"How did you get rid of it last time?"

"Sex or violence, the munin leaves after sex or violence." Or healing, I thought. Though that had been sex, too, in a way.

Padma's power rode over us like a tank, a tank with a spiked tread. We both screamed, and Jean-Claude screamed with us. Blood poured from his mouth in a red rush, and I knew what Padma had done. I'd felt him try to do it to me. He'd shoved his power into Jean-Claude and opened it, burst something inside of him.

Jean-Claude fell to his knees, blood spattering the white shirt. I was on my feet without thinking, standing between Padma and Jean-Claude. The power burned along my skin. My anger fed it as if it truly were a beast.

"Get out of my way, human, or I will kill you first, and then your master." It was like standing inside an invisible wall of fire and pain to be this close to Padma now. He'd weakened Richard, then me, done something to the marks. Without us, Jean-Claude could not win.

I stopped fighting the energy inside me. I embraced it, fed it, and it spilled out of my mouth in a laugh that raised the hairs on my arms. It wasn't my laugh. It was a laugh I'd never thought to hear this side of hell.

Padma grabbed me, a hand on each arm, lifting me off my feet. "I am allowed to kill you if you interfere with a duel."

I kissed him, a soft brush of lips.

He was so startled for a second, he just froze; then he kissed me back, locking his arms behind my back, still with my feet dangling off the ground. He raised his face enough to say, "Even if you fuck me here and now, it won't save him."

That laugh spilled from my lips, and I felt a darkness fill my eyes. That cold, white part of me where there was nothing but static and silence, the place where I killed, opened up inside my head, and Raina filled it. I remembered the feel of Nathaniel's heart in my hands, the moment I'd realized I could kill him, that I wanted to kill him, more than I wanted to heal him. So much easier to kill.

I locked my arms around Padma's neck and kissed his mouth. I shoved the power into him like a sword. His body stiffened, arms opening, but I was holding on now. His heart was slick and heavy. It beat against the power like a fish in a net. I crushed the power around it. He fell to his knees and screamed into my mouth. Blood flowed in a warm gush, filling my mouth with the warm salty rush of it.

Hands pulled at me, tried to tear me away from Padma. I clung to him, legs wrapped around his waist, arms around his neck. "Back off or I'll shatter his heart. Back off now!"

Thomas fell to his knees beside us, blood trickling down his chin. "You'll kill me and Gideon."

I didn't want to kill them. The power began to slide away, buried in regret. "No," I said it out loud. I fed the power on my anger, my outrage. The munin swelled and filled me. I squeezed Padma's heart—gently, slowly.

I laid my face against his cheek and whispered, "Why aren't you fighting back, Master of Beasts? Where is that large, burning, power of yours?"

There was no answer but his labored breathing.

I squeezed a little tighter.

He gasped. "We could die together," he said in a voice wet with his own blood.

I rubbed my cheek against his face. The blood from his lips smeared along our skin. I'd always known that blood was a turn-on for lycanthropes but I'd never fully appreciated the appeal. It wasn't so much the feel of the blood as the smell of it. Hot, sweet, flatly metallic, and underneath, the scent of fear. He was so very afraid. I could smell it, feel it.

I raised back from him enough to see his face. It was a mask of blood. Part of me was horrified. Part of me wanted to lick him clean like a cat with a bowl of cream. Instead I gave his heart a little extra squeeze and watched the blood flow faster from his mouth.

His power built in a warm wash. "I will kill you before I die, lupa."

I held him and felt his power begin to build, still weakened, but enough to do the job. "Are you still a good Hindu?" I asked.

His eyes showed confusion.

"How much bad karma have you accumulated this turn of the wheel?" I gave a quick lick over his mouth and had to put my forehead against his and close my eyes to keep from doing what the munin wanted. What Raina would have done if she'd been here. "What would be punishment enough for your evil deeds in the next reincarnation, Padma? How many lives would it take to balance this one turn?"

I drew back enough to see his face. I had enough control again not to clean his face with my tongue. Looking into his eyes, I knew I was right. He feared death and what would come after.

"What would you do to save yourself, Padma? What would you give? Who would you give?" I whispered that last.

He whispered back, "Anything."

"Anyone?" I asked.

He just looked at me.

Jean-Claude was sitting up, cradled in Richard's arms. "It is still a duel until one is dead. It is within our rights to insist on finishing this."

"Are you so eager to die?" the Traveler said. "The death of one is the death of all." He stood above us and a little back as if he didn't want to be too closely associated with us. Too bloody, too primitive, too mortal.

"That is a question for Padma to answer, not me," Jean-Claude said.

"What is your price?" Padma asked.

"No more punishment for Oliver's death. He lost a duel, it is as simple as that." Jean-Claude coughed, and more blood spattered from his lips.

"Agreed," Padma said.

"Agreed," the Traveler said.

"I never wanted them dead because of the Earthmover's death," Yvette said. "Agreed."

Asher said, "The Earthmover earned his death. Agreed."

Jean-Claude held his hand out to me. "Come, *ma petite*. We have our safety."

I shook my head, laying a kiss on Padma's forehead, gentle, chaste. "I promised Sylvie that everyone who raped her would die."

Padma's body jerked, reaction at last. "The woman you can have, but not my son."

"Do you agree to that, Traveler? You, who Liv calls master now. Do you give her up so easily?"

"Will you kill him if I refuse?" he asked.

"I gave Sylvie my word," I said. And I knew that would mean something to them.

"Then Liv is yours to do with as you see fit."

"Master," she said.

"Silence," the Traveler said.

"See, Liv, they're just monsters." I stared down into Padma's bloody face and watched fear fill his eyes like water pouring into a glass. I watched him look into my face and see the emptiness. No, for the first time I wanted to kill. Not for revenge, or safety, or even my word, but just because I could. Because in some dark part of me it would be a pleasure to crush his heart and watch dark blood pour from him. I'd have liked to blame it on Raina's munin, but I wasn't sure. Maybe it was just me. Maybe it always had been. Hell, maybe it was one of the boys. I didn't know and it didn't matter. I let the thought fill my face and eyes. I let Padma see, and fear filled his face, his eyes, because he understood.

"I want Fernando," I said softly.

"He is my son."

"Someone must die for his crimes, Padma. I would rather it were him, but if you won't give him to me, then I'll take you in his place."

"No," Yvette said. "We have been more than generous here. We have let you kill a council member and go unpunished. We have given you back your traitor and our new toy. We owe you nothing else."

I looked at Padma but I spoke for the Traveler's ears. "If you had just insulted the vampires of this city, then it would be over and you would owe us nothing. But we are lukoi and not vampires. You called our Geri to your hand and she came. You tried to break her, and when she would not bend you tortured her. You tortured her when you knew it would not give you the lukoi. You dishonored her for no reason, other than that you could. You did it because you expected no reprisal. The Master of Beasts thought our pack was beneath notice. Pawns in a larger game."

I released his heart, because if I hadn't, the munin would have killed him. I shoved the power deeper into him. I shoved it hard and fast until he screamed. Gideon and Thomas echoed the scream.

Padma collapsed backwards onto the floor with me riding his body.

I rose up, hands flat over his chest, legs straddling his body. "We are the Thronos Rokke, the Throne Rock people, and we are no one's pawns."

Fernando knelt just outside the circle. "Father," he said.

"His life or yours, Padma. His life or yours."

Padma closed his eyes and whispered, "His."

"Father! You can't give me to her. To them!"

"Your word of honor that he is ours to punish as we see fit, even unto death," I said.

Padma nodded. "My word."

Damian, Jason, and Rafael just suddenly appeared around Fernando. He reached out to his father. "I am your son."

Padma would not look at him. Even when I crawled off him, he curled on his side away from Fernando.

I wiped blood off my chin with the back of my hand. The munin was leaving, draining away. I could taste blood all the way down. I rolled onto my side and threw up. Blood does not improve the second time around.

Jean-Claude reached out to me and I went to him. The moment his cool hand touched mine I felt better. Not a lot, but some. Richard's hand touched my face gently. I let them draw me into the circle of their arms. Jean-Claude seemed to gain strength just from my touch. He sat up a little straighter.

I glanced over to find Gideon and Thomas doing much the same with Padma. Blood poured from all of them, but only Padma's eyes were still haunted by fear. I'd pushed him to the edge of the abyss. Pushed us both. I'd been raised Catholic and I wasn't sure there were enough Hail Marys in the world to cover what was happening to me lately.

Chapter 52

Fernando tried to make a break for it but he was outmanned. Or would that be out-monstered? They bound him with silver chains and gagged him. The last was to stop his constant begging. He just couldn't believe his father had betrayed him.

Liv didn't fight. She seemed to take it almost resignedly. What seemed to surprise her most was the fact that I didn't kill them both where they stood. But I had other plans for them. They'd insulted the pack. It would be pack justice. That was sort of a group activity. Maybe we'd invite the wererats and have a cross species jamboree.

When they were led away, a silence so deep and wide that it thundered in the ears filled the room. Yvette stepped into that silence. She was smiling and lovely, fresh and beautiful on Jason's blood and our mingled power.

"Jean-Claude must still answer for his traitorous ways," she said.

"What are you babbling about?" the Traveler said.

"My master, Morte d' Amour, has accused him of trying to start another council in this country. A council that will steal our power and make us but laughable puppets."

The Traveler waved it away. "Jean-Claude is guilty of many things but that is not one of them."

Yvette smiled, and the smile was enough. She was going to say something bad. "What say you, Padma? If he is a traitor, then we can execute him for it. He can be an example to all others who would dare usurp the council's power."

Padma was still on the ground, cradled in the arms of his two servants. He still wasn't feeling too good. He stared at our little group. We were still huddled on the floor, too. The six of us were not going to be dancing tonight. The look in Padma's eyes said it all. I'd humiliated him, scared the hell out of him, and forced him to give up his only son to sure death. He smiled, and it wasn't pretty. "If they are traitors, then they must be punished."

"Padma," the Traveler said, "you know this is false."

"I did not say they were traitors, Traveler. I said *if* they were traitors. If they are traitors, then they must be punished. Even you must agree to that."

"But they are not traitors," the Traveler said.

"I use my master's proxy to call a vote," Yvette said. "I think I know what three of the votes will be."

Asher came to stand near Jean-Claude and us. "They are not traitors, Yvette. To say so is a lie."

"Lies are very interesting things. Don't you think . . . Harry?" She held out her hand as if it were a signal and Harry the bartender joined her. I didn't think I could be surprised anymore tonight. I was wrong.

"I see that you know Harry," Yvette said.

"The police are looking for you, Harry," I said.

"I know," he said. At least he had trouble meeting my eyes. Didn't make me feel much better, but a little.

"I knew Harry was one of your line," Jean-Claude said, "but he is truly one of yours."

"*Oui*."

"What is the meaning of this, Yvette?" the Traveler said.

"Harry leaked the information to those awful fanatics so they would kill monsters."

"Why?" the Traveler asked.

"My question exactly," I said.

"My master is frightened of change, like many of the old ones. Making us legal is the most sweeping change we've ever been threatened with. He fears it. He wants it stopped."

"Like Oliver," I said.

"Exactement."

"But the vampire killings didn't stop it," I said. "If anything, it's given the pro-vamp lobby a boost."

"But now," she said, "we shall have our revenge, a revenge so bloody and awful that it will turn everyone against us."

"You cannot do this," the Traveler said.

"Padma has given me the key. The Master of the City is weak, his link to his servants weaker still. He would be easily killed now if someone would challenge him."

"You," the Traveler said, "you could challenge Jean-Claude, but you could never be Master of the City, Yvette. You will never have enough power on your own to be a master vampire. Your master's power has made you try to rise above your station."

"It is true that I will never be a master, but there is a master here who hates Jean-Claude and his servant. Asher." She said his name like it was planned.

He looked at her, but he seemed startled. Whatever she planned, he didn't know about it. He stared down at Jean-Claude. "You want me to kill him while he is too weak to fight?"

"Yes," she said.

"No," Asher said, "I do not want Jean-Claude's place, not like this. Beating him in a far duel is one thing, but this is . . . treachery."

"I thought you hated him," Yvette said.

"I do, but honor means something to me."

"Implying I suppose that it doesn't to me?" She shrugged. "You're right. If I could be master of this city, I would do it. But I could live another thousand years and I will never be a master. But it is not honor that stops you. It's her." She pointed at me. "There must be some alchemy in you that I do not see, Anita. You bewitch every vampire that comes near you and every shapeshifter."

"You've had a big taste and don't seem too taken with me," I said.

"My tastes run to things even more exotic than you, animator."

"If Asher will not take the city as Master, then you cannot control the city's vampires. You cannot make them do some terrible deed to the humans," the Traveler said.

"I did not trust Asher's hatred to make our plan work. It would have been useful to have control of the city's vampires but it is not necessary. The carnage has already begun," Yvette said.

We were all silent, staring at her, all of us thinking one thing. I said it out loud. "What do you mean, it's already begun?"

"Tell them, Warrick," she said.

He shook his head.

She sighed. "Fine, I will tell them. Warrick was a holy warrior before I found him. He could call the fire of God to his hands, couldn't you?"

He wouldn't look at any of us. He stood there, this huge figure in shining white, head down like a little boy who's been caught playing hooky.

"You set the fires in New Orleans and San Francisco, and here. Why no fires in Boston?" I asked.

"I told you I began to feel stronger the longer I was away from our shared master. In Boston I was still weak. It wasn't until New Orleans that I felt God's grace return to me for the first time in nearly a thousand years. I was drunk on it at first. I was deeply ashamed that I burned down a building. I did not mean to, but it felt so wonderful, so pure."

"I caught him at it," Yvette said. "I told him to do it other places, everywhere we went. I told him to kill people, but even torture wouldn't make him do that."

He did look up then. "I made sure no one was injured."

"You're a pyrokinetic," I said.

He frowned. "I was given a gift from God. It was the first sign of his favor to return to me. Before, I think I feared the Holy Fire. Feared it would destroy me. But I do not fear my own destruction now. She wishes me to use God's gifts for evil use. She wanted me to burn down your stadium with all the people inside tonight."

I said, "Warrick, what have you done?"

He whispered, "Nothing."

Yvette heard him. She was suddenly beside us, white skirts swinging. She grabbed his chin and forced him to look at her. "The entire point to burning the other buildings was to leave a trail of evidence that would culminate in tonight's little sacrifice. A little burnt offering to our master. You burned the stadium as we planned."

He shook his head, blue eyes wide, but not frightened.

She hit him hard enough to leave her hand in a red outline on his cheek. "You holy-rolling bastard. You answer to the same master that I answer to. I will rot the skin from your bones for this."

Warrick stood very straight. You could see him preparing for the torment to come. He stood shining and white and he looked like a holy warrior. There was a peace in his face that was lovely to look upon.

Yvette's power surged forward and I got just the faintest backwash. But Warrick stood there untouched, pure. Nothing happened. Yvette turned to all of us. "Who is helping him? Who is protecting him from me?"

I realized what was happening. "No one's helping him, Yvette," I said. "He is a master vampire and you can't hurt him anymore."

"What are you talking about? He is mine. Mine to do with as I see fit. He has always been mine."

"Not anymore," I said.

Warrick smiled and it was beatific. "God has freed me from you, Yvette. He has finally forgiven me for my fall from grace. My lusting after your white flesh that led me to hell. I am free of it. I am free of you."

"No," she said. "No!"

"It seems our brother council member was limiting Warrick's powers," the Traveler said. "As he was giving you power, Yvette, he was keeping it from Warrick."

"This is not possible," she said. "We will burn this city to the ground and take credit for it. We will show them we are monsters."

"No, Yvette," Warrick said. "We will not."

"I don't need you for this," she said. "I can be monster enough on my own. I'm sure there is a reporter out there somewhere that I can embrace. I'll rot in front of his cameras, on him. I will not fail our master. I will be the monster he wants us to be. The monsters we truly are." She held out her hand to Harry. "Come, let us go find victims in very public places."

"We cannot allow this," the Traveler said.

"No," Padma said. He pushed to his feet with Gideon and Thomas's help. "We cannot allow this."

"No," Warrick said, "we cannot allow her to tempt anyone else. It is enough."

"No, it is not enough. It will never be enough. I will find someone to take your place at my side, Warrick. I can make another of you. Someone who will serve me for all time."

He shook his head slowly. "I cannot allow you to steal another man's soul in my place. I will not ransom another man into the hell of your embrace."

"I thought it was hell you feared," Yvette said. "Centuries of worry that you'll roast in punishment for your crimes." She pouted at him, exaggerating her voice. "Centuries of listening to you whine about your purity and your fall from grace, and the punishment that awaited you."

"I no longer fear my punishment, Yvette."

"Because you think you've been forgiven," she said.

He shook his head. "Only God knows if I am truly forgiven, but if I am to be punished, then I will have earned it. As we all have. I cannot allow you to put another in my place."

She came to him, trailing fingers across his white tunic. I lost sight of her behind his broad back, and when she came back around she was rotting. She trailed decaying hands down his white suit leaving black and green globs, slimy trails like obscene slugs. She laughed at him with a face covered in sores.

Richard whispered, "What is happening to her?"

"Yvette's happening," I said.

"You'll return to France with me. You'll continue to serve me even though you're a master now. If anyone would make such a sacrifice, it is you, Warrick."

"No, no," he said. "If I were truly strong and worthy of God's grace, then perhaps I would return with you, but I am not that strong."

She wrapped her rotting arms around his waist and smiled up at him. Her body was running to ruin, leaking dark fluids over her white dress. Her rich pale hair was drying out before our eyes, turning to crinkling straw. "Then kiss me, Warrick, one last time. I must find your replacement before dawn."

He encircled her with his white robed arms, hugging her against his tall body. "No, Yvette, no." He stared down at her and there was something almost like tenderness on his face. "Forgive me," he said. He held his hands out in front of him.

Blue fire sprang from his hands, a strange pale color, paler even than gas flame.

Yvette turned her rotting face to look behind her at the fire. "You wouldn't dare," she said.

Warrick closed his arms around her. Her dress caught first. She screamed, "Don't be stupid, Warrick! Let me go!"

He held on, and when the fire hit her flesh she went like she'd been doused in kerosene. She burned with a blue light. She screamed, and struggled, but he had her pinned to his chest. She couldn't even beat at the flames with her hands.

The fire bathed Warrick in a nimbus of blue, but he didn't burn. He stood there yellow and white surrounded in blue fire, and he did look like a saint. Something holy and wonderful and terrible to behold. He stood there shining and Yvette began to blacken and peel in his arms. He smiled at us. "God has not forsaken me. Only my fear kept me in thrall to her all these years."

Yvette twisted in his arms, tried to get away, but he held her tight. He dropped to his knees, bowing his head while she fought him. She burned, skin peeling back from her bones, and still she screamed. The stench of burning hair and cooking flesh filled the room, but there was almost no smoke, just heat building. Making everyone in the room move back from them. Finally, mercifully, Yvette stopped moving, stopped screaming.

I think Warrick was praying while she shrieked and writhed and burned. The blue flames roared almost to the ceiling, then changed color. They became pure yellow-orange, the color of ordinary flame.

I remembered McKinnon's story of how the firebug had burned once the fire changed color. "Warrick, Warrick, let her go. You'll burn with her."

Warrick's voice came one last time. "I do not fear God's embrace. He demands sacrifice, but he is merciful." He never screamed. The fire began to eat at him, but he never made a sound. In that silence we heard a different voice. A high-pitched screaming, low and wordless, pitiless, hopeless. Yvette was still alive.

Someone finally asked if there was a fire extinguisher. Jason said, "No, there isn't." I looked at him across the room, and he met my gaze. We stared at each other and I knew that he knew exactly where the fire extinguisher was. Jean-Claude, whose hand I was still holding, knew where it was. Hell, I knew where it was. None of us went running. We let her burn. We let them both burn. Warrick I would have saved if I could have, but Yvette—Burn, baby, burn.

Chapter 53

The council went home. We had the word of two members that we would not be bothered again. I wasn't sure I trusted them, but it was the best we were

going to get. Richard and I are meeting regularly with Jean-Claude, learning how to control the marks. I still can't control the munin, but I'm working on it, and Richard is helping me. We're trying to be less nasty to one another. He's gone out of state for the rest of the summer to finish work on his master's degree in preternatural biology. Hard to work on the marks from that big a distance.

He's approached the local pack there for possible lupa candidates. I don't know how I feel about that. I'm not even sure it's Richard that I would miss. It's the pack, the lukoi. You can always find another boyfriend, but a new family, especially one this strange, that's a rare gift. All the wereleopards have come on board my bandwagon, even Elizabeth. Surprise, surprise.

The leopards call me their Nimir-Ra, leopard queen. Me and Tarzan, huh?

I gave Fernando and Liv to Sylvie. Other than a few pieces that Sylvie kept for souvenirs, they're both gone.

Nathaniel wanted to move in with me. I'm paying for his apartment. He seems lost without someone to organize his life. Zane, who recovered from his gunshot wounds, says that Nathaniel needs a master or a mistress, that he's what the S & M crowd call a pet. The term means someone who is a step below slave, someone who can't function alone. I'd never heard of such a thing, but it seems to be true, at least for Nathaniel. No, I don't know what I'm going to do with him.

Stephen and Vivian are dating. Truthfully, I'd begun to assume Stephen liked guys. Shows how much I know.

Asher stayed in St. Louis. Here, strangely, he's among friends. He and Jean-Claude reminisce about things I'd only read about in history books or seen in movies. I suggested Asher see a plastic surgeon. He informed me that the burns could not be healed because they were caused by a holy object. I said, what does it hurt to ask? When he got over the shocking idea that modern technology might be able to do something his own wonderful body could not, he asked. The doctors are hopeful.

Jean-Claude and I did christen the bathtub at my new house. Picture white candles glowing everywhere, the light gleaming on his naked chest. The petals of two dozen red roses floating on the surface of the water. That's what I came home to one morning at about three A.M. We played until dawn, when I tucked him into my bed. I stayed with him until the warmth left his body and my nerve broke.

Richard is right. I can't give myself completely to Jean-Claude. I can't let him feed. I can't truly share a bed. He is, no matter how lovely, the walking dead. I keep shying away from anything that reminds me too strongly of that fact, like blood-drinking and low body temperatures. Jean-Claude certainly has the keys to my libido, but my heart . . . Can a walking corpse hold the keys to my heart? No. Yes. Maybe. How the hell should I know?

Blue Moon

by

Laurell K. Hamilton

Book 8 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Chapter 1

I was dreaming of cool flesh and sheets the color of fresh blood. The phone shattered the dream, leaving only fragments, a glimpse of midnight blue eyes, hands gliding down my body, his hair flung across my face in a sweet, scented cloud. I woke in my own house, miles from Jean-Claude with the feel of his body clinging to me. I fumbled the phone from the bedside table and mumbled, "Hello."

"Anita, is that you?" It was Daniel Zeeman, Richard's baby brother. Daniel was twenty-four and cute as a bug's ear. Baby didn't really cover it. Richard had been my fiancé once upon a time—until I chose Jean-Claude over him. Sleeping with the other man put a real crimp in our social plans. Not that I blamed Richard. No, I blamed myself. It was one of the few things Richard and I still shared.

I squinted at the glowing dial of the bedside clock. 3:10 A.M. "Daniel, what's wrong?" No one calls at ten after the witching hour with good news.

He took a deep breath, as if preparing himself for the next line. "Richard's in jail."

I sat up, sheets sliding in a bundle to my lap. "What did you say?" I was suddenly wide awake, heart thudding, adrenaline pumping.

"Richard is in jail," he repeated.

I didn't make him say it again, though I wanted to. "What for?" I asked.

"Attempted rape," he said.

"What?" I said.

Daniel repeated it. It didn't make any more sense the second time I heard it. "Richard is like the ultimate Boy Scout," I said. "I'd believe murder before I'd believe rape."

"I guess that's a compliment," he said.

"You know what I meant, Daniel. Richard wouldn't do something like that."

"I agree," he said.

"Is he in Saint Louis?" I asked.

"No, he's still in Tennessee. He finished up his requirements for his master's degree and got arrested that night."

"Tell me what happened."

"I don't exactly know," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"They won't let me see him," Daniel said.

"Why not?"

"Mom got in to see him, but they wouldn't let all of us in."

"Has he got a lawyer?" I asked.

"He says he doesn't need one. He says he didn't do it."

"Prison is full of people who didn't do it, Daniel. He needs a lawyer. It's his word against the woman's. If she's local and he isn't, he's in trouble."

"He's in trouble," Daniel said.

"Shit," I said.

"There's more bad news," he said.

I threw the covers back and stood, clutching the phone. "Tell me."

"There's going to be a blue moon this month." He said it very quietly, no explanation, but I understood.

Richard was an alpha werewolf. He was head of the local pack. It was his only serious flaw. We'd broken up after I'd seen him eat somebody. What I'd seen had sent me running to Jean-Claude's arms. I'd run from the werewolf to the vampire. Jean-Claude was Master of the City of Saint Louis. He was definitely not the more human of the two. I know there isn't a lot to choose from between a bloodsucker and a flesh-eater, but at least after Jean-Claude finished feeding, there weren't chunks between his fangs. A small distinction but a real one.

A blue moon meant a second full moon this month. The moon doesn't actually turn blue most of the time, but it is where the old saying comes from—once in a blue moon. It happens about every three years or so. It was August, and the second full moon was only five days away. Richard's control was very good, but I'd never heard of any werewolf, even an Ulfric, a pack leader, who could fight the change on the night of the full moon. No matter what flavor of animal you changed into, a lycanthrope was a lycanthrope. The full moon ruled them.

"We have to get him out of jail before the full moon," Daniel said.

"Yeah," I said. Richard was hiding what he was. He taught junior high science. If they found out he was a werewolf, he'd lose his job. It was illegal to discriminate on the basis of a disease, especially one as difficult to catch as lycanthropy, but they'd do it. No one wanted a monster teaching their kiddies. Not to mention that the only person in Richard's family who knew his secret was Daniel. Mom and Pop Zeeman didn't know.

"Give me a number to contact you at," I said.

He did. "You'll come down then," he said.

"Yeah."

He sighed. "Thanks. Mom is raising hell, but it's not helping. We need someone here who understands the legal system."

"I'll have a friend call you with the name of a good local lawyer before I get there. You may be able to arrange bail by the time I arrive."

"If he'll see the lawyer," Daniel said.

"Is he being stupid?" I asked.

"He thinks that having the truth on his side is enough."

It sounded like something Richard would say. There was more than one reason why we'd broken up. He clung to ideals that hadn't even worked when they were in vogue. Truth, justice, and the American way certainly didn't work within the legal system. Money, power, and luck were what worked. Or having someone on your side that was part of the system.

I was a vampire executioner. I was licensed to hunt and kill vampires once a court order of execution had been issued. I was licensed in three states. Tennessee was not one of them. But cops, as a general rule, would treat an executioner better than a civilian. We risked our lives and usually had a higher kill count than they did. Of course, the kills being vamps, some people didn't count them as real kills. Had to be human for it to count.

"When can you get here?" Daniel asked.

"I've got some things to clear up here, but I'll see you today before noon."

"I hope you can talk some sense into Richard."

I'd met their mother—more than once—so I said, "I'm surprised that Charlotte can't talk sense to him."

"Where do you think he gets this 'truth will set you free' bit?" Daniel asked.

"Great," I said. "I'll be there, Daniel."

"I've got to go." He hung up suddenly as if afraid of being caught. His mom had probably come into the room. The Zeemans had four sons and a daughter. The sons were all six feet or above. The daughter was five nine. They were all over twenty-one. And they were all scared of their mother. Not literally scared, but Charlotte Zeeman wore the pants in the family. One family dinner and I knew that.

I hung up the phone, turned on the lamp, and started to pack. It occurred to me while I was throwing things into a suitcase to wonder why the hell I was doing this. I could say that it was because Richard was the other third of a triumvirate of power that Jean-Claude had forged between the three of us.

Master vampire, Ulfric, or wolf king, and necromancer. I was the necromancer. We were bound so tightly together that sometimes we invaded each other's dreams by accident. Sometimes not so accidentally.

But I wasn't riding to the rescue because Richard was our third. I could admit to myself, if to no one else, that I still loved Richard. Not the same way I loved Jean-Claude, but it was just as real. He was in trouble, and I would help him if I could. Simple. Complicated. Hurtful.

I wondered what Jean-Claude would think of me dropping everything to go rescue Richard. It didn't really matter. I was going, and that was that. But I did spare a thought for how that might make my vampire lover feel. His heart didn't always beat, but it could still break.

Love sucks. Sometimes it feels good. Sometimes it's just another way to bleed.

Chapter 2

I made phone calls. My friend Catherine Maison-Gillette was an attorney. She'd been with me on more than one occasion when I had to make a statement to the police about a dead body that I helped make dead. So far, no jail time. Hell, no trial. How did I accomplish this? I lied.

Bob, Catherine's husband, answered on the fifth ring, voice so heavy with sleep it was almost unintelligible. Only the bass growl let me know which of them it was. Neither of them woke gracefully.

"Bob, this is Anita. I need to speak with Catherine. It's business."

"You at a police station?" he asked. See, Bob knew me.

"No, I don't need a lawyer for me this time."

He didn't ask questions. He just said, "Here's Catherine. If you think I have no curiosity at all, you're wrong, but Catherine will fill me in after you hang up."

"Thanks, Bob," I said.

"Anita, what's wrong?" Catherine's voice sounded normal. She was a criminal attorney with a private firm. She was wakened a lot at odd hours. She didn't like it, but she recovered well.

I told her the bad news. She knew Richard. Liked him a lot. Didn't understand why in hell I'd dumped him for Jean-Claude. Since I couldn't tell her about Richard being a werewolf, it was sort of hard to explain. Heck, even if I could have mentioned the werewolf part, it was hard to explain.

"Carl Belisarius," she said when I was finished. "He's one of the best criminal attorneys in that state. I know him personally. He's not as careful about his clients as I am. He's got some clients that are known criminal figures, but he's good."

"Can you contact him and get him started?" I asked.

"You need Richard's permission for this, Anita."

"I can't talk Richard into taking on a new attorney until I see him. Time's always precious on a crime, Catherine. Can Belisarius at least start the wheels in motion?"

"Do you know if Richard has an attorney now?"

"Daniel mentioned something about him refusing to see his lawyer, so I assume so."

"Give me Daniel's number, and I'll see what I can do," she said.

"Thanks, Catherine, really."

She sighed. "I know you'd go to this much trouble for any of your friends, you're just that loyal. But are you sure your motives are just friendly in this?"

"What are you asking me?"

"You still love him, don't you?"

"No comment," I said.

Catherine gave a soft laugh. "No comment. You're not the one under suspicion here."

"Says you," I said.

"Fine, I'll do what I can on this end. Let me know when you get there."

"Will do," I said. I hung up and called my main job. Vampire killing was only a sideline. I raised the dead for Animators Inc., the first animating firm in the country. We were also the most profitable. Part of that was due to our boss, Bert Vaughn. He could make a dollar sit up and sing. He didn't like that my helping the police on preternatural crimes was taking more and more of my time. He wouldn't like me going out of town for an indefinite period of time on personal business. I was glad it was the wee hours and he wouldn't be there to yell at me in person.

If Bert kept pushing me, I was going to have to quit, and I didn't want to. I had to raise zombies. It wasn't like a muscle that would wither if you didn't use it. It was an innate ability for me. If I didn't use it, the power would leak out on its own. In college there had been a professor who committed suicide. No one had found the body for the three days that it usually takes for the soul to leave the area. One night, the shambling corpse had come to my dorm room. My roommate got a room switch next day. She had no sense of adventure.

I would raise the dead, one way or another. I had no choice. But I had enough reputation that I could go freelance. I'd need a business manager, but it would work. Trouble is, I didn't want to leave. Some of the people who worked at Animators Inc. were among my best friends. Besides, I had had about as much change as I could handle for one year.

I, Anita Blake, scourge of the undead—the human with more vampire kills than any other vampire executioner in the country—was dating a vampire. It was almost poetically ironic.

The doorbell rang. The sound made my heart pulse in my throat. It was an ordinary sound, but not at 3:45 in the morning. I left my partially packed suitcase on the unmade bed and walked into the living room. My white furniture sat on top of a brilliant oriental rug. Cushions that caught the bright

colors were placed casually on the couch and chair. The furniture was mine. The rug and cushions had been gifts from Jean-Claude. His sense of style would always be better than mine. Why argue?

The doorbell rang again. It made me jump for no good reason except it was insistent and it was an odd hour and I was already keyed up from the news about Richard. I went to the door with my favorite gun, a Browning Hi-Power 9mm, in hand, safety off, pointed at the floor. I was almost at the door when I realized I was wearing nothing but my nightgown. A gun, but no robe. I had my priorities in order.

I stood there, barefoot on the elegant rug, debating whether to go back for the robe or a pair of jeans. Something. If I'd been wearing one of my usual extra-large T-shirts, I'd have just answered the door. But I was wearing a black satin nightie with spaghetti straps. It hung almost to my knees. One size does not fit all. It covered everything but wasn't exactly answering-the-door attire. Screw it.

I called, "Who is it?" Bad guys usually didn't ring the doorbell.

"It is Jean-Claude, *ma petite*."

My mouth dropped open. I couldn't have been more surprised if it had been a bad guy. What was he doing here?

I clicked the safety on the gun and opened the door. The satin nightie had been a gift from Jean-Claude. He'd seen me in less. We didn't need the robe.

I opened the door and there he was. It was like I was a magician and had thrown aside the curtain to show my lovely assistant. The sight of him caught my breath in my throat.

His shirt was a conservative business cut with fastened cuffs and a simple collar. It was red with the collar and cuffs a solid almost satiny scarlet. The rest of the shirt was some sheer fabric so that his arms, chest, and waist were bare behind a sheen of red cloth. His black hair curled below his shoulders, darker, richer somehow against the red of the shirt. Even his midnight blue eyes seemed bluer framed by red. It was one of my favorite colors for him to wear, and he knew it. He'd threaded a red cord through the belt loops of his black jeans. The cord fell in knots down one side of his hip. The black boots came almost to the tops of his legs, encasing his long, slender legs in leather from toe to nearly groin.

When I was away from Jean-Claude, away from his body, his voice, I could be embarrassed, scratchy with discomfort that I was dating him. When I was away from him, I could talk myself out of him—almost. But never when I was with him. When I was with him, my stomach dropped to my feet and I had to fight very hard not to say things like golly.

I settled for "You look spectacular, as always. What are you doing here on a night that I told you not to come?" What I wanted to do was to throw myself around him like a coat and have him carry me over the threshold clinging to him like a monkey. But I wasn't going to do that. It lacked a certain dignity. Besides, it sort of scared me how much I wanted him—and how often. He was like a new drug. It wasn't vampire powers. It was good, old-fashioned lust. But

it was still scary, so I had set up some parameters. Rules. He followed them most of the time.

He smiled, and it was the smile I'd grown to both love and dread. The smile said he was thinking wicked thoughts, things that two or more could do in darkened rooms, where the sheets smelled of expensive perfume, sweat, and other bodily fluids. The smile had never made me blush until we started having sex. Sometimes all he had to do was smile, and heat rushed up my skin like I was thirteen and he was my first crush. He thought it was charming. It embarrassed me.

"You son of a bitch," I said softly.

The smile widened. "Our dream was interrupted, *ma petite*."

"I knew it wasn't an accident that you were in my dreams," I said. It came out hostile, and I was pleased. Because the hot summer wind was blowing the scent of his cologne against my face. Exotic, with an undercurrent of flowers and spice. I almost hated to wash my sheets for fear of losing the scent of him sometimes.

"I asked you to wear my gift so I could dream of you. You knew what I meant to do. If you say other, then you are lying. May I come in?"

He'd been invited in often enough that he could have crossed my threshold without the invitation, but it had become a game with him. A formal acknowledgment every time he crossed that I wanted him. It irritated me and pleased me, like so much about Jean-Claude.

"You might as well come in."

He walked past me. I noticed the black boots were laced up the back from heel to top. The back of his black jeans fit smooth and tight so there was no need to guess what he wasn't wearing under them.

He spoke without turning around. "Do not sound so grumpy, *ma petite*. You have the ability to bar me from your dreams." He turned then, and his eyes were full of a dark light that had nothing to do with vampire powers. "You welcomed me with more than open arms."

I blushed for the second time in less than five minutes. "Richard is in jail in Tennessee," I said.

"I know," he said.

"You know?" I said. "How?"

"The local Master of the City called to tell me. He was very much afraid that I would think it was his doing. His way of destroying our triumvirate."

"If he was going to destroy us, it would be a murder charge, not attempted rape," I said.

"True," Jean-Claude said, then laughed. The laughter trailed over my bare skin like a small, private wind. "Whoever framed our Richard did not know him well. I would believe murder of Richard before rape."

It was almost exactly what I'd said. Why was that unnerving? "Are you going down to Tennessee?"

"The master, Colin, has forbidden me to enter his lands. To do so now would be an act of aggression, if not outright war."

"Why should he care?" I asked.

"He fears my power, *ma petite*. He fears our power, which is why he has made you persona non grata in his territory as well."

I stared at him. "You are kidding, I hope. He's forbidden either of us to help Richard?"

Jean-Claude nodded.

"And he expects us to believe it's not his doing?" I said.

"I believe him, *ma petite*."

"You could tell he wasn't lying over the phone?" I asked.

"Some master vampires can lie to other master vampires, though I do not think Colin is such a power. But that is not why I believe him."

"Why then?"

"The last time you and I traveled to another vampire's lands, we slew her."

"She was trying to kill us," I said.

"Technically," he said, "she had set all of us free save you. You she wished to make a vampire."

"Like I said, she was trying to kill me."

He smiled. "Oh, *ma petite*, you wound me."

"Cut the crap. This Colin can't really believe that we are just going to leave Richard to rot."

"He has the right to deny us safe passage," Jean-Claude said.

"Because we killed another master in her own territory?" I asked.

"He doesn't need grounds for his refusal, *ma petite*. He merely has to refuse."

"How do you vampires get anything accomplished?"

"Slowly," Jean-Claude said. "But remember, *ma petite*, we have the time to be patient."

"Well, I don't, and Richard doesn't."

"You could have eternity if you would both accept the fourth mark," he said, voice quiet, neutral.

I shook my head. "Richard and I both value what little is left of our humanity. Besides, eternity my ass, the fourth mark wouldn't make us immortal. It just means that we live as long as you do. You're harder to kill than we are, but not that much harder."

He sat down on the couch, folding his legs under him. It wasn't an easy position, wearing that much leather. Maybe the boots were softer than they looked. Naw.

He rested his elbows on the couch arm, leaning his chest outward. The sheer red cloth covered his chest completely and left nothing to the imagination. His nipples pressed against the thin fabric. The red haze of cloth made the cross-shaped burn scar look almost bloody.

He raised himself upward with his hands propped on the couch arm like a mermaid on a rock. I expected him to tease or say something sexual. Instead, he said, "I came to tell you of Richard's imprisonment in person." He watched my face very closely. "I thought it might upset you."

"Of course it upsets me. This Colin guy, vampire, whatever the hell he is, is crazy if he thinks he's going to keep us from helping Richard."

Jean-Claude smiled. "Asher is negotiating even as we speak to try and allow you to enter Colin's territory."

Asher was his second banana, his vampire lieutenant. I frowned. "Why me and not you?"

"Because you are much better with police matters than I am." He threw one long, leather-clad leg over the couch arm and slithered over it to his feet. It was like watching a lap dance without a lap. To my knowledge, Jean-Claude had never stripped at Guilty Pleasures, the vampire strip club he owned, but he could have. He had a way of making even the smallest movement sexual and vaguely obscene. You always felt like he was thinking wicked thoughts, things you couldn't say in mixed company.

"Why didn't you just call and tell me all this?" I said. I knew the answer, or at least part of it. He seemed to be as enamored of my body as I was of his. Good sex cuts both ways. The seducer can become the seduced, with the right victim.

He glided towards me. "I thought this was news to be delivered face-to-face." He stopped just in front of me, so close that the slightly full hem of my nightie brushed his thighs. He gave a small movement of his body and the satin edge of the nightie moved gently against my bare legs. Most men would have had to use their hands to get that kind of movement. Of course, Jean-Claude had had four hundred years to perfect his technique. Practice makes perfect.

"Why face-to-face?" I asked, my voice a little breathy.

A smile curled his lips. "You know why," he said.

"I want to hear you say it," I said.

His beautiful face fell into blank, careful lines, only his eyes held the heat like a banked fire. "I could not let you leave without touching you one last time. I want to do the wicked dance before you leave."

I laughed, but it was tense, nervous. My mouth was suddenly dry. I was having trouble not staring at his chest. The "wicked dance" was his pet euphemism for sex. I wanted to touch him, but if I did, I wasn't sure where it would stop. Richard was in trouble. I'd betrayed him once with Jean-Claude; I wouldn't let him down again. "I need to pack," I said. I turned abruptly and started walking towards the bedroom.

He followed me.

I put my gun on the bedside table beside the phone, got socks out of the drawer, and started tossing them into the suitcase, trying to ignore Jean-Claude. He doesn't ignore easily. He lay on the bed beside the suitcase, propped on one elbow, long legs stretched the length of the bed. He looked fearfully overdressed against my white sheets. He watched me move around the room, moving just his eyes. He reminded me of a cat: watchful, perfectly at ease.

I went into the nearby bathroom to get toiletries. I had a man's shaving kit bag that I kept all the small stuff in. I was traveling out of town more and more lately. Might as well be organized about it.

Jean-Claude was lying on his back, long, black hair spilling like a dark dream on my white pillow. He gave a slight smile as I entered the room. He held a hand out to me. "Join me, *ma petite*."

I shook my head. "If I join you, we'll get distracted. I'm going to pack and get dressed. We don't have time for anything else."

He crawled towards me over the bed, moving in a rolling glide like he had muscles in places he wasn't supposed to have them. "Am I so unappealing, *ma petite*? Or is your concern for Richard so overwhelming?"

"You know exactly how appealing you are to me. And yes, I am worried about Richard."

He slid off the bed, following at my heels. He glided in a sort of graceful slow motion while I hurried to and fro, but he paced me, matching each of my quick steps with his easy ones. It was like being chased by a very slow predator, one that had all the time in the world but knew in the end it would catch you.

The second time I almost ran into him, I finally said, "What is your problem? Quit following me around. You're making me nervous." Truth was, his body being so close made my skin jump.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and sighed, "I don't want you to go."

That stopped me in my tracks. I turned and stared at him. "Why, for heaven's sake?"

"For centuries I have dreamed of having enough power to be safe. Enough power to hold my lands and finally, at long last, have some sense of peace. Now I fear the very man who could make my ambitions come true."

"What are you talking about?" I came to stand in front of him, arms full of shirts and hangers.

"Richard; I fear Richard." There was a look in his eyes that I'd seldom seen. He was unsure of himself. It was a very normal, human expression. It looked totally at odds with the elegant man in his peekaboo shirt.

"Why would you be afraid of Richard?" I asked.

"If you love Richard more than you love me, I fear you will leave me for him."

"If you haven't noticed, Richard hates me right now. He talks more to you than to me."

"He does not hate you, *ma petite*. He hates that you are with me. There is a great difference between the two hatreds." Jean-Claude stared up at me almost mournfully.

I sighed. "Are you jealous of Richard?"

He looked down at the toes of his expensive boots. "I would be a fool if I were not."

I transferred the blouses to one arm and touched his face. I turned his face up to mine. "I'm sleeping with you, not Richard, remember?"

"Yet, here I am, *ma petite*. I am dressed for your dreams and you do not even offer me a kiss."

His reaction surprised me. Just when I thought I knew him. "Are you hurt that I didn't give you a hello kiss?"

"Perhaps," he said very softly.

I shook my head and tossed the blouses in the general direction of the suitcase. I bumped his knees with my legs until he opened his legs and let me

stand, pressing my body the length of his. I put my hands on his shoulders. The sheer red cloth was rougher textured than it looked, not soft. "How can anyone as gorgeous as you be insecure?"

He wrapped his arms around my waist, snuggling me against him. He squeezed his legs against me. The leather of the boots was softer than it looked, more supple. With his arms around me and his legs squeezing against me, I was effectively trapped. But I was a willing captive, so it was okay.

"What I want to do is go down on my knees and lick the front of this nifty shirt. I want to know just how much of you I can suck through the cloth." I raised my eyebrows at him.

He laughed soft and low. The sound raised goose bumps up and down my body, tightening my nipples and other places. His laughter was a touchable, intrusive thing. He could do things with his voice that most men couldn't do with their hands. Yet he was afraid I'd leave him for Richard.

He rested his face on my chest, cradled between my breasts. He rubbed his cheeks softly back and forth against me, making the satin slide against me, until my breath came faster.

I sighed and leaned my face over him, folding our bodies together. "I don't plan to leave you for Richard. But he's in trouble, and that comes before sex."

Jean-Claude raised his face to me, our arms so entangled that he almost couldn't move. "Kiss me, *ma petite*, that is all. Just a kiss to tell me that you love me."

I laid my lips against his forehead. "I thought you were more secure than this."

"I am," he said, "with everyone but you."

I pulled back enough to study his face. "Love should make you feel more secure not less."

"Yes," he said quietly, "it should. But you love Richard, too. You try not to love him, and he tries not to love you. But love is not so easily slain—or so easily aroused."

I bent over him. The first kiss was a mere brush of lips like satin rubbing against my mouth. The second kiss was harder. I bit lightly along his upper lip, and he made a small sound. He kissed me back, hands sliding to either side of my face. He kissed me as if he were drinking me down, trying to lick the last drops from the bottle of some fine wine, tender, eager, hungry. I collapsed against him, hands sliding over him as if even my hands were hungry for the feel of him.

I felt his fangs, sharp, bruising against my lips and tongue. There was a quick, sharp pain and the sweet copper taste of blood. He made a small inarticulate sound and rolled over me. I was suddenly on the bed with him above me. His eyes were one solid glowing blue, the pupils gone in a rush of desire.

He tried to turn my head to one side, nuzzling at my neck. I turned my face into his, blocking him. "No blood, Jean-Claude."

He went almost limp on top of me, face buried in the rumpled sheets. "Please, *ma petite*."

I pushed at his shoulder. "Get off of me."

He rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling, carefully not looking at me. "I can enter every orifice of your body with every part of me, but you refuse me the last bit of yourself."

I got off the bed carefully, not sure my knees were steady. "I am not food," I said.

"It is so much more than mere feeding, *ma petite*. If only you would allow me to show you how very much more."

I grabbed the pile of blouses and started taking them off the hanger and folding them in the suitcase. "No blood; that is the rule."

He rolled onto his side. "I have offered you all that I am, *ma petite*, yet you withhold yourself from me. How can I not be jealous of Richard?"

"You're getting sex. He's not even getting dates."

"You are mine, but you are not mine, not completely."

"I'm not a pet, Jean-Claude. People aren't supposed to belong to other people."

"If you could find a way to love Richard's beast, you would not hold back from him. Him you would give yourself to."

I folded the last blouse. "Damn it, Jean-Claude, this is stupid. I chose you. All right? It's a done deal. Why are you so worried?"

"Because the moment he was in trouble, you dropped everything to run to his side."

"I'd do the same for you," I said.

"Exactly," he said. "I have no doubt that you love me in your way, but you love him, too."

I zipped up the suitcase. "We are not having this argument. I'm sleeping with you. I am not going to donate blood just to make you feel more secure."

The phone rang. Asher's cultured voice, so like Jean-Claude's: "Anita, how are you this fine summer evening?"

"I'm fine, Asher. What's up?"

"May I speak with Jean-Claude?" he asked.

I almost argued, but Jean-Claude had his hand out for the phone. I gave the phone to him.

Jean-Claude spoke in French, which he and Asher had a habit of doing. I was glad that he had someone to speak his native tongue with, but my French just wasn't up to following the conversation. I suspected strongly that sometimes the vampires spoke in front of me like you would speak in front of a child that doesn't have enough grown-up talk to follow the conversation. It was rude and condescending, but they were centuries-old vampires, and sometimes they just couldn't help themselves.

He switched to English, talking directly to me. "Colin has refused you entrance to his territory. He has refused entrance to any of my people."

"Can he do that?" I asked.

Jean-Claude nodded. "*Oui*."

"I am going down there to help Richard. Arrange it, Jean-Claude, or I'll go down there without arrangements being made."

"Even if it's war?" he asked.

"Shit," I said. "Call the little son of a bitch and let me talk to him."

Jean-Claude raised his eyebrows but nodded. He hung up on Asher, then dialed a number. He said, "Colin, this is Jean-Claude. Yes, Asher told me what you have decided. My human servant, Anita Blake, wishes to speak with you." He listened for a moment. "No, I do not know what she wishes to say to you." He handed me the phone and settled back against the headboard of the bed as if watching a show.

"Hello, Colin?"

"This is he." His accent was pure Middle American. It made him sound less exotic than some of them.

"My name's Anita Blake."

"I know who you are," he said. "You're the Executioner."

"Yeah, but I'm not coming down there for an execution. My friend is in trouble. I just want to help him."

"He is your third. If you enter my lands, then two of your triumvirate will be within my territory. You are too powerful to be allowed entrance."

"Asher said you also denied access to any of our people, is that true?"

"Yes," he said.

"Why, for God's sake?"

"The Council, the rulers of all vampire kind, itself fears Jean-Claude. I will not have you in my lands."

"Colin, look, I don't want your power base. I don't want your lands. I have no designs upon you whatsoever. You're a master vampire. You can taste the truth in my words."

"You mean what you say, but you are the servant. Jean-Claude is the master."

"Don't take this wrong, Colin, but why would Jean-Claude want your lands? Even if he was planning some sort of Ghengis Kahn invasion, your lands are three territories away from us. If he was going to try conquering someone, he'd pick land next door."

"Maybe there's something here he wants," Colin said, and I could hear the fear in his voice. That was rare with a master vamp. They were usually better at hiding their emotions.

"Colin, I'll swear any oath you want that we don't want anything from you. We just need for me to come down there and get Richard out of jail. Okay?"

"No," he said. "If you come down here uninvited, it is war between us, and I will kill you."

"Look, Colin, I know you're afraid." As soon as I said it, I knew I shouldn't have.

"How do you know what I feel?" The fear rose a notch, but the anger rose faster. "A human servant that can taste a master vampire's fear—and you wonder why I don't want you in my lands."

"I can't taste your fear, Colin. I heard it in your voice."

"Liar!"

My shoulders were beginning to tighten. It doesn't usually take much to piss me off, and he was working at it. "How are we supposed to help Richard, if you won't let us send anyone down there?" My voice was calm, but I could feel my throat tightening, my voice going just a little lower with the effort not to yell.

"What happens to your third is not my concern. Protecting my lands and my people, that is my concern."

"If anything happens to Richard because of this delay, I can make it your concern," I said, voice still quiet.

"See, already the threats begin."

The tightness in my shoulders spilled up my neck and came out my mouth. "Listen, you little pip-squeak, I am coming down there. I am not letting your paranoia hurt Richard."

"We will kill you then," he said.

"Look, Colin, stay out of my way, and I'll stay out of yours. You fuck with me, and I will destroy you, do you understand me? It's only war if you start it, but if you start something, by God I will finish it."

Jean-Claude was motioning for the phone rather desperately. We wrestled for the receiver for a few seconds while I called Colin an antiquated politician, and worse.

Jean-Claude apologized to the empty, buzzing phone. He hung the phone up and looked at me. The look was eloquent. "I would say I am speechless, *ma petite*, or that I don't believe that you just did that, but I do believe it. The question is: Do you understand what you have just done?"

"I am going to rescue Richard. I can go around Colin or over him. It's his choice."

Jean-Claude sighed. "He is within his rights to see it as the beginning of a war. But Colin is very cautious. He will do one of two things. He will either wait and see if you initiate hostilities, or he will try and kill you as soon as you set foot on his lands."

I shook my head. "What was I supposed to do?"

"It doesn't matter now. What's done is done, but it changes the travel arrangements. You can still take my private jet, but you will have company."

"Are you coming?" I asked.

"No. If I arrived with you, Colin would be certain that we had come to kill him. No, I will stay here, but you will have an entourage of guards."

"Now, wait a minute," I said.

He held up his hand. "No, *ma petite*. You have been very rash. Remember, if you die, Richard and I may die, as well. The binding that makes us a triumvirate gives power, but it does not come without a price. It is not merely your own life that you are risking."

That stopped me. "I hadn't thought of it that way," I said.

"You will need an entourage now that befits a human servant of mine, and an entourage that is strong enough to fight Colin's people, if need be."

"Who do you have in mind?" I asked, suddenly suspicious.

"Leave that to me."

"I don't think so," I said.

He stood, and his anger lashed through the room like a scalding wind. "You have endangered yourself and me and Richard. You have endangered everything we have or hope to have with your temper."

"It would have come down to an ultimatum in the end, Jean-Claude. I know vampires. You would have argued and bargained for a day or two, but in the end, it would have come down to this."

"Are you so sure?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I heard the fear in Colin's voice. He's scared shitless of you. He'd have never agreed to us coming down."

"It is not just me he fears, *ma petite*. You are the Executioner. Young vampires are told if they are foolish, you will come and slay them in their coffins."

"You're making that up," I said.

He shook his head. "No, *ma petite*, you are the bogeyman of vampirekind."

"If I see Colin, I'll try not to scare him more than I already have."

"You will see him, *ma petite*, one way or the other. He will either arrange a meeting when he sees you mean him no harm, or he will be there when they attack."

"We have to get Richard out before the full moon. We've only got five days. We didn't have time to do this slowly."

"Who are you trying to convince, *ma petite*, me or yourself?"

I had lost my temper. It had been stupid. Inexcusable. I had a temper, but I was usually better at controlling it than that. "I'm sorry," I said.

Jean-Claude gave a very inelegant snort. "Now she's sorry." He dialed the phone. "I will have Asher and the others pack."

"Asher?" I said. "He's not going with me."

"Yes, he is."

I opened my mouth to protest. He pointed one long, pale finger at me. "I know Colin and his people. You need an entourage that is impressive without being too frightening, and yet if the worst happens, they must be able to defend you and themselves. I will pick who goes and who stays."

"That's not fair."

"There is no time for fairness, *ma petite*. Your precious Richard sits behind bars and the full moon is approaching." He let his hand fall to his lap. "If you wish to take some of your wereleopards with you, that would be welcome. Asher and Damian will need food while they are away. They cannot hunt within Colin's territory. That would be taken as an act of hostility."

"You want me to volunteer some of the wereleopards as walking provisions?"

"I am going to supply some werewolves as well," he said.

"I'm lupa for the pack as well as Nimir-ra for the leopards. You need to run the wolves by me, too." Richard had made me lupa of the werewolves when we were dating. Lupa is often just another word for the head wolf's girlfriend, though usually it's another werewolf, not a human. The wereleopards

came to me by default. I killed their last leader and found out that everyone else was pretty much beating the hell out of them. Weak shape-shifters without a dominant to protect them end up as anyone's meat. It was my fault, sort of, that they were being hurt, so I extended my protection over them. My protection, since I wasn't a wereleopard, consisted of my threat. My threat was that I'd kill anyone who messed with them. The monsters in town must have believed it, because they left the leopards alone. Use enough silver bullets on enough monsters, and you get a reputation.

Jean-Claude put the receiver up to his ear. "It is getting so that a person cannot insult a monster in Saint Louis without answering to you, *ma petite*." If I hadn't known better, I'd say Jean-Claude was angry with me.

I guess, this once, I couldn't blame him.

Chapter 3

The private jet was like a long white egg with fins. Okay, it was longer than an egg and more pointy at the ends, but it seemed just as fragile. Have I mentioned I have this little phobia about flying? I sat in my comfy, fully swivel, fully reclinable chair very upright, seat-belted in, fingernails digging into the cushioned arms. I had purposefully turned the seat away from one of the many round windows so I couldn't see out the side nearest me. Unfortunately, the plane was so narrow that I caught glimpses on the opposite side windows of fluffy clouds and clear blue sky. Hard to forget you're thousands of feet above the ground with only a thin sheet of metal between you and eternity when clouds keep floating past the window.

Jason plopped down in the seat next to me, and I let out a little yip. He laughed. "I can't believe you're this scared of flying." He pushed his chair with his feet, making it spin around, slowly, like a kid with Daddy's office chair. His thin blond hair was cut just above his shoulders, no bangs. His eyes were the same pale blue as the sky we were flying through. He was exactly my height, five three, which made him short, especially for a man. He never seemed to mind. He wore an oversized T-shirt and a pair of jeans so faded they were almost white. He wore two hundred dollar jogging shoes, though I knew for a fact he never jogged.

He'd turned twenty-one this summer. He'd informed me that he was a Gemini, and he was now legal for everything. Everything could cover a lot of ground for Jason. He was a werewolf, but he currently lived with Jean-Claude and played morning appetizer or evening snack for the vampire. Shapeshifter blood has a bigger kick to it, more power. You can drink less of it than human blood and feel a hell of a lot better, or so I've observed.

He flung himself up from the chair and fell to his knees in front of me. "Come on, Anita. What's to worry?"

"Leave me alone, Jason. It's a phobia. It has no logic. You can't talk me out of it, so just go away."

He sprang to his feet so fast it was almost magical. "We're perfectly safe." He started jumping up and down on the floor on the plane. "See, solid."

I yelled, "Zane!"

Zane appeared beside me. He was about six feet tall, stretched long and thin as if there wasn't enough flesh to cover his bones. His hair had been dyed a shocking yellow, like neon buttercups, shaved on the sides and gelled into small, stiff spikes on top. He wore black vinyl pants, like a slick second skin, and a matching vest, no shirt. Shiny black boots completed the outfit.

"You rang?" he asked in a voice that was almost painfully deep. If a shapeshifter spends too much time in animal form, some of the physical changes can be permanent. Zane's gravelly voice and the dainty upper and lower fangs in his human mouth said he'd spent a little too much time as a leopard. The voice could have passed for human, but the fangs—the fangs gave it away.

"Get Jason away from me, please," I said through gritted teeth.

Zane looked down at the smaller man.

Jason stood his ground.

Zane moved those last two steps to close the distance between them. They stood there, pressed chest to chest, eyes locked. You could suddenly feel that skin-crawling energy that let you know that human was not what they were.

Shit. I hadn't meant to start a fight.

Zane lowered his face toward the shorter man, a low growl trickling out of his closed lips.

"No fighting, boys," I said.

Zane planted a big, wet kiss on Jason's mouth.

Jason jerked back, laughing. "You bisexual son of a bitch."

"Now, if that isn't the pot calling the kettle black," Zane said.

Jason just grinned and wandered off, though there wasn't a lot of room to wander anywhere. I also have a touch of claustrophobia. I got it from a diving accident, but I've noticed it's worse since I woke up one morning trapped in a coffin with a vampire I didn't like. I got away, but I like enclosed spaces less and less.

Zane slid into the seat beside me. The shiny black vest gaped over his thin, pale chest, giving a glimpse of a silver nipple ring.

Zane patted my knee, and I let him. He was always touching people, nothing personal. A lot of shapeshifters were touchy-feely, as if they were animals instead of people and had fewer physical boundaries, but Zane had turned to casual touch into an art form. I finally realized that he touched others as a sort of security blanket. He tried to play the dominant predator, but he wasn't. Underneath the show of teasing confidence, he knew it. He got really tense if he was in a social situation where he had to stand alone, literally

without the touch of other flesh. So I let him touch me when I'd have bitched at anyone else.

"We'll be on the ground soon," he said. The hand left my knee. He understood the rules. I let him touch me when he had no business doing it, but no long, lingering caresses. I was his touchstone when he was nervous, not his girlfriend.

"I know," I said.

He smiled. "But you don't believe me."

"Let's just say I'll relax when we actually land."

Cherry joined us. She was tall and slender, with straight, naturally blond hair cut very, very short and close to a strong, triangular face. The eye shadow was gray, the eyeliner so black it looked like crayon. The lipstick was black. The makeup wasn't the colors I'd have chosen for her, but it did match her clothes. Black fishnet stockings, vinyl miniskirt, black go-go boots, and a black lace bra underneath a fishnet shirt. She'd added the bra for my benefit. Left to her own devices, when she wasn't working as a nurse, she went pretty much topless. She'd been a nurse until they found out she was a wereleopard; then she'd been the victim of budget cuts. Maybe it was budget cuts, but then again, maybe it wasn't. It was illegal to discriminate against someone because they had a disease, but no one wants a wereanything treating the sick. People seem to think lycanthropes can't control themselves around freshly spilled blood. Some of the newer shapeshifters would be in trouble, but Cherry wasn't new. She'd been a good nurse, and now she'd never be a nurse again. She was bitter about it and had turned herself into the slut bride from Planet X, as if even in human form, she wanted people to know what she was now: different, other. Trouble was, she looked like a thousand other teens and early twenties who also wanted to be different and stand out.

"What happens once we land?" Cherry asked in a purring, contralto voice. I'd thought her voice had been the product of too much fur time, like Zane's teeth, but nope, Cherry just had this wonderful, deep, sexy voice. She'd have done good phone sex. She sat on the ground at our feet, knees out, ankles crossed, making the short skirt ride up enough to show the hose were thigh high but still managing to cover the rest. Though in a skirt that short, I was hoping she was wearing undies. I'd have never have been able to wear something that short and not flash.

"I contact Richard's brother and go to the jail," I said.

"What do you want us to do?" Zane asked.

"Jean-Claude said that he made arrangements for rooms, so you guys go to the rooms."

They exchanged a glance. It was more than an ordinary glance.

"What?" I asked.

"One of us will need to go with you," Zane said.

"No, I'm going to go in there flashing my executioner's license. I'm better off on my own."

"What if the master of this city has his people waiting for you in town?" Zane asked. "He'll know you're going to the jail today."

Cherry nodded. "It could be an ambush."

They had a point, but . . . "Look, nothing personal, guys, but you look like the top half of an S and M wedding cake. Cops don't like people who look sort of . . ." I wasn't sure how to say it without being insulting. Cops were meat-and-potatoes people. They weren't impressed by the exotic. They'd seen it all and cleaned up the mess. Most of the exotic that they saw were bad guys. After a while, policemen seem to think anything exotic is a bad guy; just saves time.

If I walked into the police station with Tweedle-punk and Tweedle-slut, it was going to raise the cop's antennae. They'd know I wasn't exactly what I was claiming to be, and that would complicate things. We needed to make things easier, not harder.

I was dressed in vampire executioner casual. New black jeans, not faded, crimson short-sleeved dress shirt, black suit jacket, black Nikes, black belt so the loops of my shoulder holster had something to hang on. The Browning Hi-Power sat under my left arm, a familiar tightness. I was carrying three blades. A silver knife in a wrist sheath on each arm and a blade in a sheath down my spine. The handle stuck up high enough that my hair had to hide it, but my hair was thick and dark enough to do the job. The last blade was like a small sword. I'd used it only once for real to pin a wereleopard through the heart. The tip had pushed out his back. A silver cross under the blouse for true emergencies, and I was packed for werebear, or almost anything else. I had a spare clip of normal bullets in my fanny pack just in case I met up with a rogue fairie. Silver didn't work against them.

"I'll go with you." Nathaniel slid in behind Cherry, pressing himself against the wall of the plane and my legs. One broad shoulder rested against my jeans in a nice, solid weight. There was actually no way for him to sit there and not touch me. He was always trying to touch me, and he was good enough at it that I couldn't always bitch about it, like now.

"I don't think so, Nathaniel," I said.

He hugged his knees to his chest and asked, "Why not?" He was dressed normally enough in jeans and a tucked-in T-shirt, but the rest of him . . . His hair was a deep, nearly mahogany auburn. He'd tied it back in a loose ponytail, but the hair fell like silken water to his knees.

Nathaniel gazed up at me with eyes the pale purple of Easter egg grass. Even if he cut the hair, the eyes would have given him trouble. He was short for a man, and was also the youngest of us, nineteen. I suspected strongly that he was in the middle of a growth spurt. Someday, that short body was going to match his shoulders, which were broad and very masculine. He was a stripper at Guilty Pleasures, a wereleopard, and once he'd been a male prostitute. I'd put a stop to that. If you're going to be leopard queen, you might as well rule. The rule was that none of the leopards were whores. Gabriel, their old alpha, had pimped them out. Shapeshifters can take a lot of damage and survive. Gabriel had figured out a way to make that pay. He pimped his kitties out to the S and M set. People who liked to give pain had paid a lot of money for Nathaniel, once upon a time. The first time I'd ever seen him was in the hospital after a client had gotten carried away and nearly killed him. Admittedly, this was after

Gabriel had been killed. The wereleopards had tried to keep up the client list without anyone to protect them from the clients.

Zane had tried to take Gabriel's place as pimp and bad-ass kitty, but he hadn't been strong enough to fill the bill. He'd let Nathaniel nearly die and hadn't been able to protect him.

Nathaniel could bench-press a grand piano, but he was a victim. He liked pain and wanted someone to be in charge of him. He wanted a master and was trying very hard for me to take the job. We might have worked something out, but being his master—or mistress—seemed to include sex, and that I was not up for.

"I'll go," Jason said. He sat down beside Cherry and laid his head on her shoulder, snuggling. Cherry moved away from him, cuddling closer to Nathaniel. It wasn't sex, exactly, it was that the wereanimals tended to get up close and personal with their own kind. It was considered something of a social gaffe to cuddle up to a different sort of animal. But Jason didn't care. Cherry was female, and he flirted with anything that was female. Nothing personal, just habit.

Jason wiggled his butt until Cherry was pressed between him and Nathaniel. "I've got a suit in my luggage. A nice, normal, blue suit. I'll even wear a tie."

Cherry growled at him. It sounded all wrong, coming from that pretty face. I am not one of those women who wants to redo other women. I don't care much for makeup or clothes. But Cherry made me want to give her hints. If she was pretty in the Bride of Frankenstein makeup, she'd have been a knockout in something that matched her skin tone.

I smiled. "Thanks, Jason. Now, give Cherry some breathing room."

He pressed himself even closer. "Zane gave me a kiss to make me move."

"Move, or I'll bite your nose off." She gave an expression that was half-snarl, half-smile, a threatening flash of teeth.

"I think she means it," I said.

Jason laughed and stood in one of those lightning-fast movements that they were all capable of. He went to stand behind my seat, leaning his forearms on it.

"I'll hide behind you until it's safe," he said.

"Get off the back of my seat," I said.

He moved his arms but stayed standing behind me. "Jean-Claude thought you might have to take some of us into police situations. We can't all look like college students and porn stars."

The porn star comment was sadly accurate for all three of the wereleopards. Another good idea of Gabriel's had been to star his people in porno films. Gabriel did his own share of starring roles. He was never one to ask of his kitties what he wasn't willing—nay, eager—to do himself. He'd been a sick son of a bitch, and he'd made sure that his wereleopards were as sick as he was.

Nathaniel had given me a gift box of three of his movies. He suggested we watch them together. I said thanks, but no thanks. I kept the tapes mainly

because I wasn't sure what to do with them. I mean, he'd given me a gift. I was raised not to be rude. They were way in the back of my video cabinet, hidden behind a stack of Disney tapes. And no, I had not watched them once I was alone.

The air slapped against the plane, making it shudder. Turbulence, just turbulence. "You're actually pale," Cherry said.

"Yeah," I said.

Jason kissed the top of my head. "You know you're actually cute when you're scared."

I turned very slowly in the seat and stared at him. I would have liked to say I stared at him until his smile faded away, but we didn't have that kind of time. Jason would grin on his way into hell. "Don't touch me."

The grin widened. His eyes sparkled with it. "Who me?"

I sighed and settled back into the seat. It was going to be a very long couple of days.

Chapter 4

Portaby Airfield is small. I guess that's why it's called an airfield instead of an airport. There were two small runways and a cluster of buildings, if three could be called a cluster. But it was clean and neat as a pin, and the setting was postcard perfect. The airfield sat in the middle of a wide, green valley surrounded on three sides by the gentle slopes of the Smokey Mountains. On the fourth side, behind the buildings, was the rest of the valley. It sloped sharply down, letting us know that the valley we were standing in was still part of the mountains. The town of Myerton, Tennessee, stretched below us in air so clean it sparkled like someone had dusted the clouds with ground diamonds. Words came to mind like *pristine*, *crystalline*.

That was the main reason one of the last remaining wild bands of Lesser Smokey Mountain Trolls lived in the area. Richard was finishing up his master's degree in biology. He'd been studying the trolls every summer for four years between teaching full time. Takes longer to get your master's degree part time.

I took a deep breath of the clean, clean air. I could see why Richard would want to spend his summers here. It was exactly the kind of place he'd enjoy. He was into outdoorsy stuff in a big way. Rock climbing, hiking, fishing, camping, canoeing, bird-watching—pretty much anything you could do outside was his idea of fun. Oh, caving, too. Though I guess, technically, you're not outside if you're inside a cave.

When I said that Richard was a Boy Scout, I didn't mean just his moral fiber.

A man walked towards us. He was almost perfectly round in the middle, wearing a pair of coveralls with oil on the knees. White hair stuck out from underneath a billed cap. His glasses were black-rimmed and square. He wiped his hands on a rag as he walked. The look on his face was polite, curious. His eyes flicked from me to the rest of the guys as they filed out of the plane. Then his eyes flicked to the coffins that were being unloaded from the storage compartment. Asher was in one. Damian was in the other.

Asher was the more powerful of the two, but he was several hundred years younger. Damian had been a Viking when he was alive, and I don't mean the football team. He'd been a card-carrying, sword-wielding, marauding raider. One night he'd raided the wrong castle, and she took him. If she had a name, I've never heard it. She was a master vampire and ruler of her lands, the equivalent to Master of the City when there is no city in a hundred miles. She took Damian on a summer night over a thousand years ago, and she kept him. A thousand years, and he felt no more powerful in my head than a vampire half his age. I'd underestimated his age by hundreds of years, because part of me just couldn't accept that you could exist that long and not be more powerful, scarier. Damian was scary but not a millennium worth of scary. He'd never be more than he was: a third or fourth banana for all eternity. Jean-Claude bargained for Damian's freedom when he came to be Master of the City. He ransomed Damian. I never knew what it cost Jean-Claude, but I knew that it hadn't been cheap. She had not wanted to give up her favorite whipping boy.

The man said, "I'd shake your hand, but I've been working on the planes. Mr. Niley's man is waiting in the building."

I frowned. "Mr. Niley?"

He frowned then. "Aren't you Mr. Niley's people? Milo said you'd be coming in today." He looked back, and a tall man stepped out of the building. His skin was the color of coffee, two creams. His hair was cut in a wedge, leaving his elegant, sculpted face bare and unadorned. He was wearing a suit that cost more than most cars. He stared at me, and even from a distance I felt the dead weight of his eyes. All he needed was a sign over his head that said Muscle.

"No, we're not Mr. Niley's people." That he'd made the mistake made me wonder who Mr. Niley was.

A voice called, "These are the people I've been expecting, Ed." It was Jamil, one of Richard's enforcers. The enforcers were Sköll and Hati after the wolves that chase the sun and moon in Norse mythology. When they catch them, it will be the end of the world. Tells you something about werewolf society that their enforcers were named after creatures that would bring about the end of everything. Jamil was Sköll for Richard's pack, which meant he was head enforcer. He was tall and slender in the way a dancer is slender, all muscles and shoulders planed down to a smooth, graceful machine of flesh. He was wearing a white sleeveless men's undershirt and loose, tailored white pants with a very sharp cuff rolled at the end of the pants legs. Black suspenders graced his upper body and matched the highly polished black shoes. A white linen jacket was thrown over one shoulder. His dark skin gleamed against the

whiteness of his clothes. His hair was nearly waist length in cornrows with white beads woven through the braids. Last time I'd seen him, the beads had been multicolored.

Ed flicked a look back at Jamil. "If you say so," he said. He went back to the main building, leaving us to ourselves. Probably just as well.

"I didn't know you were here, Jamil," I said.

"I'm Richard's bodyguard. Where else would I be?"

He had a point. "Where were you the night his body was supposedly attacking this woman?"

"Her name is Betty Schaffer."

"Have you talked to her?"

His eyes widened. "She's already cried rape once on a fine, upstanding white boy. No, I haven't talked to her."

"You could try and blend in a little."

"I'm one of only two black men for about 50 miles," he said, "There's no way for me to blend in, Anita, so I don't try." There was an undercurrent of real anger there. I wondered if Jamil had been having trouble with the locals. It seemed likely. He wasn't just African American. He was tall, handsome, and athletic looking. That alone would have gotten him on the redneck hit parade. The long cornrow hair and the killer fashion sense raised the question that he might violate the last white male bastion of homophobia. I knew that Jamil liked girls, but I was almost willing to bet some of the locals hadn't believed that.

"I assume that is the other African American guy." I was careful not to point at Milo. He was watching us, face expressionless, but too intense. Muscle recognizes muscle, and he was probably wondering about Jamil just as we were wondering about him. What was professional muscle doing out here in the boonies?

Jamil nodded. "Yeah, that's the other one."

"He doesn't blend in, either," I said. "Who is he?"

"His name is Milo Hart. He works for a guy named Frank Niley who is supposed to arrive today."

"You and he sit down and have a talk?"

"No, but Ed is just full of news."

"Why does Frank Niley need a bodyguard?"

"He's rich," Jamil said as if that explained it, and maybe it did. "He's down here doing some land speculation."

"Ed the plane mechanic tell you all this?"

Jamil nodded. "He likes to talk, even to me."

"Gee, and I thought you were just another pretty face."

Jamil smiled. "I'll do my job when Richard lets me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means if he'd let me watch over him like a good Sköll is supposed to, this rape charge would never have happened. I'd have been a witness, and it wouldn't be just her word against his."

"Maybe I should talk to Ms. Schaffer," I said.

"Babe, you just read my mind."

"You know, Jamil, you're the only person who ever calls me babe. There's a reason for that."

His smile widened. "I'll try to remember that."

"What happened to Richard, Jamil?"

"You mean did he do it?"

I shook my head. "No, I know he didn't do it."

"He did date her," Jamil said.

I looked at him. "What are you saying?"

"Richard's been trying to find a replacement for you."

"So?"

"So, he's been dating anything that moves."

"Just dating?" I asked.

Jamil swirled his jacket from his shoulder to one arm, smoothing the cloth and not looking at me.

"Answer the question, Jamil."

He looked at me, almost smiling, then sighed. "No, not just dating."

I had to ask. "He's been sleeping around?"

Jamil nodded.

I stood there, thinking about that for a second or two. Richard and I had each been celibate for years, separate decisions. I'd certainly changed my lifestyle. Did I really think he'd stay chaste when I hadn't? Was it any of my business what he did? No; no, it wasn't.

I finally shrugged. "He's not my boyfriend anymore, Jamil. And he's a big boy." I shrugged again, not really sure how I felt about Richard sleeping around. Trying very hard not to feel anything about it, because it didn't matter how I felt. Richard had his own life to live, and it didn't include me, not in that way. "I'm not here to police Richard's sex life."

Jamil nodded almost to himself. "Good. I was worried."

"What, you thought I'd throw a fit and storm off, leaving him to his just desserts?"

"Something like that," he said.

"Did he have sex with the woman who's made the accusation?"

"If you mean intercourse, no. She's human," he said. "Richard doesn't do humans. He's afraid they're too fragile."

"I thought you just said he'd been sleeping with Ms. Schaffer."

"Having sex, but not doing the dirty deed."

I wasn't a virgin. I knew there were alternatives, but . . . "Why alternative methods with humans? Why not just . . . do it?"

"Doing the wild thing can release our beast early. You don't want to know what happens when you're with a human who doesn't know what you are, and you shift on top of them, inside them." A shadow crossed his face, and he looked away.

"You sound like the voice of experience," I said.

He looked slowly back at me, and there was something in his face that was suddenly frightening, like looking up and realizing that the bars between you and the lion at the zoo aren't there anymore. "That is none of your business."

I nodded. "Sorry, you're right. You're absolutely right. It was too personal."

But it was interesting information. There had been a point where I'd pretty much begged Richard to stay the night. To have sex with me. He'd said no because it wouldn't be fair until I saw him change into werewolf form. I needed to be able to accept the whole package. I hadn't been able to do that once the package bled and writhed all over me. But now I wondered if part of his hesitation had been simply fear of hurting me. Maybe.

I shook my head. It didn't matter. Business. If I concentrated really hard, maybe I could stay on track. We were here to get him out of jail, not to worry about why we broke up.

"We could use a little help here with the luggage," Jason called.

He had two suitcases under each arm. Zane and Cherry were carrying one coffin. They looked like pallbearer bookends. Nathaniel was lying on his back on the other coffin. He'd taken off his shirt and unbound his hair. His hands were folded across his stomach, eyes closed. I didn't know whether he was playing dead or trying to get a tan.

"A little help here," Jason said, kicking his foot towards the rest of the luggage. Two suitcases and a huge trunk still sat unclaimed.

I walked towards them. "Jesus, only one of those suitcases is mine. Who's the clotheshorse?"

Zane and Cherry put the coffin gently on the Tarmac. "Just one suitcase is mine," Zane said.

"Three of them are mine," Cherry said. She sounded vaguely embarrassed.

"Who brought the trunk?"

"Jean-Claude sent it," Jason said. "Just in case we do meet with the local master. He wanted us to make a good show of it."

I frowned at the trunk. "Please tell me there's nothing in there that Jean-Claude plans on me wearing."

Jason grinned.

I shook my head. "I don't want to see it."

"Maybe you'll get lucky," Jason said. "Maybe they'll try to kill you instead."

I frowned at him. "You're just full of happy thoughts."

"My speciality," he said.

Nathaniel turned his head and looked at me, hands clasped across his bare stomach. "I can lift the coffin, but it's not balanced right for carrying. I need help."

"You certainly do," I said.

He blinked up at me, one hand raised to block the sun. I moved until my body blocked the sun and he could look at me without squinting. He smiled up at me.

"What's with the coffin sunbathing?" I asked.

The smile wilted around the edges, then faded completely. "It's the scene in the crypt," he said as if that explained everything. It didn't.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He raised just his shoulders and head off the coffin like he was doing stomach crunches. His abs bunched nicely with the effort. "You really haven't watched my movies, have you?"

"Sorry," I said.

He sat up the rest of the way, smoothing his hair back with both hands in a practiced gesture. He slipped a silver clasp around the hair and flipped the tail of auburn hair behind his back.

"I thought silver jewelry burned when it touched a lycanthrope's skin," I said.

He wiggled his hair, settling the silver clasp securely against his neck. "It does," he said.

"A little pain makes the world go round, I guess."

He just stared at me with his strange eyes. He was only nineteen, but the look on his face was older, much older. There were no lines on that smooth skin, but there were shadows in those eyes that nothing would ever erase. Cosmetic surgery for the soul was what he needed. Something to take the terrible burden of knowledge that had made him what he was.

Jason limped over to us, loaded with suitcases. "One of his movies is about a vampire who falls in love with an innocent young human."

"You've seen it," I said.

He nodded.

I shook my head and picked up a suitcase. "You got a car for us?" I asked Jamil.

"A van," he said.

"Great. Pick up a suitcase, and show me the way."

"I don't do luggage."

"If we all help, we can load the van in half the time. I want to see Richard as soon as possible, so grab something and stop being such a freaking prima donna."

Jamil stared at me for a long, slow count, then said, "When Richard replaces you as lupa, I won't have to take shit from you."

"Fine, but until then, hop to it. Besides, this isn't giving you shit, Jamil. When I give you shit, you'll know it."

He gave a low chuckle. He slipped his jacket back on and picked up the trunk. It should have taken two strong men to lift it. He carried it like it weighed nothing. He walked off without a backward glance, leaving me to get the last suitcase. Zane and Cherry picked the coffin back up and walked after him. Jason shuffled after them.

"What about me?" Nathaniel said.

"Put your shirt back on and stay with the coffin. Wouldn't do to have someone make off with Damian."

"I know women who would pay me to take the shirt off," he said.

"Too bad I'm not one of them," I said.

"Yeah," he said, "too bad." He picked his shirt up off the ground. I left him sitting on the coffin in the middle of the Tarmac, shirt wadded in his hands. He looked sort of forlorn in a strange, macabre way. I felt very sorry for Nathaniel. He'd had a rough life. But it wasn't my fault. I was paying for his apartment so he didn't have to turn tricks to make ends meet, though I knew other strippers at Guilty Pleasures who managed to make ends meet on their salary. Maybe Nathaniel wasn't good with money. Big surprise there.

The van was large, black, and looked sinister. The sort of thing serial killers drive in made-for-TV movies. Serial killers did drive vans in real life, but they tended to be pale colors with rust spots.

Jamil drove. Cherry and I rode up front with him. The luggage and everyone else went in the back. I expected Cherry to ask me to sit in the middle because I was at least five inches shorter than she was, but she didn't. She just crawled into the van, in the middle, with those long legs tucked up in front of the dashboard.

The road was well paved, almost no potholes, and if you held your breath, two cars could pass each other without scraping paint. Trees hugged the road on either side. But on one side, you caught glimpses of an amazing drop-off, and on the other side, there was just rocky dirt. I preferred the dirt. The trees were thick enough that the illusion of safety was there, but the trees fell away like a great, green curtain, and you could suddenly see for miles. The illusion was gone, and you realized just how high up we were. Okay, it wasn't like Rocky Mountain high, but it would do the job if the van went over the edge. Falling from high places is one of my least favorite things to do. I don't clutch the upholstery like in the airplane, but I'm a flatlander at heart and would be glad to be in the lower valley.

"Do you want me to drop you at the police station or take you to the cabins first?" Jamil asked.

"Police. Did you say cabins?"

He nodded. "Cabins."

"Rustic living?" I asked.

"No, thank God," he said. "Indoor plumbing, beds, electricity, the works, if you aren't too particular about the decor."

"Not a fashion plate?"

"Not hardly," he said.

Cherry sat very still between us, hands folded in her lap. I realized she wasn't wearing her seat belt. My mother would be alive today if she'd been wearing hers, so I'm picky about it. "You're not wearing your seat belt," I said.

Cherry looked at me. "I'm squashed enough without the seat belt," she said.

"I know you could survive a trip through the windshield," I said, "but having you heal that much damage would sort of blow your cover."

"Am I supposed to be playing human?" she asked.

It was a good question. "For the townfolk, yeah."

She fastened her seat belt without any more arguing. The wereleopards had taken me to heart as their Nimir-ra. They were so glad to have someone act

as protector, even if it was just a human, that they didn't bitch much. "You should have told me we were trying to blend in. I'd have dressed differently."

"You're right; I should have said something." Truthfully, it hadn't occurred to me until just that moment.

The road spilled down into what passed for flatland here. The trees were so thick that it was almost claustrophobic. There was still a gentle swell to the land, letting you know you were driving over the toes of mountains.

"Do you want us to wait for you outside the station?" Jamil asked.

"No, you guys sort of stand out."

"How are you going to get to the cabins?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. Taxi?"

He looked at me, the look was eloquent. "In Myerton, I don't think so."

"Damn," I said. "Drive us to the cabins then. I'll take the van back into town."

"With Jason?" Jamil said.

I nodded. "With Jason." I looked at him. "Why is everyone so solicitous of me? I mean, I know there may be problems, but you guys are being awful cautious." I sat up straighter in the seat and stared at the side of Jamil's face. He was watching the road like his life depended on it.

"What aren't you guys telling me?"

He hit his turn signal and waited for a pickup truck to go past, then turned left between yet more trees. "It'll take longer to get to the cabins."

"Jamil, what is going on?"

Cherry tried her best to sink into the seat, but when you're model tall and in the middle, it's hard to play invisible. That one body movement told me she knew, too. That they both knew something I didn't.

I looked at her. "Cherry, tell me what's going on."

She sighed and sat up a little straighter. "If anything happens to you, Jean-Claude's going to kill us."

I frowned at her. "I don't understand."

"Jean-Claude couldn't come here himself," Jamil said. "It would be seen as an act of war. But he's worried about you. He told us all that if we let you get killed, and he survives your death, he'll kill us, all of us." He watched the road as he talked, turning onto a gravel road that was so narrow that trees brushed the sides of the van.

"Define *all*," I said.

"All of us," Jamil said. "We're your bodyguards."

"I thought you were Richard's bodyguard?" I said.

"And you're his lupa, his mate."

"If you're a real bodyguard, you can't guard two people. You can only guard one at a time."

"Why?" Cherry asked.

I looked at Jamil. He didn't answer, so I did.

"Because you can't take a bullet for more than one person, and that's what a bodyguard does."

Jamil nodded. "Yeah, that's what a bodyguard does."

"You really think anyone's going to be shooting at Anita?"

"The bullet's a metaphor," Jamil said. "But it doesn't matter. Bullet, knife, claws, whatever it is, I take it." He pulled into a wide gravel turnaround and a huge clearing. There were small, white, boxy cabins scattered around the clearing like a Motel 6 that had been cut into pieces. There was a neon sign, pale in the sunlight, that said Blue Moon Cabins.

"Anita is our Nimir-ra. She's supposed to protect us, not the other way around."

I agreed with her. I'd picked Zane and Cherry not for their bodyguarding ability but because they didn't mind sharing blood with the vampires. Even among the wereleopards, most of them didn't like donating. They seemed to think being a blood cocktail for the vamps was worse than sex for money. I wasn't sure I agreed with them, but I wasn't about to force them to do it if they didn't want to. I didn't donate blood, and I was sleeping with one of the undead.

"No," I said. "I didn't agree to this. I can take care of myself, thank you very much." I opened the door, and Jamil reached across and grabbed my arm. His hand looked very dark against the paleness of my arm. I turned very slowly and looked at him. It was not a friendly look. "Let go of me."

"Anita, please, you are one of the toughest humans I've ever met. You are the most dangerous human female I've ever seen." His hand squeezed just enough for me to feel the immense strength in it. He could probably deadlift an elephant if it didn't wiggle too much. He could certainly crush my arm.

"But you are human, and the things you're up against aren't."

I stared at him. Cherry sat very still between us, half-pinned by Jamil's body "Let go of me, Jamil."

His hand tightened. It was going to be a hell of a bruise. "Just this once, Anita, stay in the background, or you're going to get us all killed."

Jamil's body was extended across the seat, across Cherry. I was on the edge of the seat, butt half in the air. Neither he nor I were balanced very well. His grip was on the middle of my forearm, not a good place to hold on.

"What you fuzzballs keep forgetting is that strength isn't enough. Leverage, there's the ticket."

He frowned at me, obviously puzzled. His hand tightened just this side of serious injury. "You can't fight this, Anita."

"What do you want me to say? Uncle?"

Jamil smiled. "Uncle, okay, yeah, say uncle. Admit that just this once you can't take care of yourself."

I pushed myself out of the van, tucking my legs so he was suddenly trying to hold my entire body weight with a one-handed grip on my forearm. My arm slipped through his fingers. I let myself fall to the ground, going for the long blade down my back, not worrying about trying to stand. My right hand went for the Browning, but I knew I wouldn't make it in time. I was trusting that Jamil wasn't going to kill me. We were grandstanding. If I was wrong on that, I was about to die.

Jamil spilled over the seat, arms reaching for me, trusting in his own way that I wouldn't blow his head off. He knew I had the gun. He was treating me

like a shapeshifter who knew the rules. You didn't kill over small stuff. You bled each other, but you didn't kill.

I sliced his arm open from a nearly prone position. There was a moment of utter surprise on his face. He hadn't known about the third blade or its length, and getting sliced open is always a shock. He jerked backwards out of sight like someone had pulled him, but I knew better. He was just that fast.

I had time to get to one knee before he bounded onto the hood of the van, crouched like the predator he was. I had the Browning pointed at him. I got to my feet, gun nice and steady on the middle of his body. Standing didn't help things. I didn't shoot better standing. But somehow I wanted to be on my feet.

Jamil watched me but made no move to stop me. Maybe he was afraid to try. Not of the gun but of himself. I had hurt him. Blood was splashing all over those pretty white clothes. His entire body vibrated with the desire to close the distance between us. He was pissed, and it was four nights until full moon. He probably wouldn't kill me, but I wasn't going to test the theory. He could break my neck with one blow. Hell, he could explode my skull like an egg. No more chances.

I pointed the Browning at him one-handed, knife still in my left. "Don't do it, Jamil. I'd hate to lose you over something this stupid."

A low growl trickled from his lips. The sound alone raised the hair at the back of my neck.

The others were out of the back of the van. I had a sense of movement. "Everyone stay back," I said.

"Anita," Jason said, voice very calm, no teasing, no jokes. "Anita, what's going on?"

"Ask Mr. Macho there."

Cherry spoke from her seat inside the van. She hadn't moved. "Jamil was trying to explain to Anita how she couldn't handle herself against shapeshifters and vampires." She slid very slowly towards the edge of the seat. I kept my gaze on Jamil, but my peripheral vision was good enough to catch the spots of blood all over the white skin.

"Stay in the van, Cherry. Don't press me."

She stopped scooting along the seat and just sat there. "Jamil wanted her to take a backseat when the action starts."

"She is still human," Jamil growled. "She is still weak."

Cherry's deep, caressing voice said, "She could have sliced your throat open instead of your arm. She could have shot you in the head when you reached for her."

"I still can," I said, "if you don't tone it down."

Jamil lay nearly flat on the hood, fingers splayed. His entire body trembled with tension. Something lurked behind that human body, swimming up through his eyes. His beast pushed against his flesh like a leviathan swimming just below the water, so you caught a dark glimpse of something huge and overwhelmingly alien.

I'd turned my body in silhouette, my left hand with the knife behind my back, the back of my hand resting lightly on the top of my butt. I'd fallen into

the stance I used at the shooting range when I was shooting targets. The gun was pointed at his head now, because he'd lowered his body mass until it was the biggest target. I'd saved Jamil's life once. He was a good man to have at Richard's back, even if he didn't always like me. I didn't always like him, so we were even. But I respected him, and until now, I thought he respected me. His little show in the van said he still thought of me as a girl.

Once upon a time, it had bothered me more to kill people. Maybe it was years of killing vampires. They looked human. But somewhere along the way, it just didn't bother me to pull the trigger. I stared at Jamil's face, looked him right in the eyes, and felt that stillness fill me. It was like standing in the middle of a buzzing field of white noise. I could still hear and see, but it all fell away so there was nothing but the gun and Jamil and the emptiness. My body felt light and ready. In my saner moments, I worried that I was becoming a sociopath. But right now, there was nothing but a very calm knowledge that I'd do it. I'd pull the trigger and watch him die at my feet. And feel nothing.

Jamil watched my face, and I saw the tension begin to leak out of him. He stayed very still until that vibrating energy died down and that awful looming presence of his beast slid below the surface once more. Then he very, very slowly sat back on his knees, still watching my face.

I kept the gun pointed on him. I knew how fast they could move, fast as a wolf, maybe faster. Like nothing this side of hell.

"You really would do it," he said. "You'd kill me."

"You bet."

He took a deep breath, and it shuddered down his body, reminding me strangely of a bird settling its feathers. "It's over," he said. "You're lupa. You outrank me."

I lowered the gun carefully, still looking at him, still trying to keep a feel for where everyone else was standing. "Please tell me that this wasn't some sort of dominance crap?"

Jamil gave a smile that was almost embarrassed. "I thought I was trying to make a point, but I wasn't. I've spent the last month down here having to explain to the local pack how we ended up with a human lupa. How I'm outranked by a human woman."

I shook my head and pointed the gun at the ground. "You stupid son of a bitch. Your pride is wounded that I'm higher in the pack than you are."

He nodded. "Yeah."

"You guys just drive me crazy," I said. I was almost yelling. "We do not have time for macho bullshit."

Zane leaned against the van near Cherry. He was very careful to keep his hands down and move slowly, no sudden moves. "You couldn't have taken Jamil without the knife and the gun. You won't always have them with you."

"Is that a threat?" I asked.

He raised his hands upward. "Just an observation."

"Hey, folks." A man stepped out of one of the cabins. He was tall, thin, with shoulder-length grey hair and a darker mustache. The hair and the lines in his face said he was over fifty.

The body that showed from the T-shirt and jeans looked lean and younger. He'd frozen in the doorway, hands on the wooden edges of the doorjamb. "Easy there, little lady."

I pointed the gun at him, because under that calm exterior there was enough power to raise goose bumps on my skin, and he wasn't even trying.

"This is Verne," Jamil said. "He owns the cabins."

I lowered the gun to the ground. "He the local Ulfric, or do they have something scarier hiding in the woods?"

Verne laughed and started walking towards us. He moved in an almost clumsy roll like his arms and legs were too long for his body, but it was deceptive. He was playing human for me. I wasn't fooled.

"You spotted me pretty damn quick there, little lady."

I put the Browning up because to keep it out would be rude. I was here as his guest in more than one way. Besides, I had to trust someone enough to put the gun up. I couldn't keep it naked in my hand the entire trip. I still had the naked blade, complete with blood. It needed to be cleaned before I could sheathe it. I'd gummed up a couple of smaller sheaths from not cleaning them well enough.

"Nice to meet you, Verne, but don't call me little lady." I started to wipe the blood on the edge of the black jacket. Black's good for that.

"Don't you ever give an inch?" Jamil asked.

I glanced at him. There was blood all over his nice white clothes. "No," I said. I motioned him over to me.

He frowned. "What?"

"I want to use your shirt to wipe the blood off the blade."

He just stared at me.

"Come on, Jamil. The shirt is already ruined."

Jamil pulled the shirt over his head in one smooth motion. He threw the shirt at me, and I caught it one-handed. I started cleaning the blade with the unstained part of the shirt.

Verne laughed. He had one of those deep, rolling chuckles that matched his gravelly voice. "No wonder Richard's been having such a hard time finding a replacement for you. You are a solid, cast-iron, ball-busting bitch."

I looked at his smiling face. I think it was a compliment. Besides, truth was truth. I wasn't down here to win Miss Congeniality. I was down here to rescue Richard and to stay alive. Bitch was just about the right speed for that.

Chapter 5

The outside of the cabins were white and looked sort of cheap. The interiors weren't honeymoon cabins, but they were amazingly roomy. There

was a queen-size bed in the one I was given. There was a desk against one wall with a reading lamp. There was an extra chair in front of a picture window. The chair was blue plush and comfortable. It sat on a small throw rug that looked homemade and was woven in shades of blue. The woods were hardwood and polished to a honeyed gleam. The bed's comforter was royal blue. There was a bedside table, complete with a lamp and a phone. The walls were pale blue. There was even a painting over the bed. It was a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Frankly, any of Van Gogh's work done after he started going seriously nuts creeps me out. But it was a good choice for a blue room. For all I knew, the other cabins had matadors done on velvet, but this was okay.

The bathroom was standard white with a small window high over the bathtub. The bathroom looked like standard motel issue except for a blue bowl of potpourri that smelled like musk and gardenia.

Verne had informed me that this was the largest cabin left. I needed the floor space. Two coffins take up a lot of room. I wasn't sure I wanted to have Asher and Damian in my room permanently, but I didn't have time to argue. I wanted to go see Richard as soon as possible. We could always argue about who got the vamps as bunk mates after I saw Richard.

I made three phone calls before we went to the jail. The first was to the number that Daniel had given me, to let him know we were in town. No one answered. The second call was to Catherine to let her know I'd arrived safely. I got her machine. The third call was to the lawyer that Catherine had recommended, Carl Belisarius. A woman with a very good phone voice answered. When she found out who I was, she was sort of excited, which puzzled me. She forwarded me to Belisarius's cell phone. Something was up, which was probably bad.

A deep, rich, male voice answered, "Belisarius here."

"Anita Blake. I assume that Catherine Maison-Gillette told you who I am."

"Just a moment, Ms. Blake." He pushed a button and there was silence. I was on hold. When he came back on the phone, I could hear wind and traffic. He'd stepped outside.

"I am very glad to hear from you, Ms. Blake. What the fuck is going on?"

"Excuse me?" I said, tone less than friendly.

"He won't see me. Catherine gave me the impression that he needed a lawyer. I traveled to this godless piece of real estate, and he won't see me. He says he didn't hire me."

"Shit," I said softly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Belisarius." I had a thought. "Did you tell him that I hired you on his behalf?"

"Will that make a difference?"

"Truthfully, I don't know. Either it'll help, or he'll tell you to go to hell."

"He's already done that. I am not cheap, Ms. Blake. Even if he refuses my services, someone has to pay for the day."

"Don't worry, Mr. Belisarius. I'll take care of it."

"Do you have that kind of money?"

"How much are we talking about?" I asked.

He mentioned a fee. I did my best not to whistle in his ear. I counted slowly to five and said, calmly, "You'll get your money."

"You have that kind of money? I took Catherine's word for a lot of things on this. Forgive me if I'm starting to be suspicious."

"No, I understand. Richard's giving you a hard time, so you're giving me one."

He gave a rough laugh. "All right, Ms. Blake, all right. I'll try not to pass the buck, but I want some assurances. Can you pay my fee?"

"I raise the dead for a living, Mr. Belisarius. It's a rare talent. I can pay your fee." And I could, but it sort of hurt to do it. I wasn't raised poor, but I was raised to appreciate the value of a buck, and Belisarius was a little outside of outrageous.

"Send word to Richard that I hired you. Call me back if it makes a difference. He may refuse to see either of us."

"You're paying a great deal of money, Ms. Blake, especially if I take the case. I assumed you and Mr. Zeeman were close in some way."

"It's a long story," I said. "We're sort of hating each other right now."

"A lot of money for someone you hate," he said.

"Don't you start, too," I said.

He laughed again. His laugh was more normal than his speech, almost a bray. Maybe he didn't practice his laugh for the courtroom. I knew he practiced that rich, rolling voice.

"I'll send the message, Ms. Blake. Hopefully, I'll be calling you back."

"Call me even if he says no. At least I'll know what to expect when I come down to the jail."

"You'll come down even if he refuses to see you?" Belisarius asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"I look forward to meeting you, Ms. Blake. You intrigue me."

"I bet you say that to all the girls."

"To very few, Ms. Blake." He hung up.

Jason came out of the bathroom as I hung up. He was wearing the suit. I'd never seen him in anything except T-shirts and jeans or leather and less. It was odd to see him standing there in a navy blue suit, white shirt, and a thin white tie with a tastefully small design running through it. When you looked close, the tie was silk and the print was tiny fleur de lis. I knew who had picked out the tie. The suit was a better cut than most off the rack, but Jean-Claude had ruined me for off the rack no matter how nice the fit.

He buttoned the first button on the jacket and smoothed his hands through his blond hair. "How do I look?"

I shook my head. "Like a person."

He grinned. "You sound surprised."

I smiled. "I've just never seen you look like a grown-up."

He fake pouted at me, lip pushed out. "You've seen me nearly naked and I didn't look grown-up?"

I shook my head and smiled in spite of myself. I'd changed my clothes in the bedroom while he changed in the bathroom. I found a few dark spots of

blood on the red blouse. As it dried, it would turn black and look even worse, which was why the blouse was soaking in the sink. Red shows blood no matter what people say.

The black jeans had escaped unstained as far as I could tell. A few spots of blood are hard to find on black. Black or navy blue hides blood best. I guess a really dark brown would work, but I don't own much brown, so I don't know for sure.

The fresh blouse was a pale, almost icy, lavender. It had been a gift from my stepmother, Judith. When I opened the box at Christmas and saw the pale blouse, I assumed she bought me yet another piece of clothing that would look better on her blond ice princess body than on my darker one. But the pure, clear color actually looked pretty spiffy. I'd even been gracious enough to tell Judith I was wearing it. I think it was the first gift in ten years that I hadn't exchanged. I was still 0 for 8 in the gift department for her. Oh, well.

Black dress pants with a belt wide enough for the Browning and wider than was fashionable, black flats, and I was ready. I'd added just a touch of makeup: eye shadow, mascara, a hint of blush, and lipstick. I tried not to think why I'd dressed up. It wasn't for the local cops. Jason and I were probably both overdressed for the locals. Of course, if we'd shown up in jeans and T-shirts, we'd have been underdressed. The only really good thing to wear to meet police is a uniform and a badge. Anything else and you are not in the club.

There was a law being discussed in Washington, D.C., right now that might give vampire executioners what amounted to federal marshal status. It was being pushed hard by Senator Brewster, whose daughter had gotten munched by a vampire. Of course, he was also pushing to revoke vampires' rights as legal citizens. Federal status for executioners, maybe. Revoking vamps' legal rights, I didn't think so. Some vampires would have to do something pretty gruesome to give the antivamp lobby that much push.

In March, vampire executioners had been officially licensed. It was a state license because murder was a state, not a federal, crime.

But I understood the need for federal status for vampire executioners. We didn't just kill, we hunted. But once we crossed out of our licensed area, we were on shaky ground. The court order was valid as long as the state we crossed into agreed to an extradition order. The extradition order was then used to validate the original order of execution. My preference was to get a second order of execution every time I crossed a state line. But that took time, and sometimes you'd lose the vamp to yet another jurisdiction and have to start all over again.

One enterprising vampire crossed seventeen states before he was finally caught and killed. The general run, if they run, is maybe two or three. Which is why most vampire executioners are licensed in more than one state. In our own way, we have territories, sort of like vampires. Within that territory, we kill. Outside of it, it's someone else's job. But there are only ten of us, and that's not a lot for a country with one of the largest vampire populations in the world. We aren't constantly busy. Most of us have day jobs. I mean, if the vampires had been bad enough to keep us hopping, then they'd never have made legal status.

But the more vamps you get in an area, the higher your crime rate. Just like with humans.

Having to stop every time you left your licensed area made it harder to do our jobs. Having no real status as a police officer made it impossible to enter an investigation unless invited. Sometimes we weren't invited in until the body count was pretty damn high. My largest body count for a vampire was twenty-three. Twenty-three dead before we caught him. There had been higher body counts. Back in the fifties, Gerald Mallory, sort of the grandfather of the business, had slain a kiss of vampires that took out over a hundred. A kiss of vampires is like a gaggle of geese; it's the group name. Poetic, ain't it?

The phone rang. I picked it up and it was Belisarius. "He'll see us together. I'll try to have something to tell you by the time you get here." He hung up.

I took a big breath in through my nose and let it out in a rush through my mouth.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked.

"Nothing."

"You're nervous about seeing Richard," he said.

"Don't be so dammed smart."

He grinned. "Sorry."

"Like hell," I said. "Let's go."

We went.

Chapter 6

The drive to Myerton took longer than it had to because I was driving an unfamiliar van on very narrow roads. It made me nervous. Jason finally said, "Can I drive, please? We'll get there before dark."

"Shut up," I said.

He shut up, smiling.

We did finally drive into Myerton. The town consisted of a main street that was paved and looked suspiciously like a two-lane highway with buildings hugging the edges. There was a stoplight with a second, much smaller gravel road spilling red clay dust across the blacktop. The town's only stoplight made you notice the two fast-food restaurants and a mom-and-pop diner that actually had a bigger crowd than the Dairy Queen. Either the food was good, or the Dairy Queen wasn't.

Jamil had given me directions to the police station. He said to drive down the main street, turn right. You can't miss it. Whenever someone says that, it means one of two things. Either they're right and it's obvious, or it's hidden and you'll never find it without a detailed map where X marks the spot.

I turned right at the stoplight. The van hit a pothole and rolled like a great beast treading water. I wished I had my Jeep. The gravel road was the true main street of the town. Buildings with a raised wooden sidewalk in front of them lined one side of the street. I spotted a grocery store and a woodworker's shop selling handmade furniture. They had a rocking chair out in front that still had rough grey bark on parts of the wooden frame. Very rustic. Very nifty. Another shop sold herbs and homemade jellies, though this wasn't the time of year for it. Houses lined the other side of the street. They weren't the newer Midwestern look that has taken over large parts of the South. The houses were mostly one story on cinder blocks or red rock bases. They were covered with side shingles running strongly to off-white and grey. One yard had a herd of ceramic deer and a crop of lawn gnomes so thick, it looked like they should be selling them.

There were mountains at the end of the street and trees like a thick, green curtain. We were about to drive back into the forest, and I hadn't seen anything that looked like a police station. Great.

"It has to be right here," Jason said.

I checked my rearview mirror, no traffic, and stopped. "What do you see that I don't?" I asked.

"Shang-Da," he said.

I looked at him. "Excuse me?"

"On the porch at the end of the street."

I looked where he was looking. A tall man sat slumped in a lawn chair. He was wearing a white T-shirt, jeans, no shoes, and a billed cap pulled low. His tan stood out strongly against the whiteness of the shirt. Large hands held a can of soda or maybe beer. Just an early-morning pick-me-up.

"That's Shang-Da. He's our pack's second enforcer. He's Hati to Jamil's Sköll."

Ah. The light dawned. "He's guarding Richard, so the police station has to be nearby."

Jason nodded.

I looked at the slumped figure. He didn't look particularly alert at first glance. He almost blended into the scene until you realized the T-shirt was spotless and new. The jeans had creases as if they'd been ironed and you realized though he was tanned, the skin coloring wasn't just from the sun. But it wasn't until he moved his head very slowly and looked straight at us that I realized just how good the act was. Even from a distance there was an intensity in his gaze that was almost unnerving. I knew we suddenly had his full attention and all he'd done was move his head.

"Shit," I said.

"Yeah," Jason said. "Shang-Da's new. He transferred in from San Francisco Bay pack. No one fought him when he came in as Hati. No one wanted the job that badly."

Jason pointed across the street. "Is that it?"

It was a low, one-story building made of white-painted cinder blocks. There was a small, gravel parking lot out front but no cars. The van took up most of the parking lot. I parked as close to the side as I could, hearing the soft

swish of tree branches along the top of the van. There was probably a police car out there someplace that would be parking beside me. I think they had room.

There was a small wooden sign, elegantly carved, hanging beside the door. It read, Police Station. That was it, the only hint. Couldn't miss it—Jamil had a sense of humor. Or maybe he was still pissed that I'd cut him. Childish.

We got out. I felt Shang-Da's gaze on me. He was yards away, but the power of his attention crept down my skin, raising the hair on my arms. I glanced his way, and for a second, our eyes met. The hair at the back of my neck stood to attention.

Jason came to stand beside me. "Let's go inside."

I nodded, and we walked to the door. "If I didn't know better, I'd say Shang-Da doesn't like me."

"He's loyal to Richard, and you've hurt him—badly."

I glanced at him. "You don't seem mad at me. Aren't you loyal to Richard?"

"I was there the night Richard fought Marcus. Shang-Da wasn't."

"Are you saying I was right to leave Richard?"

"No. I'm saying I understand why you couldn't handle it."

"Thanks, Jason."

He smiled. "Besides, maybe I have designs on your body."

"Jean-Claude would kill you."

He shrugged. "What's life without a little danger?"

I shook my head.

Jason got to the door first but didn't try to open it for me. He knew me better than that.

I opened the mostly glass doors. I guess the doors were also a clue. Everything else on the street had doors like you'd see on a house. The glass doors were modern business doors. The interior was painted white, including the long barlike desk across from the door. There were some wanted posters tacked to a bulletin board to the left of the door and a radio system behind the desk, but other than that, it could have been the reception room for a dentist.

The guy sitting behind the desk was big. Even sitting down, you had a sense of size. His shoulders were almost as broad as I was tall. His hair was very short and still curled in tight ringlets. He'd have had to shave his head to get rid of the curls.

My executioner's license is in a nice fake-leather carrying case. It had my picture on it and looked damned official, but it wasn't a badge. It wasn't even a license good in this state. But it was all I had to flash, so I flashed it. I went in, holding the license out in front, because I was bringing a gun into a police station. Cops tended not to like that.

"I'm Anita Blake, vampire executioner."

The cop moved just his eyes; his hands were hidden behind the desk. "We didn't call for an executioner."

"I'm not here on official business," I said. I stood in front of the desk. I started to put the license away, but he held his hand out for it, and I gave it to him.

He studied the license while he asked, "Why are you here?"

"I'm a friend of Richard Zeeman."

His grey eyes flicked up then. It wasn't a friendly look. He tossed the license back on top of the desk.

I picked it up. "Is there a problem, Officer . . ." I read his nameplate, ". . . Maiden?"

He shook his head. "No problem except that your friend is a damned rapist. I never understand why the meanest son of a bitch in the world always seems to have a girlfriend."

"I'm not his girlfriend," I said. "I'm exactly what I said I was: his friend."

Maiden stood, and he looked every inch of his six-foot-plus frame. He wasn't just tall; he was bulky. He'd probably been a wrestler or a football player in high school. The muscle had started to melt into a general bulk, and he was carrying about twenty pounds around the waist that he didn't need, but I wasn't fooled. He was big and tough and used to it. The gun around his waist matched the rest of him. It was a chrome-plated Colt Python long barrel with heavy black custom grips. Good for hunting elephants, a little much for scaring drunks on a Saturday night.

"Who are you?" He pointed a thumb at Jason.

"Just a friend," Jason said. He smiled, trying to look harmless. He wasn't as good at looking harmless as I was, but he was close. Beside Officer Maiden we both looked sort of fragile.

"Her friend, or Zeeman's?"

Jason gave a big, good-humored smile. "I'm everyone's friend."

Maiden didn't smile. He just looked at Jason, giving him a cold, hard stare out of those dark grey eyes. Maiden didn't have any better luck staring Jason down than I did. Jason kept smiling. Maiden kept staring.

I finally touched Jason's arm ever so lightly. It was enough. He dropped his eyes, blinked, but the smile never faltered. But it was enough for Maiden to feel he'd won the staring contest.

Maiden lumbered out from behind the desk. He moved like he was aware that he was big, like in his own ears, the earth trembled as he moved. He was big, but he wasn't that big. Of course, I wasn't going to point it out to him.

A second man came out of a small door to the right of the desk. He was wearing a pale tan suit that fit him like an elegant glove. The white shirt was ribbed down the front, and he had one of those string ties with a hunk of gold at his throat. His eyes were large, black, and surprised when they saw me. His hair was cut very short, but stylish. The hand he extended for me to shake had a diamond pinkie ring and a college class ring on it.

"Could this vision of loveliness be the infamous Ms. Blake?"

I smiled before I could stop myself. "You must be Belisarius."

He nodded. "Call me Carl."

"I'm Anita, and this is Jason."

He shook hands with Jason, still smiling, still pleasant. He turned to Maiden. "May we go see my client now?"

"The two of you can go, but not him." Maiden jerked another thumb at Jason. "Sheriff said let the two of you in. No one said anything about anybody else."

Jason opened his mouth. I touched his arm. "That's fine."

"And the gun stays out here," he said. I didn't want to give up the gun, but it made me think better of Maiden that he'd spotted it.

"Sure," I said. I pulled the Browning out from under the jacket. I hit the slide and spilled the clip into my other hand. I jacked the gun open to show the chamber was empty and handed the whole shooting match to Maiden.

"Didn't trust me to unload it for you?"

"I figured the Browning might be too small for your hands. Requires fine motor skills."

"You giving me shit?" he said.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm giving you shit."

He smiled then. He looked the Browning over before he put it in a desk drawer along with the clip. "Not a bad gun if you can't handle anything bigger." He locked the drawer—another brownie point for Maiden.

"It's not size that counts, Maiden. It's performance."

His smile widened to a grin. "Your friend still has to wait out here."

"I said that was fine. I meant it."

Maiden nodded and led the way back through the door that Belisarius had come out of. There were two doors in the middle of the long, white hallway. One said, Ladies, the other, Men.

"I'd hoped you coming out of this door meant you were visiting Richard."

"I'm afraid not. Mr. Zeeman has not relented."

"Relented," Maiden said, "relented. Now, that's a nice lawyer word."

"Reading improves your vocabulary, Officer Maiden. You should try it sometime. Though I suppose you can get by with just looking at the pictures."

"Ooh, I'm cut to the quick on that one," Maiden said.

"If you cut us, do we not bleed?" Belisarius asked.

Maiden shocked the hell out of me by giving the next line: "If you tickle us, do we not laugh?"

Belisarius clapped softly. "Touché, Officer Maiden."

"Big and well read," I said. "I'm impressed."

He pulled a chain out of his pocket with keys on the end of it. "Don't tell the other cops. They'd think I was a sissy."

I looked up at him, all the way up at him. "It's not reading Shakespeare that makes you a sissy, Maiden. It's that damn gun. Only pansies carry that much hardware."

He unlocked the door at the end of the hallway. "Got to carry something big, Ms. Blake. Balances me out when I run."

That made me laugh. He opened the door and ushered us through. He locked the door behind us and went down a long white stretch of hallway with two closed doors on either side. "Wait here. I'll go make sure your boyfriend is ready to see you."

"He's not my boyfriend," I said. It was becoming automatic, like an involuntary reflex.

Maiden smiled and unlocked the door at the far end. He vanished through it. "You and Officer Maiden seem to have hit it off, Ms. Blake."

"Cops dish out a lot of shit. Trick is, don't take it personally, and dish back."

"I'll remember that next time."

I looked up Belisarius. "It might not work for you. You're a lawyer, and you're wealthy."

"And I'm not an attractive woman," he said.

"That, too, though that can work against me with policemen."

Belisarius nodded.

Maiden stepped back through the far door. He was smiling like something had amused the hell out of him. I was betting I wasn't going to think it was funny. "I told Zeeman that for a fucking pervert, he had a cute girlfriend."

"I'll bet that's not what you said," I said.

He nodded. "I asked him why, with a nice piece of ass like you for his girlfriend, he had to go out and rape somebody."

"What'd he say?" I asked, face as blank as I could make it.

"He said you're not his girlfriend."

I nodded. "See, I told you so."

Maiden opened the door wide and motioned us through. "Ring the buzzer when you want out." We stepped through, and he said, "Enjoy," as he locked us in.

They must have gotten a deal on white paint because the entire room was white, even the floor. It was like standing in the middle of a blizzard. Two bunks, one on top the other, the bars on a small window, even the toilet and sink were white. The only color was the bars that formed a three-sided cage. Richard sat on the other side of the bars looking at us.

He was sitting on the lower bunk. His hair fell in thick waves, nearly hiding his face. In the stark whiteness of the overhead lights, the hair looked darker than its normal honey brown, almost chestnut. He was wearing a pale green dress shirt untucked, sleeves rolled back over muscular forearms. His dark brown dress slacks were wrinkled from being slept in. He unfolded his six-foot-one-inch body from the bunk. The dress shirt stretched tightly across his shoulders and upper arms. He'd bulked up a little since last I'd seen him, and he'd been pretty muscular to begin with. Once upon a time, it would have been my great pleasure to have peeled that shirt off and seen what was underneath, to have run my hands over that lovely chest and those strong arms. But that was then, and this was a whole new ball game, one that I really couldn't win.

Richard came to stand at the bars, hands wrapping around them. "What are you doing here, Anita?" His voice wasn't as angry as I feared it would be. He sounded almost ordinary, and some tightness in the center of my body relaxed.

Belisarius stepped away from us. He sat at the table outside the cell and began spreading papers out of his briefcase. He tried to look very busy and give us as much privacy as he could. It was a nice gesture.

"I heard you were in trouble."

"So you came to rescue me?" he made it a question. His solid brown eyes stared at me, searching my face. His hair had fallen into his eyes. He smoothed it back from his face in an achingly familiar gesture.

"I came to help."

"I don't need your help. I didn't do it."

Belisarius interrupted. "You've been charged with rape, Mr. Zeeman."

I turned and looked at Belisarius. "I thought it was attempted rape."

"I've been reading the file while I was waiting. Once I had Mr. Zeeman's permission to act as his lawyer, I got access to the records. The rape kit was negative for semen, but there was evidence of penetration. Penetration is enough to constitute rape."

"I never had intercourse with her," Richard said. "It never got that far."

"But you did date her," I said.

He looked at me. "Yes, I did." There was a little anger in his voice now.

I let it go. I'd probably be grumpy, too, if I were in jail on trumped-up charges. Hell, I'd be grumpy even if I had done it.

"The problem, Mr. Zeeman, is that without semen samples, you can't really prove conclusively that you didn't violate Ms. Schaffer. If this is a frame, it's a good one. You dated the woman more than once. She went out with you and came home beaten up." He paged through one of the files. "There was vaginal bruising, some tearing. If she wasn't raped, it was still very rough."

"Becky said she liked it rough," Richard said quietly.

"When did how rough she liked sex come up in conversation?" I asked.

He met my eyes, no flinching, ready to be angry if I was angry. "When she was trying to get me to go to bed with her."

"What exactly did she say?" Belisarius asked.

Richard shook his head. "I don't remember exactly, but I told her I was afraid I'd hurt her. She said if I liked it rough, she was my girl."

I walked away from him to stand looking at the closed door. I didn't want to be here for this. I turned around, and he was already staring at me, already meeting my gaze. "Is this why you wanted to see both of us at once? So I'd hear all the details?"

He gave a harsh sound, almost laughter, but bitter. A strange look passed over his face. Once I could have read his every thought on his face, in his eyes. Now I didn't know him. Sometimes I thought I'd never known him, that we'd both been fooling ourselves. "If you want details, I can give you details. Not about Betty, but there's Lucy and Carrie and Mira. Especially Lucy and Mira. I can give you details on them."

"I heard you'd been a busy boy," I said. My voice was softer than I wanted it to be, but normal. I wasn't going to cry.

"Who told you to come down here, Anita? Who disobeyed me?" That first prickling roil of energy crept through the room. Sometimes you could forget what Richard really was. He was better at hiding it than any lycanthrope I knew. I glanced at Belisarius. He seemed oblivious. Good, he wasn't sensitive to it. But I was. The power crept over my skin like a warm wind.

"No one disobeyed you, Richard."

"Someone told you." His hands flexed on the bars, rubbing over and over. I knew he could have ripped them out of the floor. He could have knocked a hole through the back wall if he wanted to. The fact that he was still in this cage was only because he didn't want out badly enough to blow his cover. A mild-mannered junior high science teacher could not bend steel bars.

I leaned close to the bars, lowering my voice. His otherworldly energy breathed along my skin. "Do you really want to discuss this now, in front of a stranger?"

Richard leaned in so close his forehead pressed against the bars. "He's my lawyer. Doesn't he need to know?"

I leaned in so close I could have touched him through the bars. I wanted to touch him. He didn't seem quite real this way. "You really are a babe in the woods on this one, aren't you?"

"I've never been arrested before," he said.

"No, that was always my job."

He almost smiled. Some of that energy leaked away. His beast sliding away inside that perfect camouflage.

I touched the cool, metal bars, sliding my hands just below his. "I bet you thought you might be visiting me like this someday, but not the other way around."

He gave a small smile. "Yeah, and I'd bake you a cake with a file in it."

I smiled. "You don't need a file, Richard." I slid my hands over his. He squeezed my fingers gently. "You need a good lawyer, and I brought you one."

He stepped away from the bars. "Why do I need a lawyer when I'm innocent?"

Belisarius answered, "You've been charged with rape. The judge has refused you bail. Son, if we can't break her story, you're looking at two to five years, if we're lucky. The pictures are in the file. She was beat up pretty bad. She's a pretty little blond thing. She'll come into court dressed like everyone's favorite second grade teacher. The one you had a crush on that smelled like Ivory soap." He stood up and started walking towards us as he talked. "We'll cut your hair—"

"Cut his hair?" I exclaimed.

Belasarius frowned at me. "Cut your hair, dress you up nice. It helps that you're handsome and white, but you're still a big, strong-looking man." He shook his head. "It's not you we have to prove innocent, Mr. Zeeman. It's Ms. Schaffer we have to prove guilty."

Richard frowned. "What do you mean?"

"We have to make her look like the whore of Babylon. But first, I'll file a motion that no bail is excessive for a first offense. Hell, you don't even have a traffic ticket. I'll get you bail."

"How long will it take?" I asked.

Belisarius looked at me a little too hard. "Is there a time limit I'm not aware of?"

Richard and I looked at each other as if on cue. Then he said, "Yes," and I said, "No."

"Well, which is it, boys and girls, yes or no? Is there something I need to know here?"

Richard looked at me, then said, "No, I guess not."

Belisarius didn't like it, but he let it go. "Okay, kiddies. I'll take your word for it, but if this piece of information that I don't need to know comes up and bites me on the ass, I will not be amused."

"It won't," I said.

He shook his head. "If it does, I will leave Mr. Zeeman high and dry. You will be finding yourself a new lawyer faster than you can say penitentiary."

"I didn't do anything wrong," Richard said. "How can this be happening?"

"Why would she cry rape on you?" I asked.

"Somebody did it," Belisarius said. "If not you, then who?"

Richard shook his head. "Betty dates a lot. I know of at least three other men, myself."

"We'll need their names."

"Why?" he asked.

"Son, if you are going to argue with me every step of the way, this won't work."

"I just don't want to drag anyone else into this."

"Richard," I said, "you are in trouble here. Let Carl do his job, please."

Richard looked at me. "You dropped everything to ride to my rescue, huh?"

I smiled. "Pretty much."

He shook his head. "How'd Jean-Claude feel about that?"

I looked away, not meeting his eyes. "He wasn't thrilled, but he wants you out of jail."

"I'll just bet he does."

"Look, kiddies, we don't have a lot of time here. If you two can't curb the personal stuff, maybe Anita here should leave."

I nodded. "I agree. You're going to have to tell him details about Ms. Schaffer that I don't want to hear. And you need to be able to talk freely about her."

"Are you jealous?" Richard asked.

I took in a deep breath and let it out. I would have liked to have said no, but he could smell a lie. I'd been doing okay until he'd made that crack about Betty being his girl for the rough stuff. That had bugged me. "I have no right to be jealous of you, Richard."

"But you are, aren't you?" he asked. He watched my face while he asked it.

I had to force myself to meet his eyes while I answered. I wanted to dunk my head, and I couldn't stop the rush of color up my face. "Yeah, I'm jealous. Happy?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"I'm out of here." I wrote the phone number of the cabin on Belisarius's notebook and pressed the buzzer to be let out.

"I'm glad you came, Anita," Richard said.

I kept my back turned to the door, hoping Maiden would hurry. "I wish I could say the same, Richard."

The door opened. I escaped.

Chapter 7

"Have fun visiting your boyfriend?" Maiden asked as he followed me down the hall.

I waited at the second locked door. "He's not my boyfriend."

"Everyone keeps saying that." Maiden unlocked the door and held it open. "Maybe it's a case of the lady protesting too much."

"Take your library card and shove it, Maiden."

"Ooh," he said, "that was nasty. Wonder if I can think of a comeback half that good."

"Let me have my gun, Maiden."

He locked the door behind us. Jason was sitting in the little row of chairs across from the desk. He looked up. "Can we go home now?"

"Wasn't Officer Maiden entertaining?" I asked.

"He wouldn't let me play with his handcuffs," Jason said.

Maiden went behind the desk and unlocked the drawer. He brought out the Browning, slipped the clip back in it, and pulled the slide back, which jacked a shell into the chamber. He checked the safety and handed it to me, butt first.

"You think Myerton's dangerous enough to need to carry one in the chamber?" I asked.

Maiden looked at me. It was a long look as if he were trying to tell me something. "You never know," he said finally.

We stood staring at each other for a few frozen moments, then I put the Browning in the holster with the bullet ready to go, though I checked the safety twice. Didn't usually go around with a live round in the chamber. Made me nervous. Made me more nervous that Maiden might be trying to warn me. Of course, he might just be yanking my chain. Some cops, especially small town ones, tended to give me grief. Being a vampire executioner made some of them want to trade macho shit with me, like getting me to carry a live round in the chamber.

"Have a nice day, Blake."

"You, too, Maiden," I said.

I had the door open, Jason at my back, when Maiden said, "Be careful out there."

His eyes were guarded. There was nothing to read on his face. I am not a subtle person, big surprise. "You got something to say, Maiden?" I asked.

"I'm going to be taking my lunch break after you leave."

I looked at him. "It's ten o'clock in the morning. Little early for lunch, don't you think?"

"Just thought you'd like to know I won't be here."

"I'll try and squelch my disappointment," I said.

He flashed a quick grin, then stood. "I gotta lock the door behind you, since I'm leaving the desk unattended."

"Locking Belasarius in with Richard?"

"I won't be gone that long," he said. He opened the door for us, waiting for us to go outside.

"I don't like games, Maiden. What the fuck is going on?"

He wasn't smiling when he said, "If the fancy lawyer gets bail for your boyfriend, I'd leave town."

"You're not suggesting he jump bail, are you, Officer?"

"His family has been here almost from the first night he was taken into custody. Before that, it was the scientists that he's been working with. A lot of nice, upstanding citizens standing around for witnesses. But the nice upstanding citizens won't be here forever."

Maiden and I looked at each other. I stood there for a minute, wondering if he'd stop hinting and just tell me what the hell was going on. He didn't.

I nodded at him. "Thanks, Maiden."

"Don't thank me," he said. He locked the door behind us.

My hand wasn't on the butt of the Browning, but it was sort of close to it. It'd be silly to draw the gun on a nice August morning in a town with a population lower than most college dorms.

"What was that all about?" Jason asked.

"If we don't get Richard out, he's going to get hurt. The only reason he hasn't been yet is that there have been too many witnesses. Too many people to ask questions."

"If the cops are in on it," Jason said, "why would Maiden warn us?"

"He's not happy about being in on it, maybe. Oh, hell, I don't know. But it means that someone wanted Richard in jail for a reason."

A pickup truck pulled across the street in front of the little grey house that Shang-Da was camped out in. Four men jumped out of the back. There was at least one more in the cab. He slid out of sight, and they formed a semicircle at the base of the porch. One of them had a baseball bat.

"Well, well," Jason said. "You think if we bang on the doors and yell for police help, we'll get it?"

I shook my head. "Maiden did help us. He warned us."

"I'm all warm and cozy with the effort," Jason said.

"Yeah," I said. I started walking across the street. Jason followed a couple of steps behind. I was thinking as hard as I could. I had a gun and they might not.

But if I killed somebody, I'd be bunking with Richard. Myerton's legal system didn't seem to take to well to strangers.

Shang-Da stood on the porch, looking down at the men. He'd taken off the billed cap. His black hair was cut very short on the sides and longer on top. The hair was shiny with gel but squashed flat from the cap. He stood balanced on his bare feet, long arms loose at his sides. He wasn't in a fighting stance yet, but I knew the signs.

His eyes flicked to us, and I knew he'd seen us. The thugs hadn't yet. Amateur thugs. Didn't mean they weren't dangerous, but it meant you might be able to bluff them. Professional muscle tended to call a bluff.

A small, elderly woman came through the screen door to stand next to Shang-Da. She leaned heavily on a cane, her back bowed. Her grey and white hair was cut very short and permed in one of those tight hairdos that elderly women seem so fond of. She wore an apron over a pink housedress. Her knee-high hose were rolled down over fuzzy slippers. Glasses perched on a small nose.

She shook a bony fist at the men. "You boys get off my property."

The man with the baseball bat said, "Now, Millie, this has got nothing to do with you."

"This is my grandson you're threatening," she said.

"He ain't her grandson," another man said. He was wearing a faded flannel shirt open like a jacket.

"Are you calling me a liar, Mel Cooper?" the woman asked.

"I didn't said that," Mel said.

If we'd been someplace more private, I'd have just wounded one of them. It would have gotten their attention and called the fight off. But I'd have bet almost any amount of money that if I shot one of them, the mysterious sheriff would ride to their rescue. Maybe the plan was to get more of us in jail. I was too new on the scene to even make an educated guess.

Jason and I walked up onto the grass. Mel was the closest to us. He turned, showing a stained undershirt and a beer gut beneath the flannel shirt. Ooh, charming.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

"Well, aren't you just Mr. Smooth."

He took a menacing step towards me. I smiled at him. He frowned at me. "Answer the fucking question, girlie. Who are you?"

"Doesn't matter who she is," the one with the baseball bat said. "This isn't any of her business. Leave it alone, or you'll get what he's going to get." He motioned with his head at Shang-Da.

"I get to the beat the crap out of you, too?" I said. "Oh, goody."

Baseball Bat frowned at me, too. I had two of them puzzled. Confusion to my enemies.

The woman shook a bony fist at them again. "You get off my property, or I will call Sheriff Wilkes."

One of the men laughed, and another said, "Wilkes will be along. When we're finished."

Baseball Bat said, "Come down off that porch, boy, or we're coming up after you."

He was ignoring me. He was ignoring Jason. They weren't just amateur muscle. They were stupid amateur muscle.

Shang-Da's voice was surprisingly deep, very calm. There was no fear in it—big surprise—but there was an undercurrent of eagerness, as if under that calmness he was itching to hurt them. "If I come down off this porch, you will not enjoy it."

The man with the baseball bat wheeled his weapon of choice in a quick, professional circle. He used it like he knew how. Maybe he'd played ball in high school. "Oh, I'll enjoy it, China boy."

"China boy," Jason said. I didn't have to see his face to know he was smiling.

"Not very original is it?" I commented.

"Nope."

Mel turned towards us, and another man moved with him. "Are you making fun of us?"

I nodded. "Oh, yeah."

"You think I won't hit you because you're a girl?" Mel asked.

It was tempting to say, "No, I think you won't hit me because I have a gun," but I didn't say it. Once you pull a gun in a fight, you've pushed the violence level to a height where death is a very real possibility. I didn't want anyone dead with the cops waiting to ride down and sweep us up. Didn't want to go to jail. I have a black belt in judo. But Mel's companion was almost as big as Officer Maiden, and not half as pretty. They both outweighed me and Jason by a hundred pounds apiece, or more. They'd been big most of their lives. They thought it made them tough. Up until this moment, it probably had. In fact, it still might. I wasn't going to stand there and trade blows with them. I'd lose. Whatever I was going to do had to be quick and take my opponent out immediately. Anything less, and I stood a very good chance of getting seriously hurt.

I'd bet on me against any bad guy my size. Trouble was, as usual, none of the bad guys were my size. There was a tightness in my gut, a nervous tremble. I realized with something close to shock that I was more afraid right now than I had been with Jamil in the truck. This wasn't a dominance game with rules. No one was going to say uncle when someone was bleeding. Scared? Who, me? But it had been a long time since I'd stood up to the bad guys without pulling a weapon. Was I becoming too dependent on hardware? Maybe.

Jason and I moved back, sliding a little away from each other. You need room to fight. The thought occurred that I'd never really seen Jason fight. He could have thrown the pickup truck they came in across the street, but I didn't know if he knew how to fight. If you throw human beings around like toys, people can get badly hurt. I didn't want Jason in jail, either.

"Don't kill anyone," I said.

Jason smiled, but it was just a baring of teeth. "Gee, you're no fun." That first prickle of energy that said shapeshifter breathed along my body.

Mel had been moving forward in a flat-footed, untrained movement. No martial arts, no boxing, just big. The other guy was in a stance. He knew what he was doing. Jason could heal a broken jaw in less than a day; I couldn't. I wanted Mel. But he'd stopped moving forward. There were goose bumps on his hairy arms. "What the hell was that?"

He was big and stupid, but he was psychic enough to feel a shapeshifter. Interesting.

"Who the hell are we? What the hell was that? Mel, you need better questions," I said.

"Fuck you," he said.

I smiled and motioned him forward with both hands. "Come and get it, Mel, if you think you're man enough."

He let out a roar and ran at me. He literally ran at me with his beefy arms wide like he was going to do a bear hug. The bigger guy with him rushed Jason. I had a sense of movement and knew Shang-Da wasn't on the porch anymore. There was no time to be afraid. No time to think. Just to move. To do what I'd done a thousand times in practice in the dojo, but never in real life. Never for real.

I ducked Mel's outstretched arms and did two things almost simultaneously: I caught his left arm as he went past and swept his legs out from under him. He fell heavily to his knees, and I got a joint lock on his arm. I really hadn't decided to break the arm. A joint lock on an elbow hurts enough that most people will negotiate after you prove just how much it hurts. Mel didn't give me time. I caught a flash of the blade. I broke his arm. It made a thick wet sound, flopping loose like a chicken wing bent backwards.

He shrieked. Screaming didn't cover the sound. The blade was in his other hand, but he seemed to have forgotten it for the moment.

"Drop the knife, Mel," I said.

He tried to get to his feet, one knee hyperextended to the side. I kicked the knee and heard it give a deep, low pop. A bone breaking is a crisp, sharp sound. A joint doesn't break as clean, but it breaks easier.

He fell on the ground, writhing, screaming.

"Throw the knife away, Mel!" I was yelling at him.

The knife went airborne, lost across the fence into the next yard. I stepped away from Mel, just in case he had another surprise. Everybody else had been busy, too.

The big one that had attacked Jason was lying in a heap by the pickup truck. There was a fresh dent in the side of the truck, as if he'd been thrown into the side of it. He probably had.

A third man lay in a crumpled heap at the foot of the porch steps. He wasn't moving. Another man was trying to crawl away, one leg dangling behind him like a broken tail. He was crying.

Shang-Da was trying to break through the man with the baseball bat's defenses. Jason was fighting a tall, thin man with muscles corded along his bare arms. He was in a low fighting stance, Tae Kwon Do or jujitsu.

Shang-Da took two blows on each arm from the baseball bat, then he took the bat away from him. He broke the bat into two large pieces. The man turned to run. Shang-Da started to stab him in the back with the broken end of the bat.

I yelled, "Don't kill him."

Shang-Da flipped the broken wood in his hand and smashed the unbroken end against the man's skull. He went to his knees so suddenly it was startling.

The tall man fighting Jason crept forward in a fast crab movement that looked sort of silly, but his foot lashed out and Jason had to throw himself back onto the ground. Jason kicked at him, but the tall man leaped over the kick so high and so gracefully that he seemed to float in the air for a moment.

Sirens wailed, coming quickly closer.

Baseball Bat fell forward onto his face. He never tried to catch himself. He was out for the count.

The only one of the bad guys standing was the tall man. Jason scrambled to his feet quickly enough to stay just ahead of the punches and kicks, but not well enough to hurt him back. Super strength does not mean super skill.

Shang-Da started to move in to help.

Jason looked at Shang-Da, and that was all the tall man needed. He landed a kick to the side of Jason's head that stunned him and left him on his knees on the ground. The man turned and I saw the roundhouse kick coming. It was a kick that could snap someone's neck. I was closer than Shang-Da. I didn't even think about it. I moved forward and knew it wouldn't be in time. But the tall man saw the movement. He switched his attention from Jason to me.

I was suddenly in a defensive stance. He reversed the kick, and I managed to avoid it because he was off balance. There were two police cars skidding down the street towards us. Shang-Da stopped moving forward. I think we both thought the fight was over. The tall man thought otherwise.

The kick was just a blur of motion. I got one arm up in a partial block. My arm went numb and the next thing I knew, I was flat on my back staring up at the sky. It didn't even hurt.

He could have moved in and killed me, because for a second, I couldn't move. There was no sound for that frozen second, just me on the grass, blinking upward. Then I could hear my blood pounding in my ears. I took a deep gasping breath and I could hear human voices again.

A man's voice yelled, "Freeze, motherfucker!"

I tried to say, "Colorful," but no sound came out. I could taste blood in my mouth. My face didn't hurt that much yet; I was sort of numb. I opened my mouth just to see if I could. I could. My jaw wasn't broken. Great. I raised one arm upward and managed to say, "Help me up."

Jason said, "They've got guns pointed at us."

Millie came down off the porch with her cane. She looked funny from my angle, like a fuzzy-footed giant. "Don't you be pointing guns at my grandson and his friends. These men attacked them."

"Attacked them?" said a man's voice. "Looks like your 'grandson' and his friends attacked them."

I fumbled my ID out of my jacket pocket and held it up in the air. I could probably have sat up on my own, but since I'd taken a hit, I might as well use it. I was hurt, and the more hurt the cops thought I was, the less likely we'd be going to jail. If only the bad guys had been hurt, then we'd have all ended up in jail on assault charges or worse. I hadn't checked for pulses in at least two of the thugs. They'd been lying awfully still. This way we could all press assault charges. They could put us all in jail, or none in jail. Or that was the plan. As plans go, I'd had better ones. I was lucky my jaw wasn't broken.

"Anita Blake, vampire executioner," I said. The announcement would have had a little more oomph if I hadn't been flat on my back, but hey, you do what you can. I did roll onto one side. My mouth had filled with enough blood that I either had to spit or swallow. I spat onto the grass. Even rolling onto my side made the world spin. I wondered for a second or two if I was going to spit up more on the grass than just blood. The nausea passed, leaving me worried about a concussion. I'd had them before, and they usually made me sick to my stomach.

I couldn't see Millie anymore, but I could hear her. "You put up those guns, Billy Wilkes, or I will tan your hide with my cane."

"Now, Miss Millie," the male voice said.

I repeated who I was and said, "I need some help to stand. Can my people help me up, please?"

The male voice, Sheriff Wilkes I presumed, sounded a little uncertain, but said, "They can move."

Jason grabbed the arm that was holding my ID up in the air. He looked down at me and pulled me to my feet. It was too quick and I didn't have to pretend that the world went spinning. When my knees buckled, I didn't fight it. I slid to my knees and Shang-Da took my other arm. Between the two of them, they got me standing and facing the cops.

Sheriff Wilkes was about five foot eight, and he was wearing a pale blue Smokey the Bear hat and a matching uniform. He looked trim and in shape like he worked out and took it seriously. The gun at his side was a ten mil Beretta. It was holstered. The day was looking up.

He stared at me with eyes a dark, solid, trustworthy brown. He took the hat off and wiped sweat from his forehead. His hair was a pale salt and pepper and made me put his age at over forty. "Anita Blake, I've heard of you. What are you doing in our town?"

I spat another mouthful of blood into the grass and managed to stand more than sag between Shang-Da and Jason. Truth was, I could have stood on my own. But all the bad guys were on the ground. Even the one that had kicked me was down for the count. Shang-Da must have stepped in after I went down. I knew Jason couldn't have taken the tall man.

"I came to see a friend in your jail—Richard Zeeman."

"Friend?" he made it a question.

"Yeah, friend."

There were two deputies behind Wilkes. They were both over six feet tall. One of them had a scar that went from eyebrow to jaw on one side. Jagged;

more a broken bottle than a knife. The other deputy had a shotgun in his hands. It wasn't pointed at us, but it was there. Scarface snickered at me. The one with the shotgun just stared with eyes as empty and pitiless as a doll's.

Maiden was standing behind the others, hands in front, one hand clasping his opposite wrist. His face was blank, but there was an edge around his mouth that said he was trying not to smile.

"We've got to run you all in for assault," Wilkes said.

"Great," I said, "I can't wait to press charges."

He looked at me, his eyes just a touch wide. "You're the only ones standing, Ms. Blake. I don't think you have grounds to press charges."

I leaned a little heavier against Jason. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of my mouth. I could feel my eye already starting to swell. I've always been a bleeder if you hit me in the face. I knew I looked pitiful. "They attacked us, and we were forced to defend ourselves." I let my knees slide out from under me. Shang-Da caught me and lifted me easily in his arms. I closed my eyes and curled against his chest.

"Shit," Wilkes said.

"Look at that poor little girl, Billy Wilkes," Millie said. "You going to take her before Judge Henry. What do you think he's going to do to the rest of these hooligans? He's got a daughter about her age."

"Shit," Wilkes said again with more force. "Let's get everybody down to the hospital. We'll sort it out there."

"Ambulance is on its way," Maiden said.

"One won't be enough," Wilkes said.

Maiden laughed low and deep. "There aren't enough ambulances in the county for this many bodies."

"There would have been enough for three," Wilkes said.

I tensed in Shang-Da's arms. He tightened around me, one hand pressed against the side of my head firmly enough that raising up would have hurt my face. I let the breath ease out of my body and concentrated on being still, but I'd remember what Wilkes had said. We'd see who got the ambulance ride next time.

Chapter 8

It took one ambulance, one pickup truck, two squad cars, Santa's sleigh, and me riding in the van for everyone to get to the hospital. Okay, not Santa's sleigh, but we did look like a parade. Nearly six hours later, we were back in Myerton in the only interrogation room they had. I'd been the only one of the injured that got to leave the hospital.

The guy that Jason had thrown into the truck might have permanent spine damage. They'd know when the swelling went down. Two of the three that Shang-Da had knocked unconscious had regained consciousness. They had concussions but would recover. The third was still out for the count, and the doctors were talking about swelling of the brain and skull fractures. Shang-Da had also done the bad guy with the compound fracture. I only had Mel to my credit, but he was in worse shape than the compound fracture. It takes a hell of a lot of work to heal a joint break. Sometimes you never recover full use of the limb. I felt sort of bad about that, but he had pulled the knife.

Belisarius had been a busy little lawyer. He'd not only arranged bail for Richard, but he'd also been representing us for the last hour or so. Richard was a free man, temporarily. If Belisarius could keep the rest of us out of jail, he was worth the money.

Wilkes didn't want to arrest us, but he wanted to take our fingerprints. I didn't have a problem with that until Shang-Da did. He really didn't want his prints taken, which made both Wilkes and me suspicious. But if Shang-Da wouldn't do it, then none of us would. I told Wilkes if he wanted our prints, he had to charge us with something. He seemed reluctant to do that.

Maybe it was because I'd used my one phone call to contact a cop I knew, who in turn had contacted an FBI agent I knew.

Having a call from the feds made Wilkes jumpy as hell. The bad guys had ambushed us across from the police station. You didn't do a planned attack right next door to the cops unless you were pretty sure they wouldn't spoil the fun. The bad guys had known the police wouldn't help us. They'd said as much during the fight, challenging Millie to call Wilkes, like it wouldn't help. But Wilkes's reaction to the call from the feds sort of clinched it for me. Policemen are very territorial. No federal laws had been broken. The FBI had no business in a simple assault case. Wilkes should have been pissed, and he wasn't. Oh, he made noises like he was angry, and he was, but he should have raised hell, and he didn't. His reaction to everything was just a little bit off—a little bit less convincing than it should have been.

I was betting he was dirty. I just couldn't prove it yet. Of course, it wasn't my job to prove it. I'd come down here to get Richard out of jail, and we'd done that.

Wilkes finally asked to speak with me alone. Belisarius didn't like it, but he left with the others. I sat at the little table and looked at Wilkes.

It was the cleanest interrogation room I'd ever been in. The table was pale pine and looked handmade. The walls were white and clean. Even the linoleum on the floor was hospital bright. I didn't think Myerton got a lot of use for the room. It'd probably started life as a storage closet. It had been almost too small to hold five of us, but there was room for two.

Wilkes pulled a chair out and sat across from me. He clasped his hands in front of him and looked at me. There was a band around his head where the hair had been pressed flat from the hat. There was a plain gold wedding band on his left hand and one of those watches that joggers use, big and black and

utilitarian. Since I had the lady's version of the same watch on my left wrist, it was hard to criticize.

"What?" I said. "You going to give me the silent treatment until I scream for mercy?"

He gave a very small smile. "Made some phone calls about you, Blake. There's a lot of talk that you'll bend the law if you need to. That maybe you've murdered people."

I just looked at him. I could feel my face thinning out, blanking. Once upon a time, every emotion I'd felt had played along my face, but that was a while ago. I'd perfected my blank cop stare, and it showed nothing.

"Is there a point to this conversation?" I asked.

The smile this time was bigger. "I just like to know who I'm dealing with, Blake, that's all."

"Good to be thorough," I said.

He nodded. "I got calls from a Saint Louis cop, a fed, and a state cop. The state cop says you're a pain in the ass and will bend the law six ways to Sunday."

"Bet that was Freemount," I said. "She's still pissed about a case we worked together."

He nodded, smiling pleasantly. "The fed sort of hinted that if you were detained, he might find a reason to have the local federal office to come take a look around."

I smiled. "Bet you really enjoyed that."

His brown eyes went hard and dark. "I don't want the feebies down here messing in my pond."

"I'll bet you don't, Wilkes."

His face tightened, letting me see just how angry he was. "What the fuck do you care?"

I leaned across the table on my elbows. "You should be more careful who you do a frame-up job on, Wilkes."

"He's a fucking junior high science teacher. How was I supposed to know he was shacking up with the fucking Executioner?"

"We're not shacking up," I said automatically. I sat back in my seat. "What do you want, Wilkes? Why the private talk?"

He ran his hand through his salt-and-pepper hair, and for the first time, I realized how nervous he was. He was scared. Why? What the hell was happening in this tiny town?

"If the rape charges disappear, Zeeman is free to leave town. You and everybody go with him. No harm, no foul."

A sport's metaphor—ooh, I was all a-tingle. "I didn't come down here to sniff around your mess, Wilkes. I'm not a cop. I came down here to get Richard out of trouble."

"He's out of trouble if he leaves."

"I'm not his keeper, Wilkes. I can't promise what Richard will do."

"Why does a schoolteacher have bodyguards?" Wilkes asked.

I shrugged. "Why do you want the schoolteacher out of the way bad enough to frame him for rape?"

"We've all got our secrets, Blake. You make sure he leaves town and takes his assassins with him, and we can all keep our secrets."

I looked at my hands spread on the smooth tabletop. I looked back up, met his eyes. "I'll talk to Richard, see what I can do. But I can't promise anything until after I've talked to him."

"Make him listen, Blake. Zeeman is so clean he squeaks, but you and I know the score."

I shook my head. "Yeah, I know the score, and I know what people say about me." I stood up.

He stood up. We looked at each other.

"I don't always pay attention to the letter of the law, that's true. One of the reasons Richard and I aren't dating anymore is that he is so fucking squeaking clean it makes my teeth hurt. But we have one thing in common."

"What's that?" Wilkes asked.

"Push us, and we push back. Richard usually for moral grounds, because it's the right thing to do. Me, because I am just that unpleasant."

"Unpleasant," Wilkes said. "Mel Cooper may never walk right again or have the full use of his left arm."

"He shouldn't have pulled a knife on me," I said.

"If there hadn't been witnesses, would you have killed him?"

I smiled, and even to me, it felt like a strange smile, not humorous, unpleasant maybe. "I'll talk to Richard. Hopefully, we'll be out of your hair before tomorrow night."

"I wasn't always a small-town cop, Blake. Don't let the surroundings fool you. I will not let you and your people fuck with me."

"Funny," I said. "I was thinking the very same thing."

"Well," Wilkes said, "we know where we stand."

"I guess we do," I said.

"I hope come dark tomorrow you and your friends are on your way out of town."

I stared into his brown eyes. I'd looked into scarier eyes, blanker, more dead. He didn't have the eyes of a professional killer. He didn't even have good cop eyes. I could see the fear shiny and almost panicked around the edges. No, I'd seen scarier eyes. But that didn't mean he wouldn't kill me if he got the chance. Make even a good man scared enough, and you never know what he'll do. Make a bad man scared, and you are in trouble. Wilkes probably hadn't killed anybody yet or they wouldn't have framed Richard for rape. They'd have framed him for murder or just killed him. So Wilkes hadn't slid completely down into the abyss. But once you embrace the screaming darkness, eventually, you kill. Maybe Wilkes didn't know that yet, but if we pushed hard enough, he'd figure it out.

Chapter 9

By the time I got back to the cabins, it was after seven. It was August, so it was still daylight, but you could tell it was late. There was a softness to the light, a tiredness to the heat as if the day itself was eager for night. Or maybe it was just me that was tired.

My face hurt. At least I hadn't had to have stitches in my mouth. The EMS guy on the ambulance had said I'd need a couple of stitches. When I got to the hospital, the doctor said I didn't. A very bright spot for me. I'm sort of phobic about needles. But I've taken stitches with no painkiller and that ain't fun, either.

Jamil was standing in front of the cabins. He'd changed into black jeans and a T-shirt with a smiley face on it. The T-shirt was cut across the middle so his abs showed. Though my dance card was full of attractive men, Jamil did have one of the nicest stomachs I'd ever seen. The muscles stood out under the tight smoothness of his skin like shingles on a roof. It didn't even look real. Somehow, I didn't think you needed cobblestone abs to be a good bodyguard. But hey, everyone needs a hobby.

"I'm sorry I missed the fun," he said. He touched my bruised lip gently. It still made me wince. "I'm surprised you let anyone mark you."

"She did it on purpose," Shang-Da said.

Jamil looked at him.

"Anita pretended to faint," Jason said. "She looked really pitiful."

Jamil looked back at me.

I shrugged. "I didn't let someone kick me in the face on purpose. But once I was down, I did play up how hurt I was. This way, we could press our own assault charges."

"I didn't think you lied that well," Jamil said.

"Live and learn," I said. "Where's Richard? I need to talk to him."

Jamil glanced behind him at one of the cabins, then back to me. There was a look on his face that I couldn't read. "He's cleaning up. He's been in the same clothes for two days."

I stared at his so-careful face, trying to figure out what he wasn't telling me. "What's going on, Jamil?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Don't give me grief, Jamil. I need to talk to Richard—now."

"He's in the shower."

I shook my head, and it made my head hurt. "Screw this. What cabin is he in?"

Jamil shook his head. "Give him a few minutes."

"Longer," Shang-Da said, his voice very bland.

Jason looked from one to the other of them, eyes just a touch wide.

"What is going on?" I asked.

The cabin door behind Jamil opened. A woman appeared in the doorway. Richard had her arms and seemed to be trying to push her, gently but firmly, out the door.

The woman turned and saw me. She had pale brown hair in one of those hairdos that seem artless and simple yet actually take hours to do. She pulled away from Richard and stalked towards us. No, towards me. Her dark eyes were all for me.

"Lucy, don't," Richard said.

"I just want to smell her," Lucy said.

It was the kind of comment a dog might make if it could speak. Smell me, not see me. We primates tend to forget that a lot of other mammals consider smell more important than vision.

Lucy and I had time to study each other as she walked towards me. She was only a little taller than me, maybe five foot six. Her walk was an exaggerated sway so that the short, plum-colored skirt bloused around her and you got glimpses of the hose and garters she was wearing underneath. She was carrying a pair of black heels but walked towards us in a graceful, almost tiptoe movement. Her blouse was a paler purple, unbuttoned so that you glimpsed enough of the bra to know it was black and matched the rest of the undies that you could see. And either the bra was a wonderbra or she was, well, stacked. She was wearing more makeup than I ever wore, but it was well-applied and made her skin look smooth and perfect. Her dark lipstick was smeared.

I glanced behind her at Richard. He was wearing a pair of blue jeans and nothing else. Water still beaded on his naked chest. His thick hair clung to his face and shoulders in wet strands. He had her dark lipstick smeared across his mouth like a plum-colored bruise.

We looked at each other, and I don't think either of us knew what to say.

The woman knew exactly what to say. "So you're Richard's human bitch." It was so hostile, it made me smile.

She didn't like the smile. She stepped into me so close, I'd have to step back to keep the edge of her skirt from brushing my legs. If I'd had any doubt what she was, this close, her power danced over my skin like insects swarming over my body. She was powerful.

I shook my head. "Look, before we get into any arcane werewolf shit or worse, personal shit, I need to talk to Richard about jail and why the local cops went to the trouble of framing him for rape."

She blinked at me. "My name is Lucy Winston. Remember it."

I looked into her pale brown eyes from inches away. I was close enough to see the small imperfections in her eyeliner. Richard had mentioned a Lucy in jail. He couldn't be dating two of them, could he? "Lucy—Richard mentioned you," I said.

She blinked again, but this time she was puzzled. She took a step back from me to glance at Richard. "You mentioned me to her?"

Richard nodded.

She backed up and looked on the verge of tears. "Then why . . ."

I glanced from one to the other of them. Why what, is what I wanted to ask. But I didn't. I'd been enjoying disliking Lucy. If she cried, it might spoil my fun.

I put my hands up like I was surrendering and stepped around her. I walked towards Richard because we had to talk, but seeing Lucy in her garters and hose had taken a lot of the fun out of it.

It was none of my business what he did. I was sleeping with Jean-Claude. I was all out of stones to throw. So why was I having such a hard time not being pissed? Maybe that was a question better left unanswered.

Richard stepped back out of the doorway so I could walk past him. He closed the door behind me, leaning against it. We were suddenly alone, really alone, and I didn't know what to say.

He leaned against the door with his hands behind his back. Water beaded on his naked upper body. He'd always had a nice chest, but he had been lifting weights since last I'd seen him without his shirt. His upper body was almost aggressively masculine, though still short of that overdone look that bodybuilders strive so hard for. He was slumped against the door. It made his stomach muscles bunch. Once upon a time, I could have helped him dry off. His hair was starting to dry in a wavy mass. If he didn't do something soon, he'd have to wet it and start over.

"Lucy drag you out of the shower without a towel?" The moment I said it, I wished I hadn't. I put my hand up and said, "I'm sorry. It's none of my business. I don't have the right to be catty with you."

He smiled, almost sadly. "I think that's the second time I've ever heard you admit you were wrong."

"Oh, I'm wrong a lot. I just don't admit it out loud."

That made him smile again, and it was almost his normal smile. That bright flash of perfect teeth in the permanent tan of his face. Most people thought Richard was tanned. I knew it was skin color because I'd seen the whole package. He was white bread, all Middle American, with a family that made the Waltons look unfriendly, but a generation or so back was something not so white bread.

Richard pushed away from the door. He walked towards me on his bare feet. I was more aware than was polite of the line of hair running down the center of his lower abdomen.

I turned away and said, "Why did they want you in jail?" Business, concentrate on business.

"I'm not sure," he said. "May I get a towel and finish drying off while we talk?"

"It's your cabin. Help yourself," I said.

He disappeared into the bathroom. I was left to look around. The cabin was almost identical to mine except that it was yellow and it was more lived in. The cheerful comforter was pushed onto the floor in a sunny heap. The white sheets were wrinkled. Richard was almost fanatical about making the bed. Somehow Lucy didn't strike me as the neat type. I was betting she had mussed the bed. Of course, there was a wet spot on one side, so maybe she'd had help.

I passed my hand over the damp sheets. Even the pillow was wet as if that thick wet hair had laid across it. My throat felt tight, and if I hadn't known better, I'd have said there were tears in my eyes. Naw, surely not. I mean I'd been the one that dumped Richard. Why should I cry?

The print above the bed was another Van Gogh, *Sunflowers* this time. I wondered if every cabin had a Van Gogh print in a color that matched the decor. Yeah, maybe if I concentrated on the room's furnishings, I wouldn't keep wondering if Lucy had looked up at the melting sunflowers while Richard . . .

I cut that particular visual off. I didn't need to go there—ever. Did I really think that Richard was going to stay chaste while I boffed Jean-Claude? Did I really expect him to just wait around? Maybe I had. Stupid, but maybe true.

The bathroom door was still closed. I could hear water running. Was he taking another shower? Maybe he was just wetting down his hair. Maybe. Or maybe he was cleaning off. Sex was never as neat as the movies made it. Real sex was messy. Good sex was messier.

Three months with Jean-Claude, and I was a sex expert. It was almost funny. I'd been chaste until he came along. Not virginal. My fiancé in college had taken care of that. I'd fallen into my fiancé's arms with the trust that only first love can give you. It was one of the last naive things I ever did.

Richard and I had been engaged, briefly. But we'd never had sex. We'd both been chaste since our first experience in college with other people. Just a personal choice that we both shared. Maybe if we'd given in to that lust, there wouldn't be so much heat left between us. Of course, lately, we'd been mostly fighting.

Richard had been too kindhearted, too tender, too squeamish to rule the wolf pack. He'd had a chance to kill the old Ulfric, Marcus, twice; and twice Richard refused the kill. No kill, no new Ulfric. I urged him to kill Marcus. And after he did it, I dumped him. Unfair, wasn't it? Of course, I hadn't told him to eat Marcus, just to kill him. What's a little cannibalism between friends?

The water was still running in the bathroom. If I hadn't been afraid he'd answer dripping wet in nothing but a towel, I'd have knocked and asked him to hurry. But I'd seen enough of Mr. Zeeman for one day. Less was definitely more.

There were pictures pinned above the desk. I walked towards them. I'd had one semester of Primate Studies: North American. We'd all called it troll class. The Lesser Smokey Mountain Troll is one of the smallest of the North American trolls. They average between three and a half feet to five feet. They are mostly vegetarians but will supplement their diet with carrion and insects. I let all the stats run through my head as I walked towards the pictures. They were covered in blackish fur from head to foot. Crouched in the trees, huddled together, they looked like tall chimpanzees or slender gorillas, but there were pictures of them walking. They were completely bipedal. The only primate except man that walked upright.

The close-up shots of faces were startling. Their faces were more furry than the great apes and more manlike. Some early theories had said trolls were the missing link between man and ape. There had been at least two famous

cases of circuses in the early 1900s that toured with trolls but listed them as wild men. American settlers had been killing trolls for centuries. By the early 1900s, they'd been rare enough to be oddities.

Two things happened in 1910 that saved the trolls from utter destruction. One: a scientific article was published that said that the trolls used tools and buried their dead with flowers and personal articles. The scientist very carefully did not project anything beyond the basic findings, but the newspapers did. They declared that trolls believed in an afterlife, that they believed in God.

An evangelical minister named Simon Barkley felt that God spoke to him. He went out and captured a troll and tried to convert him to Christianity. He wrote a book about his experiences with Peter (the troll), and it became a best-seller. Suddenly, trolls were a cause célèbre.

One of my biology profs had kept a black-and-white photo of Peter the Troll up in his office. Peter had his head bowed and his hands clasped. He was even wearing clothes, though Minister Barkley was always distressed that without constant supervision, Peter disrobed.

I wasn't sure how good a time Peter had with Barkley, but he saved his species from almost certain extinction. Peter had been a North American Cave Troll, the only species on this continent smaller than the Lesser Smokey. Barkley had been moved by the spirit of God, but he hadn't been stupid. There had still been Greater Smokey Mountain Trolls in those days, eight to twelve feet tall and carnivorous. Barkley hadn't tried to save one of them. Probably just as well. It would have been a real downer if the troll had eaten Barkley instead of praying for him.

Trolls were the first protected species in America. The Greater Smokey Mountain Troll was not protected. It was hunted to extinction; but then, it pulled up large trees and beat the tourists to death and sucked the marrow from their bones. Hard to get good press that way.

There was still a troll society called Peter's Friends. Even though it was illegal to kill trolls, any trolls, for any reason, it still happened. Hunters poached them. Though staring into those too-human faces, I don't know how they did it. Not just for a trophy.

Richard stepped out of the bathroom in a rush of warm air. He was still wearing the jeans, but now there was a towel on his head and a blow-dryer in one hand. He had rewet his hair, though he seemed to have gotten all of him in the shower to do it. Mercifully, he'd dried his chest and arms off. His arms looked amazingly strong. I knew he could have tossed around small elephants, regardless of how muscular he looked, but the muscles helped remind me. Physically, he was a pleasure to gaze upon. But it made me wonder why he'd been spending the extra time on his body. Richard didn't usually sweat that kind of thing.

I pointed at the pictures. "These are great." I smiled and meant it. Once upon a time, I'd envisioned spending my life in the field doing this kind of work. A sort of preternatural Jane Goodall. Though truthfully, primates hadn't been my main area of interest. Dragons, maybe, or lake monsters. Nothing that wouldn't eat me if it got the chance. But that had been long ago before Bert, my

boss, recruited me to raise the dead and slay vampires. Sometimes, even though Richard was older than I was by three years, he made me feel old. He was still trying to have a life amid all the strange shit. I'd given up on anything but the strange shit. You couldn't do both equally well—or I couldn't.

"I'll take you up to see them, if you'd like," he said.

"I'd love to, if it wouldn't upset the trolls."

"They're pretty accustomed to visitors. Carrie—Dr. Onslow—has started allowing small groups of tourists to come and take pictures."

He'd mentioned a Carrie in the same breath with Lucy. Was this the same woman? "Are you guys that hard up for money?" I asked.

He sat down on the side of the bed and plugged in the blow-dryer. "You're always short of money on a project like this, but it's not money we need. It's good press."

I frowned at him. "Why do you need good press?"

"Have you been reading the newspaper lately?" he asked. He removed the towel from his head. His hair was dark and brown with moisture, heavy, as if there was still water to be squeezed from it.

"You know I don't read the newspaper."

"You didn't own a television, either, but you do now."

I leaned my butt against the edge of his desk, as far away from him as I could get and not leave the room. I'd bought the television so that he and I could watch old movies and videos.

"I don't watch much television anymore."

"Jean-Claude not a fan of muscials?" Richard asked, and there was that edge to his voice that I'd heard in the last few weeks: angry, jealous, hurt, cruel.

It was almost a relief to hear it. His anger made everything easier. "Jean-Claude's not much of a watcher. He's more a doer."

Richard's face thinned out, anger making his high, sculpted cheekbones stand out underneath his skin. "Lucy isn't much of a watcher, either," he said, voice low and careful.

I laughed, and it wasn't a happy sound. "Thanks for making this easier, Richard."

He stared down at the floor, his wet hair tucked to one side so his face was in full profile. "I don't want to fight, Anita. I really don't."

"Could have fooled me," I said.

He looked up, and his chocolate brown eyes were dark with more than just color. "If I'd wanted a fight, I could have just given in to Lucy. Let you find us in the bed together."

"You're not mine, anymore, Richard. Why should it bother me what the hell you do?"

"That is the question, isn't it?" He stood and started walking towards me.

"Why did they frame you?" I asked. "Why did they want you in jail?"

"That's you, Anita. All business."

"And you let yourself get distracted, Richard. You don't keep your eye on the ball." Geez, a sports metaphor. Maybe it was contagious.

"Fine," he said, and that one word was so angry that it almost hurt. "The troll band that we're studying has broken into two bands. Their birth rate is so low that they don't do that very often. It's the first recorded offshoot for a North American troll troop in this century."

"This is all fascinating, but what does it have to do with anything?"

"Just shut up and listen," he said.

I did. That was a first.

"The second smaller troop moved out of the park. They've been on private land for a little over a year. The farmer who owned the land was okay with that. In fact, he was sort of pleased. Carrie brought him up to see the first troll baby born on his land, and he carried the picture in his wallet."

I looked at him. "Sounds great."

"The farmer, Ivan Greene, died about six months ago. His son was not a nature lover."

"Ah," I said.

"But trolls are a severely endangered species. And they're not like the snail darter, or the velvet-back toad. They're a big, showy animal. The son tried to sell the land, and we got it stopped legally."

"But the son wasn't happy with that," I said.

Richard smiled. "Not hardly."

"So he took you to court," I said.

"Not exactly," Richard said. "We expected him to do that. In fact, we should have known something was wrong when he didn't keep us tied up in court."

"What did he do?" I asked.

The anger was leaking away as Richard talked. He always had to work really hard to stay angry. Me, it was one of my best things. He retrieved the towel from the bed and started drying his hair while he talked.

"Goats started disappearing from a local farmer."

"Goats?" I said.

Richard peered at me through a curtain of wet hair. "Goats."

"Somebody's been reading too much 'Billy Goat Gruff,' " I said.

Richard wrapped the towel more firmly around his head and sat down on the bed. "Exactly," he said. "No one who really knew anything about trolls would have taken goats. Even the European Lesser Trolls that do hunt will take your dog before they'll take your goat."

"So it was a setup," I said.

"Yeah, but the newspapers got hold of it. We were still okay until the dogs and cats started disappearing."

"They got smarter," I said.

"They listened to Carrie's interviews where she discussed food preferences," he said.

I'd come to stand at the foot of the bed. "Why are the local cops interested in some land squabble?"

"Wait, it gets worse," he said.

I picked up the spilled comforter and sat on the edge of the bed with it bundled in my lap. "How worse?"

"A man's body was found two weeks ago. It was just one of those horrible hiking accidents at first. He fell off the mountain. It happens," Richard said.

"Having seen some of the mountains, I'm not surprised," I said.

"But somehow the body was listed as a troll kill."

I frowned at him. "It's not like a shark kill, Richard. How did they tell a troll did it?"

"A troll didn't do it," Richard said.

I nodded. "Of course not, but what was their proof, false or otherwise?"

"Carrie tried to get the coroner's report. But it was leaked to the newspapers first. The man had been beaten to death and had bites out of his body from animals. Troll bites."

I shook my head. "Anybody who dies in these mountains is going to have animal bites on the body. Trolls are known scavengers."

"Not according to Sheriff Wilkes," Richard said.

"What does the sheriff get out of this?"

"Money," Richard said.

"Do you know that for sure?" I asked.

"You mean, can I prove it?"

I nodded.

"No. Carrie's been trying to see if there's a paper trail, but so far, nothing. She's been chasing around, trying to get me out of jail for the last few days."

"Is she the same Carrie you mentioned as a girlfriend in jail?" I asked.

Richard nodded.

"Aha," I said.

"Did you just say, aha?" he asked.

"Yes, and I apologize for it, but what better way to keep Carrie from working on the mystery than to put her boyfriend in jail."

"I'm not her boyfriend anymore," he said.

I hurried past that little bit of knowledge. "Is it common knowledge that you're not an item anymore?"

"Not really."

"Then that may explain why they wanted you in jail. They framed you for rape because so far, Wilkes isn't willing to kill."

"You think that will change?" Richard asked.

I touched my swollen lip. "He's already started upping the violence level."

Richard leaned across the bed until his fingertips touched the bruises on my face. It was a tentative touch like a butterfly's wing. "Did Wilkes do this?"

My heart was suddenly beating faster. "No," I said, "Wilkes was very careful to only show up after all the bad guys needed an ambulance."

Richard smiled, fingers tracing the edge of my face, just beyond the bruises. "How many of them did you hurt?"

My pulse was beating so hard, I was afraid he could see it jumping in my throat. "Just one."

Richard scooted just a little closer to me, hand still trailing up and down my cheek. "What did you do to him?"

I didn't know whether to move away or cuddle my aching face against the cool warmth of his hand. "I broke his arm and leg at the joint."

"Why did you do that?" Richard asked.

"He was threatening Shang-Da, and he pulled a knife on me." My voice sounded breathy.

Richard leaned in close, then closer. He pulled the ridiculous towel from his head, and his thick hair fell in chilled, wet strands around his face, against my skin. His lips were so close to my mouth, I could feel his breath.

I stood, stepping back from him, the comforter still bundled in my arms. I let it fall to the floor, and we stared at each other.

"Why not, Anita? You want me. I can feel it, smell it, taste your pulse on my tongue."

"Thanks for that visual, Richard."

"You still want me after months in his bed. You still want me."

"That doesn't make it right." I said.

"Loyal to Jean-Claude now?" he asked.

"Just trying not to fuck up any worse than I already have, Richard. That's all."

"Regretting your choice?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No comment."

He stood and started towards me. I put a hand out, and he stopped. The weight of his gaze was almost touchable, as if I could feel what he was thinking, and it was personal and intimate, and things we'd never done before.

"Sheriff Wilkes says get out of Dodge by dark tomorrow, take our bodyguards with us, and he'll just forget everything. The rape charges will vanish, and you can go back to your normal life."

"I can't do that, Anita. They're talking about hunting the trolls down with guns and dogs. I'm not leaving until I know the trolls are safe."

I sighed. "School starts in less than two weeks. Are you going to stay here and lose your job?"

"Do you really think Wilkes will let it go that long?" Richard asked.

"No," I said. "I think he or some of his men will start killing people first. We need to find out why this land is so valuable."

"If it's minerals, Greene hasn't filed the report, which means he doesn't need government permission and doesn't need partners."

"What do you mean permission and partners?"

"If he'd found, say, emeralds on land that bordered the national park, then he'd have to file the claim and try to get permission to place a mine next to the park. If he'd found something that needed blasting and hard mining like maybe lead or something, then he might need partners to help him finance it. Then he'd need to file a claim to show the prospective partners."

"When did you start studying geology?" I asked.

He smiled. "We've been trying to figure out what is on the land that is worth this much trouble. Minerals seemed the logical choice."

I nodded. "Agreed, but either it's not minerals or it's something private, and he doesn't have to share that info, right?"

"Exactly."

"I need to speak with Carrie and the other biologists," I said.

"Tomorrow," he said.

"Why not tonight?"

"You said it outside: arcane werewolf shit."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"It means that we're four nights from the full moon, and you're my lupa."

"I heard you've been taking applicants for the job," I said.

He smiled, and it wasn't nearly embarrassed enough. "You may find it strange, but a lot of women find me attractive."

"You know I don't find that strange," I said.

"But you're still with Jean-Claude," he said.

I shook my head. "I'm out of here, Richard. I'll stay around and try to keep you from being killed or getting any of our pack killed, but let's drop the personal stuff."

He closed the distance between us, and I put my hands up to keep him from touching me. My hands ended up pressed to his bare chest. His heart thudded against my hands like a trapped animal.

"Don't do this, Richard."

"I tried hating you, and I can't." He put his hands over mine, holding them against the hard smoothness of his chest.

"Try harder." But it was a whisper.

He leaned over me, and I drew back. "If you don't dry your hair, you're going to have to wet it down again."

"I'll risk it." He kept moving towards me, lips half parted.

I stepped back, pulling my hands out of his, and he let me. He was strong enough that he didn't have to let me, and that still bothered me.

I backed towards the door. "Stop trying to love me, Richard."

"I have tried."

"Then stop trying and just do it." The door was pressed against my back. I grabbed the doorknob without turning around.

"You ran from me that night. You ran from me to Jean-Claude. You pulled his body around you like a shield to keep me away."

I opened the door, but he was just suddenly there, holding it half-closed. I started tugging on the door, and it was like pulling against a wall, immobile. His one hand pressed flat on the door, against the pull of my entire body, and I couldn't budge him. I hated that a lot.

"Damn it, Richard, let me go."

"I think you're more afraid of how much you love me than you are of Jean-Claude. At least with him you know you're not in love."

That was it. I wedged my body in the door enough so he couldn't close it on me, but I stopped tugging on it. I looked up at him, at every gorgeous inch of him. "I may not love Jean-Claude in the same way I love you."

He smiled.

"Don't get cocky," I said. "I do love Jean-Claude. But love isn't enough, Richard. If love were enough, I wouldn't be with Jean-Claude now. I'd be with you." I looked into his big, brown eyes and said, "But I'm not with you, and love isn't enough. Now, get away from this damned door."

He stepped back, hands at his side. "Love can be enough, Anita."

I shook my head and stepped out on the steps. The darkness was thick and touchable but not yet solid. "The last time you listened to me, you killed for the first time, and you haven't recovered from it. I should have just shot Marcus for you."

"I'd have never forgiven you for that," he said.

I gave a harsh sound that was almost a laugh. "But at least you wouldn't be hating yourself. I'd be the monster, not you."

His handsome face was suddenly very solemn; all the light fled from it. "Whatever I do, wherever I go, Anita, I am the monster. You left me because of what I am."

I stepped down onto the ground, staring up at him. There was no light inside the cabin, and Richard stood in a darker shadow than the coming night. "I thought you said I left you because I was afraid of how much I loved you."

He looked confused for a second, not knowing how to deal with his own logic thrown back into his face. He finally looked at me. "Do you know why you left me?"

I wanted to say, "Because you ate Marcus," but I didn't. I couldn't say it staring into his face, so ready to believe the worst of himself. He wasn't my problem anymore, so why did I care how hurt his ego was? Good question. I was out of good answers. Besides, maybe there was some truth to what Richard was saying. I didn't know anymore.

"I'm going to go to my cabin, now, Richard. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"Afraid?" he asked.

I shook my head and answered without turning around. "Tired." I kept walking, knowing he was watching me. The parking area was empty. I didn't know where Jamil and the others had gone, and I didn't care. I needed some alone time.

I walked through the soft, summer darkness. There was a spill of stars overhead, glittering and edged by the dark shapes of leaves. It was going to be a beautiful evening. Somewhere off in the distance, a high, clear howl rode the coming dark. Richard had said something about arcane werewolf shit. We were going to have a moonlight jamboree. God, I hated parties.

Chapter 10

I leaned against the door of my cabin, eyes closed, breathing in the cool air. I'd turned the air-conditioning on for my two guests. The coffins sat in the middle of the floor between the desk and the bed. Under the Circus of the Damned, deep underground, neither Damian nor Asher slept until full dark. I hadn't been sure if they would aboveground or not. So the air. Though, actually, it had been partly selfish. Vampires in a closed, hot space tended to smell, well, like vampires. They didn't smell like dead bodies. It was like the smell of snakes, and yet that wasn't it, either. It was a neck-ruffling smell. Thick, musky, more reptile than mammal. The smell of vampires.

How could I be sleeping with one of them? I opened my eyes. It was dark in the cabin, but there was still a faint push of illumination through the two windows. A faint touch of light against the gleaming feet of the coffins. Had that small touch of natural light been enough to keep both vampires comatose, dead in their coffins, waiting for true dark? Something had, because I knew that they were still and waiting inside the coffins. A small amount of concentration, and I knew they were still dead to the world.

I strode between the coffins into the bathroom, closed and locked the door. The darkness seemed too solid. I turned on the light. It was white and harsh after the darkness. I was left blinking in the brightness.

Getting a good look at myself in the mirror was almost startling. I hadn't really seen the bruises yet. The corner of my left eye was a wonderful shade of purple black, swollen, puffy. Seeing it made it hurt worse, like seeing blood from a cut that doesn't sting until you notice it.

My left cheek was a wonderful shade of greenish brown. It was that sickly green that usually takes days to accomplish. My lower lip was puffy. You could still see the edge of darkened skin where it had bled. I ran my tongue inside my mouth and could feel the ridge where my cheek had been forced against my teeth, but it was healed. I stared into the mirror and realized as sore and awful as it looked, it wasn't as bad as it should have been.

It took me a few moments of staring to figure it out. When I did finally realize what was happening, a rush of fear ran through my body from my toes to the top of my head. I felt almost faint.

I was healing. I was healing days worth of injury in only hours. At this rate, the bruises would be almost gone by tomorrow. I should have been wearing the fight marks for days, a week at least. What the hell was happening to me?

I felt Damian wake in his coffin. I felt it like a stab through my body. It staggered me against the sink. I knew he was hungry, and I knew that he sensed me near at hand. I was Jean-Claude's human servant, bound by marks that only death would break. But Damian was mine. I'd raised him and another vampire, Willie McCoy, more than once. I'd called them from their coffins during daylight hours, safely underground, but the sun had been burning bright when I did it. One necromancer had said it made perfect sense. We could only raise zombies after the souls had fled the bodies, so I could only raise vamps when their souls had fled for the day.

I wasn't even going to debate the vampires and soul issue. My life was complicated enough without religious discussions. I know, I know, I was just delaying the inevitable. If I stayed with Jean-Claude, I was going to have to face the whole issue. No hiding. But not tonight.

Raising Damian had forged some kind of link between us. I didn't understand it and didn't have anyone to ask advice of. I was the first necromancer in several hundred years that could raise vampires like zombies. It scared me. It scared Damian more. Frankly, I didn't blame him.

Was Asher awake, too? I concentrated on him, sent that power, magic, whatever the hell it was, outward. It brushed him, and he felt me. He was awake and aware of me.

Asher was a master vampire. Not as powerful as Jean-Claude, but a master, nonetheless. That gave him certain abilities that Damian, who was by far the elder of the two, would never have. Without the link between us, Damian wouldn't have sensed me searching for him.

I wanted a few minutes to be alone and think, and I wasn't going to get it. I didn't make them call for me. I opened the door and stood framed in the light, blinking out into the thick darkness.

The vampires stood like pale shadows in the gloom. I hit the overhead light. Asher threw his hand up to protect his eyes from the light, but Damian just blinked at me. I wanted them to cower back from the light. I wanted them to look monstrous, but they didn't.

Damian was a green-eyed redhead, but that didn't really cover it. His hair fell like a red curtain around his upper body, the hair so red it looked like spilled blood against the green silk of his shirt. The shirt was a paler green than his eyes. They were like liquid fire, if fire could burn green. It wasn't vampire powers that made his eyes gleam. It was natural color, as if his mother had fooled around with a cat.

Asher was a blue-eyed blond, but again, that description didn't do him justice. The waves of his shoulder-length hair were golden. I don't mean blond, I mean gold. His hair was almost metallic in its glittering brilliance. His eyes were a blue so pale, they were almost white, like the eyes of a husky.

He was wearing a white dress shirt, untucked over chocolate brown dress pants. Leather loafers, no socks, completed his clothes. I'd spent too much time around Jean-Claude to call it an outfit.

If you could stop staring at the eyes and hair long enough to see their faces, Asher was the handsomer of the two. Damian was handsome, but there was a length of jaw, a less perfect slope to the nose—small imperfections that might go unnoticed if you hadn't had Asher for comparison. Asher was beautifully handsome like a medieval cherub. Half of him, anyway.

Half of Asher's face was the beauty that drew a master vampire to him centuries ago. The other half was covered in scars. Holy water scars. The scars started about an inch from the midline of his face so his eyes, nose, and those full, perfect lips remained untouched, but the rest was like melted wax. His neck was pale and perfect, but I knew that the scars continued at his shoulders.

His upper body was worse than the face, the scars rough and pitted. But like the face, only half of his body was scarred. The other half was still lovely.

I knew that the scars touched his upper thigh, but I had never seen him completely nude. I had to take his word that the scars covered the space between. It had been implied though never stated that he was still capable of sex but was scarred. I didn't know for sure, and I didn't want to know.

"Where are your bodyguards?" Asher asked.

"My bodyguards? You mean Jason and the Furballs?"

Asher nodded. His golden hair fell forward over the scarred side of his face. It was an old habit. The hair hid the scars—or almost hid the scars. He could use the shadows the same way. He always seemed to know just where the light would hit him. Centuries of practice.

"I don't know where they are," I said. "I just finished talking to Richard. I guess they thought we needed privacy."

"Did you need the privacy?" Asher asked. He looked straight at me, using the scars and beauty for a double effect. He didn't look happy for some reason.

"It's none of your damn business," I said.

Damian sat at the foot of the carefully made bed. He smoothed pale, long-fingered hands across the blue coverlet. "Not in this bed, you didn't," he said.

I came to stand beside the bed and stare down at him. "If one more vampire or were-anything tells me they can smell sex, I am going to scream."

Damian didn't smile. He'd never been a real happy camper, but lately was even more serious than usual. He just sat there, looking up at me. Jean-Claude or even Asher would have smiled, teased. Damian just looked at me with eyes that held sorrow the way others' held laughter.

I reached out to touch his shoulder and had to sweep back a lock of his hair to reach it. He jerked back from my touch as if it had hurt. He pushed to his feet and went to stand near the door.

I was left with my hand out, puzzled. "What's wrong with you, Damian?"

Asher came to stand beside me. He rested his hands lightly on my shoulders. "You are quite right, Anita. What you do with Monsieur Zeeman is none of my business."

I slid my hands over his, sliding my fingers to intertwine with his. I remembered the feel of his cool skin against mine. I leaned my back against him, pulling his arms around me, and I wasn't tall enough. It wasn't my memory. It was Jean-Claude's. Asher and he had been companions for over twenty years, once upon a time.

I sighed and started to pull away.

Asher leaned his chin on the top of my head. "You need someone's arms that you don't feel threatened by."

I leaned against him, eyes closed, and for just a moment let him hold me. "The only reason this feels so good is that I'm remembering someone else's pleasure."

Asher gently kissed the top of my head. "Because you see me through the nostalgia of Jean-Claude's memories, you are the only woman in over two hundred years who doesn't treat me like a circus freak."

I leaned my face against the bend of his arm. "You are devastatingly handsome, Asher."

He smoothed the hair from my bruised cheek. "To you, perhaps." He leaned over me and laid the softest of kisses on my cheek.

I pulled away from him, gently, almost reluctantly. What I remembered of Asher was simpler than anything I was trying to pull off in this lifetime.

Asher didn't try to hold me. "If you were not already in love with two other men, the way you look at me might be enough."

I sighed. "I'm sorry, Asher I shouldn't touch you like that. It's just . . ." I didn't know how to put it into words.

"You treat me like an old lover," Asher said. "You forget and touch me as if you'd touched me before when it is always the first time. Do not apologize for that, Anita. I enjoy it. No one else will touch me so freely."

"Jean-Claude will," I said. "These are his memories."

Asher smiled and it was almost sorrowful. "He is loyal to you and to Monsieur Zeeman."

"He's turned you down?" I asked and wished I hadn't.

Asher smile brightened, then dimmed. "If you would not share him with another woman, would you truly share him with another man?"

I thought about that for a second or two. "Well, no." I frowned up at him. "Why do I feel like apologizing for that?"

"Because you share with Jean-Claude and myself the memories of Julianna and the two of us. We were a very happy ménage à trois for almost longer than you have been alive."

Julianna had been Asher's human servant. She'd ended up burned as a witch by the same people that had scarred Asher. Jean-Claude couldn't save them both. I wasn't sure that either of them had truly forgiven Jean-Claude for this oversight.

Damian said, "If I'm not interrupting, I need to feed." He was standing by the door, hugging himself as if he were cold.

"You want me to open the door and yell dinner?" I asked.

"I want permission to go feed," he said.

I frowned at the phrasing but said, "Go find one of our walking donors and help yourself. Just our people, though. We can't hunt here."

Damian nodded, standing up straighter as if he'd been hunched in upon himself. I could feel that he was hungry, but it wasn't hunger that made him huddle. "I will not hunt."

"Good," I said.

He hesitated, with his hand on the doorknob. His back was to me, but his voice came low, "May I go and feed?"

I glanced at Asher. "Is he talking to you?"

Asher shook his head. "I think not."

"Sure, help yourself."

Damian opened the door and slipped outside. He left the door slightly ajar.

"What is his problem lately?" I asked.

"I think he must answer that question," Asher said.

I turned and looked at him. "Does that mean you can't answer the question or won't answer it?"

Asher smiled and his face moved freely, even the scarred skin. He was having consultations with a plastic surgeon in Saint Louis. No one had ever tried to repair holy water damage on vamps, so they didn't know if it would work, but the doctors were hopeful. Hopeful but cautious. The first operation was still months away.

"It means, Anita, that some fears are very personal."

"Are you saying Damian's afraid of me?" I didn't try to keep the astonishment out of my voice.

"I am saying that you must speak to him directly if you want answers."

I sighed. "Great, just what I need. Another complicated male in my life."

Asher laughed, and it slid along my bare arms like a touch, raising gooseflesh. The only other vampire that could do that to me was Jean-Claude.

"Stop that," I said.

He gave a low, sweeping bow. "My most sincere apologies."

"Bullshit," I said. "Go get dinner. I think the werewolves are planning some sort of party or ceremony."

"You need one of us with you at all times, Anita."

"I heard Jean-Claude's ultimatum." I looked at him and couldn't keep the surprise off my face. "You think he'd really kill you if something happened to me?"

Asher just looked at me with his pale, pale eyes. "Your life means more to him than mine does, Anita. If it did not, he would be in my bed and not yours."

He had a point, but . . . "It would kill something inside of him to kill you personally."

"But he would do it," Asher said.

"Why? Because he said he'd do it?"

"No, because he would always wonder if I allowed you to die as revenge for his failure to protect Julianna."

Oh. I opened my mouth to say more, and the phone rang. Daniel's voice came low and panicked, backed by country music.

"Anita, we're out at the Happy Cowboy on the main highway. Can you come down?"

"What's wrong, Daniel?"

"Mom's tracked down the woman who accused Richard. She's determined to make her stop lying."

"Are they fighting yet?" I asked.

"Yelling."

"You outweigh her by over a hundred pounds, Daniel. Just toss her over your shoulder and get her out of there. She'll only make things worse."

"She's my mother. I can't do that."

"Shit," I said.

Asher asked, "What has happened?"

I shook my head. "I'll be there, Daniel, but you're being a wimp."

"I'd rather take on every guy in the bar than my mother," he said.

"If she makes a big enough scene, you may get your chance." I hung up. "I cannot believe this."

"What?" Asher asked again.

I explained as quickly as I could. Daniel and Mrs. Zeeman were staying at a nearby motel. Richard hadn't wanted them at the cabins with so many shapeshifters running around. Now I wished we'd kept them closer to home.

It would have been nice to have changed out of the blood-splattered blouse, but we were out of time. No rest for the wicked.

The real trick was what to do with Richard. He'd want to come along, and I didn't want him anywhere near Miss Betty Schaffer.

Legally, he could enter the bar and sit down beside her. There was no court order to stay away. But if the sheriff realized we weren't getting out of town, he'd look for any excuse to get Richard back behind bars. I didn't think Richard would have nearly as pleasant a second visit as he had a first. Their ambush today had backfired. They'd be frustrated and scared. They'd hurt Richard this time. Hell, they might hurt his mother. Charlotte Zeeman and I were going to have to have a little talk. Come to think of it, I was with Daniel. I'd have rather faced a full-blown bar fight than have a talk with his mother. At least she'd never be my mother-in-law. If I was going to have to punch her out tonight, that was almost comforting.

Chapter 11

Richard and I compromised. He came along and swore to stay in the car. I brought along Shang-Da, Jamil, and Jason to make sure he stayed in the car, though if push came to shove, I wasn't sure they'd listen to me over Richard, not even if it was for his own good. It was the best I could do. Some nights that has to be enough, because that's all you've got.

The Happy Cowboy, which was one of the worst names for a bar I'd ever heard, was on the main highway. It was a two-story building that was supposed to look like a log cabin and managed not to. Maybe it was the neon horse with its cowboy rider on the sign. The lights gave the illusion that the horse was going up and down, along with the cowboy's arm and hat. He didn't look particularly happy riding the neon horse, but then maybe that was just me. I certainly wasn't happy to be here.

Richard had driven his four-by-four. He'd finally gotten around to blow-drying his hair. It was a thick, wavy foam around his face and shoulders. It looked so soft, you wanted to plunge your hands into it. Or again, maybe that was just me. He'd added a plain green T-shirt, tucked into his jeans, and white jogging shoes.

Jamil and Shang-Da were riding shotgun in the middle seat. Jamil was still wearing his cut-off smiley T-shirt, but Shang-Da had changed. He was all in black from his soft leather loafers to his belted dress slacks, to the silk T-shirt and tailor cut jacket. His short back hair was gelled into a crop of spikes on top of his head. He looked relaxed and at home in the clothes and the hair. He would also look utterly out of place at the Happy Cowboy. Of course, being over six feet tall and Chinese put him behind the game when it came to blending in here. Maybe he, like Jamil, was tired of trying to pass.

That was why Jason, still in his grown-up blue suit, was with us. Nathaniel had wanted to come, but he wasn't old enough to go into a bar. I didn't know how good Zane was in a stress situation yet, and Cherry always made me feel vaguely protective, so Jason it was.

"If you're not out in fifteen minutes, we're coming in," Richard said.

"Thirty minutes," I said. I did not want Richard near Ms. Betty Schaffer.

"Fifteen," he said, voice very quiet, very low, very serious. I knew that tone of voice. I'd gotten all the compromise I was going to get.

"Fine, but remember that if you go to jail tonight, your mom may go with you."

His eyes widened. "What are you talking about?"

"What would Charlotte do if she saw her little boy being dragged away to jail?"

He thought about that for a second, then bowed his head. He laid his forehead on the steering wheel. "She'd put up a fight for me."

"Exactly," I said.

He raised his face and looked at me. "I'll behave for her sake."

I smiled. "I knew it wasn't for mine." I got out of the car before he could answer that one.

Jason settled into step beside me. He'd straightened his tie and buttoned the first button on the jacket. He'd also tried to slick back his baby-fine hair, but it escaped all efforts in tiny wisps. His hair was very straight and very fine, and it would have looked better either much shorter or much longer. But hey, it wasn't my hair.

We were both carded at the door by a muscular guy in a dark blue T-shirt. The crowd was divided almost down the middle. There was the tight jeans, cowboy boots crowd, and the short skirts, business jackets crowd. There was some intermingling. Some of the women in cowboy boots had short skirts. Some of the business jackets were wearing jeans. It was the only alcohol for a twenty-mile radius, and it served food. Where else were you going to go on a Friday night? I'd have rather gone for a moonlit walk, but I didn't drink. Come to think of it, I didn't dance, either, though Jean-Claude was working on both. Corruption at every turn.

There was a live band playing country music so loudly it might as well have been hard rock. A haze of cigarette smoke floated over everything like a late-night fog. The entrance was on a little raised platform so you could look around before plunging into the sea of bodies. Charlotte is actually an inch or two shorter than I am, so I didn't bother scanning for her. I looked for Daniel.

How many six-foot-tall, tanned guys with wavy, shoulder-length hair could there be? More than you'd think.

I finally spotted him near the bar because he was waving to me. He'd also tied his long hair back in a very tight ponytail, which was why scanning for the hair hadn't worked. His hair was nearly identical to Richard's except it was a more solid brown, a rich chestnut. His skin was the same tanned shade as his brother's. The same high, sculpted cheekbones, solid brown eyes, even the dimple in the chin. Richard was a little broader through the shoulders and chest, just physically more imposing, but other than that, the family resemblance was almost scary. All the brothers looked like that. The two oldest had cut their hair, one of them was almost a blond, and the father was going a little grey, but the five Zeeman men in one room was a testosterone treat.

And the matriarch of this pile of masculine pulchritude was standing about six feet from her son. Charlotte Zeeman had short blond hair that framed a face that looked at least ten years younger than I knew she was. She was wearing a butter yellow suit jacket over dress slacks. She was also poking her finger into the chest of a tall blond woman.

The second woman had a mane of curled blond hair, but I was betting that neither the color nor the curl were real. It had to be Betty Schaffer, and the name didn't suit her. She looked like someone named Farrah or Tiffany.

I waded into the crowd with Jason behind me. The crowd was thick enough that I stopped saying excuse me about halfway across the room and just started pushing.

A tall man in a plaid work shirt stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. "Can I buy you a drink, little lady?"

I reached back and got Jason's hand. I raised it where it was visible. "Taken. Sorry." There was more than one reason I'd wanted to bring Jason with me to a bar on a Friday night.

He stared down at Jason, way down, making a show of how very tall he was. "Don't you want something a little bigger?"

"I like them small," I said, my face very serious. "It makes oral sex easier."

We left him speechless. Jason was laughing so hard, he could barely keep his feet. I pulled him through the crowd by the hand. Holding his hand seemed to be hint enough for the rest of the cruising males.

The crowd was clearing around the bar. People had moved back to form a semicircle around Charlotte, Betty, and Daniel. He had stepped up behind his mother, laying a hand on either shoulder trying to pull her back. She shrugged him off rather violently and ignored him. He let her do it.

Charlotte got up in the woman's face. I was close enough to catch a word or two above the band, "Liar . . . whore . . . my son . . . rapist . . ." To hear even that much, Charlotte was screaming at the woman.

Betty was tall, but the spike-heeled boots put her at six feet. The jeans were painted on, the blouse was midriff, and there was no bra. She had small enough breasts that she could get away with it, but it was still noticeable and

meant to be. She looked like a cowboy hooker. Richard had dated her. It made me think worse of him.

Two large guys wearing T-shirts that matched the guy who had carded us at the door were at the edge of the crowd. I think they were sort of puzzled by Charlotte. She was tiny and female and hadn't hit anyone yet. She also looked older than the general crowd, though not really like anyone's mother.

Betty had finally had enough. She was screaming back words like, "He did, rapist, bastard."

I let go of Jason's hand and stepped up beside them. They both looked at me. Charlotte was the most startled. Her large, honey-brown eyes went wide. She said, "Anita," as if no one had told her I was in town.

I smiled. "Hi, Charlotte. Can we talk outside?" I had to put my face nearly next to hers to be heard.

She shook her head. "This is the whore that's lied about Richard."

I nodded. "I know. Let's take it outside, though."

Charlotte shook her head again. "I am not leaving until she tells the truth. Richard did not rape her."

We were yelling, with our faces almost touching, to be heard. "Of course, he didn't," I said. "Water is wet, the sky is blue, and Richard isn't a rapist."

Charlotte stared at me. "You believe him."

I nodded. "I got him out on bail. He's waiting to see you outside."

Her eyes went even wider, then she smiled, and it was beautiful. It was one of those smiles that made you feel warm down to your toes. Charlotte was like that. When she was happy, everyone around her was happy. When she wasn't happy . . . well, that spilled over, too.

She yelled in my ear, "Let's go see Richard."

I turned to go through the crowd and heard a gasp. I turned to see Betty Schaffer wearing the dripping remnants of a beer. Betty slapped Charlotte. Charlotte returned the favor but with a closed fist.

Betty was suddenly on her butt in the floor, blinking up at us.

The bouncers moved in, as Charlotte moved in to finish the job. I threw Charlotte over my shoulder. She weighed more than she looked like she did, and she was struggling. Unlike most women, she was good at struggling. I didn't want to hurt Charlotte, but she wasn't returning the favor. She kicked me in the knee and I dumped her onto the floor hard.

She lay there for a second, breath knocked out of her, staring up at me. Daniel moved forward to help her up, and I stopped him with a hand on his chest. "No."

The band had fallen silent with a last twangy guitar string. Into the sudden silence, my voice sounded loud, "You can walk out of here on your own, or you can be carried out unconscious, Charlotte. Your choice, but you are leaving."

I went down on one knee, carefully, because Charlotte didn't fight like a girl. I lowered my voice for her ears alone. "Richard will come in here in just a few minutes to see what's wrong. If he gets near her again, the local cops will revoke his bail and lock him up again." It was only partially true. Legally, he

had every right to enter the bar, but I was betting that Charlotte didn't know that. Most law-abiding citizens wouldn't have.

Charlotte looked at me for a second longer, then offered me a hand. I helped her stand, still cautious. She had a hell of a temper once it got started. Admittedly, it took a lot to get her this mad, but once she reached it, it was every man for himself.

She let me help her to her feet without trying to slug me. An improvement. We made our way through the crowd with Daniel and Jason trailing behind us. No one crowded us as we went for the door. They stared, but didn't crowd.

The bouncer at the door said, "She doesn't come back in here."

Charlotte opened her mouth to say something, and I gripped her shoulder. "Don't worry. She won't."

He looked at Charlotte but nodded.

I let her get about three good steps ahead of me as we reached the parking lot. Call it an instinct. She whirled, and I think would have hit me, but I was out of reach. She stared at me with those big honey-brown eyes, made somehow paler by the halogen lamps. "Don't you ever lay hands on me again," she said.

"Behave like Richard's mother and not his outraged girlfriend, and I won't."

"How dare you!" she said. She moved closer. I moved away. I didn't really want to have a fistfight in the parking lot of a bar with Richard's mother.

"If anyone should be trying to beat the shit out of Ms. Peroxide Blond, it should be me."

That stopped her cold. She stood straight and looked at me. I could almost see her sanity returning. "But you aren't dating him anymore. Why should you care?"

"That is the sixty-four thousand dollar question, isn't it?" I said.

Charlotte smiled suddenly. "I knew you couldn't resist my boy. No one could."

"If he keeps dating everything in sight, I might."

She frowned. "I can't believe he ever dated that thing," she said.

We both turned and watched Richard walk towards us. There were nearly identical looks on our faces. We disapproved of Ms. Schaffer—a lot.

Her first words were, "I cannot believe you dated that woman. She is a whore."

Richard looked embarrassed, more than I'd gotten from him. "I know what she is."

"Did you have sex with her?"

"Mother!"

"Don't you *mother* me, Richard Alaric Zeeman."

"Alaric," I said.

Richard spared me a frown, then turned back to his mother. "No, I never slept with Betty."

He was saying he'd never had intercourse with her. Charlotte would take it to mean that no sex at all had happened, just like I had. I remembered what

Jamil had said about alternatives, but I kept quiet. I didn't want to upset Charlotte, and I didn't want to know.

"Well, at least that shows better sense," Charlotte said. She walked up to him and smoothed the front of his T-shirt, then bowed her head, and I realized she was crying.

I couldn't have been more surprised if she'd bitten him, maybe less.

Richard's entire face crumpled into helpless lines. He looked at me as if for help, and I backed up. I shook my head. I was no better around crying women than he was, maybe less.

He hugged her to him. I heard her murmur, "I was so worried about you in that awful jail."

I backed up out of earshot, and Daniel joined me. He didn't seem eager to join them, either. Of course, Charlotte didn't have to cry to unman Daniel.

"Thanks, Anita," he said.

I looked up at him. He was wearing a red tank top that was almost a twin of one Richard had. For all I knew, it was the same one. He looked tanned and handsome and very grown-up. "You're assertive around everyone but your parents. Why is that?"

He shrugged. "Isn't everyone like that?"

I shook my head. "No."

Jason moved up beside us. He echoed me: "No." Then he laughed. "Of course, my mother would never have gotten into a fight in a bar, no matter what I did. She's much too . . . decorous."

"Decorous," I said.

"My last roommate had a word-a-day calendar," Jason said.

"You've been reading again," I said.

He hung his head, looking abashed, then gave me rolled eyes and a grin. It was such a mix of shame and utter cuteness that I laughed. "I can't donate blood and have sex twenty-four hours a day. There's no television at the Circus of the Damned."

"If there was?" I asked.

"I'd still read, but don't tell anyone."

I put an arm around his shoulders. "Your secret is safe with me."

Daniel put his arm around Jason from the other side and said, "Won't breathe a word of it."

We walked towards the four-by-four, arm in arm. "If Anita was in the middle, this would be perfect," Jason said.

Daniel just stopped in his tracks, staring at Jason. I pulled away from both of them. "You just don't know when to stop, do you, Jason?"

He shook his head. "No."

Richard walked over to us. He sent Daniel to their mother, and Daniel didn't argue with the order. He sent Jason on to the car, and Jason didn't argue. I stood looking up at his suddenly serious face, wondered what my orders were going to be, and bet I would argue with them.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I'll have to go with Daniel and my mother to calm her."

"I hear a *but* coming," I said.

He smiled. "*But* there's a ceremony to meet my lupa tonight. It's customary before two packs share a full moon that they be formally introduced."

"How formally?" I asked. "I didn't pack for formal."

The smile widened into that wondrous smile that was his mother's. It had that same utter good humor to it. Contagious. "I don't mean that kind of formal, Anita. I mean there are rites to observe."

"Rites, as in what?" I asked. I sounded suspicious, even to me.

He hugged me, spontaneously, not girlfriend-boyfriend, but just a happy-to-see-you hug. "I have missed you, Anita."

I pushed away from him. "I make a suspicious comment and you say you've missed me. I don't get that, Richard."

"I love all of you, Anita, even the suspicious parts."

I shook my head. "Stick to business, Richard. What rites?"

The smile faded, the good humor dying from his eyes. He looked suddenly sad and I wanted to take it back, to have him smile at me again. But I didn't. We weren't an item anymore, and he'd been dating little Miss Schaffer, the cowgirl hooker. I didn't understand that at all. She puzzled me even more than Lucy.

"I have to go with my mother for a while. Jamil and Shang-Da can explain what you have to do as my lupa tonight."

I shook my head. "One of the bodyguards stays with you, Richard. I don't care which one it is, but you don't go out there alone."

"Mom will not understand a chaperone that isn't family," Richard said.

"Don't go all momma's boy on me, Richard. I've had enough of that from Daniel for one night. Explain it any way you like, but you aren't leaving here without backup."

He stared down at me, and his handsome face was serious, arrogant. "I am Ulfric, Anita. Not you."

"Yeah, you're Ulfric, Richard. You're in charge, fine, then do a good job of it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that if the bad guys find you out alone tonight, they might not wait to find out if you're leaving tomorrow. One of them might get a little eager and try to hurt you."

"If it's not silver bullets, they can't kill me."

"And how are you going to explain to your mother that you survived a shotgun blast to the chest?" I asked.

He glanced back at her and Daniel. "You cut right to the bone, don't you," he said.

"It saves time," I said.

He turned back to me. Anger had darkened his eyes, thinned out his face. "I love you, Anita, but sometimes I don't like you very much."

"It's not me you don't like, Richard, not on this issue. You're terrified that if Mommy Dearest finds out you're a shapeshifter, she'll think you're a monster."

"Don't call her that."

"Sorry," I said. "But it's still the truth. I think you're underrating Charlotte. You're her son, and she loves you."

He shook his head. "I don't want her to know."

"Fine, but choose a bodyguard. Why not tell your mom that he's backup in case the police try to make trouble? It's the truth."

"As far as it goes," Richard said.

"The best lies are always at least partially true, Richard."

"You're much better at lying than I am," he said. I looked for anger in the words, but there was nothing. It was just a statement of fact that left his eyes empty and sad.

I was tired of apologizing, so I didn't. "Do you want to take their car and I can drive the four-by-four back to the cabins?"

He nodded. "I'll take Shang-Da with me. He doesn't like you much."

"I thought he might have warmed up to me since the fight this afternoon," I said.

"He still thinks you betrayed me," Richard said.

I didn't even try to touch that one. "Fine, I'll take Jason and Jamil with me. They can give me lessons in werewolf etiquette."

"Jason won't be much help. He's never been part of a healthy pack."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"It means that because our old lupa was such a sadistic bitch, we were all afraid of each other. A normal pack is much more touchy-feely, more casual with each other."

"How touchy?" I asked.

He smiled, almost sadly. "Talk to Jamil. He'll teach you and Jason, too." He seemed to think about that.

"What about the wereleopards, and the vampires?"

"I already asked Verne. They are our guests tonight."

"One big happy family," I said.

Richard looked at me. It was a long, searching look. It took a lot to meet his eyes and not to flinch. "It could be, Anita, it really could be." With that, he turned and walked to his mother and brother.

I watched him go and wasn't sure what to make of his last comment. I used to wonder why he put up with me, but after meeting his mother, I knew. It had taken me three Sunday dinners to realize why Charlotte and I were either in perfect agreement or on opposite ends of any discussion. We were too much alike. A family, like a pack, can only have so many alphas or it tears itself apart. Only Richard's brother, Glenn, is currently married, and his wife and Charlotte butt heads constantly. Aaron is a widower. I'm told the fights between Charlotte and Aaron's deceased wife were legendary. They'd all gone out and married someone like mom. Glenn's wife, though full-blooded Navajo, was still petite, and tough. The Zeeman men seemed to have a weakness for small and tough.

Beverly, as the only girl and the eldest, was wonderfully dominant. She and Charlotte had almost not survived her teenage years, according to Glenn

and Aaron. Bev had settled down, gone to college, married, and was pregnant with her fifth child. She had four boys and was trying one last time for a girl.

I'd paid attention to Richard's family because I'd thought they were going to be my in-laws. That didn't seem likely to happen now. Oh, well. I had enough problems with my own family. Who needed a second one?

Chapter 12

Everyone was in my room getting a lesson in werewolf etiquette. I sat on the foot of the bed with Cherry perched beside me. She'd washed off the black makeup, and her face was pale and young with a dusting of golden freckles across her cheeks. I knew she was my age, twenty-five, but without makeup, she looked younger. Like her own younger more innocent sister. The new clothes added to the illusion. She'd changed into a faded pair of jeans and an oversized T-shirt. Clothes you wouldn't mind shapechanging in. This close to the full moon, sometimes you got carried away and changed early. So I'm told. So I've seen.

Zane leaned against the far wall, wearing nothing but a pair of jeans with the knees worn away to holes. He'd kept the nipple ring. It looked very noticeable against his bare chest.

Jason was wearing shorts that had started life as a pair of jeans. The edges were ragged with strings like he'd picked at them. The only other thing he was wearing was an older pair of jogging shoes, no socks. He lay on his stomach, head pointed towards us, with one of my pillows bundled under his chin, knees bent, feet kicking slowly in the air while he listened to Jamil.

Jamil paced back and forth in front of us in his little smiley shirt. He'd kicked his shoes off by the door and paced on smooth, dark feet. Even just walking he gave off an energy like a low-level current. The moon was nearly full, and energy was easy to come by.

We'd tried to include Nathaniel in the lecture, but we couldn't find him. I didn't like that much. I'd been ready to man a full-scale search, but Zane had seen him going off with one of the female werewolves. The implication seemed to be that they'd gone off for a little one on one. So, no search, but I wasn't happy about it. I wasn't even sure exactly why I wasn't happy about it, but I wasn't.

Nathaniel needed to know some rudimentary greetings because he was mine. No one had ever met a lupa that was also Nimir-ra for a leopard pard, but Verne had decided the leopards would be included because they were mine. So they needed the little greetings lecture. I'd sent Damian and Asher out to find Nathaniel. No one in Verne's pack expected the vampires to be part of the

official greeting. In fact, it had been requested that they not touch any of the werewolves unless offered. Strongly requested.

So it was just the four of us watching Jamil pace. He finally stopped in front of me. "Stand up."

It sounded far too much like an order for my taste, but I stood, looking up at him.

"Richard says you have a degree in biology."

Not the opening I was expecting, but I nodded. "Preternatural biology, yeah."

"How much do you know about natural wolves?"

"I've been reading Mech," I said.

Jamil's eyes widened just a bit. "L. David Mech?"

"Yeah, you seem surprised. He is one of the leading authorities on wolf behavior."

"Why have you been reading him?" Jamil asked.

I shrugged. "I'm lupa of a werewolf pack, but I'm not a werewolf. There are no good books on werewolves, so the best I could do was research real wolves."

"What else have you read?" he asked.

"*Of Wolves and Men*, by Barry Holstun Lopez. A few other books, but those were the two best I've found."

Jamil smiled, a quick baring of teeth. "You have just made my job a lot easier."

I frowned up at him.

"The formal greeting is like one friendly wolf greeting another. The point is to get the nose back here," he touched the hair behind my ear, gently.

"Do you rub the cheek along the other person's cheek like a real wolf would do? I mean in human form, you don't have any glands on the cheek to help you scent mark another wolf."

He looked down at me, solemn almost, nodding. "Yes, you do rub cheeks even in human form. Then you bury your nose in the hair behind the ear."

"How big is Verne's pack?" I asked.

"Fifty-two wolves," Jamil said.

I raised eyebrows at him. "Please tell me that I don't have to rub faces with every single one of them."

Jamil smiled, but it left his eyes serious. He was thinking something. I wanted to know what it was. "Not with all of them, just the alphas."

"How many?"

"Nine," he said.

"Doable, I guess." I looked up into his thoughtful face and just asked, "What are you thinking so hard about, Jamil?"

He blinked at me. "What—"

"Don't tell me it's nothing. You went all solemn and thoughtful about five minutes ago. What gives?"

He stared down at me. The concentration in his dark eyes was almost touchable. "I'm impressed that you bothered to research natural wolves."

"That's the third time you've used the term *natural wolves*. I've never heard it before."

Jason rolled off the bed to his feet. "We are real wolves part of the time. We're just not natural."

I looked to Jamil, and he nodded.

"So calling you guys real wolves is an insult?"

"Yes," Jamil said.

"Anything else to watch for?" I asked.

Jamil looked at Jason. They exchanged a look that made me feel excluded. Like there was some unpleasant surprise coming and no one was telling me.

"What?" I said.

"Let's just do the greeting," Jamil said.

"What are you guys hiding from me?"

Jason laughed. "Just tell her."

A low growl trickled from Jamil's human throat. The sound alone raised the hair on my arms. "I am Sköll, and you have no name among the lukoi. Your voice is only the wind outside our cave."

Jason took a few steps closer. "The trees themselves bow before the wind," he said. It sounded way too formal for Jason.

"Good," Jamil said, "you do know some lukoi phrases."

"We were afraid to touch each other," Jason said, "not to talk to each other."

Zane pushed away from the wall, moving between them, standing close to me. "The moon is rising. Time is passing."

I frowned at all of them. "I feel like you're speaking in code and I don't know how to crack it."

"Apparently, we have some phrases in common," Jamil said, "between the lukoi and the pard."

"Great, the wolves and the leopards share some common ground. Now what?"

"Greet me," Jamil said.

"Uh-uh," I said, "I'm lupa. You're just the Sköll, the muscle. I outrank you, so you offer me your face and throat first."

"She is your lupa, and our Nimir-ra, which is an equivalent rank to your Ulfric, she has the right to ask," Zane said.

Jamil growled at him.

Zane moved behind me, as if using me for a shield. It would have worked better if he hadn't been nearly ten inches taller than me.

"She refuses you," Jamil said. "You stand alone before me."

"No way," I said. "Zane is mine. You aren't going to use him for some macho dominant crap."

Jamil shook his head. "He moved into you, but you didn't touch him."

I frowned up at him. "So?"

Jamil sighed. "All your reading has told you nothing about us."

"Then explain it to me," I said.

Jason said, "When Zane moved in close to you, he was asking for your protection, but you didn't touch him. That's seen as a rejection of his petition for protection."

Cherry was still sitting very still on the bed, hands clasped in her lap. "It's one of the rules that works the same for the wolves and for us."

I glanced behind me at them. "How do the two of you know all this?"

"With Raina and Marcus in charge, we all got to do a lot of petitioning for protection," Jason said.

"Gabriel spent a lot of time with Raina," Cherry said. "We, the wereleopards, got to spend a lot of time with the wolves."

"So when Zane moved up close, what was I supposed to do?"

"Do you want to protect him against me?" Jamil said.

I stared up at that tall, muscular body. Even if he hadn't been a lycanthrope, he'd have scared me in a fair fight. Of course, nature had made sure there would be no fair fight. Jamil outweighed me by a hundred pounds or more. His reach was twice mine. His upper body strength . . . well, enough said. There was no such thing as a fair fight between the two of us. That was why I felt perfectly comfortable using weapons.

"Yeah," I said, "I want to protect Zane against you. If that's what it takes."

"Then touch him," Jamil said.

I frowned again. "Can you be a little more specific?"

"The touch is what's important," Jamil said, "not where or how."

Zane was standing at my back. I moved backwards until my back touched his body. Our bodies made a nice solid line. "Enough?" I asked.

Jamil shook his head. "For God's sake, just touch him." He motioned to Jason. "Ask for my protection."

Jason came to his side with a smile. He stood very close but was careful not to touch. Jamil put an arm across his shoulders, obviously protective, almost a hug. "There, that's it."

"Does it have to be just like that, or can I touch him anywhere that's noticeable?"

Jamil made a small sound between an umph and a growl. "You are making this too complicated."

"No," I said, "you are. Just answer the question."

"No, it doesn't have to be just like this, but it's best if you get in the habit of making the offer look normal to people."

"Why?" I asked.

"What if Zane were running from me in public? He sees you through the crowd, comes up to you. All you have to do is pretend to hug him, or even kiss him. I know you've given him your protection and none of the humans around us know anything is wrong."

I wasn't sure how I felt about not being included with the other humans, but I let it go. I drew Zane out from behind me with a hand around his waist. I'd have been more comfortable if he'd been wearing a shirt, but hey, that was my hang-up, not his. I made it my left arm, leaving my right free. I also moved back enough so that my gun wasn't pressed up against his body. Having my

arm around Zane's waist, standing a little apart, made the gun under my arm very obvious. There were a lot of different ways to make threats. "Happy?" I asked.

Jamil nodded once very curtly.

Jason stepped away from him, closer to Zane and me.

"Jamil's just mad that Zane told you he had to do a submissive greeting."

"And you've reminded her," Jamil said.

"Ooh," Jason said, "I'm so scared."

A roil of power prickled through the room. I watched Jamil's brown eyes bleed to a rich yellow. He stared at Jason with wolf eyes. "You will be."

Cherry slid off the bed, kneeling behind me. She reached a hand up to me, and I took it. She licked a quick tongue across my hand, a greeting that only the leopards used, then one slender hand went to my leg, holding onto my pants like a small, shy child. She seemed to think something bad was about to happen.

I half expected Jason to come to me like the wereleopards had, but he didn't. He moved farther into the room, away from Jamil, but he didn't ask for help.

"What's the big deal?" I asked. "Jamil just offers me his cheek first, right?"

"Oh, no," Jason said, "much more fun than that."

That made me frown because I knew what Jason's idea of fun was.

"Maybe I asked for something I don't understand."

"But you did ask," Jamil said, "and as our lupa it is your right."

I was beginning to suspect I'd made a faux pas. That I'd asked something of Jamil he didn't want to give and I probably wouldn't like receiving. "If you hadn't been such an asshole when we first got here, Jamil, I'd probably let this go."

"But. . ." he said.

"But I don't back down, not to you."

"Not to anyone," Jason said softly.

That, too.

"If I refuse, it's challenge between us," Jamil said.

"Fine, but remember, you've had your last free pass for the weekend, Jamil."

He nodded. "I see the gun."

"Then we understand each other," I said.

"We understand each other," he said. Jamil closed the distance between us, eyes still an eerie shade of yellow.

"Don't get cute, Jamil."

He gave a quick baring of teeth. "I am doing what you asked, Anita."

Zane moved behind me, hands on my shoulders, but giving me more room to move. Cherry huddled against my legs. Neither of them moved away. I took that as a good sign. I hoped I was right.

Jamil touched my face very lightly with the tips of his fingers. "If we were in public, it would be this." He bent downward and it looked like he was going to kiss me.

He did. A soft brush of lips, fingers still holding my face. He drew back from me. When he opened his eyes, they were still that rich, golden yellow. It was a startling color against the darkness of his skin.

I had just stood there throughout, too startled to know what to do. Neither the leopards nor Jason called foul, so Jamil was doing what I'd forced him to do. Probably. If it had been Jason, I'd suspected some sort of ploy to steal a kiss, but Jamil didn't play those kinds of games.

He stayed with his hands still cradling my face. "But tonight won't be in public. Between ourselves when no one watches . . ." He didn't finish the sentence. He just leaned over me again.

His tongue ran across my lower lip.

I jerked back.

He let his hands fall to his sides. "You read the wolf books, Anita, I am a submissive wolf begging a dominant's attention."

"It's a variation of food begging by pups," I said. "In two adult wolves, it's a ritual of licking and biting gently at the mouth of the dominant wolf by the subordinate."

Jamil nodded.

"You've made your point," I said.

"The greeting I am trying to teach you is like our version of a handshake. You both offer your faces at the same time. It's more like a kiss."

"Show me," I said.

He leaned into me again, but this time he didn't try to touch my mouth. He rubbed his cheek along mine, rubbing his face across my ear until his face was buried in the hair behind my ear. His movement had put my face against his hair. His hair was in cornrows, and the texture was rough and soft at the same time.

Jamil spoke with his mouth still against my hair, "You have to bury your face in the hair and smell the skin."

He burrowed his face into my hair until he had to be touching skin. I heard him breathing in air. His breath was almost hot against my skin.

I tried to return the favor, but had to raise on tiptoe, one hand against his chest for balance. Zane slid away from me, and I used my other hand on his shoulder. The cornrows made it easier to put my face next to the skin of his scalp. The braids moved around my face like small thin ropes.

I could smell his hair straightener, his cologne, and under all that was him. The moment his scent hit me, I felt a rush of power, and it wasn't his. I suddenly knew that Richard was sitting on a bed, holding his mother. I felt him look up as if he'd see me standing at the foot of the bed. But I was miles away, standing at the foot of a different bed. We drew in the rich warm smell of Jamil's skin, and Richard's power broke over me in a march of goose bumps.

Jamil drew back from me, hands still on my shoulders. His nostrils flared while he drew in scent. "Richard—I smell our Ulfric. How?"

Zane pressed against my back, rubbing his face against my hair. Cherry had curled herself around my leg like a fetus. "She is your lupa. Bound to your Ulfric."

Jamil stepped back from me, something very close to fear on his face. "She cannot be bound to Richard. She is not lukoi."

I moved towards him, and Zane went to his knees behind me. Cherry let me go, hands sliding away reluctantly. They huddled together, holding each other.

I spared them a glance and asked, "You guys all right?"

Zane nodded. "I saw you call the power of the marks once before, but I've never been touching you when you called the Ulfric's power. It's a rush."

Cherry just stared at me, eyes gone large in a pale face.

"Don't I know it," Jason said. He was still across the room, hugging his naked chest, hands rubbing up and down his bare arms as if he were cold. He wasn't cold.

I turned back to Jamil. "I am bound to Richard. It isn't the same kind of bonding that he'd have with another lycanthrope, but it is a bond."

"You are Jean-Claude's human servant," Jamil said.

I hated the term, but it was accurate, technically anyway. "Yes, I am, just as Richard is Jean-Claude's wolf to call."

"He cannot call our Ulfric like a dog. Richard does not answer to the vampire's whims."

"Me, either," I said. "Sometimes I think Jean-Claude may have bitten off more than he can drink with the two of us."

The door to the cabin opened, no knock, no preliminaries. Asher stepped through with Nathaniel in his arms. He was bundled into Asher's suit jacket. What I could see of his legs were pale and bare.

I ran forward. "What happened?"

Asher laid Nathaniel on the bed on his back, trapping the jacket under his body. He was nude except for the jacket. Nathaniel tried to curl up onto his side into a ball, but Asher stopped him, trying to smooth his legs down, to make him lie still. "Lie still, Nathaniel."

"It hurts!" His voice was strangled, twisted tight with pain.

I knelt by the bed, touching his face. He looked at me, eyes so wide they flashed white. His mouth opened and a small moan escaped him. His hand clawed at the bedspread as if he needed to hold something, anything. I gave him my hand and his grip was so tight I had to remind him not to crush my hand.

He muttered, "Sorry," then his spine bowed, body twisting. Normally, seeing Nathaniel completely nude would have embarrassed me. Now I was too scared to be embarrassed. There were bleeding cuts on his chest, but they looked shallow. Nothing seemed wrong enough for this kind of pain.

Cherry disappeared into the bathroom. I didn't think you were that squeamish if you were a nurse.

"Who did this?" I asked.

"He is our message from the local vampires," Asher said.

"What message?"

Nathaniel twisted on the bed, his other hand grabbing at my arm. Two slow tears trailed down his cheeks. "They kept asking me why we'd come

here." He threw his head back and forth, and I caught a glimpse of something on his neck. I got one hand free and moved all that long, auburn hair so I could see his neck. A vampire bite showed in the smooth flesh of his neck. The bite was clean, neat, but the skin was slightly darker than it should have been.

"Did one of you do this?" I asked.

"I took blood from the bend of his arm," Asher said. "That is Colin's doing."

Nathaniel's body eased against the bed, the spasm or whatever passing. "I told them we were here to rescue Richard. I told them the truth, over and over." His hand convulsed around mine, eyes closing as if he were riding a wave of pain. After a few seconds, he opened his eyes, his hand easing around mine. "They wouldn't believe me."

Cherry came out of the bathroom. She tried to push me gently but firmly out of the way, but Nathaniel clutched at my hand. Cherry settled for making me kneel by the head of the bed. He could still hold my hand, but I was out of the way. She began to explore the wounds on his chest. She was very submissive, almost untrustworthily so, but let someone be injured and it was like a different Cherry rose to the occasion. She became Nurse Cherry, as if the leather-slut-from-hell was her secret identity.

"Do you have a first aid kit in this cabin?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"I've got one in my suitcase in the other cabin," Cherry said.

"I'll get it," Jason offered. He started for the door.

"Wait," I said. "Jamil, go with him. I don't want anyone else taken tonight."

No one argued with me. It was a first. The two werewolves just went for the door. Damian had to move out of the way for them to leave. He shut the door behind them and leaned against it. His eyes had gone a drowning, solid green, like emerald fire. His pale skin was taking on that translucent, almost glowing quality that the vamps get when their humanity begins to fold away. Strong emotions will do that to the lesser vamps: fear, lust, anger.

I looked at Asher. He was . . . normal. He stood just back from the bed, that handsome, tragic, face blank and empty. It was so like the expression Jean-Claude used when he was hiding something.

"I thought Colin was either supposed to attack us directly or leave us alone," I said. "No one said anything about this kind of shit."

"It was . . . unexpected," Asher said.

"Well, explain it to me."

Damian pushed away from the door, stalking into the room, every movement tight with anger. "They tortured him because they enjoyed it. They're vampires, but they fed off more than just blood."

"What are you saying, Damian?"

"They fed off his fear."

I looked from his glowing face to Asher, then back to Damian. "You mean literally, don't you?"

Damian nodded. "The one who brought me over was like that. She could feed off of fear as if it were blood. She'd go for days feeding off of terror, then suddenly she'd take blood. But she didn't just feed, she slaughtered. She'd come back to the chamber covered in blood, slick with it. Then she'd make me . . ." His voice trailed off. He looked at me, his eyes were beginning to look like naked green flame, as if his power were eating the bones of his eye sockets. "I felt it when we met Colin. I smelled it. He's like her. He's a night hag, a mora."

"What the hell is a night hag or a mora? And what do you mean, you met Colin? I thought you rescued Nathaniel."

"No, they gave him back to us," Asher said. "If we did not see him, the message would not be complete."

Cherry interrupted us. "His pulse is thready, his skin is clammy. He's going into shock. The cuts on his chest are shallow. Even two vampire bites in one night shouldn't put him into shock. We heal better than this."

"There is a third bite," Asher said. Through it all, his voice had been utterly calm, as if nothing touched him.

Cherry looked down the length of Nathaniel's body, then touched his thigh. She moved his legs apart. "Of course, the femoral artery. Why is the skin discolored on both bites?" She touched the skin of his inner thigh. "The skin feels almost cold."

Nathaniel writhed on the bed. He let go of my hand, reaching for me as if he wanted a hug. He grabbed one arm, and a handful of my blouse. His eyes were wild. "It hurts."

"What hurts?" I asked.

"The bites are contaminated," Asher said.

"What do you mean, contaminated?"

"Think of it as a poison."

"He's a wereanimal, they're immune to poisons," I said.

"Not this one," Asher said.

"What kind of poison is it?" Cherry said.

There was a knock on the door. Jason said, "It's us."

Damian looked at me. His eyes had calmed down to a soft glow, his skin almost back to the milky perfection that passed for normal.

I nodded.

He opened the door. Jason came in with a first aid kit bigger than most overnight bags. Maybe Cherry had been a Girl Scout in another life. Jamil followed behind Jason like a dark, solemn shadow.

"The kind of poison that nothing in that little bag will stop," Asher said.

I stared up at him, suddenly realizing what he'd just said. "You mean he's going to . . ." I couldn't even say it.

"Die," Asher said in that same utterly calm, almost mildly amused voice that he'd been using since they first walked into the cabin.

I stood, Nathaniel's hands clinging to me. I looked at Cherry and she moved in to help me draw free of him. I wanted to say things to Asher that I didn't want Nathaniel to hear. Zane crawled onto the bed on the other side. Nathaniel grabbed his hand and held on. Another spasm threw Nathaniel

writhing on the bed. Zane and Cherry held him down, let him use that crushing strength on their hands. The two were leopards stared at me while Nathaniel thrashed, eyes rolling back into his head. Zane and Cherry watched me. I was their Nimir-ra, their leopard queen. I was supposed to protect them, not drag them into shit like this.

I turned away from their accusing, expectant eyes and moved with Asher to the door. "What do you mean he's going to die?"

"You've seen the kind of vampires that rot and re-form themselves?"

"Yeah. So?"

"One of them bit Nathaniel."

"I've been bitten by one of them. Jason's been bitten by one of them. Nothing like this happened to us." I glanced back and found Jason holding Nathaniel's hand while Cherry started cleaning the chest wounds. Somehow I didn't think bandaging the cuts was going to help.

Jamil and Damian joined us. We stood in a little circle, talking, while Nathaniel screamed. Asher said, "It is one of the rarest of talents. I thought that only Morte d' Amour, Lover of Death, the council member could do this. Colin chose his messages carefully. The slashes are harm from a distance with just a flexing of power."

"Jean-Claude can't cause harm from a distance," I said.

"No, and no one else can spread corruption from their bite. No one else in this country."

"You keep saying corruption," Jamil said. "What does that mean exactly?"

Cherry came to us with white gauze pads in her hands. Her pale freckles stood out like ink on her suddenly pale skin. There was yellow and green puss on the gauze. "This came out of the chest wounds," she said quietly. "What the hell is it?"

We all looked at Asher, even Damian. But I was the one who said it out loud, "He's rotting. He's decaying while he's still alive."

Asher nodded. "The corruption is in his blood. It will spread and then he will rot."

I looked back to the bed. Jason was speaking low and softly to Nathaniel, stroking his head like you'd comfort a sick child. Zane was looking at me.

"There has to be something we can do," I said.

Asher's face was as closed and careful as I'd ever seen it. One of Jean-Claude's memories of Asher went through me so forcefully that my fingertips tingled with it. It wasn't a memory of any one event. I recognized the set of Asher's shoulders. I knew his body language with a familiarity built up of years of observation. More years than I'd been alive.

"What are you hiding, Asher?" I asked.

He looked at me, pale, pale eyes blank, empty, lined with those amazing golden eyelashes like shining lace. He smiled. The smile was everything it should have been: joyous, sensual, welcoming. That smile went through my heart like a knife. I remembered that face whole and perfect. I remembered when that smile had made me catch my breath.

I shook my head. The physical movement helped. I shook off the memories. They faded, but it didn't change what I'd seen, what I knew. "You know how to save him, don't you?"

"How badly do you want to save him, Anita?" His voice wasn't neutral now, it was almost angry.

"I brought him down here, Asher, I put him in danger. I'm supposed to protect him."

"I thought he was supposed to be your bodyguard," Asher said.

"He's walking food, Asher. You know that. Nathaniel can't even guard himself."

Asher let out his breath in a long sigh. "Nathaniel is a *pomme de sang*."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"It means apple of blood. It is a sobriquet among the Council for willing food."

Damian finished the thought. "The vampire that feeds from a *pomme de sang* is duty bound to protect them, like a shepherd keeping the wolf from his sheep." Damian looked at Asher while he said it, and it was not a friendly look. They were fighting about something, but there was no time.

I touched Asher's arm. It felt stiff, wooden, not even alive. He was drawing away from me, away from the room, away from what was happening. He was going to let Nathaniel die without even trying. Unacceptable.

I made myself grip that wooden, unalive arm. I hated it when Jean-Claude felt like this. It was a reminder of what he was, and what he wasn't. "Don't let him die, not like this. Please, *mon chardonneret*."

He jumped like I'd hit him when I used the old nickname that Jean-Claude had used so many years ago. It meant literally, my goldfinch, which sounded silly in English. But the look on Asher's face wasn't silly. It was almost shocked.

"No one has called me that in over two hundred years." His arm softened under my hand, feeling warm, alive again.

"I don't beg often, but for this I will."

"He means so much to you?" Asher asked.

"He's everyone's victim, Asher. Someone has to give a damn about him. Please *mon*—" He put his fingers over my lips.

"Don't say it, Anita, don't ever say it again unless you mean it. I will save him, Anita, for you."

I felt like I was missing something. I could remember Jean-Claude's pet name for Asher but I couldn't remember why Asher was afraid to try to heal Nathaniel. As I watched him walk to the bed, golden hair trailing like a glittering veil across his shoulders, that missing memory seemed very important.

Asher held his hand out to Damian. "Come, my brother, or does the famed courage of the Vikings fail you now?"

"I was slaughtering your ancestors before you were a gleam in your great-granddaddy's eye."

"Shit, this is dangerous, isn't it?" I asked.

Asher knelt beside the bed. He looked back at me, the golden hair sliding over the scarred side of his face, hiding it. He knelt, all golden perfection, and smiled, but it was bitter. "We can take the corruption into ourselves, but if we are not powerful enough, it will enter us, and we will die, but your precious wereleopard will be saved either way."

Damian crawled onto the far side of the bed, moving Zane away from his spot by Nathaniel's head. Nathaniel had stopped screaming. He lay very still, skin pale, shiny with sweat. His breath came in shallow pants. The wounds on his chest were oozing pus. There was a smell in the room now, faint but growing. The bite on his neck still seemed solid, but the skin of his neck was a deep blackish green like a bruise that was killing deep.

"Asher," I said.

He looked at me, one hand running along Nathaniel's bare thigh.

"Damian's not a master."

"I cannot save your leopard by myself, Anita. Who would you save? Which will you sacrifice?"

I looked at Damian. His green eyes were human again. He looked very mortal, curled beside Nathaniel.

"Don't make me choose."

"But it is a choice, Anita. It is a choice."

I shook my head.

"Do you want me to save him?" Damian asked.

I met his gaze, and didn't know what to say.

"His pulse is very weak," Cherry said. "If you're going to do something, you better do it soon."

"Do you want me to save him?" Damian asked again.

Nathaniel's fast, gasping breath was the only sound in the sudden silence. They all looked at me. Waited for me to decide. And I couldn't decide. I felt my head nod, almost as if I wasn't doing it. I nodded.

The vampires began to feed.

Chapter 13

A feeding takes longer in real life than it does in the movies. Either it's too quick or they do a fade like a 1950s sex scene. We all stood around the room and watched. The room was quiet enough that you could hear the vampires making small, wet noises as they fed.

Cherry knelt by the head of the bed. She checked Nathaniel's wrist pulse periodically. The rest of us had moved farther away. I ended up on the far side of the room, leaning my butt on the desk. I was working very hard at not

looking at the bed. Everyone moved around the room, restless, embarrassed, I thought.

Jason came to stand beside me, leaning on the desk. "If I didn't know his life was at stake, I'd be jealous."

I looked at him, trying to tell if he was teasing. There was a look in his eyes, a heat, that said he was not. It made me look over at what was happening.

Damian had drawn Nathaniel's body into his arms, his lap, so that he cradled the smaller man almost the full length of his body. Parts of Damian's body were lost to sight behind Nathaniel's naked body. His arm cradled the smaller man's chest against the green silk shirt. The pus had soaked into the cloth in blackening streaks. Nathaniel's face was pressed by one pale hand into the vampire's shoulder. Damian had come from behind for the neck strike. You could see the top of his bloodred hair, his mouth locked over the wound. Even from where I stood, I could see Damian's jaws swallowing.

Asher was still kneeling on the floor, one of Nathaniel's pale legs flung outward so his foot hung in empty air. Asher's face was buried in the man's inner thigh, so close to the groin that Nathaniel's slack genitalia touched the side of his face. Asher moved his head slightly and a spill of golden hair flung over Nathaniel's groin. It didn't hide it so much as have him peeking out through it.

A blush flowed over my face so hard and fast I was almost dizzy. In turning away, I caught a glimpse of myself in the room's only mirror. My face was burning. My eyes looked wide and surprised. It was junior high all over again, stumbling on couples under the bleachers, hearing their laughter chase me into the night.

I stared at myself in the mirror and got a grip. I was not fourteen anymore. I was not a child. I was not a virgin. I could do this with a modicum of grace. Couldn't I?

Jamil had moved to the farthest corner of the room. He was sitting there, arms tucked around his knees, face set in harsh lines, angry. He wasn't enjoying the show, either.

Zane had moved back to lean against the wall, arms crossed. He was looking at the floor as if there was something very interesting on it.

Jason was still sitting against the desk, watching the show. I looked at him without turning around. "You do realize that you're the only one who seems to be enjoying the view."

He shrugged, grinning. "It's a nice view."

I raised my eyebrows. "Don't tell me you're gay."

"Don't tell me you care," he replied.

My eyebrows went up a little farther. "My heart is breaking. I'll have to burn all my lingerie." I kept watching his face. He was smiling but not like it was a joke.

"Are you saying all that teasing is just an act?" I asked.

"Oh, no, I like women. But, Anita, almost none of the vampires in Jean-Claude's inner circle are women. I've been acting as a *pomme de sang* for two years. That's a lot of fangs sinking into your body."

"Is it really that close to sex?" I asked.

The humor left his face and he just looked at me. "You've really never been rolled completely by a vamp, have you? I mean I knew you had partial immunity even before the marks, but I thought someone somewhere would have gotten to you."

"Nope," I said.

"Sometimes I'm not sure, but it may be better than sex, and almost everyone who's been doing me has been a guy."

"So you're bisexual?"

"If what they're doing now counts as sex, yeah. If it doesn't then . . ." he laughed, and the sound was so abrupt in the silence that I saw Zane and Jamil jump. "If this doesn't count as sex, let's just say that 'where no man has gone before' no longer applies."

Damned if I didn't want to ask who it had been. Maybe I would have asked, but Cherry spoke and the moment was gone. "His pulse is stronger. Losing this much blood, he should be getting weaker, but he's not."

Asher drew back from the wound. "We are not so much drinking blood as drawing out the corruption." He stood one hand under Nathaniel's thigh. He moved the leg back onto the bed, straightening his limbs as if he were a sleeping child. A moment before, it had been utterly sexual; now there was something in the way Asher acted that was tender, careful.

Damian pulled away from the wound. There was a spot on his lip, not red, but black. I wondered if it had tasted bad. He wiped the spot away with the back of his hand. If it had been pure blood he'd have licked it off. So it hadn't been pleasant.

He crawled out from under Nathaniel, laying him carefully on his back. He drew covers over Nathaniel as he moved off the bed.

Cherry had her first aid kit open. She recleaned the chest wounds with antibacterial antiseptic. The first few sterile cloths came away smeared with pus. We'd all moved next to the bed without realizing it. The smell was stronger here, unpleasant, but fading. When the skin and wounds were completely cleaned, the flesh was whole, and bright red blood welled into the slashes.

Cherry flashed the room a smile so warm and bright that you had to smile back. "He's going to be all right." She sounded surprised, and I wondered how close it had been.

Someone drew a hissing breath. I turned to the sound. Damian was backing up. He was staring at his hands. That pale, milky skin was turning dark, a blackness flowing under the skin. The flesh of his hands began to peel back while we watched.

Chapter 14

"Shit," I said.

Damian held his hands out to me like a child that had burned its hand. I didn't know which was worse, the terror in his face or the almost resigned look in his eyes.

I shook my head. "No," I said, but my voice was soft. "No," I said it again, louder, stronger.

"You cannot stop it," Asher said.

Damian stared at the darkening flesh of his hands, soft horror on his face. "Help me," he said, and he looked to me.

I stared down at him and didn't have the faintest idea how to save him. "What can we do?" I said.

"I know you are accustomed to riding in on your white steed and saving the day, Anita, but some battles cannot be won," Asher said.

Damian had gone to his knees staring at his hands. He ripped his shirt off in pieces, leaving remnants of the sleeves on his arms. The rotting flesh was halfway to his elbows. A fingernail split and fell to the floor with a burst of something dark and noisome. The smell was back, sweet and sickly.

"I healed Damian once of a facial cut," I said.

Damian made a sound between a laugh and something more bitter. "I didn't nick myself shaving, Anita." He shifted his gaze from the peeling flesh of his hands to me. "Even you can't heal this."

I dropped to my knees in front of him, reaching out to touch his hands. Damian jerked away. "Don't touch me!"

I put my hands over his hands. The skin felt almost hot to the touch, as if the corruption were cooking him from the inside out. The skin was soft as if, if I pressed too hard the skin would give way like a rotted spot in an apple.

My throat was tight. "Damian, I'm . . . sorry." Dear God, it was an inadequate word. A thousand years of "life" and he'd given it up for me. He would never have taken such a risk if I had not asked. It was my fault.

The look in his eyes was grateful, and pain-filled. He pulled his hands gently out from under mine. Careful not to press too hard against my hands. I think we were both afraid my fingers would sink through his skin and into the flesh inside.

His face twisted in pain, and a small sound escaped his lips. I remembered Nathaniel's cries of how it had hurt.

The ends of his fingers burst like overripe fruit, spilling something black and greenish onto the floor. It splattered my arm. The smell was growing in sickening waves.

I didn't swipe at the drops on my arm but I wanted to. I wanted to slap at them like a spider, shrieking. My voice held some of the strain I was trying to keep off my face. "I've got to at least try to heal you."

"How?" Asher asked. "How do, even you, begin to heal this?"

Damian made a low whimpering sound. His body shuddered, face ducking, neck twisting, and finally he screamed. Wordless, hopeless.

"How?" Asher asked again.

"I don't know," and I was screaming, too.

"Only his original master, the one who saved him from the grave, would have any chance of healing him."

I looked at Asher. "I called Damian from his coffin once. It was accidental, but he answered to my call. I kept his . . . soul, whatever, from fleeing his body once. We are bound together, a little."

"How did you call him from his grave?" Asher asked.

"Necromancy," I said, "I am a necromancer, Asher."

"I know nothing of necromancy," he said.

The smell swelled stronger. I breathed through my mouth, but that just put the odor on the back of my tongue. I was almost afraid to look at Damian. I turned slowly like a character in a horror movie, where you just know the monster is right behind you, and you delay looking because you know it will blast your sanity forever. But some things are worse than any nightmare. The rot had moved past his elbows. Naked bone showed through the back of his hand. The smell had driven all but the three of us back. I stayed kneeling in the rotting fluid of Damian's body. Asher stayed close, but only I was still within touching distance.

"If I were his master, what would I do?"

"You would drink his blood, take the corruption into yourself as we did for Nathaniel."

"I didn't think vamps fed on each other."

"Not for food," Asher said, "but there are many reasons to share blood. Food is only one of them."

I stared at Damian, watching the blackness spread under his skin like ink. I could actually see it swimming underneath his flesh. "I can't drink the corruption away," I said.

"But I could," Damian's voice came breathy with pain.

"No!" Asher said. He took a threatening step towards us. I could feel his power flaring out from him like a whip.

Damian flinched, but looked up at the other vampire. He held his hands out to Asher, pleading.

"What is going on?" I asked, looking from one to the other of them.

Asher shook his head, face angry, but otherwise unreadable. I watched his features smooth and grow blank. He was hiding something.

"No," I said, getting to my feet. "No, you tell me what Damian meant." Neither spoke.

"Tell me!" I screamed it into Asher's calm face.

He just stared at me, face as closed and impassive as a doll's.

"Dammit, one of you tell me what Damian meant. How could he drink away his own corruption?"

"If . . ." Damian started.

"No," Asher said, pointing a finger at him.

"You are not my master," Damian said. "I must answer."

"Shut up, Asher," I said. "Shut the fuck up and let him talk."

"Would you have her risk all for you?" Asher asked.

"It does not have to be her. Only someone with more than human blood," Damian said.

"Tell me," I said, "now."

Damian spoke in a rushed whisper, voice edged with pain. "If I drank blood from one powerful . . . enough. I might be able . . ." He shuddered, struggling, then continued in a voice that was weaker than just a moment before. "Might be able to take in enough power to . . . cure myself."

"But if the one he takes blood from is not strong enough mystically to take the corruption into himself, then they will die as Damian is dying now," Asher said.

"I'm sorry," Jason said, "but count me out."

"Me, too," Zane said.

Jamil was across the room hugging his arms. He just shook his head.

Cherry knelt by the bed. She said nothing, eyes huge, face terrified.

I finally turned back to Asher "It has to be me. I can't ask anyone else to take the risk."

Asher grabbed the back of my hair in a movement so fast I hadn't seen it coming. He twisted my face back to look at Damian. "Is this how you want to die, Anita? Is it? Is it!"

I spoke through gritted teeth. "Let go of me, Asher. Now!"

He released me slowly. "Don't do this, Anita. Please, don't. The risk is too great."

"He's right," Damian's voice came in a bare whisper, so low I was surprised I could hear it at all. "You could cure me but kill . . . yourself."

The rot had spread up his arms and was gliding like some malignant force underneath his collarbones. His chest was like glowing ivory, and I could feel his heart thudding in his chest. I could feel it like a second heartbeat in my own head. A vampire's heart didn't always beat, but it was beating now.

I was so scared I could taste something flat and metallic in my mouth. My fingertips tingled with the desire to run. I couldn't stay in this room and watch Damian melt down into a stinking puddle, but part of my brain was screaming at me to run. Run somewhere far away where I wouldn't have to watch and I certainly wouldn't have to let those rotting hands touch me.

I shook my head. I stared at Damian, not at the rotting flesh, but at his face, his eyes. I stared into those shining green eyes like bits of emerald fire. It was ironic that as parts of him corrupted and sloshed away, that what was left had become its most beautiful. His skin was polished ivory with a depth of light like some white jewel. His hair seemed to glow like spun rubies, and those eyes, those emerald eyes . . . I stared at him, made myself see him.

I swept my hair to one side, exposing my neck. "Do it." I dropped my hand, and the hair moved back to hide my neck.

"Anita," he said.

"Do it, Damian, do it. Now, please, before I lose my nerve."

He crawled to me. He swept the hair aside with a hand gone blackened flesh and bone. He left a trail of something heavy and thick on my shoulder. I could feel that thickness sliding down my shirt like a snail. I concentrated on

the soft glow of his skin, the imperfect slope of his nose where someone centuries ago had broken that perfect profile.

But it wasn't enough. I turned my head to one side so he wouldn't have to touch me more than necessary. I saw his head tense for the strike and I closed my eyes. It was sharp like needles and it didn't get better. Damian wasn't strong enough to roll me with his eyes. There would be no magic to take away the pain.

His mouth locked against the wound and he began to feed. I thought I'd have to try and force my power into him or lower my shields and let him inside my power, let him drink it away. But moments after his teeth pierced my skin, something flared between us. Power, bond, magic. It raised every hair on my body.

Damian cuddled against the front of me, pressing our chests to one another, and the power burst over us in a rush that filled the room with sighing. Distantly I realized that there was a wind and it was coming from us. A wind forged of the cool touch of vampire and the chill control of necromancy. A wind forged of us.

Damian was like a feeding thing at my throat. The power took the pain, turned it into something else. I felt his mouth at my throat, felt him swallowing my blood, my life, my power. I gathered it all into us and thrust it back into Damian. I fed it into him with my blood.

I visualized his skin whole and perfect. I felt the power spill down his body. I felt us push out the other. I could feel it flowing out of us, not onto the floor but into the floor, past the floor, into the ground below. We were exorcising it, ridding ourselves of it. It was no more.

The two of us knelt bathed in power. A wind trailed Damian's hair across my face, and I knew the wind was us. It was Damian who drew back, trailing power between us like the broken shreds of some dream.

He knelt in front of me, lifting his hands to my face. They were healed, under the remnants of that black ooze, his hands were healed. His arms healed. He cradled my face in his hands and kissed me. The power was still there. It flowed over us, through his mouth, in a line of energy that burned.

I drew back from Damian's kiss. I managed to sit up.

"Anita."

I looked at Damian.

"Thank you," he said.

I nodded. "You're welcome."

"Now," Asher said, "I think it is time for showers all around." He stood, pants covered in black goop. It was on his hands, too, and I couldn't remember when he'd touched Damian or the floor.

I could feel the stuff clinging to my bare back where Damian had touched me. My pants were soaked with it from the knees down. The clothes would have to be burned or at least thrown away. This was one of the reasons I kept a pair of coveralls in my Jeep to put on over my clothes at crime scenes and some zombie raisings. Of course, I hadn't expected to get this messy before I'd even left the damn cabin.

"Showers sound great," I said. "You first."

"May I suggest that you go first. A hot shower is a wonderful luxury, but for Damian and me it is a luxury, not a necessity."

"Good point," I said. My hair had kept the stuff from soaking to my scalp, but I could feel it when I touched my hair.

It. I kept saying, "it." I was shying away from the fact that "it" was Damian's body rotted and leaked out upon the floor. Sometimes when it's too horrible you have to distance yourself from it. Language is a good way to do that. Victims become an "it" very quickly, because sometimes it's too horrible even to say, "he," or "she." When you're scraping pieces of someone's loved one off your hands, it has to be an "it." Has to be, or you run screaming. So, I was covered in black, greenish it.

I washed my hands thoroughly enough so I could dig through my suitcase without contaminating the clothes. I'd picked out jeans and a polo shirt. Asher appeared behind me. I looked up at him.

"What?" I asked. It sounded rude even to me. "I mean, what now?"

Asher rewarded me with a smile. "We will have to meet Colin tonight."

I nodded. "Oh, yeah. He is definitely on my dance card for tonight."

He smiled and shook his head. "We cannot kill him, Anita."

I stared at him. "You mean we can't, as in it's too hard a job or we can't, as in we shouldn't do it?"

"Perhaps both, but certainly the latter."

I stood. "He sent Nathaniel to us to die." I looked into the suitcase, not seeing it, just not wanting to look up. There was a rim of blackness at the base of my fingernails that the scrubbing at the sink hadn't lifted. There had been a moment when the power broke between us, and I knew it would work, but until that second . . . I had tried very hard not to think about it. It was only after I'd gone into the bathroom to clean my hands off that I started to shake. I'd stayed in the bathroom until my hands were steady. The fear was under control, all that was left was anger.

"I do not think anyone was meant to die, Anita. I think it was a test."

"A test of what?" I asked.

"How much power we truly have. In a way it was a compliment. He would never have contaminated Nathaniel if he thought we had no hope of saving him."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because, to kill a *pomme de sang* of another master vampire is a mortal insult. Wars have begun over less."

"But he knows we can't make war on him without the Council hunting us down."

"Which is why we cannot kill him." Asher held up his hand, which stopped me with my mouth open. I closed it. "The last master you killed was threatening your life directly. You killed her to protect yourself. Self-defense is allowed. But Colin has not offered us personal violence."

"That is cutting it pretty damn close, Asher."

He gave a graceful nod. "*Oui*."

"So if we kill him the Council comes back to town and cleans our clock."
Slight frown lines showed between his eyes. I don't think he understood the slang. "They will kill us," he said.

I'd met some of the Council, and I knew he was right. Jean-Claude had enemies on the Council and now so did I. No, I did not want to give the nightmares of all vampirekind an excuse to come back to St. Louis and wipe us out.

"What can we do? Because, mark me on this, Asher, they will pay for what they did to Nathaniel."

"I agree. If we do nothing to avenge the insult, it will be viewed as a sign of weakness and Colin may come against us and kill us."

"Why is everything so damned complicated with you guys?" I asked.
"Why couldn't Colin just believe we'd come down here to rescue Richard?"

"Because we didn't leave town." Nathaniel's voice came thin but steady from the bed. He blinked lilac eyes at me. Cherry had bandaged his chest and the neck wound was covered with a large piece of taped gauze. I assumed the thigh wound was similarly covered, but the bedspread covered him from the waist down.

"When Richard got out of jail, Colin expected us to leave town. When we didn't, he thought we meant to take over his territory."

I went to stand by the bed. "Zane said you went off with one of Verne's werewolves. How did the vamps get hold of you?"

"Mira," he said.

"Excuse me?" I said.

"The werewolf's name is Mira." He looked away from me as if he didn't want to look me in the face while he talked. "She took me home. We had sex. Then she left the room. When she came back the vampires were with her." He looked up at me. I found myself staring down into his eyes and the need in them was so raw it made me flinch.

"There were too many of them for you to fight, Nathaniel," I said. "It's okay."

"Fight?" He laughed, and it was so bitter it hurt just to hear it. "There was no fight. I was already chained down."

I frowned. "Why?"

He let out a long sigh. "Anita, Anita, God." He put one arm across his eyes.

Zane came to the rescue, sort of. "You know that Nathaniel is a submissive?"

I nodded. "I know he likes to be tied up and . . ." The light dawned. "Oh, okay. I get it. Mira invited you home for some S and M sex."

"D and S, dominance and submission," Zane said, "but yeah."

I took a deep breath, mistake. The room still stank of bodily fluids, the unpleasant kind. "So she wrapped you up like a present and gave you to them?"

"Yes," he said, softly. "The sex had been good. She was a good top."

"Top?" I asked.

"Dominant," Zane said.

Ah.

Nathaniel curled onto his side, drawing the bedspread around him. "The master, Colin, paid her to bring one of us to them. Anyone of us. It didn't matter who. It could have been Jason, or Zane, or Cherry. One of their animals, he said." He huddled down into the blankets, eyes fluttering shut, then open, then shut.

I looked at Cherry. "Is he alright?"

"I gave him something to help him sleep. It won't last long. Our metabolisms are too fast, but he'll get maybe half an hour, an hour if we're lucky."

"If you're not going to take a shower, I'd like to," Damian said.

"No, I'm getting in."

"But you can't wear what you've picked out," Asher said.

I frowned at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Jean-Claude sent a trunk of clothes just for this occasion," he said.

"Oh, no," I said, "no more leather and lace shit."

"I agree with you, Anita," Asher said. "If we were simply going to kill them it wouldn't matter what we wore, but we are putting on a show as much as anything. Appearance will matter."

"Well, shit," I said. "Fine, I'll dress up, we won't kill anyone, but you better come up with something that we can do to them. They can't abuse our people like this and just walk away."

"They will expect retribution, Anita. They are waiting for it."

I looked at Nathaniel cuddled so deep in the blankets that only the top of his head showed. "This retribution better be good, Asher."

"I will do my best."

I shook my head. "You do that." I went into the shower without any clothes to put on because the trunk was in the other cabin. I figured with both coffins in my room I didn't need the trunk. I'd really hoped we wouldn't be opening the damn thing. I hated dressing up in normal dressy clothes. Jean-Claude's idea of dressing up was always worse.

Chapter 15

It took three rounds of shampoo to get my hair clean. The stuff on my body didn't seem to want to come off unless I scrubbed. There is that point in the middle of the back that you just can't do yourself. It is one of the few areas that married people have an edge on us single folk. I finally had to turn the shower on as high as it would go and just let it pound the middle of my back. The stuff finally sloughed off and floated down the drain.

The stuff clung like nothing I'd ever had to clean off before. That included real rotting corpses and zombies. None of it had ever been as tough to get rid of as Damian's . . . fluids.

Cherry was the one who knocked on the door and brought in a pile of clothes. I didn't like any of them. Too much leather for my taste. It took two trips back and forth, wrapped in nothing but a towel, to find clothes that I was willing to wear. There was one red leather bodysuit that seemed to be nothing but straps. It might be interesting for private use just between Jean-Claude and myself, but wearing it in public was definitely out.

I ended up in a short-sleeved, black velvet, midriff top with such a low neckline that it took a special bra under it just so the bra didn't show. Jean-Claude had kindly packed the bra. It was one of those uplifting ones, and if there was one thing my chest didn't need, it was more lift; but it was also the only bra I had access to that plunged low enough that it didn't show with the shirt. There was a velvet dress that would have needed the bra for its neckline, too. Jean-Claude had been a busy little vampire.

Everything fit perfectly, if you were willing to wear it. I picked a leather skirt as the lesser of evils. There was a pair of thigh-high black boots that zipped in the back. The tops of the boots were wide and stiff and open at the back. The fronts of the boots came up to the absolute limit of my legs, brushing my groin at odd moments if I walked wrong. The boots had to have been custom-made for me. I didn't remember Jean-Claude ever measuring me for shoes. He'd held pretty much every inch of me in his hands at one point or another. Apparently, that had been enough.

But the leather skirt had belt loops for my shoulder holster, and the velvet midriff had enough sleeves that the shoulder straps didn't dig into any bare flesh. The side straps felt a little strange against my bare sides when I moved, but it was doable. Of course, there was no way to wear an inner-pants holster in the skirt.

I had added the spine sheath down my back and both wrist sheaths. The spine sheath showed underneath the midriff, but hey, they expected us to be armed. Frankly, I wanted a second gun with me. One of the good things about flying on Jean-Claude's private jet as opposed to an airline was that I had several guns to choose from.

It was a mini-Uzi on a shoulder strap. It had a clip that attached to the back of the skirt so it didn't swing around too much, but you could pull it out into the open with one hand.

When I put it on, Asher's only comment had been, "We can't kill them, Anita."

I looked at the weapons that I'd laid out on one of the last clean spaces of floor. There was an American Derringer, a second Browning Hi-Power, a sawed-off shotgun, and one pump-action shotgun.

I looked up at him. "I didn't bring everything I had."

"So glad to hear it," he said. "But the machine gun is a killing weapon, nothing more."

"The reason I'm in this outfit is because you said we need to make a good show. Well, we can't cause harm from a distance. We can't spread corruption with any of your bites. What the hell are we going to do, Asher? What can we possibly do that will impress them?" I swung the Uzi into my left hand, pointing it at the ceiling. "If there's anyone with him tonight that we can kill, I'll kill them with this."

"And you think that will impress or frighten Colin?"

"Have you ever seen a vampire cut in half by one of these?" I asked.

Asher seemed to think about that for a few seconds as if he'd seen so many horrible things that he just wasn't sure. Finally, he shook his head. "No, I have not."

"Well, I have." I let the gun swing back to the small of my back. "It impressed me."

"Did you do it?" he asked, his voice soft.

I shook my head. "No, just saw it done."

Jamil knelt beside me. He was wearing something that had started life as a black T-shirt but had been cut so severely at the neck, arms, and midriff that it looked more like a wishful thought than a shirt. It covered his nipples, and that was about it. But his upper body was muscular and impressive nearly bare. We were going for impressive tonight. He'd gotten to keep his black jeans and I was jealous. But Jamil didn't belong to Jean-Claude, so there'd been no time to have some piece of leather specially made. Truthfully, I hadn't been a hundred percent certain Jamil was even going to come with us. Not only was Jamil coming but so was Richard. Surprise, surprise. Jamil took an armload of clothes for Richard to choose from. Shang-Da was coming along as well, and he needed to change. Though he, like Jamil, had never belonged to Jean-Claude intimately enough to have specially made clothes. So it was whatever they could find in his suitcase. Happy hunting.

Chapter 16

Damian had refused to share a shower with Asher even though they were both dirty and would need someone to help scrape the stuff from the harder-to-reach places. I'd suggested they share a shower because they were both guys. I knew that Asher was bisexual, but I still had a hard time wrapping my Midwestern upbringing around the fact that it didn't matter what sex Asher shared a shower with, he saw both as sexual objects. I knew it, and it didn't really bother me, but every once in a while, the knowledge surprised me. I don't know why.

Asher came out of the shower with nothing but a towel knotted at his waist. Damian went into the shower. The last of the night. Jason had helped

Asher scrape the harder-to-reach places. Jason didn't tease the vampire. He just went in, helped him clean up, and got out. I'd actually wondered, after Jason's little confession, if he would tease men the same way he teased women. Apparently not.

The scars on Asher's chest were very visible. As he walked, the scars on his right thigh flashed from the towel. The rest of him was a pale golden perfection. He'd once known what it was like to walk into any room and have people gasp at his beauty. People still gasped, but not for the same reasons.

Zane and Cherry were being very careful not to look at him. They kept their faces blank, but their discomfort screamed how they felt.

Asher's face was bland, as if he didn't notice, but I knew he did.

Jason didn't look away. He'd pulled on a pair of leather pants but waited on the shirt and boots because he still had to help Damian flake the gunk off his skin. He sat on one of the coffins, swinging his bare feet, looking at me. His eyes flicked to the vampire, then back to me.

Oh, hell. Who died and made me den mother? You'd think hanging around with this many preternatural studly guys would mean there was a lot of sex, and sexual tension was in the air a lot, but more than sex, was pain. I don't know if it was because I was a girl, or what, but I ended up doing a hell of a lot more hand-holding than any of the guys. Maybe it was a girl thing. I certainly didn't think of myself as particularly compassionate. So why was it me walking across the floor to the vampire?

Asher was kneeling in front of the trunk. His back was smooth and almost perfect, only a few trailing scars where the holy water had dripped down his side. His golden hair hung thick and wet, water trailing in silver lines down his back. There weren't enough towels, so the guys were forgoing a second towel for the hair.

I took the towel I'd used for my hair from the back of the desk chair. I'd put it there so it could dry. I went to him and put a hand on his shoulder. He flinched, lowering his head, trying to get the wet hair to cover his scarred face. The gesture was automatic, no thinking required, and it hurt my heart to see him do it.

If we'd been lovers, I'd have licked the water off his chest, caressing my tongue down the deep scars, maybe even slid a hand under the towel. But we weren't lovers, and I'd never seen him nude. I didn't know what was under the towel. He'd told me once that he was still fully functional, but that didn't really tell me what he looked like under the towel. And as comfortable as I was with him, I wasn't sure I wanted to know. If it was as bad as his chest, I was almost sure I didn't want to see. Yes, I admit there was a small part of me that did want to know for sheer curiosity's sake.

I did the best I could. I laid my face against the roughness of his right cheek. "What are you going to wear?"

He sighed and leaned his face into me. One hand touched my hand, sliding my arm across his damp chest. "I think we shall need to shock them. I shall wear very little."

I moved back enough to see his face. He kept my hand pressed to his chest, resting on the smooth perfection of his left side. "You sure about that?"

He smiled but blinked at the same time so I couldn't read his eyes. He patted my hand and let me go. "I am accustomed to the effect I have on people, *ma cherie*. I have had centuries to use it to my advantage."

I stood and draped the towel over his shoulders. "You'll need this for your hair."

He grabbed the ends of the towel like a shawl, pressing the cloth to his nose and mouth. "It smells of the sweet scent of your skin."

I touched a strand of that heavy, gold hair. "You say the nicest things." I stared down into that face, into the frosted blue of his eyes, and felt something low in my body tighten. A sudden flexing of lust that made me catch my breath. Sometimes it happens. Sometimes it's just a gesture, a turn of the head, and you catch your breath, your body reacts on a level that you can't control. When it happens, you pretend it didn't, you hide it. Heaven forbid that the object of such instant desire should know what you're thinking. But tonight, I let it show in my eyes. I let him see how he moved me.

He took my hand and laid a gentle kiss against my skin. "*Ma cherie*."

Jason came to stand near us, leaning against the nearest coffin as he'd leaned against the desk. "Damn," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"You've seen me naked, or almost. We've been up close and very personal." He sighed. "And you didn't look at me like that."

"Jealous?" I asked.

He seemed to think about that for a second, then nodded. "Yeah, I think I am."

Asher laughed and it was touchable, caressable, like a feather trailing down your skin held by a knowledgeable hand. "In that smooth, perfect body, in the full bloom of your youth, alive and breathing, and you are jealous of me. How lovely."

A knock on the door saved us from further discussion. I drew the Browning and put my back to the wall near the door. "Who is it?"

"It's Verne."

I parted the drape and looked out. He seemed to be alone. I opened the door and ushered him inside. The moment his back was to me, I pressed the gun barrel into his back and kicked the door closed.

He froze. "What's up?" he asked.

"You tell us," I said.

"Anita," Asher said.

"No, he's the Ulfric. He's supposed to have his pack under solid control."

I felt his ribs expand through the gun barrel. "I can smell the shit in the carpet, the sheets. Colin pay a visit?"

I shoved the barrel tight enough into his back to leave a bruise. "He left a present."

"He gave us one of his presents once," Verne said. "I know what I'm smelling in here because I held Erin's hand while he rotted to death."

"Why should I believe you?" I asked.

"If you have a problem with Colin's people, why pull a gun on me?"

"One of your wolves lured Nathaniel away and delivered him to the vampires."

Again I felt the movement through the gun barrel as he turned his head to look at the bed. "Why isn't he dead?"

"That's our business," I said.

He nodded. "Which of my wolves delivered your cat to Colin?"

"Mira," I said.

"Shit," he said. "I knew she was pissed that Richard had stopped seeing her, but I never thought she'd go over to the vampires."

Asher walked to us. "By rules of hospitality, you can be held responsible for the actions of your pack."

"What can I do to make up for this breach of protocol?" The words sounded way too formal for Verne's down-home drawl.

I leaned into him because the gun couldn't get any closer without going into his body. Had to make my point somehow. "How do I know you didn't tell her to do it?"

"I told you what he did to Erin. Colin said we were getting above ourselves, forgetting that vampires are more powerful than any animal. How the hell did you cure your leopard?"

"His name's Nathaniel," I said.

Verne took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "How did you cure Nathaniel?"

I flicked my eyes past Verne's body to Asher. He gave the slightest of nods, and I backed up enough steps that I'd be out of reach in case Verne was upset about the gun. But I kept the gun pointed at him, because I was still closer than ten feet. Even a normal man armed with just a knife can close that distance quicker than most people can upholster a gun.

"At great risk to ourselves," Asher said.

"How?" Verne asked. He moved towards the bed as if I was of no importance. Asher told him how we'd healed Nathaniel.

"And neither of you were poisoned by it?" Verne asked.

"Damian was affected," Asher said.

Verne searched the room. "You mean the red-haired vampire?"

Asher nodded.

"I can hear him in the bathroom. He should be dead."

"Yes, he should be," Asher said.

Verne turned and looked at me then. "Our vargamor said she felt your power tonight. Said you conjured up some sort of spell."

"I don't know the term vargamor," I said.

"A pack's wise woman or wise man, a witch usually, but not always. Sometimes just a psychic. Most packs don't bother with them anymore. How did you save the vampire once he started to rot?"

I holstered the Browning. One, I couldn't keep the gun naked in my hands forever; two, I was beginning to believe Verne. "I'm a necromancer, Verne. Damian's a vampire. I healed him."

His eyes narrowed. "Just like that?"

I laughed. "No, not just like that. We damn near didn't save him, but we did it."

"Could you cure one of my people?"

"Did Colin do one of your people tonight?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, but if we stand with you against him, he will."

"Why would you stand with us on this?" I asked.

"Because I hate that bloodsucking son of a bitch."

"If that's true, then Mira broke pack law," Jason said.

Verne nodded. "Normally, I'd kick her ass. She disobeyed me, but she injured you. Your grievance takes precedence." He glanced at Asher, then at me, as if he wasn't a hundred percent sure who to ask permission of. "What can my pack do to make this right between us?"

I looked at him, head to one side. I didn't like the idea that one of his wolves had betrayed Nathaniel. It made me not trust him. But I understood why Mira was pissed. Richard had dumped her. A woman scorned and all that.

"First, delay the greeting ceremony," I said. "We're going to be ass deep in vampires; there won't be time for anything else tonight."

Verne nodded. "Done."

"And I want Mira's head in a basket," I said.

"We need a place to meet Colin," Asher said.

"Our lupanar is ready for company," Verne said.

"Most generous," Asher said.

It was generous. Maybe too generous. "You understand that we aren't going to kill Colin for this. That whatever happens tonight—unless he attacks us, forces us to defend ourselves—we'll be leaving in a few days, and Colin will still be Master of the City."

"You mean if I help you hurt him, he may hold a grudge?" Verne said.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Erin was a good kid. He wasn't even one of the young ones that had gone up against the vampires. They picked him because he was one of my wolves."

"Nathaniel said that Mira had been paid to bring one of our animals to Colin," I said.

"It sounds like him." Verne's hands balled into fists, and his power moved through the cabin like a line of heat. "I've wanted him to pay for what happened to Erin for ten years, but I haven't had the power to go up against him."

"You don't want him dead?" I asked, and I sounded surprised.

"Colin, for the most part, leaves us alone. But better yet, he can't call wolves. If we kill him, a new master will move in, maybe one that can control wolves. Maybe one that is a bigger, meaner son of a bitch. Dead would be great, but not until I know what it would cost my pack."

"The devil you know or the devil you don't," I said.

Verne looked at me for a second, then nodded. "Yes."

"Great," I said, "let's turn up the fire under this particular devil and roast his *cojónes*."

For one of the few times on this trip, everyone seemed to be in agreement. I was used to killing vampires, not punishing them, because I'd learned a long time ago that you either killed monsters or left them the fuck alone. Once you pull on their tail, metaphorically speaking, you're just never quite sure how they're going to react. Sorry, cancel that. I knew exactly how Colin would react. The question was how much blood would be spilled and could we possibly pull this off without getting some of our people killed. I didn't give a damn if we killed some of Colin's people, in fact, I was sort of looking forward to it.

Chapter 17

I walked through a world of silvered moon shadows and the black outlines of trees. The boots were low-heeled enough and they fit well enough that they actually weren't bad for walking through the woods. It wasn't the fit of anything that made it uncomfortable to be out in the woods; it was the heat and the noise. There was sweat at the bend of my knees underneath the nylons and the leather. I'd added a leather jacket, borrowed from Jason. The jacket hid the mini-Uzi and the big leather purse I had slung over one shoulder. The purse was Cherry's and had a can of aerosol hair spray in it. I had a golden lighter in the pocket of the jacket. The lighter belonged to Asher. It was too hot to be wearing the jacket.

All that leather crinkled and sighed every time I moved. Under other circumstances, it might have been interesting; as it was, it was irritating. Important safety tip: Don't try to sneak up on people in new leather. At least not people with supernatural hearing. Of course, we weren't sneaking up on anybody tonight. The vampires knew we were coming.

Verne's people had delivered the message. Once Richard arrived on the scene, my suspicious nature was ignored. If Verne said he told the vamps where to meet and why, then of course Richard believed him. Truthfully, so did I, but it still bugged me how easily Richard accepted Verne's word.

Of course, Richard had been visiting with Verne's pack for several years every summer. He knew them as friends. I respected friendship; I just didn't always trust it. Okay, I didn't trust other people's friends. I trusted my own, because I trusted my own judgment. Which meant, I guess, that I still didn't trust Richard's judgment. No, I didn't.

Thinking of him was enough. I could feel him off to my left like a warm presence moving through the summer night. I had a moment of feeling him walking. I could feel the rhythm of his body as he moved. I was almost dizzy, stumbling, as I pulled away from the image.

Zane took my arm. "You all right?"

I nodded and pulled away. I didn't know him that well yet. If I had a choice, I wasn't that touchy-feely with people I didn't know. But the moment I pulled away, I felt him shrink back. I knew without any magic at all that I'd hurt his feelings. I was his Nimir-ra, his leopard queen, and I was supposed to like him, or at least not dislike him. I didn't know whether apologizing would make it worse or better, so I said nothing.

Zane moved off through the woods, leaving me to myself. He was wearing the leather pants, vest, and boots he'd worn on the plane. Funny how Zane's personal wardrobe was just fine for tonight.

Richard stopped moving and stared at me across the yards that separated us. He was dressed all in black: leather pants and a silk shirt that clung to his new, improved, muscular upper body. He'd been lifting weights since Jean-Claude last measured him for shirts. He stood there all in black, a color I'd never seen him in. The moonlight was strong enough that I could see his face in bold highlights; only the eyes were lost to shadow, as if he were blind. Even from here, I could feel him like a line of heat in my body.

Earlier, Asher had made things in my body go low and tight. But now, standing in the hot, summer woods, watching the gleam of moonlight reflecting off the silk and leather on Richard's body, seeing his hair slide like a soft cloud around his shoulders, it made my chest tight, closer to tears than to lust, because he wasn't mine anymore. Whether I liked it or not, whether I wanted it or not, I would always regret not having been with Richard. I'd had other opportunities in the past for being with other guys in intimate settings, but I'd never regretted saying no before. In fact, I always felt like I'd dodged a bullet. Only Richard made me regret.

He started walking towards me. It made me look away as if we'd been at a restaurant or something, and I'd been caught staring at my ex. I remembered a night just after college when I'd been in a restaurant with some friends, and seen my ex-fiancé with his new girlfriend. He'd walked towards us as if he'd introduce me to her. I'd fled to the ladies' room and hid out until one of my girlfriends came and told me the coast was clear. Four years ago, I'd run for cover because he had dumped me and didn't seem to miss me. Now I stood my ground but not because I had dumped Richard. I stood my ground because my pride wouldn't let me hurry away through the trees and pretend I hadn't run away. I wasn't much into running lately.

So I stood there in the silvered dark, my heart beating in my throat, and waited for him to come to me.

Jamil and Shang-Da stood together in the dark, watching but not following him, as if he'd told them to stay put. Even from here, I could tell Shang-Da didn't like it. As far as I could see, Shang-Da hadn't changed clothes. He was still in his all-black, totally monochromed tailored suit, shirt, and accessories.

Richard came to stand about two feet in front of me. He just looked down at me and said nothing. I couldn't read his expression, and I didn't want to read his mind again.

I broke first, babbling. "I'm sorry about that, Richard. I didn't mean to invade you like that. I'm not very good at controlling the marks yet."

"That's all right," he said. Why is it that voices in the dark can sound so much more intimate?

"You okay with Asher's plan for tonight?" I asked, more for something to say while he stared down at me than for anything else.

Verne had learned through Mira that Colin believed that Asher was his replacement. Both masters were of an equivalent age. Colin was more powerful, but much of that extra power could have been from the ties that made him Master of the City. It was the first time I'd ever been told that just being Master of the City gave you extra power. Live and learn.

"I understand that Asher has to convince Colin that he doesn't want the job," Richard said.

Asher had decided that the way to do that was to convince Colin he was infatuated with me and with Jean-Claude. I wasn't sure how I felt about the plan, really. But we all agreed, even Richard, that the local vamps wouldn't believe that ties of friendship and nostalgia made Asher happy where he was. Vampires are like people in one respect, they'll believe a sexual explanation before an innocent one. Even death doesn't change the human trait of being willing to believe the worst of a person rather than the best.

"It's none of my business what you do or who you do it with, remember?" His voice was a great deal more neutral than his words.

"I was embarrassed in the bathroom. You caught me off guard."

"I remember," I said. He shook his head. "If we're supposed to flaunt our power tonight, that means we need to use the marks."

"Mira told them that you were interviewing new lupas. They know we're not an item," I said.

"We don't have to show them domestic bliss, Anita, just power." He held out his hand to me.

I stared at it. The last time he'd led me through summer woods had been the night he killed Marcus. The night when everything had gone wrong.

"I don't think I can take another stroll through the woods, Richard."

His hand closed into a fist. "I know I handled it badly that night, Anita. You'd never seen me shapeshift, and I shifted on top of you, while you couldn't get away. I've thought about that. I couldn't have chosen a worse way to introduce you to what I was. I know that now, and I'm sorry I scared you."

Scared didn't quite cover it, but I didn't say it out loud. He was apologizing, and I was going to accept it. "Thank you, Richard. I didn't mean to hurt you. I just . . ."

"Couldn't handle it," he said.

I sighed. "Couldn't handle it."

He held his hand out to me. "I'm sorry, Anita."

"Me, too, Richard."

He gave a small smile. "No magic, Anita, just your hand in mine."

I shook my head. "No, Richard."

"Afraid?" he asked.

I stared up at him. "When we need to draw the marks, we can touch; but not here, not now."

He reached up to touch my face, and I heard the silk of his shirt rip. He lowered his arm and put three fingers in the ripped seam. "That's the third time that's happened." He spread the seam on the other arm, putting his whole hand in it. He turned and showed me his back. The seams at the shoulders had pulled apart on both sides like mouths.

I giggled, and I don't do that often. "You look like the Incredible Hulk."

He flexed his arms and shoulders like a bodybuilder. The look of mock concentration on his face made me laugh. The silk ripped with an almost wet sound. Silk sounds the closest to flesh of any cloth when you tear it; only leather sounds more alive under a blade.

His tanned flesh showed pale through the black cloth, as if some invisible knife were slashing rips in it. He straightened up. One sleeve had ripped so badly at the shoulder that it flapped around his upper arm. The seams at the top of his chest were like twin smiles.

"I feel a draft," he said. He turned and showed me his back. The shirt had peeled off his back, hanging in tatters.

"It's trashed," I said.

"Too much weight lifting since I was measured for the shirt."

"You are perilously close to being too muscular," I said.

"Can you ever be too muscular?" he asked.

"Yes, you can," I said.

"You don't like it?" he asked. He wadded his hands into the front of the shirt and pulled. The silk tore into black shreds, ripping like a soft scream. He tossed the silk at me. I caught it by reflex, not thinking.

He grabbed what was left of the shirt across his shoulders and pulled it over his head, exposing every inch of his chest, his shoulders. He strained his arms upward, making the muscles mold against his skin from stomach to shoulder.

It didn't just make me catch my breath, it made me catch and hold, forgetting to breathe for a few seconds, so that when I did remember, my breath came out in a shaky gasp. So much for being cool and sophisticated.

He lowered his arms and all that was left were the sleeves. He pulled them off like a stripper removing long gloves and let the bits of silk fall to the ground. He stood looking at me, nude from the waist up.

"Am I supposed to applaud or say, 'My, my, Mr. Zeeman, what big shoulders you have'? I'm aware that you have a great body, Richard. You don't have to rub my face in it."

He moved into me until he was standing so close that a hard thought would have made us touch. "What a good idea," he said.

I frowned at him, because I wasn't following. "What's a good idea?"

"Rubbing your face in my body," he said, his voice so low that it was almost a whisper.

I blushed and hoped he couldn't see it in the dark. "It's an expression, Richard. You know I didn't mean it."

"I know," he said, "but it's still a good idea."

I stepped back. "Go away, Richard."

"You don't know the way to the lupanar," he said.

"I'll find it on my own; thanks, anyway."

He started to reach out to touch my face, and I almost stumbled backing up. He flashed me a quick smile and was gone, running through the trees. I could feel the roil of power like wind in a sail. He rode the energy of the woods, the night, the moon overhead, and if I wanted to, I could go along for the ride. I stood there, hugging my arms, concentrating everything I had on blocking him out, cutting the power between us.

When I felt alone and locked within my own skin again, I opened my eyes. Jason was standing so close it made me jump. It also made me realize how careless I'd been.

"Damn, Jason, you scared me."

"Sorry. I thought someone should stay behind and make sure no vampires made off with you."

"Thanks, I mean that."

"You all right?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I'm fine."

He grinned, and there was almost enough moonlight to see the laughter in his eyes. "He's getting better at it," Jason said.

"Getting better at what?" I asked. "Being Ulfric?"

"Seducing you," Jason said.

I stared at him.

"You know how I was jealous of the way you looked at Asher?"

I nodded.

"The way you look at Richard . . ." He just shook his head. "It's something."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters," he said. "It doesn't make you happy, but it matters."

And to that, there wasn't a damn thing I could say. We started walking through the woods in the general direction everyone else had been going. We didn't need no stinking directions.

Chapter 18

We found the lupanar, and we didn't need directions. We had Jason's nose and my ability to sense the dead. I'd assumed that all lupanars were the same, but yards away from this one, I knew I was wrong. Whatever lay up ahead had death mixed in with it: old death. It felt almost like a restless grave. Sometimes you'd be out in the woods and find one. An old grave where someone was buried without rites, just a shallow hole in the ground. The dead don't much care for shallow holes. It needs to be deep and wide or they get restless.

Cremation takes care of all of it, actually. I'd never met a ghost of someone who had been cremated.

We could see the soft shine of lanterns through the trees when Jason stopped, touching my arm for attention. "I don't like what I'm smelling," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"A body aboveground for a long time."

"A zombie?" I made it a question.

He shook his head. "No, drier, older than that."

We both looked at each other. I was pretty sure we were both thinking the same thing. Rotting vampire. I realized that I was clutching his arm, and he was clutching mine. We stood in the dark like children wondering if that noise was really a monster or if it was the wind. Neither of us took that next step to find out. If we'd had covers, we'd have been under them.

If we'd gone in there just to kill them, I'd have been all right. A slash-and-burn operation was my style lately. Every time we approached the vamps on their own territory by their own rules, we got hurt. I realized suddenly how much I did not want to walk into that place and negotiate with the monsters. I wanted to press a gun under Colin's chin and pull the trigger. I wanted done with it. I did not want to walk in there and give him power over me through some ancient rules of hospitality among the terminally anemic.

Damian came gliding through the trees. He was dressed in the standard uniform of black leather pants so tight you knew that nothing else was under them but vampire. But he was wearing a black silk T-shirt with a scooped neck. It looked almost like a woman's shirt. His shoulder-length hair helped the illusion of femininity, but the chest and shoulders that peeked out of the shirt ruined the effect: masculine, definitely masculine.

Jason was wearing an almost identical outfit, except the shirt and pants were satin. Though the knee-high boots were identical. For the first time, I realized that Jason was broader through the shoulders than Damian. Had that just happened recently? I looked from the werewolf to the vampire and shook my head. They grow up so fast.

What I said out loud was, "You guys look like backup singers for a Gothic band."

"Everyone's waiting for you," Damian said.

I realized that I still didn't want to go. I felt Jason shake his head. "No," he said.

"You're afraid," Damian said.

Jason nodded. I frowned. Jason and I were both usually braver than this, no matter what nasty things were in the next room—or the next clearing, as the case may be.

"What's up, Damian? What's happening?"

"I told you what Colin was."

"You called him a night hag. He can feed off fear. Was that supposed to be a clue?" I asked.

"He can also cause fear in others," Damian said.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to relax my hold on Jason's arm. He kept his death grip. "That makes sense," I said. "They can always guarantee a meal that way, right?"

Damian nodded. "But he also enjoys it. Fear is like a drug to a night hag. My old master said it was better than blood, because she could walk through a world of fear. If she desired it, she could move through a world that trembled, ever so slightly, at her passing."

"And that's what Colin is doing tonight?" I said.

Jason dropped his hand from my arm. He stayed close enough that our arms brushed, but we weren't huddling in the dark like rabbits.

"I can usually tell when a vamp is doing mind stuff on me. He's good."

"This is different from the other master-level powers, Anita. My first master said it was like breathing to a human, something you did without thinking about it. She could intensify it, but she could never really stop it. A low level dread surrounded her at all times."

"Was she scary in bed?" Jason asked. I think he meant it as a joke.

The look on Damian's face even by moonlight wasn't funny. "Yes," he said. "Yes, she was." He looked at me, and there was an intensity in his face that I didn't like. He actually reached out to me, then let his hand drop.

He finally said. "Some of the masters can feed off of other things, not just fear. "

"What else?" I asked.

Asher breathed through my mind, and he must have done the same to Damian, because we both jumped. His voice came like a whisper in a nearby room, almost as if it was sound without words. "Hurry."

There was no more talk. We hurried.

The lantern light shone through the trees like small, yellow moons. Damian glided through that last line of trees into the clearing. I didn't glide. I stumbled over the outer edge of the clearing. There was a power circle in this land so old and walked so often that it was like a curtain waiting to be drawn around the lupanar. It would take almost no power to bring whatever was here alive.

When I quit seeing with that inner vision and looked out into the clearing, I stopped walking. I just stood and stared. Jason stood and stared with me. Between the two of us, we were getting pretty jaded, but the lupanar of the Oak Tree Clan was worth a stare or two.

It was a huge clearing with an oak tree in the center of it, but that was like saying the Empire State Building is tall. The tree was like some great spreading giant. A hundred feet tall, rising up and up. There was a body hanging from one of the lower branches. It was mostly skeleton with dried bits of tendon holding one arm out. The other arm had disintegrated, falling to the ground. There were bones everywhere under the tree. White bones, yellowed bones, bones so old they were grey from being weathered. A carpet of bones stretched out from beneath the tree, filling the clearing.

The wind picked up, hurrying through the forest. It sent the leaves on the oak rustling and whispering. The rope on the skeleton creaked as it swung in

the wind. And with that one creak, my eyes went back to the tree, because there were dozens of creaking ropes. Most of them were empty now, broken or eaten to ragged ends, but those ropes creaked and moved with the wind, up and up. I followed the ropes up to the top of the tree as far as I could look in the dark by moonlight. The tree had to be over a hundred years old, and there were ragged bits of rope at its top. They'd been hanging bodies on this tree for a very long time.

The skeleton rotated suddenly in the growing wind, jaw gaping, empty sockets reflecting the lantern light for a second. The tendons at the jaw gave way, and the jaw hung, swinging on one side, like a broken hinge. I had a horrible urge to run across that boneyard and yank the jaw away, or reattach it, anything so that bit of bone would stop wagging in the wind.

"My God," Jason whispered.

All I could do was nod. I wasn't rendered speechless often, but I had no words for this.

Damian had stopped and moved back to stand by us. He seemed to be waiting, as if he were our escort. I finally tore my gaze away from the tree and its awful burden. There were benches forming three sides of a disconnected triangle. There was enough room between each bench that no one was unduly crowded, yet the clearing felt crowded, almost as if the air itself was thick with things unseen, hurrying to and fro, brushing past me in a rush of gooseflesh.

"Did you feel that?" I asked.

Jason looked at me. "Feel what?"

I guess not. That meant whatever was crowding so close in the air wasn't something that a shapeshifter would pick up on. So what was it?

There was a vampire staring at me from where he sat on the near bench. His hair was brown, cut short so his neck was pale and bare. His eyes seemed very dark, maybe brown, maybe black. He smiled, and I felt his power rush over me. He was trying to capture me with his eyes. Usually, I would have tried to stare him down, but I didn't like what I was feeling in this place. Power, and it wasn't vampires. I looked away from his eyes, studying the pale curve of his cheek. His lips were full, with an upper lip that was set in a perfect bow, very feminine. The rest of the face was all points and angles; the chin sharp, the nose too long. It was a face that would be homely except for that mouth and those long-lashed eyes, dark and drowning deep as black mirrors.

I didn't stare too long at those eyes. I was feeling unsteady, as if the ground under my feet wasn't quite solid. Richard should have told me about the lupanar. Someone should have prepared me. Later, I'd be angry that no one had; now, I was just trying to figure out what to do about it. If Verne's clan were practicing human sacrifice, then it had to be stopped.

Damian moved in front of me, blocking my view of the ethers. "What's wrong, Anita?"

I looked at him. The only thing that kept me from losing it right then in front of the other vampires was Richard. He'd have never tolerated human sacrifice. Oh, he might have come down here once, then never returned, and

not called the police, but he would never have returned year after year. He simply wouldn't have approved.

Maybe this was the way Verne's clan treated its dead. If it was anything else, I'd call in the state cops, but not tonight. Not unless they dragged out a screaming victim. If they did that, then all bets were off.

I shook my head. "What could possibly be wrong?" I said. I walked into the clearing, going for our own little group. It looked as if all three groups had the same amount of people. That was pretty typical of a meet between preternatural groups. You always negotiated your entourage.

Richard stood and came to meet me. I took his hand when he offered it, but strangely, right at that moment, I didn't care if he was wearing his shirt or not. I was angry at him. Angry at him for not preparing me for this place. Maybe he thought that nothing shocked me anymore, or maybe . . . oh, hell, I didn't know, but he'd screwed up again.

So I let him hold my hand, and the touch of his flesh meant nothing. I was too confused and working too hard on holding my temper to be seduced right then.

"Take the jacket off, child; let's get a look at what you've got," a voice said.

I turned, slowly, to look at the owner of that voice.

The vampire had hair that I would have called golden if I hadn't had Asher's hair to compare it to. The hair was cut short, all over. His eyes could have been blue or grey in the uncertain light. The face had frozen before he'd ever hit twenty. Still young enough that his face was thin and smooth, as if he'd died before he'd been able to grow a decent beard.

He had the face of a child on a tall, gangly frame, as if he'd been awkward in life. He wasn't awkward as he stood. He came to his feet in a movement so smooth it looked like dancing. He stood, and the black-eyed vamp stood with him, coming to his side in a motion of long practice like they were two parts of a whole.

There was one human woman among the eight of them. She looked like pure Native American with waist-length hair that was as true black as my own. Hers was straight and thick. Her skin was a dark brown, face almost square, with large, brown eyes that had lashes so thick that even from a distance they were noticeable.

If she wore any makeup, I couldn't tell. She was one of those women that is striking rather than beautiful, too strong featured for conventional prettiness, but you wouldn't forget the face once you saw it.

"Come on, girl, strip off," that young face said. "We've seen most everything everybody else has. I will be mighty disappointed if I don't get to see your goodies, too."

The woman's face remained marvelously blank, but there was a tightness to those strong shoulders, a slight turn to that long line of neck. She didn't seem to be enjoying the show.

Richard's hand tightened around mine. I thought at first he was trying to warn me not to get mad, but one glance at his face, and it was the other way

around. He was getting pissed. The night would go downhill pretty damn fast if I was supposed to be the calm one.

"Are you always this offensive, or am I getting a special treat?" I asked.

He laughed, but it was just a laugh, ordinary, human. He couldn't do the voice tricks that Jean-Claude and even Asher could do. Of course, Colin had other talents. I'd seen those other talents carved in Nathaniel's chest.

Asher stood. He'd started the evening wearing satin a pale icy blue only two shades darker than his white-blue eyes. The jacket had darker blue embroidery at the sleeves and lapels. It fastened with one of those cloth loops over a large, silk-covered button. The pants matched the jacket perfectly. He'd tried the jacket on with no shirt. His chest had been very visible. The scars had seemed harsher against the soft blue cloth. He'd stared at himself in the room's only mirror for a long time. He'd finally put a white silk shirt on under the jacket.

Now that white shirt was in tatters. It looked like gigantic claws had ripped at it. His chest showed very plainly through the ruined cloth. There was no blood. I'd only seen three vampires that could cause harm from a distance. One of them had been a member of their council. But none of them had had the delicacy of control to shred cloth so close to flesh and not draw blood. We were deep into the pissing contest. So far, Colin was winning.

I looked at Shang-Da and Jamil, standing just behind the bench. They looked untouched, unharmed.

"Some bodyguards," I said.

"We're not here to guard vampires," Shang-Da said.

I looked at Jamil. He shrugged.

Great, just great. Zane was standing even farther behind the wolves. He didn't look any worse for wear, either, but he also looked lost, like the lone teetotaler at a wine tasting.

"Was I supposed to stop him?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, Zane. Not you." I spared a glance at Richard, wondering why he'd just let everyone stand around. Asher I understood. Asking for help was a sign of weakness.

"Remove the jacket, or I'll remove it for you," Colin said.

"Colin, you've made your point." The woman's voice was surprisingly deep, a rich, smoky alto.

Colin patted her hand, smiled, but his words weren't gentle. "I will tell you when my point has been made, Nikki." He moved away from her then, dismissed her, and the pain of that dismissal showed.

For a moment, anger flared in those dark eyes, and I felt her power. Her power, not his. She was a witch or a psychic or something I had no word for. Human in the same way I was human: barely.

The anger vanished behind that dark, stoic face, but I knew what I'd seen. She didn't love him, nor he her. But she was his human servant, bound for all eternity, for better or worse.

"You want to see what's under the jacket," I said, "come over here and help me out of it. It'd be the gentlemanly thing to do."

"Anita," Richard said.

I patted his arm. "It's okay, Richard. Chill."

The look on his face was enough. He didn't trust me to behave. Funny, in our own ways, neither of us trusted the other.

I looked at Asher. We shared no marks. We couldn't read each other's thoughts. But we didn't need to. We were getting our butts kicked because the werewolves weren't helping us.

I looked over at the eight werewolves that were local. Verne sat on the bench with his wolves poised around him. Two of them were in full wolf form, except they were the size of ponies, bigger than any normal grey wolf. Verne was still in his T-shirt and jeans. No one had dressed up but us. Even the other vampires were just in suits and dresses.

I'd never seen this many vampires dressed so . . . ordinarily. Most of them had a sense of style, or at least theater. They put on a good show. Of course, in the presence of the bone-draped tree who needed a better show? Of course, the lupanar was supposed to be our showplace, not Colin's. Again, I wondered if we could trust Verne as far as Richard thought we could.

I walked a little into the center of the triangle made by the three benches. I waited for Colin to join me.

He just stood there next to the black-eyed vamp, smiling. "Now why would I waste the energy to walk even a few yards when I can undress you from here?"

I smiled and I made it mocking. "Scared to get too close?"

"I admit you are a delicate little thing, but appearances are often deceiving. I have used this youthful face of mine more than once to fool the unwary. I am not the unwary, Anita Blake." He extended a pale hand, and I felt the power thrill over my skin before it slashed through the front of the velvet top. The cross spilled out of the velvet like a captive star set free. The cross flared white and I was careful to look sideways from it. It burned like magnesium, so bright it was almost painful. Crosses glow around vamps, but they don't glow like small supernovas unless you are in serious trouble. I'd never had one glow like this when I wasn't afraid yet. I'd always assumed the cross reacted to my level of fear like a holy mood ring. Tonight, for the first time, I realized that it may have been my faith that enabled it to glow, but once the faith was in place, something else took over. Not my will, but thine.

Colin's vampires reacted just as they were supposed to. They cowered, throwing their arms or their jackets or in one case, a skirt, in front of their eyes. Hiding from the light.

Except for Colin and the black-eyed vamp. Why was I not surprised that those two were old enough and powerful enough to face the cross? They weren't happy about it. They were protecting their eyes, squinting against the light, but they weren't cowering.

"Slash me again, fang-boy, see what else falls out."

He did what I asked. I really hadn't thought he'd try. He slashed at me through the air, but the power fell away like water parting around a rock.

"If you want to hurt me, Colin, you're going to have to get up close and personal."

"I could have Nikki rip it from your throat."

"I thought you were hot shit, Colin. Or is that just when you have young men tied up and helpless? Is that what you need to feel like a big bad vampire? Someone tied up and helpless, or is it young men that does it for you?"

Colin said one word: "Barnaby."

The black-eyed vampire moved in front of Colin, closer to the cross. But he stopped, unable to come closer. Then, over the glow of the cross, I watched Barnaby's face begin to rot. That smooth flesh sloughed away, sliding in wet gobbets of flesh down his face, until tendons glistened wetly and bone showed as his nose collapsed, showing his face like a skull covered by rotted things.

He limped towards me, one hand held out, and it reminded me of Damian's hands earlier in the night. The flesh bursting in a stinking wave of blackness. Except there was no smell. The last vamp I'd seen who could rot at will had also been able to control the smell, like a magical deodorant.

If it had been a fight, I'd have drawn a gun and blown him away before he took the cross, but this was a contest of wills more than anything. If he was vampire enough to touch my cross, then I had to be brave enough to let him do it. I hoped he didn't press it between our bodies. I'd had one vampire do that, and a second degree burn on my breast wasn't my idea of fun.

The cross burned brighter and brighter as he came for me. I had to turn my head away from the light; it was so bright it hurt me to look at it. I knew it hurt the vampire more.

I felt that rotted hand slide across my chest, leaving something wet and semisolid to slide between my breasts. He grabbed the chain and not the cross, smart vampire. He jerked the chain and it broke. The cross swung into his arm, and the silver burned with a flame as white and pure as the light had been.

The vampire screamed and threw the cross, which spun in a glittering arc like a tiny comet until it was swallowed by the dark.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim lantern light once more, I said, "Don't worry about it, Barnaby, I've got extras."

He'd fallen to his knees, cradling his arm. He was still a walking rotted nightmare, but the flesh of his hand had blackened.

"But not everyone has your faith," Colin said. Again, just like in the forest, I didn't feel his vampire powers reach out, but I was suddenly afraid. Now that I knew what it was, it wasn't as bad, but it was different from any other ability I'd ever sensed. Quieter somehow, and more frightening because of it.

"Barnaby, the young blond werewolf is very afraid of you. He's tasted your kind before."

Barnaby got to his feet and tried to move around me. I stepped in front of him. "Jason is under my protection."

"Barnaby won't hurt him, just play with him a little."

I shook my head. "I gave Jason my word that I wouldn't let the vampire that did Nathaniel touch him."

"Your word?" Colin said. "You're a modern American. Your word means nothing."

"My word means something to me," I said. "I don't give it lightly."

"I can taste the truth of your words, but I say that Barnaby shall play with your young friend, and you cannot stop him without breaking truce. Whoever breaks truce first will have the Council to answer to."

I kept moving with Barnaby so that he was slowly backing me up, but I kept getting in his way. "Colin, you can feel fear, so I'm told. You can feel how very afraid he is of your friend here."

"Oh, yes, I will feast tonight."

"You could break his mind," I said. Someone touched my back and I jumped. It was Asher. I'd been backed up all the way to the bench.

Richard and his bodyguards had moved around Jason. They might not protect Asher, but they would protect Jason. Barnaby moved to one side, trying to get around me. I was forced to jump on and over the bench to put myself in his way again.

I put my left hand against that decaying chest. The right was on the butt of the Browning. I made sure he saw it.

Colin spoke. Though Barnaby's body should have blocked his view, it was almost as if he could see through the other vampire's eyes. "If you shoot one of my vampires, then you will have broken truce."

"You sent Nathaniel back to us dying. Asher said it was a compliment of sorts, that you truly thought we could cure him."

"And you did, didn't you?" Colin said.

"Yeah," I said. "Well, let me pay you the same compliment. I think if I shoot Barnaby point-blank, he'll survive it. I've shot rotting vamps before, and their clothes took more damage than they did."

"You can taste the truth in her words," Asher said. "She believes he'll live, which means it is not a breach of truce."

"She believes it, but she hopes for his death," Colin said.

"Breaking the mind of one of our entourage," Asher said, "will break the truce, as well."

"I do not agree," Colin said.

"Then we've got a stalemate," I said.

"I think not," Colin said. He turned to Verne. "Verne, earn your keep. Strip the young one of his protectors."

Verne stood and his wolves flowed around him. They moved into the clearing on a roil of energy that made the nape of my neck dance and my hand go for a gun.

Richard said, "Verne."

But Verne wasn't looking at Richard. He was looking at me. He was carrying a small covered basket in his hands. I didn't wait to find out what he had in the basket. I pointed the gun at his chest.

Chapter 19

"Ease down, girl," Verne said. "It's a present."

I kept the gun nice and steady on the center of his body. "Yeah, right."

"When you see what it is, you'll know that we aren't on his side."

"Don't pick the wrong side, puppy dog," Colin said. "Or I will make you very, very sorry."

Verne looked at the vampire. I watched his eyes bleed from human to wolf while he held that basket out to me. But he kept those angry, frightening eyes on Colin.

"You have no animal to call," Verne said, in a voice gone rough and growling low. "You dare to stand in our place of power and threaten us. You are less than the wind outside our cave. You are nothing here."

"She is not one of you, either," Colin said.

"She is lupa of the Thronnus Roke Clan."

"She is human."

"She stands between you and a werewolf. That's lupa enough for me."

Barnaby had backed off. I don't know if he thought I'd jump the gun and shoot him or if Colin had whispered a new plan in his rotting skull. I wasn't sure I even cared. There was a glob of something heavy and wet sliding down into the bra. It was like feeling a tear slide down your cheek but worse, so much worse. I'd resisted the urge to wipe it away with Barnaby staring me down. As soon as he crept back to Colin, I used my left hand to scoop the leftover part out and fling it on the ground.

"What's the matter, Anita? Too up close and personal for you?"

I wiped my hand on the leather skirt and smiled. "Fuck you, Colin."

Verne stepped into the center of the triangle alone. His wolves stayed huddled in front of the far bench. He came to stand a couple of yards in front of our bench with that basket in his hands.

I glanced at Asher. He shrugged. Richard nodded like I was supposed to go meet him. A present, Verne had called it.

I went to meet him. He knelt, setting the basket on the ground between us. He stayed kneeling. I knelt, too, because he seemed to expect it. He just kept looking at me with those wolfish eyes. He still looked like an aging Hell's Angel, but those eyes . . . I wondered if I would ever get used to seeing wolf eyes in a human face. Probably not.

I raised the hinged lid of the small basket. A face, a head, looked up at me. I scrambled to my feet. The Browning just appeared in my hand. I pointed it at Verne, then the ground, then pressed the flat of the barrel to my forehead.

I found my voice, finally. "What is that?"

"You said you wanted Mira's head in a basket. That if we gave you that, it would make it right between our two clans."

I took a sharp breath and blew it out. I looked down into the basket, still standing, still holding the gun like the comfort object it was. The mouth was open in a soundless scream, the eyes half closed as if they'd caught her napping, but I knew they hadn't. Someone had simply closed the eyes after they took her head. Even dead, like this, the bones of the face were delicate, and you knew at least the face had been pretty.

I forced myself to put up the gun. It couldn't help me now. I dropped back to my knees, staring at it. I finally looked up at Verne. I was shaking my head over and over. I looked into his face and tried to read something in it that I could yell at or talk to. But the expression was alien, and it wasn't just the eyes.

You'd think after all this time, I would stop forgetting that they weren't human. But I had. I'd been pissed, and I'd spoken as if I was talking to another human being, but I hadn't been. I'd been speaking to werewolves, and I'd forgotten that.

I heard someone whispering, and it was me. I was whispering, "This is my fault. This is my fault." I started to put my left hand in front of my face, and I caught a whiff of Barnaby's rotted flesh. It was enough.

I crawled to one side and vomited. I knelt on all fours, waiting for it to pass. When I could speak, I said, "Don't any of you people understand the term? It's just a fucking expression!"

Richard was there, kneeling by me. He touched my back gently. "You told him what you wanted, Anita. She had betrayed the pack's honor. It can carry a death penalty. All you helped them choose was the method of execution."

I glanced sideways at him. I had a horrible urge to cry. "I didn't mean it," I whispered.

He nodded. "I know." There was a look in his eyes of such sorrow, of a shared knowledge of how many times you never really meant what you said, but the monsters were listening, and they always took you at your word.

Chapter 20

"I thought you were tough, Miss Blake."

Richard helped me stand and I let him. I leaned against him for a second, my forehead against the smooth skin of his arm. I pushed away from him and stood on my own. I met Colin's eyes. They were definitely grey, not blue.

"I know we're supposed to go through all the protocol and waltz for a while, Colin. But the last of my patience is sitting in that basket. So state your grievance and let's all get the fuck out of here."

He smiled. "So tenderhearted, maybe your reputation is just talk after all."

I smiled then and shook my head. "Maybe it is, but since we're not supposed to kill each other tonight, Colin, it doesn't matter."

Colin walked away from me. He went to stand closer to his own people but faced Asher. I had been dismissed as his own human servant had been dismissed.

"I will not be replaced, Asher."

"I have not come to replace you," Asher said, voice empty, neutral.

"Why would Jean-Claude send a master almost exactly my age into my lands against my express orders?"

"I could have hidden what I was," Asher said. "But Jean-Claude thought you would misinterpret that. I came in hiding nothing."

"But still you came," Colin said.

"I cannot change what has happened," Asher said. "What would satisfy us all?"

"Your death," Colin said.

Everybody went very still, as if we'd all caught our collective breaths. I started to say something and Richard touched my shoulder. I closed my mouth and let Asher talk, but it was hard.

Asher laughed that wonderful touchable laugh. "Breaking the truce, aren't you, Colin?"

"Not if I kill a rival sent to supplant me. Then I am merely protecting myself and making an example for other ambitious vampires."

"You know I have not come to supplant you," Asher said.

"I know nothing of the kind."

"I am content where I am."

"Why?" Colin asked. "You could be the master of a city somewhere far from their triumvirate. Why would you be content with less?"

Asher gave a very small smile. "I prefer gentler persuasions over power."

Colin shook his head. "I have been told you are in love with her, and with Jean-Claude himself. I have been told that you are bedding them both and that is why the Ulfric seeks a new lupa."

"If he would only cooperate, it could be a happy foursome," Asher said.

Richard, startled beside me, stiffened. It was my turn to touch his arm and keep him from saying what he was thinking.

"I have been told many things," Colin said. "My people have watched you from afar. We believe you are enamored of the girl and of Jean-Claude. We are aware of your history together. We even believe that a lover of men like yourself would do their Ulfric if he would let you. What we do not believe is that you are bedding any of them. We believe that this is a pathetic story to save yourself."

I started walking to Asher. The plan was that we would put on a mild show of petting. I'd warned him it better be mild, but I never got the chance.

There was movement in the dark. Dozens of vampires appeared out of the darkness, encircling the clearing. Colin had been distracting us while the vampires moved up to flank us, and neither Asher nor I, nor any of the wereanimals had sensed them.

"Let us have Asher and the rest of you may go free."

"You are breaking the truce now," Asher said. He sounded calm, empty, as if Colin hadn't just demanded his death.

Verne strode forward. "This is our lupanar. We can close it to all strangers."

"Not without your vargamor. You left her safe at home just in case things went wrong. So protective of your human pet. I counted on it." He raised an arm as if summoning his people. "No one you have with you is witch enough to invoke the circle."

"If you kill Asher it will break truce."

"I will not harm Jean-Claude's triumvirate. I merely remove a rival."

The vampires moved up through the trees. They didn't hurry. They moved like solid shadows, slow, as if they had all night to tighten the circle and take us. "Asher?" I asked without taking my gaze from those slowly menacing figures.

"*Oui.*"

"Does this break truce?"

"*Oui.*"

"Great," I said.

I felt him move towards me, but I had eyes only for the outer dark and that ever-shrinking circle. I picked one vampire out. Male, slender, youngish in appearance. He wore no shirt. His chest was a pale, almost glowing whiteness in the darkness.

"What is it, *ma cherie?*" Asher was standing very close to me now. I moved him to one side with my left arm and brought the mini-Uzi out with my right. swinging it around my body, shooting before I'd actually pointed so the bullets cut across the vampire's legs, making him jerk. I grabbed it with both hands and fought the gun to spray it back and fourth across his body. I was screaming as I did it, wordless, not to sound menacing. You couldn't hear the screams over the machine gun. I screamed because I couldn't help myself, because the tension, the horror, something came up my hand from the gun and out my mouth.

The blood that sprayed from his body was black from distance and night. It looked like his body was torn in half by some giant hand. His upper body fell slowly to one side. His lower body collapsed to its knees.

The circle of vampires had frozen or had dived for cover. The silence was thunderous. My own labored breathing seemed painfully loud. My voice came breathy, but clear, a shout, "Nobody move, nobody fucking move!"

No one moved.

Asher's voice broke the stillness. "We can all walk away from here tonight, Colin."

"Impressively violent," Colin said, "but I think you are mistaken. Poor Archie will not be walking anywhere."

"My apologies to Archie," I said.

"I must have payment for him, Miss Blake."

"You can bill me."

"Oh, I intend to, Miss Blake. I intend to take it out of your hide."

"How many of your people do you want me to kill tonight, Colin? I've got lots more bullets."

"You cannot kill them all, Miss Blake."

"Yeah, but I can kill about a half dozen and wound twice that many. I don't see them lining up for it, Colin."

I badly wanted to see his face, but I kept my attention on the vamps in the trees. They hadn't moved. The vampires already inside the lupanar were someone else's problem. My job was keeping the others at a distance. I think Asher knew the division of labor. I just hoped Richard did.

"I don't know how Jean-Claude runs his territory, but I know how I run mine. What you fail to appreciate, Miss Blake, is that nothing you can do to them will make them fear you more than they already fear me."

"Death is the ultimate threat, Colin, and I don't bluff."

"Neither do I."

I felt something move out through the trees. Power moving from Colin to those waiting figures. I started to turn the gun from the darkness to Colin, but Asher touched my arm. "He is mine. Watch the others."

I slid the gun a fraction back to the still forms. "You get the Master of the City and I get all the rest. Sounds fair."

Richard moved up beside me. "You don't get all of them," he said.

I wanted to ask if he would kill them. If he would use that preternatural strength to snap spines and tear their bodies apart with his bare hands as I had done with the machine gun. But I didn't ask. How good Richard's threat was was between him and his conscience. The only thing that bothered me about Richard's conscience was that I couldn't count on him for a single kill tonight. He'd hurt people and toss them around, but if he wouldn't kill, that meant that he couldn't account for any of them. There were over a hundred bad guys, vampires, and only eight of us. Sixteen if I could count Verne, but I didn't know if I could count on him and his people. It would have been nice to be able to trust Richard at my back, but I didn't.

The vampires out in the dark began to rot. Not all of them, but damn near half. I'd never seen so many. For a vampire to rot, it means that the vamp that made them was the same kind of creature. Which meant that Barnaby had made half of Colin's people. No Master of the City would allow any subordinate to have such power. But the proof was staring me in the face with eye sockets gone to black dripping ruin.

"You have been very bold, Colin, to share your power with your second to this degree," Asher said.

"Barnaby is my right hand, my second eye. Together we are a stronger master than either of us would be apart."

"As are Jean-Claude and I," Asher said.

"But Barnaby is a corruptor. He brings that to the dance," Colin said.

"What do you bring to Jean-Claude's dance, Asher?" Fear breathed through the lupanar. I shivered as it prickled down my skin, tightened my chest, and tried to stop my breath in my throat.

"Night hag," Damian spoke, his voice a hiss. He spit on the ground in the general direction of Colin, but he didn't walk any closer.

"I smell your fear, Damian. I can taste it like rich, nutty ale on the back of my tongue," Colin said. "Your master must have been a fine piece of work."

Damian moved back a step, then stopped. "You ask why Asher is content to remain with Jean-Claude when he could go elsewhere and be his own master. Maybe he is tired as I am tired of the struggle. The in-fighting. The fucking politics. Jean-Claude ransomed me from my master. I am not a master vampire, nor will I ever be. I have no special powers. Yet, Jean-Claude bargained for me. I serve him not out of fear but out of gratitude."

"You make Jean-Claude sound weak. The Council does not fear weaklings, yet they fear him," Colin said.

"Compassion is not weakness," Richard said. "Only those without compassion think otherwise."

I glanced at him, but he was looking at the vampires, not me. The fact that I felt it was a personal remark to me was just me being overly sensitive.

"Compassion." Colin shook his head. He threw back his head and laughed. It was sort of unnerving. I kept my attention on the outer darkness and the waiting vamps, but it was hard not to watch the laughing vampire. Hard not to ask what was so funny.

"Compassion," Colin said again. "Now that is not a word I would have used for Jean-Claude. Has he fallen in love with his human servant? I do not think love is the path to Jean-Claude's heart. Is it sex?" He raised his voice and called to me. "Is that it, Miss Blake? Has the seducer finally been seduced? Are you that good a piece of ass, Miss Blake?"

That made my shoulders hunch. But I kept my eye on the other vampires, the machine gun held in both hands. "A lady doesn't kiss and tell, Colin."

That made him laugh again. "Jean-Claude would never forgive me if I killed the best piece of ass he's found in centuries. I say again, give me Asher, and the blond wolf. Asher's life and the wolf's fear at Barnaby's hands. That is the price for safe passage through my lands."

It was my turn to laugh, a soft, harsh sound. "Fuck you."

"I take it that is a no," he said.

"No," I said. I watched the vampires out in the dark. They hadn't moved, but somehow there was a sense of movement, an increased energy. It was nothing I could start shooting about, but I didn't like it.

"Does Miss Blake speak for all of you?" Colin asked.

"You can't have Jason to torture," Richard said.

"I would not willingly give up my life," Asher said.

"The human servant speaking for all. How very strange. But if the answer is no, then the answer is no."

Asher yelled, "Anita!"

I started to rotate the gun back towards them, but something slashed down my face, over one eye. It made me hesitate, one hand going over my eye, holding it. I had time to think, stupid, and start to lower my hand, start to raise the gun back up, and a vampire slammed into me, taking us both to the ground.

I was flat on my back with a woman on top of me, mouth wide, fangs snapping at my face like a dog. I pulled the trigger with the muzzle pressed to her body. The bullets exploded out her back in a rain of blood and thicker bits. Her body danced on top of mine, twitching, jerking. I had to push her body off of me, and when I could sit up, it was too late. The vampires were inside the lupanar and the fighting was joined.

I couldn't see out of my right eye. It was too full of blood, and more kept pouring down. A figure appeared in front of me and I fired up the length of its body until the bullets exploded its head in a burst of splattering rain. I closed my right eye and did my best to ignore it. Nursing the wound was going to get me killed.

I looked around for the others. Verne tore the head off a vampire and sent it spinning into the dark. Richard was at the center of a mob, almost lost to sight with bodies hanging off him. Asher was covered in blood, facing Colin. There were werewolves everywhere in wolf or manwolf form. Two vamps came for me and sight-seeing was over.

One of them was rotting down to bones, the other was solid. I shot the solid one first because he, I was sure, I could kill. Rotting vamps don't also die from bullets. The solid one fell to his knees in a spray of blood, face split in half like a ripe melon.

The rotting vamp jumped me in a blur of speed and we went tumbling across the ground as I tried to bring the gun up. The mouth stretched above my face, naked tendons straining between the bones of his cheeks, fangs came for my face. I fired into the body, but the gun was at a bad angle and missed anything vital. All I got for my troubles was the scream of a wolf, and I knew that I'd shot someone that was on our side. Shit.

I turned my head and the fangs sank through the leather jacket into my shoulder. I screamed, my hand fumbling for the jacket pocket and my backup cross. A rotted hand caressed my face, sliding over the wound above my eye. The leather jacket acted as a sort of armor, keeping the fangs from getting a good lock on my shoulder. The mouth worried at my shoulder like a dog with a bone, trying to dig through the thick leather into the flesh beyond. It hurt, but not as much as it was going to hurt if I didn't do something.

The cross flared to life like a captive star, but the vamp had its face buried in the leather. It couldn't see the cross. I swung the cross by the chain into its bare skull. Smoke rose from the bone, and the vampire jerked its face back from me, naked teeth opened in a scream. I shoved the cross in its face, and those teeth snapped at it like a dog telling you to stay away. But those teeth caught the chain, and bit through it. There was a moment where even without most of the flesh left on the skull I could see surprise on its face. I flung my arms across my face and heard the dull explosion, the spatter of debris. There was a sharp pain in my hand, and when I could look, I had a bone shard in my left hand. I pulled the shard out, and only then did I bleed.

The vampire was just so much mess scattered around me. The cross lay on the ground still glowing, smoke rising off its surface as if the metal had been freshly made and quenched in the blood of the vampire. I started to pick it up

by the chain, and Nikki, Colin's human servant, was standing over me. I caught the dull flash of her knife and rolled away, coming to one knee with the Browning in one hand. She was right above me waiting for an underhand strike, but I wasn't standing, and she didn't have time to change her strike. I started to pull the trigger and a werewolf barreled into her, took them both off into the dark. Shit. What was I supposed to do, yell "mine" like in a volleyball game?

I heard Jason yelling. He was standing only about a yard away with both arms stuck through the chest of a rotting vampire. He was pulling desperately on his arms, but they seemed trapped, caught on the ribs. The vampire didn't seem to mind. It licked his face, and he screamed. Another rotter was on his back, riding him, head back for a strike. I sighted down my arm at the head and fired. The head jerked back, and brains spilled out a hole on the other side in a dark gush, but the vampire turned its head slowly and looked at me. I fired into that calm face three more times in a tight cluster before the head collapsed in upon itself like an empty eggshell. The vampire fell away from Jason.

I walked towards Jason and the other vampire. Now it was the vampire who was struggling to get free of Jason, but they were entwined like bumpers after a car wreck. I put the gun barrel under the vampire's chin, my other hand over Jason's eyes to protect them, and fired. It took three shots for the brain to be destroyed and the body to go limp.

I moved my hand from Jason's eyes, and he looked past me, eyes widening. I was already turning before he could yell, "Behind you!"

The blow came before I'd finished the turn. My shoulder and arm went numb. My hand opened and the Browning slipped out while I was still trying to see what had hit me. I dived for the ground, rolling on my good shoulder and came up to my knee to see Nikki holding a very big stick. I was lucky she'd lost the knife somewhere.

I started to draw the big knife down my back, but I was using my left hand, because my right still wasn't working. Left-handed I was slower, and Nikki was unbelievably fast. She moved in a blur of motion that was beyond human. She was on me, slashing the air with the club, and I gave up trying to draw a knife, and worked just at not being hit. The attack was so quick, so savage, that I didn't have time to stand. All I could do was roll on the ground barely ahead of each blow.

The jagged end of the branch sank into the ground next to my face. She struggled for a second to free it, and I kicked her in the knee. It made her stagger, but didn't dislocate it, or she'd have screamed. It did force her back from the club. I rolled away, trying to get to my feet. She grabbed me, and lifted me over her head like she was bench-pressing me. The next thing I knew I was airborne. I hit the ground just short of the oak, falling into the bones beneath the tree hard enough that some of them shattered. The jolt of power that ran through me from hands to knees drove what air I had left from my body. I lay there half-stunned, not just from being thrown across the clearing, but from the power roaring across my body from the bones. It was death magic, and though different from mine, it recognized me, recognized my power. I

knew as I lay in the bones that I could bring the circle to life? But what would happen when the wards flared to life? This pack worshipped Odin. If I set the circle of power would it count as a holy place? Would it suddenly be like standing inside a church? It had possibilities if I could warn Asher and Damian.

I got painfully to my knees and found that we were losing. Everywhere I looked our people were buried under piles of vampires. Asher and Damain were still standing free, but both were bleeding and Colin and Barnaby were pressing the attack. Richard was completely lost to sight except for one arm gone long with claws. Verne was standing with another werewolf in human form. It was a woman shorter than I was with short dark hair that touched her shoulders, dressed in a thigh-long T-shirt and pants. She looked small beside Verne, but she was the only one of his people still standing. The others were dead or dying on the ground.

My right hand was working again, just stunned not dislocated. Lucky me. I drew a knife from one of the wrist sheaths. It wasn't a blade consecrated to ritual, but it would have to do.

I wanted to whisper to Asher and Damian for them to fly, but it was too far away to whisper, and I didn't know how to talk directly to either of their minds. I did the only thing I could think of, I yelled. I yelled, "Asher, Damian!"

They turned startled faces to me.

I raised the knife so they could see it, and screamed, "Fly, damn it, fly!"

Nikki was almost to the bone circle. I screamed, "Fly!" Asher grabbed Damian's wrist, and I had to turn away before I could see them safe. I had moments to try and make this work. Nikki had a power similar to mine. If she figured out what I was trying to do she'd stop me if she could.

I pressed my hands to the tree trunk and the power breathed through me. It was magic that had been built with death, and that was my speciality. The moment I touched the tree I knew that it wasn't human sacrifice, but that this was where their munin gathered. The spirits of their dead were here in the bones, the tree, the ground. They filled the air with a whispering, tittering, noise that only I could hear.

The lukoi consume their dead, at least part of them, and the eating of their flesh puts them into some sort of ancestral memory. Munin they call them after Odin's raven, Memory. They aren't ghosts, but they are the spirits of the dead, and I was a necromancer. The munin liked me. They eased around me like a cool caress of wind, entwining like phantom cats. I could channel the munin, sort of like a medium at a seance, but more, and worse. The only munin I'd ever channeled had been Raina, the wicked bitch of the east. But when she came, it was like a battering ram. Standing there in the middle of hundreds, thousands of munin, I knew I could open to them. But it would be like opening a door, an invitation. I could wallow in the past, live other lives. It was a whisper of seduction. Raina came like a rapist, an overwhelming force. Not a sharing, but a taking.

However they'd tied their munin to this place it was blood magic, death magic. I cut the palm of my hand and pressed it to the tree. I prayed, and sprinkled blood on the bones at my feet. The circle of power snapped into place

with a rush that raised my skin as if it would crawl off my flesh. I invoked the circle. I called the wards. I worshipped, and it was enough.

Shrieks, screams filled the night. The vampires went up in flames. They ran, burning, for the edge of the ward and all who made it across exploded in a rain of burning bits and pieces.

I felt Damian above me, and Asher. None of the vampires left behind tried to do anything but run. Most fell into burning heaps on the ground without taking another step. Anyone under a hundred died where they stood.

The Indian woman had come to stand on the edge of the bone circle. She stared at me while the vampires screamed and died, and the stink of burning flesh and hair was thick enough to choke. Her face showed nothing. She'd rescued the club.

Finally she said, "I should kill you."

I nodded. "Yes, you should, but your allies are dead and your master has flown away. I'd get out while the getting's good, if I were you."

She nodded and threw the club to the ground. "Colin and Barnaby live, and we will see you again, Anita."

"I look forward to it," I said. I was hoping that she wouldn't notice that my back was pressed against the tree, because I wasn't sure I could stand on my own.

Nikki nodded, and started to walk away into the dark, past the tree and the bones. She spoke something then stepped through the ward. When she stepped through, the magic quenched, swallowed back into the earth.

She looked at me from the dark on the other side of the quieted circle. We stared at each other for a long moment, and I knew that if we met again she would kill me if she could. She was Colin's human servant. It was her job.

I slid down the tree until I was sitting in the bones. My legs were too weak to hold me and a fine trembling had started in my hands. I gazed out into the lupanar, gazed out over my handiwork. Some of the bodies still burned, but no vampire moved within the circle. The vampires were dead. All of them.

Chapter 21

Another fight, another shower. Rotting vampire was not an odor you wanted to wear to bed. My hair was still damp when I called Jean-Claude to fill him in on what we'd done. Okay, on what I'd done.

I told him the shortest version possible. His response, "You did *what?*"

I repeated it.

Silence on the other end of the phone. I couldn't even hear him breathe.

"Jean-Claude, you still there?"

"I am here, *ma petite*." He sighed. "You have surprised me once again. I did not see this coming."

"You don't sound happy," I said. "You know the news could be worse. We could all be dead."

"I did not think Colin would be so foolish."

"Live and learn," I said.

"Colin was right to fear you, *ma petite*."

"I told Colin what would happen if he messed with us. He pushed the button, not me."

"Who are you trying to convince, *ma petite*, me or yourself?"

I thought about that for a moment. "I don't know."

"Are you admitting you were wrong?" His voice held mild amusement.

"No." I tried to think how to say it. Finally, I said, "We were losing, Jean-Claude. They were going to kill us. I had to do something. I wasn't even sure it would work." I held the phone, and wished that he were here to hold me. I hated the thought that I wanted him like that. That I wanted anyone like that. I hated needing people. They all had a tendency to die on me. But I'd have given a great deal for a pair of comforting arms right at that moment.

"*Ma petite, ma petite*, what is wrong?"

I motioned Asher over to the phone. "Talk to your second banana. Ask Asher if there were other options. If there were other options, I couldn't see them."

"There is something in your voice, *ma petite*. Something fragile." He whispered the last word.

I just nodded, and handed the phone to Asher. I walked away from it hugging myself tight. Fragile, he said. Scared, more like. I'd scared myself tonight. Something in the power I released had extinguished the torches around the lupanar. Those of us still standing had moved by the light of burning corpses. It had been a scene right out of Dante's *Inferno*, and I had done it. The power inside of me had done this thing. Yeah, scared about covered it.

Damian came up to me. He whispered, "Jason's crying in the shower."

I sighed. *Great, just what I needed, another crisis*. But I didn't ask questions. I just knocked on the door of the bathroom. "Jason, you all right?"

He didn't answer me. "Jason?"

"I'm all right, Anita." His voice, even over the shower sounded strained. I'd never really heard him cry before, but that's what it sounded like, a voice thick with tears.

I pressed the top of my head to the door and sighed. I did not need this tonight. But Jason was my friend, and who else was I going to send in to comfort him? Damian had come to me with it. Zane didn't seem the hand-holding type, and Cherry, well . . . if I was going to send another woman into comfort him, it seemed cowardly. Asher? Naw.

I knocked on the door again. "Jason, can I come in for a minute?"

Silence. If he'd been feeling anywhere near okay, he'd have made some kind of joke about me finally seeing him in the shower. That he didn't tease me at all was a bad sign.

"Jason, can I come in . . . please?"

"Come in," he said finally.

I opened the door and the warm air fogged around me. I closed the door behind me. The room was soft and thick with warmth. It was hot, the moisture beading on every surface as if he'd cranked the shower up to as hot as it would go. Hot as it would go was enough to scald the flesh from your bones, if you were human.

The light left his shadow on the white shower curtain. He wasn't standing. He was sitting on the floor of the shower, huddled.

I moved the towel from the lid of the stool and sat down with it in my lap. "What's wrong?"

He took a deep sobbing breath, and even over the shower I could hear him weeping. Crying didn't cover it, weeping.

I wanted to see him while I talked to him, and I didn't want to see him naked. Choices, choices.

"Talk to me, Jason. What's wrong?"

"I can't get it off me. I can't get clean."

"You mean metaphorically speaking or literally?" I asked.

"It's all over me and I can't get it off."

I was being a coward and a prude. I reached a hand for the curtain and slowly drew it back until I could see him without splashing the entire bathroom with water.

Jason had his knees drawn up tight to his chest, arms locked around them. The heat from the water was enough to make me draw back. His skin had turned a nice cherry pink but that was it. I'd have had blisters or worse by now.

There were clinging patches of black goo on his back. The back of one arm had a patch on it. He'd scrubbed and boiled himself nearly raw and couldn't get clean.

He stared straight ahead at the faucets, rocking ever so slightly. "I was okay until I got in the shower and it wouldn't come off. Then I kept seeing those two vampires in Branson. I thought about Yvette, watching her rot. But it's the two in Branson. I can still feel their hands on me, Anita. Sometimes I still wake up in the middle of the day in a cold sweat, remembering."

In Branson, Missouri we'd taken on the local Master of the City. She'd had two young women that she was going to torture unless we gave her some of us to torture. They'd suggested that if Jason made love to two of the female vamps they would let one of the girls go. I think he'd enjoyed it, at first, but then they'd started to rot.

Jason had struggled away from them, crawling against the wall. His bare chest was covered in bits of their flesh. A strand of something thick and heavy slid slowly down his neck onto his chest. He batted at it like you would swat at a spider that you found crawling along your skin. He was pressed into the black wall with his pants nearly to his thighs.

The blond rolled off her back and crawled towards him, reaching a hand out that was nothing but bones with bits of dried flesh. She seemed to be decaying in dry ground. The brunette was wet. She lay back on the floor, and

some dark fluid rushed out from her to pool beneath her body. She'd undone her own leather shirt, and her breasts were like heavy bags of fluid.

"I'm ready for you," the brunette said. Her voice was still clear and solid. No human voice should have come out of those rotting lips.

The blond grabbed Jason's arm and he screamed.

I shook my head trying to clear the memory. It had haunted my dreams for a while just witnessing it. But for Jason it had become his private phobia. One of the Council's flunkies had been one of the rotting ones. She'd tortured him, too, because she liked how very, very afraid he was of her. Yvette's little torment had only happened about two months ago. Tonight's fun and games had been far too close to home.

I took off the wrist sheaths and laid them on the back of the stool. The fact that I was wearing the wrist sheaths when I should have been getting ready for bed said something about my own paranoia. The heat from the water as I reached for the knob was almost frightening. Years of being told, don't touch, hot. I knew that fire killed wereanimals, but apparently heat didn't. I turned the knob until the temperature was something I could touch.

Jason started to shiver almost as soon as the water began to cool. Frankly, I was amazed that the cabin's hot water heater had kept up this long. The floor was wet and the water soaked into the legs of my jeans. I had another pair I could change into.

I found the bar of soap but the washrag was black. I threw it into the sink and got the last clean one. I'd have to remember to ask for extra towels. I should have done that anyway.

Jason finally looked at me, a slow turning of his head. His blue eyes looked almost glassy, as if he were slipping into his own version of shock. "I can't go through it again, Anita. I can't."

I soaped the clean washrag until it squished white suds. I touched his back and he flinched. I would have given almost anything in that moment if he had grabbed for me, or teased, or even made a pass. Anything to let me know he was okay. Instead he sat there naked and wet and miserable. It made my throat tight, but damn it if I cried, I was afraid I wouldn't stop. I was in here to comfort Jason not to make him comfort me.

Worse yet, I couldn't get it off his back. It had been hard enough to get off my own skin, but the extra hour Jason had sat around waiting for me to finish my shower had turned the fluid into glue. I finally resorted to using my fingernails, glad that I'd refused Cherry's offer of fingernail polish. I would have chipped it all to hell. I scraped it off a piece at a time with my fingers while the hot water ran and Jason shivered. But it wasn't the cold that made him shiver. I was so hot in the moist heat, I didn't feel well.

I'd cleaned everything but one last patch low on his back, very low. It was like the fluid had soaked into the band of his pants, low enough that the curve of buttocks started just below the patch. I was squeamish about that one. Because, though Jason seemed unaware that he was nude, I was very aware of it.

I was also having trouble keeping the oversized T-shirt I'd put on for bed from getting wet. Normally I wouldn't have cared but I'd forgotten to pack a second nightshirt. I finally turned the shower off and adjusted the temperature on the faucets so I had water without having to try and dodge the shower.

I moved back to Jason and started peeling that last patch off his skin. I tried talking to get my mind off of where my hands were. "We killed all the vampires, Jason. It's okay."

He shook his head. "Not Barnaby. We missed him, and he was their creator. I can't stand the thought of him touching me, Anita. I can't do this again."

"Then go home, Jason. Take the jet and get out."

"I won't desert you," he said. His gaze stayed on my face for a moment. "And it's not just because Jean-Claude wouldn't like it."

"I know that," I said. "But all I can do is swear to you that if it is within my power to protect you from Barnaby, I will."

I was leaning very close to him, my arm down the length of his back. I'd finally gotten over the embarrassment with the sheer concentration of prying the dried bits from his body. It was like dissecting that frog in high school. It was gross until the teacher told me to cut out the brain. Then I got so interested in scraping the skull away, ever so carefully, so as not to damage the brain, that I forgot the smell, the poor pitiful frog, and just concentrated on getting the brain out in one piece. My lab partner and I were the only pair to get the brain out whole.

Jason turned his head towards me, brushing my hair with his face. "You smell like Cherry's base makeup."

I spoke without looking up. "I don't own any base so she put some of hers on me earlier. She wears base that is way too pale for her, so it works for me. I thought I got all of it off."

"Hmm," he said. His mouth was very close to my ear.

I froze in mid-movement. My body pressed against his back, my hand touching the smooth skin just above his buttocks. There was a tension now that hadn't been there. My pulse sped up with the awareness of his body, because I suddenly knew he was aware of me. I got the last piece of dried goop off his skin and took a deep breath. I started to lean back and knew that he was going to try something. Part of me was nervous about it and part of me was relieved. It was Jason after all, and he was naked, and I was close, and it was Jason. If he'd let the opportunity pass, I'd have known he was hurt beyond anything I could fix.

His arm slid around my waist, and he used that incredible speed that they were capable of. I felt him lift me and we were just suddenly on the floor with him on top. It was his legs on my legs that pinned me. He used his arms to keep his body raised enough that his groin didn't press into me, which of course meant my view of his body was unobstructed. A mixed blessing. He began to lean his face down for a kiss.

I put a hand on his chest and stopped the movement. "Stop it, Jason."

"The last time I did this you shoved a gun in my ribs and said you'd shoot me if I stole a kiss."

"I meant it," I said.

"You're armed," he said, "I'm not holding your hands down."

I sighed. "You know my rule. I don't point a gun at anyone unless I plan to shoot them. You're my friend now, Jason. I'm not going to shoot you for stealing a kiss. You know it, I know it."

He smiled and leaned in closer. My hand was on his chest but my hand just kept getting closer to my own chest. "But I also don't want you to kiss me. If you're really my friend, you won't do it. You'll just let me up."

His face was just above mine so close it was hard to focus on his eyes. "What if I tried for more than a kiss?" He moved his face so his mouth was hovering over my chest. I could feel his breath just above the soft line where my breasts began.

"Don't push it, Jason. If I shoot you in the right spot, it won't kill you, you'll be hurt, but you'll heal."

He raised his face back up to me. He grinned, and started to roll off of me. The door opened and Richard was just suddenly standing there staring down at us. Perfect, just perfect.

Chapter 22

"Would you believe I slipped?" Jason asked.

"No," Richard said. That one word was very cold.

"Get off of me, Jason."

He rolled to one side but made no move to grab for a towel. Richard threw the towel at him. Jason caught it, and his eyes sparkled with the effort not to smile. Jason had a streak in him that made him enjoy yanking someone's chain. He liked to stir the pot and see what happened. Someday he was going to do it with the wrong person, and he was going to get hurt. But not tonight.

"Get out, Jason. I need to talk to Anita."

Jason stood and wrapped the towel around his waist. I'd sat up but hadn't stood up. Jason offered me his hand. I almost never let a man help me stand, sit, or do much of anything. I took Jason's hand, and he gave it that little extra pull that made me bump into him when I got to my feet.

"You want me to go?" he asked.

I moved a step back but let him keep my hand. "I'll be all right," I said.

Jason grinned up at Richard as he walked out the door. Richard closed the door, leaning against it. I was effectively trapped and he was angry enough that the room filled with prickling energy.

"What was all that about?" he asked.

"It's none of your business anymore, is it?" I asked.

"Earlier today I thought you turned me down because you were being loyal to Jean-Claude."

"I turned you down because it was the right thing to do." I went to the sink and started trying to clean the bits of black crud out from under my fingernails.

"If Jean-Claude finds out you're doing Jason, he'd hurt him, maybe kill him."

"Are you going to tell on us? Run home tattling to our master?" I looked at him in the mirror when I said it. My reward was that he flinched. A little too close to home, that comment.

"Why Jason?" he asked.

"Do you really believe that I'm having sex with Jason?" I turned and used the slightly damp towel to dry my hands.

Richard just looked at me.

"Jesus, Richard, just because you're jumping everything in sight doesn't mean I am." I sat down on the closed stool and tried to blot my jeans dry with the towel.

"So you're not sleeping with him?"

The towel was not helping the jeans. "No, I'm not." I threw the towel in the corner. "I can't believe you'd even ask."

"If you'd found me on the floor with a naked woman on top of me, you'd have thought the same thing," he said.

Hmm, he had me there. "All the women I'd find you with would be strangers who are either dating you, fucking you, or both. What you saw on the floor was Jason being Jason. You know how he is."

"You used to threaten to shoot him if he touched you."

I stood. "Do you really want me to shoot him because he made a pass? I thought one of our main problems was that you thought I shot first and asked questions later. I think you called me bloodthirsty." I pushed past him and where our skin touched power flared like an invisible flame.

He moved back clutching his arm like it had hurt. But I knew it hadn't hurt. It had felt wonderful, a rush of power to make your hair stand on end. It was little touches like that that let us both know what it could be between us.

I walked out. So there was power between us, so there was heat, so what? It didn't change the fact that I was sleeping with Jean-Claude. It didn't change the fact that Richard was sleeping around. The fact that I was jealous of his girlfriends and he was jealous of any man he thought I might be having sex with was just a nasty cosmic joke. We'd get over it.

Chapter 23

There were three people in my bed; none of them were me. Cherry and Zane had curled up around Nathaniel like fleshy security blankets. I'd been informed that the physical closeness of your group, whatever the animal flavor, was healing both emotionally and physically. Richard had backed up this bit of werelore, so the wereleopards got the bed, because Nathaniel had hysterics at the thought of being without me.

So the wereleopards got the bed, and I got the floor. I managed to get a blanket and a pillow to go with my bit of carpet. We were in a new cabin. Verne was going to try to clean the old cabin, but the bed and carpet were probably a lost cause.

I apologized for that, but Verne seemed to think I could do no wrong. He was tickled pink, purple, and blue that I'd fried Colin's vamps. I was not so happy. Revenge can be a very scary thing. If someone had done to Jean-Claude's vamps what I did to Colin's vamps, I'd . . . we'd have killed them.

The bathroom door opened and closed quietly.

I sat up, hugging the blanket around me. Jason threaded his way between the two coffins. He was wearing a pair of silk boxers. He'd put them on last night in the bathroom and come out without a word. I'd still been trying to convince the wereleopards that they couldn't all sleep naked.

Jason had wanted to sleep with them, adding his otherworldly energy to theirs, but they refused him. Not because he was wolf instead of leopard, but because Cherry didn't trust him to keep his hands to himself.

Jason paused in front of the bed, staring down at the pile of sleeping wereleopards. He ran his hands through his sleep-tousled hair. His hair was straight enough and baby fine enough that his hands could smooth the hair into place. He stayed near the foot of the bed, staring down.

I finally stood, wrapping the blanket around me. I was wearing an oversized sleeping shirt that hit me at midcalf. One size does not fit all, but it was still nightclothes, and I wanted something between me and anyone else. At heart, I am a prude. I went to stand next to Jason, covered shoulder to foot in the blanket. It wasn't Jason I didn't trust. It was everyone else who made me uncomfortable.

Cherry lay on her back, sheets tangled around her knees. She was wearing a pair of red bikini underwear stretched tight across narrow hips. Her waist was very long so that she got height from there as well as those long legs. Her breasts were small and firm. She sighed and rolled one shoulder, making the flesh of one breast move, settling closer to the bed. The nipple tightened as if something in the movement or the dream was exciting. Or maybe she was just cold.

I glanced at Jason. He was gazing at her like he was memorizing every curve, the way her breast spilled to the side. His eyes were almost soft as he looked at her. More than lust, maybe? Or the way you look at a really fine work of art, admiring it because you're not allowed to touch.

Neither of the others were giving nearly as good a show. Nathaniel was wrapped in a ball, head pressed to Cherry's waist. He was so bound in covers that all you could see was the top of his head. He whimpered in his sleep, and

Cherry's hand touched the top of his head, her other arm flinging out into space, eyes still closed, still asleep. But even in her sleep, she reached for him, comforted him.

Zane lay on the other side of Nathaniel, spooning his body against the smaller man's. But the covers had been dragged off him, showing the blue bikinis he was wearing. The underwear looked suspiciously like Cherry's, as if she'd had to give him something to wear to bed.

Jason had eyes only for Cherry's slender form. I was surprised that she couldn't feel the weight of his gaze, even in her sleep.

I held the quilt in place with one hand and touched his wrist with the other. I crooked my finger at him and led the way to the far corner of the room, as far away from the bed as we could get.

I leaned against the wall to the side of the window. Jason leaned against the wall close enough that his shoulder brushed the edge of the quilt. I didn't protest because we were whispering. Besides, after awhile, complaining about everything that Jason did just got tiresome. It wasn't really personal. He pushed his luck with everyone.

"Did you sense anyone the last watch?"

He shook his head, leaning so close that I could feel his breath against my cheek. "They're afraid of you after last night."

I turned to look at him and had to move my head back a little to be able to focus on his eyes. "Afraid of me?"

His face was very serious. "Don't be coy, Anita. What you did last night was impressive, and you know it."

I hugged the blanket around my shoulders and looked at the ground. After the rush of power had faded last night, I'd been cold. I'd been cold all night. It was nearly ninety degrees outside. The air conditioner was whirring, and I was cold. Unfortunately, it wasn't the kind of cold that blankets or heat or even another warm body could chase away. I'd scared myself last night. Lately, that took a lot.

I'd seen the burning vampires in my dreams. They'd chased me with flame-covered arms. Their mouths opened in screams, fangs leaking fire like dragon's breath. The burning vamps had offered me Mira's head. The head had talked in its basket, asking, "Why?" Because I was careless didn't seem like a good enough answer. I ran from the dying vampires all night long, one dream after another, or maybe it was just one long, broken dream. Who knows? Either way, it hadn't been restful.

Richard had turned to me last night with the vampire bodies still glowing like banked fires. He'd looked at me, and I'd felt his revulsion, his horror at what I'd done, like a knife through my heart. If things had been reversed and I'd been the werewolf and he'd been the human, he'd have been just as sickened after the show with Marcus as I had been. No, more so. The only reason Richard hung around with monsters was the fact that he was one.

Richard had gone off to his cabin with Jamil and Shang-Da. Shang-Da and Jamil hadn't been horrified; they'd been impressed. Though Shang-Da had said, "They'll kill us all for this."

Asher had disagreed. "Colin is a lesser master than Jean-Claude, yet he demanded the life of Jean-Claude's second, me, and the sanity of one of his wolves, Jason. He overstepped his bounds. Anita merely reminded him of that."

Shang-Da had looked at the blackened corpses, slowly turning to piles of ash. "You think any master vampire will allow this to go unanswered?"

Asher shrugged. "It is no disgrace to lose against someone who has met the Council and survived."

"Besides," Jamil said, "he'll be scared now. He won't come against Anita face-to-face again."

Asher nodded. "Exactly; he fears her now."

"His human servant, Nikki, could have enabled the wards just like I did," I said.

"I believe," Asher said, "that if his servant had power so similar to your own, she would not have merely warned him."

"She'd have tried to keep me from setting the magic free," I said.

"Yes," Asher said.

"She lied," I said.

Asher smiled and touched my cheek. "How can you be so cynical and be surprised when people lie?"

To that, there was no answer. What I'd done was just beginning to sink in then. Now, in the light of midday, not morning—we'd managed to sleep the morning away—I was cold with the knowledge that what I'd done last night hadn't used power from either Richard or Jean-Claude. What I'd done last night had been all me. I'd have been able to do it without a single vampire mark or a drop of extra power.

I hated it when I did something so inhuman and couldn't blame anyone else for it. Made me feel like a freak.

Jason touched my shoulder. I looked at him. There must have been something in my face, because the grin faded from his. His eyes held that world-weary sorrow that peeked through every once in awhile.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I shook my head. "You saw what I did last night. I did it. Not Jean-Claude. Not Richard. Me. Just little old me."

He put his hands on my shoulders and turned me to look at him full face. "You saved me last night, Anita. You put yourself between me and those things. I'll never forget that, ever."

I tried to look away, and he shook me gently until I looked at him. We were exactly the same height, so it wasn't like looking up at him, just at him. All the teasing was gone. What was left behind was something more serious, more grownup, less Jason. "You killed to save us last night. None of us will forget that. Verne and his wolves won't forget that."

"Colin won't forget it, either," I said. "He'll come after us."

Jason shook his head. "Asher and Jamil are right. He's scared shitless of you now. He won't come near you."

I grabbed his arms, letting the quilt slide to the floor. "But he'll hurt the rest of you. He'll try and take you, Jason. He'll give you to Barnaby. He'll break you just to hurt me."

"Or he'll kill Asher," Jason said. "I know." He smiled, and it was almost his usual grin. "Why do you think we both stayed in here with you last night? I, for one, wanted your protection."

"You know you have it," I said.

The smile softened. "I know." He touched my face gently. "What's wrong? I mean really wrong? Why do you look so . . . tormented today?"

"What I did last night wasn't very human, Jason. I felt Richard's horror. I felt him think of me as a monster, and he's right."

Jason hugged me. I stiffened at first, and he started to let me go, then I relaxed against him. I let him hold me, wrapping my own arms around his back. I buried my face against his neck and had a horrible urge to cry.

There was a soft sound from behind us. I raised my head to look. The wereleopards were climbing off the bed, gliding towards us on human feet but moving as if there were muscles in their legs and hips and torsos that didn't exist in mine. Zane and Cherry writhed and glided, nearly naked, towards us. Cherry held Nathaniel's hand, leading him like a child. But he didn't look like a child as he padded towards us, naked. Undies would have hurt the upper thigh wound. Now, as he came towards us, it was clear that he wasn't completely unhappy to see me. Or maybe it was waking up next to Cherry, or maybe it was just a guy thing. Either way, I didn't like it.

I pushed away from Jason. He didn't fight it, just stepped back. He watched the wereleopards come, but I don't think he was worried about it. In fact, I could feel his energy prickle along my skin. Strong emotions like lust will make a shapeshifter's energy rise. The moment I thought it, I looked without thinking. Jason was happy to see Cherry, very happy.

I looked away, blushing. I turned my back on all of them, arms hugging my sides.

Someone touched my shoulder. I flinched.

"It's me, Anita," Jason said.

I shook my head.

He hugged me from behind, arms very carefully across my shoulders and no lower. "I'm not sorry you killed them, Anita. I'm just sorry you didn't kill Barnaby."

"Someone else is going to pay for my bravado, Jason. Like Mira last night. I do things, say things, around you guys, and it all goes wrong."

Zane moved around in front of me. I stared up at him with Jason's arms still around my shoulders like a bulky necklace. Zane's brown eyes were as serious as I'd seen them on this trip.

He reached out to touch my face, and only Jason's arms tightening ever so slightly kept me from backing away or saying, "Don't." Touching didn't mean the same thing to lycanthropes as it did to the rest of American society. I would say *human*, but there were a lot of countries that were more into casual touching than ours.

Zane's fingers trailed down my cheek while he studied my face, frowning. "Gabriel was our whole world. He and Elizabeth made us, chose us. As bad as you think he was, Gabriel saved most of us. I was a junkie, but he didn't allow drugs in his pard."

He leaned into me, sniffing along my skin, rubbing his cheek so that I could feel the fine stubble along his jaw. "Nathaniel was a street whore. Gabriel pimped him out but not to just anybody, not to everybody."

Cherry was on her knees. She took my hand, rubbing her face against my skin like a cat scent-marking. "I lost a leg in a hit-and-run accident. Gabriel offered me my leg back. He cut it off above the stump, and when I shifted, the leg grew back."

Zane laid a gentle kiss on my forehead. "He did care for us in his own, twisted way."

"But he never risked his life for us," Cherry said. She started licking my hand, again for all the world like a cat. She stopped licking me seconds before I told her to stop. Maybe she sensed my tension. "You risked your life to save Nathaniel. You risked the lives of your vampires for him."

Zane cradled my face in his hands, leaning back so he could see my face. "You love Asher. Why would you risk him for Nathaniel?"

I drew back gently from their hands until I was standing alone near the door. I wasn't going to make a break for it, I just needed some room.

Nathaniel crouched in the middle of the room. He was the only one who hadn't touched me.

"I don't love Asher," I said.

"We can smell your desire for him," Zane said.

Oh, great. "I didn't say I didn't think he was cute. I said I didn't love him." My eyes slid to the coffin. I knew he couldn't hear me, but . . .

Jason was leaning against the wall, grinning at me, arms crossed over his chest. The look on his face was enough.

"I don't love him."

Cherry and Zane stared at me, wearing almost identical expressions, neither of which I could read. "You care for him," Cherry said.

I thought about that, then nodded. "Okay, I care for him."

"Why would you risk him for Nathaniel?" she asked. She was still on her knees. She went to all fours as she spoke. Her breasts hung down, moving as she crawled towards me. I'd never had a naked woman crawl towards me, ever. Naked men, but not naked women. It bothered me. Homophobic? Who me?

"Nathaniel is mine to protect. I'm his Nimir-ra, right?"

Cherry kept crawling towards me. Zane had dropped to all fours and was joining her. Muscles moved under the skin of their shoulders, their arms, muscles that shouldn't have been there. They moved forward in a wave of grace and muscled potential, like violence contained inside skin. Except for Nathaniel. He stayed crouched and immobile, as if waiting for some signal.

I looked past the oncoming wereleopards to Jason. "What's going on?"

"They want to understand you."

"There's nothing to understand," I said. "Colin hurt Nathaniel because he could, like you'd abuse a dog you didn't like. No one abuses my friends. It's not allowed."

Cherry had waited for Zane so that they moved in tandem towards me, a nearly matched pair. They were almost to me, almost within touching range, and I didn't want them to touch me. Something was going on, and I didn't like it.

"Nathaniel isn't your friend," Jason said. "It wasn't friendship that made you risk Asher."

I frowned at him. "Stop helping me."

Zane and Cherry looked up at me, and I think they would have touched me but weren't sure of their welcome. "Gabriel said he cared for us," Zane said, "but he risked nothing. He sacrificed nothing." He raised up on his knees, close enough that his otherworldly energy pressed like a warm wind against my bare legs. "You risked your life for one of us last night. Why?"

Cherry raised up on her knees, and again it was like an echo. Their power pressed against me like a great, warm hand. Their intensity, their need, filled their eyes. And I realized for the first time that it wasn't just Nathaniel that was needy. It was all of them. They had no home, no love, no care.

"It wasn't friendship," Zane said. "The wolf is right."

"You aren't having sex with Nathaniel," Cherry said.

I stared at them, at those eager faces. "Sometimes you do things just because it's the right thing to do," I said.

"You risked Asher and Damian, then you risked yourself," Zane said. "Why? Why?"

"Why did you protect me last night?" Jason asked. "Why did you stand between me and Barnaby?"

"You're my friend," I said.

Jason smiled. "Now, I am, but that wasn't why you protected me. You'd have done the same for Zane."

I frowned at Jason. "What do you want me to say, Jason?"

"The real reason why you protected me. The same reason you risked so much for Nathaniel. Not friendship, or sex, or love."

"Then why?" I asked.

"You know the answer, Anita."

I looked from him to the two kneeling wereleopards. I hated putting it into words, but Jason was right. "Nathaniel is mine now. He's on the list of people that I'll protect. He's mine, and no one can hurt him without answering to me. Jason's mine. You're all mine, and no one hurts what's mine. It's not allowed."

It sounded so arrogant saying it out loud. It sounded medieval, but it was still true. Some things just are true; you don't have to voice them, they just are. And somewhere along the way, I'd started collecting people. My people. It used to mean friends, but lately, it meant more than that, or less. It meant people like Nathaniel. We certainly weren't friends, but he was mine, just the same.

Staring down into Zane and Cherry's faces, it was like I could see all the disappointments, the small betrayals, the selfishness, the pettiness, the cruelty. I

watched it fill their eyes. They'd seen so much of it that they simply couldn't understand kindness or honor; or worse, they just didn't trust it.

"If you mean that," Zane said, "we're yours. You can have all of us."

"Have?" I made it a question.

"They mean sex," Jason said. He wasn't smiling now. I wasn't sure why. He'd been enjoying the show a moment before.

"I don't want to have sex with either of you, any of you," I added hastily. Didn't want to have any misunderstandings.

"Please," Cherry said, "please choose one of us."

I looked at them. "Why do you want me to have sex with one of you?"

"You love some of the wolves," Zane said. "You feel true friendship for them. You feel none of that for us."

"But you feel lust," Cherry said. "Nathaniel disturbs you because you find him attractive."

That cut a little too close to home. "Look, guys, I don't sleep with people just because I find them attractive."

"Why not?" Zane asked.

I sighed. "I don't do casual sex. If you don't understand that, I'm not sure I can explain it to you."

"How can we trust you if you don't want anything from us?" Cherry said.

I didn't have an answer for that one. I looked at Jason. "Can you help me out here?"

He pushed away from the wall. "I think so, but you may not like it."

"Explain," I said.

"The problem is that they've never really had a Nimir-ra, not for real. Gabriel was an alpha, and he was powerful, but he wasn't a Nimir-raj, either."

"One of the werewolves described Gabriel as a *lion passant*, a passive leopard, one that had power but didn't protect," I said. "The pard called me a *léoparde lionne*, one that protects, before they promoted me to Nimir-ra."

"We called Gabriel *léopard lionne*," Zane said, "because he was all we knew, but the wolves were right, he was a *lion passant*."

"Great," I said, "so it's settled."

"No," Cherry said. "If Gabriel taught us anything, it was that you can't trust anyone unless they want something from you. You don't have to love us, but pick one of us for a lover."

I shook my head. "No. I mean thanks for the invitation, but no thanks."

"Then how can we trust you?" Cherry asked, voice almost a whisper.

"You can trust her," Jason said. "It's Gabriel that you couldn't trust. He's the one that convinced you that sex was so damned important. Anita isn't even sleeping with our Ulfric, but Zane saw her last night. He saw what she did to protect me."

"She did it to protect her vampire. The one she cares for," Zane said.

"I don't feel for Damian the way I feel for Asher, but I risked my life for him last night," I said.

The leopards frowned up at me. "I know," Zane said, "and I don't understand that. Why didn't you let him die?"

"I'd asked him to risk his life to save Nathaniel. I try never to ask of others what I'm not willing to do myself. If Damian was willing to risk his life, then I couldn't do less."

The leopards were lost. It showed in their faces, the tension that flowed through their power, as it breathed along my skin.

"Am I yours?" Nathaniel asked. His voice sounded small and lost.

I looked past the others to him. He was still crouched, huddled in the middle of the floor. He was huddled in around himself. His long, long hair had spilled around him, across his face. His flower-petal eyes stared out at me through that curtain of hair, like he was staring out through fur. I'd seen other lycanthropes that did that, hid behind their hair, and stared. Crouched there, he was suddenly feral and vaguely unreal. He brushed the hair back from one side, revealing a line of arm and chest. His face was suddenly young, open, and raw with need.

"I won't let anyone else hurt you, Nathaniel," I said.

A single tear slid down his face. "I'm so tired of not belonging to anyone, Anita. So tired of being anyone's meat that wanted me. So tired of being scared."

"You don't have to be scared anymore, Nathaniel. If it's within my power to keep you safe, I will."

"I belong to you now?"

I didn't like the phrasing, but watching him cry, one crystalline tear at a time, I knew that now wasn't the time to quibble over semantics. I hoped I wasn't signing up for more up-close-and-personal care than I wanted, but I nodded. "Yes, Nathaniel, you belong to me." Words alone rarely impressed shapeshifters. It was like part of them didn't understand words.

I held out my hand to him. "Come, Nathaniel, come to me."

He crawled to me, not in that wild, muscular grace, but head down, crying, face hidden by his hair. He was sobbing full out by the time he reached me. He held one hand up to me blind, not looking at me.

Zane and Cherry had moved to either side, letting him come close to me.

I took Nathaniel's hand and wondered what to do with it. Shaking it wasn't enough, kissing it seemed wrong. I racked my brain for anything on leopards and just blanked. The one thing that the leopards did most often was lick each other. I couldn't think of anything else.

I raised Nathaniel's hand to my mouth, bending over to press my mouth to the back of his hand. I licked his skin, one quick movement, and the taste of him was familiar. I knew in that moment that Raina had licked this skin, ran lips, tongue, teeth, down this body.

The munin welled up inside of me, and I fought it. The munin wanted to bite his hand, to draw blood and lap it like a cat with cream. The imagery was too repulsive to me. My own horror helped me chase Raina away. I pushed her down inside me and realized that she never really left me anymore. That was why she came so quickly and so easily. I felt her hiding inside me like a cancer waiting to spread.

I stood there with the taste of Nathaniel's skin in my mouth and did what Raina had never done: I gave comfort.

I raised Nathaniel's head gently until I could cradle his face between my hands. I kissed his forehead, I kissed the salty taste of tears from his cheeks.

He fell against me with a sob, arms locked around my legs, pressed against me. There was a moment when Raina tried to flare to life as Nathaniel's groin pressed against my bare legs.

I reached out to Richard, drawing on the mark between us. His power came to my call like a warm brush of fur. It helped chase away that awful, stinging presence.

I offered my hands to the other leopards. They pressed their faces to my skin, chin marking me like cats, licking me as if I were a kitten. I stood there with the three wereleopards pressed to me, borrowing Richard's power to keep Raina at bay. But it was more than that. Richard's power filled me, washed through me into the leopards.

I was like the wood in the center of a fire. Richard was the flame, and the wereleopards warmed themselves against that heat. They took it into themselves, bathed in it, wrapped it around themselves like a promise.

Standing there, caught between Richard's power, the wereleopards' needs, and that awful touch of Raina, like some foul perfume, I prayed: Dear God, don't let me fail them.

Chapter 24

The greeting ceremony that had been interrupted last night was back on for tonight. One thing about the monsters: You have to observe the rules. The rules said we needed a greeting ceremony, well, by golly, we'd have one. Vengeful vampires, or crooked cops, or hell freezing over, if there was a rite to be performed, or a ceremony to be had, you went ahead with it. The vampires were worse about being cultured while they tore your throat out, but the werewolves weren't far behind.

Me, I'd have ordered takeout and said, "Hell with it; let's try to solve the mystery." But I wasn't in charge. Even crispy-crittering over twenty vamps last night didn't make me top dog or top anything else, though Verne's invitation had been very, very polite. Colin wasn't the only one who was scared of me now.

Executing almost all of Colin's vamps meant that Verne's pack was in charge now. They had the personnel to keep Colin from making more vamps. Apparently, if there was no tie between vampires and wereanimals in an area, then whoever had the strength could rule over the others. Until last night, Colin

had kept the wolves in line; now the shoe was on the other foot, and from the look in Verne's eyes, the shoe was going to pinch.

It was one of those hot August nights that is utterly still. The world sits in the close, hot darkness as if holding its breath, waiting for a cool breeze that never comes.

But there was movement under the trees. No wind, but movement. People crept among the trees. No, not people, werewolves. Everyone was still in human form, but you wouldn't have mistaken them for human. They eased through the trees like gliding shadows, moving through the scattered underbrush almost soundlessly. If there had been even the smallest breeze to stir the trees, they would have been soundless. But a brush of twig, a crunch of leaf, a rustle of green leaves, and you heard them. On a night like tonight, even the small sounds carried.

A twig snapped off to my left, and I jumped. Jamil touched my arm, and I jumped again.

"Damn, babe, you're jumpy tonight."

"Don't call me babe."

His smile flashed in the darkness. "Sorry."

I rubbed my hands along my arms.

"You can't be cold," he said.

"I'm not." It wasn't cold that was trailing up and down my skin like insects marching.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked.

I stopped in the dark woods, knee-deep in some tall, leggy weed. I shook my head, searching the darkness. Yeah, there were several dozen werewolves slinking around, but it wasn't the shapeshifters themselves that were freaking me out. It was . . . it was like hearing voices in a distant room. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but I could hear them—hear them in my head. I knew what it was; it was the munin. The munin in the lupanar. The munin called to me, whispered across my skin. They were eager for me to come, waiting for me. Shit.

Zane stared out into the dark. He was standing close enough that I heard him draw a breath and knew he was scenting the wind. They were all turned out into the night, even Nathaniel. He seemed more confident than I'd ever seen him, more comfortable in his own skin, no pun intended. Our little ceremony this afternoon had meant something to all three of the leopards. I still wasn't sure what, exactly, it meant to me.

They were all wearing old jeans, T-shirts, things you wouldn't mind shapeshifting in, because one night closer to the full moon, accidents happened. No, not accidents. I would get to watch some of them lose their human shapes tonight. I realized that I really didn't want to see it. Not really.

Asher and Damian were not here. They had gone to spy or negotiate with Colin and his remaining vamps. I'd thought this was a really bad idea, but Asher had assured me that it was expected. That he as Jean-Claude's second would carry the message that I, we, had spared Colin and his second in command, Barnaby. We had allowed his human servant to walk from the circle.

We had been generous, and we didn't have to be. By their laws, Colin had overstepped his bounds. He was the lesser vampire, and we could have taken everything from him.

Of course, the truth was that Colin and Barnaby had escaped. The only person we allowed to escape was Colin's human servant. But Asher assured me that he could lie to Colin and that the Master of this City would never realize it was a lie.

There was a tightness in my gut at the thought of Damian and Asher out there alone with Colin and company. The vamps had rules for everything, but they had a tendency to bend the rules until they were just this side of breaking. Close enough to get Asher and Damian hurt. But Asher had been so confident, and tonight I was playing lupa. One monster at a time, I guess.

Another thing that was making me nervous was no guns. Knives were okay, they substituted for claws, but no guns. Marcus had been the same way. No Ulfric worth his salt would let you bring a gun into their inner sanctum. I understood it, but I didn't have to like it. After what I'd done for Verne last night, I thought the request for no guns was downright rude.

Richard had informed me that my killing of Colin's vamps inside the lupanar would be our gift, the gift that the visiting Ulfric and lupa gave to the resident pack.

The gift was usually a freshly killed animal, jewelry for the lupa, or something mystical. Death, jewelry, or magic; it sounded like Valentine's Day.

I'd put jeans on to protect my legs from the underbrush, even though it was hot enough for my knees to sweat. The only one of us wearing shorts was Jason. If his legs were getting scratched up, he didn't seem to mind. He was also the only one not wearing a shirt of some kind. I'd put on a royal blue tank top so at least the top of me would be cool. It did leave the knives sort of visible, though.

The big knife down my spine was still invisible unless you looked really hard at my back. The tank top was thin material, and you could see the sheath, though not in the dark. I had my usual wrist sheaths and silver blades on my forearms. They were very visible against my skin. I had a new knife in my pocket. It was a four-inch switchblade with a safety lock. Didn't want to sit down and stab myself. This is one of those blades that comes straight out. Yes, it is illegal. It had been a gift from a friend who didn't sweat legalities much. So why have a four-incher that is illegal to carry in most states? Because at six inches, it wasn't comfortable to sit down with it in my pocket. So nice to have friends that know your size.

I was also wearing a silver crucifix. I didn't plan on meeting any bad vamps tonight, but I didn't trust Colin not to try something. If he knew enough about the greeting ceremony to know I wouldn't be allowed a gun, now is when he would jump me.

There were soft grey shadows under the trees. The moon and stars were bright somewhere overhead. But where we stood, the trees were a solid darkness between us and the sky. I felt almost claustrophobic standing there in the dark.

"I don't smell anything but other lukoi," Jason said.

Everybody agreed. Nothing but us shapeshifters tonight. No one but me seemed to be able to feel that whispering echo. I was the only necromancer in the bunch, so the spirits of the dead liked me better.

"We need to be at the meeting place before the ceremony goes any further," Jamil said.

I looked at him. "You mean they've started the ceremony already?"

"The call has been given," Jason said.

He said it like *call* should have been in capital letters. "What do you mean the call has been given?"

"They've sacrificed an animal and smeared blood on the tree, sort of what you did last night," Jason said.

I rubbed my arms. "I wonder if that's why I'm sensing the munin."

"When we smear blood on the rock throne, our spirit symbol, it doesn't make the munin come," Jason said.

I shook my head. "I've been in your lupanar, Jason; this one is different. Their magic is different from yours."

I felt something creeping through the trees. A roil of energy that made my heart skip a beat, and then beat faster, as if I'd been running. "Jesus, what was that?"

"She's feeling the call," Jason said.

"That's impossible," Jamil said. "She isn't lukoi." He stabbed a finger at Cherry, Zane, and Nathaniel. "They don't feel it. They're shapeshifters, and they don't feel the call to the lupanar."

Cherry looked at us, then shook her head. "He's right. I feel something like a vague buzz through the woods, but it's nothing big."

Nathaniel and Zane agreed with her.

My skin rushed across my body like it was going to try to crawl away under its own power. It was creepy as hell. "What is happening to me?"

"She is feeling the call," Jason said.

"That is not possible," Jamil said.

"You keep saying that about her, Jamil, and you keep being wrong," Jason said.

A low, growling snarl trickled from Jamil's mouth.

"Stop it, both of you," I said. I looked behind me farther into the trees until there was nothing but a wall of darkness shot by faint moonlight. Jason was right. I could feel the magic. It was ritual magic, and it was death magic.

Lycanthropes' power comes from life. They are the most alive preternatural creatures I've ever been around, more like fairies than humans, sometimes. But this lupanar ran on death as well as life; it called to me twice. Once through Richard's marks; second through my necromancy. I wished Richard were here.

He'd gone to have dinner with his family. Shang-Da had gone with him at my insistence. Sheriff Wilkes had to know we weren't leaving town by now. It wasn't just the local vampires we had to worry about. Richard had called on the telephone, saying they were running late, to start without him. His mother just

hadn't understood why he couldn't stay longer. All of the Zeeman men were so pussy whipped—ah, henpecked, sorry.

I started through the trees, and they followed me. I climbed on top of a fallen log. You never step directly over a log. You never know if there's a snake on the other side. Step on the log, then over. Tonight it wasn't snakes I was worried about. I moved slowly, picking my way through the trees. My night vision is excellent for a human, and I could have gone faster. I wanted to go faster. I wanted to fling myself through the trees and run. I didn't, but it was force of will alone that kept me walking.

It wasn't just the death I was picking up on. It was that warm rising energy that was pure lycanthrope. I knew I could sense some of this with Richard holding my hand. We'd done it before on a full moon, but never with me alone. Never just me moving through the darkness trying to breathe past the beating of my heart and the rush of someone else's power.

I whispered, "Richard, what have you done to me?" Maybe it was his name, maybe it was just thinking of him, but I suddenly felt him sitting in the car. I had a moment of seeing Daniel driving. I could smell Daniel's aftershave. I could feel the warm tightness of Richard's chest. I pulled away and was left staggering. If I hadn't had a tree to hug, I'd have fallen to my knees. If that moment of sharing hit Richard as hard as it hit me, I was glad he wasn't driving.

"Anita, are you all right?" Jason touched my shoulder. And power flowed between us in a hot, skin-creeping rush. I turned to him and it felt like I was moving in slow motion. I couldn't breathe past the power and the sensations that filled my mind. Images, flashes, like watching a room through strobe light. A bed, white sheets, the smell of sex so fresh it was hot and musky. My hands resting on a smooth chest. A man's chest. That warm, rolling power that was pure lycanthrope, pure beast, filled my body, like the man underneath me. Sharp, pleasant, exciting. The power spilled out my fingertips, pulling claws from my hands like knives unsheathing. The beast pushed at the smooth skin of my body, tried to slip out and overwhelm me. But I held it, tightened my body around it, and let only my hands turn monstrous. Claws sliced that smooth chest. Blood, hot and fresh enough to taste on our tongues.

Jason stared up at me from the bed, still pinned by my body, our body, and he screamed. He'd wanted this. Chosen it. And still he screamed. I felt his flesh give under claws. Those hands struck again and again, until the white sheets were spongy with blood and he lay motionless underneath us. If he survived, he would be one of us. I remembered not caring if he lived or if he died, not really. It was the sex, the pain, the joy of it all that mattered.

When I could feel my body again, Jason and I were kneeling in the leaves. His hands were still on my arms. Someone was screaming, and it was me. Jason stared at me with a face almost blank with horror. He'd shared the ride, but it wasn't his memory.

It wasn't Richard's memory, or mine. It was Raina's. She was dead but not forgotten. She was why I feared the munin. I was a necromancer with ties to the wolves. The munin liked me. Raina's munin liked me best of all.

"What's wrong?" Cherry said. She touched me, and it opened something inside of me again. It welcomed Raina back with a rush that left me screaming. But I fought it this time. Fought it because I did not want to see Cherry the way Raina would see her. Jason wouldn't care. Cherry would care. I would care.

There was a rush of sensations: skin damp with sweat, hands with long, polished nails on my breasts, those grey eyes staring up at me, mouth open, slack, shoulder-length yellow hair against a pillow. Raina on top again.

I screamed and pulled away from them both. The images died as if a plug had been pulled. I scrambled through the leaves on all fours, eyes shut tight. I ended sitting, hugging my knees to my chest, face buried against my legs. I squeezed my eyes so tight that I began seeing white snakes against my eyelids.

I heard someone move through the crunching leaves. I felt them hovering over me.

"Don't touch me," I said. It was almost another scream.

I heard whoever it was kneel in the dry leaves before Jamil's voice came. "I won't touch you. Are you still getting the memories?"

He didn't ask if I was seeing the memories. I found the phrasing strange. I shook my head without looking up.

"Then it's over, Anita. Once the munin leave, they're gone until called again."

"I didn't call her." I raised my face slowly and opened my eyes. The summer night seemed blacker somehow.

"It was Raina again?" he made it a question.

"Yes."

He knelt as close as he could get without touching me. "You shared the memories with Jason and with Cherry."

I wasn't sure if it was a question or a statement, but I answered it: "Yeah."

"It was a full visual," Jason said. He was sitting with his bare back against a tree.

Cherry had her hands pressed to her face. She spoke, face hidden. "I cut my hair after that night, after what she did to me. One night with her was the price for not having to do one of their porno movies." She jerked her hands away from her face, crying. "God, I can smell Raina's scent." She rubbed her hands against her jeans, over and over, as if she'd touched something bad and was trying to wipe it away.

"What the fuck was that?" I asked. "I've channeled Raina before, but it wasn't like that. I've got glimpses of memories, but not a full-blown movie. Nothing like that, ever."

"Have you been trying to learn to control the munin?" Jamil asked.

"Just to get rid of it, them, whatever."

Jamil moved closer to me, studying my face as if looking for something. "If you were lukoi, I'd tell you, you can't just turn the munin off. If you have the power to call them, then you must learn to control them, not just shut them out. Because you can't shut them out. They'll seek a way into you, through you."

"How do you know so much?" I asked.

"I knew a werewolf who could call the munin. She hated it. She tried to shut them out. It didn't work."

"Just because it didn't work for your friend doesn't mean I can't do it." I could feel his breath warm against my face. "Back off, Jamil."

He scooted back, but he was still closer than I wanted him to be. He sat back in the leaves. "She went crazy, Anita. The pack had to execute her." His eyes went past me into the darkness. I turned to see what he was looking at. Two figures stood in the darkness. One was a woman with long, pale hair and a long, white dress like something out of a 1950s horror movie. If you were playing the victim. But she stood very straight, very certain, as if she were anchored to the ground like a tree. There was something almost frightfully confident about her.

The man with her was tall, slender, and tanned dark enough that he looked brown in the dark. His hair was short and a paler brown than his skin. If the woman seemed calm, he seemed nervous. He gave off energy in a roiling bath that breathed along my skin and made the night seem hotter.

"Are you well?" the woman asked.

"She shared the munin with two of us," Jamil said.

"By accident, I take it," the woman said. She sounded faintly amused.

I was not amused. I got to my feet, a little unsteady, but standing. "Who are you?"

"My name is Marianne. I am the vargamor for this clan."

I remembered Verne and Colin talking about a varga-something last night. "Verne mentioned you last night. Colin said he'd left you at home to keep you safe."

"A good witch is hard to find," she said, smiling.

I looked at her. "You don't feel Wiccan."

Again, I knew she smiled at me. Her peaceful condescension grated on my nerves. "A psychic then, if you prefer the term."

"I'd never heard the term vargamor before last night," I said.

"It's rare," she said. "Most packs don't have one anymore. Considered too old-fashioned."

"You aren't lukoi," I said.

Her head cocked to one side, and the smile was gone, as if I'd finally done something worthwhile. "Are you so sure?"

I tried to get a sense of what had made me so sure she was human, or at least not lukoi. She had her own energy. She was psychic enough for me to notice. We'd have recognized each other without any introductions. We might not have known the exact flavor of each other's abilities, but we'd have recognized a kindred or rival spirit. Whatever power moved her, it wasn't lycanthropy.

"Yeah, I'm sure you're not lukoi," I said.

"Why?" she asked.

"You don't taste like a shapeshifter."

She laughed then, and it was a rich, musical sound that managed to be wholesome and earthy all at the same time. "I like your choice of senses. Most

humans would have said I didn't feel right. Feel is such an imprecise word, don't you think?"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

"This is Roland. He is my bodyguard for this night. We poor humans must be watched over for fear that some overzealous shapeshifter might lose control and harm us."

"Somehow I don't think you are that easy a prey, Marianne."

She laughed again. "Why, thank you, child."

Her calling me child made me add about ten years to her age. She didn't look it. It was dark, but she still didn't look it.

"Come, Anita. We will escort you to the lupanar." She held out her hand to me like I was supposed to take it and be led like a child.

I looked to Jamil. I hoped somebody knew what was going on, because I was lost.

"It's all right, Anita. The vargamor is neutral. She never fights or takes sides in challenges. That's how she can be human and run with the pack."

"Are we involved in a challenge or a fight that I don't know about?" I asked.

"No," Jamil said, but he sounded uncertain.

Marianne interpreted for me without being asked. "Introducing two outside dominants to a pack can lead to fighting. Having someone as powerful as Richard is raising the hackles on our younger wolves. Having him sleeping with our pack's only two dominant females makes it worse."

"You mean we may get into a pissing contest," I said.

"A colorful phrase, but accurate enough," she said.

"Okay, now what?" I asked.

"Now, Roland and I escort you all to the lupanar. The rest of you may go ahead. You know the way, Jamil."

"I don't think so," I said.

"No to what?" Marianne asked.

"Do I look like Little Red Riding Hood?" I said. "I'm not taking a stroll in the woods with two strangers. One of them a werewolf and the other a . . . I don't know what you are yet, Marianne. But I don't want to be alone with the two of you."

"Very well," she said. "Some or all may stay. I was thinking that you might like privacy to speak with another human tied to the lukoi. Perhaps I was wrong."

"Tomorrow in the light of day, we can talk. Tonight, let's just take it easy."

"As you like," she said. Again, she held out her hand to me. "Come. Let us talk as we all troop to the lupanar as one big, happy family."

"You're making fun of me now," I said. "That won't put you on my A-list."

"I make fun of everyone a little," she said. "I mean no harm by it." She waggled her hand at me. "Come, child, the moon is passing above us. Time wastes away."

I walked towards her with my five bodyguards at my back. I didn't take her hand, though.

I was close enough to see the condescending smile clearly now. Anita Blake, the famous vampire hunter, afraid of some backcountry wisewoman.

I smiled. "I'm cautious by nature and paranoid by profession. You've offered me your hand twice now within just a few minutes. You don't strike me as someone who does anything without a reason. What gives?"

She put her hands on her hips and tsked at me. "Is she always this difficult?"

"Worse," Jason said.

I frowned at him. Even if he couldn't see it in the dark, it made me feel better.

"All I want, child, is to touch your hand and get a sense of how powerful you are before we let you inside the boundaries of our lupanar again. After what you did last night, some of our pack fear you within the boundaries of our lupanar. They seem to think you will steal our power."

"I can tap into it," I said, "but I can't steal it."

"But the munin already reach out to you. I felt you call your munin. It traveled through the power we have called tonight in the lupanar. It disturbed it like plucking on a thread of a spider's web. We came to see what we had caught, and if it were too big to eat, we would cut it loose and not take it home."

"The spider metaphor worked for maybe two sentences, then you lost me," I said.

"The lupanar is our place of power, Anita. I need to get a sense of what you are before you enter it this night." The laughter was gone from her voice. She was suddenly very serious. "It is not just our protection I am thinking of, child. It is yours. Think, child, what would happen to you if the munin within our circle rode you one after another? I need to make sure you can control at least that well."

Just hearing her say it made my stomach tight with fear. "Okay." I held out my hand to her like we were going to shake hands, but I gave her my left hand. If she didn't like it, she could refuse it.

"Offering the left hand is an insult," she said.

"Take it or leave it, vargamor. We don't have all night."

"That is more true than you know, little one." She put her hand out as if to touch mine but stopped with her hand just above mine. She spread her hand above my skin. I mirrored her. She was trying to get a sense of my aura. Two could play at that game.

When I raised my hands up in front of my body, she mirrored me. We stood facing each other, hands spread wide, not quite touching. She was tall, five-foot-seven or five-foot-eight. I didn't think there were high heels under that long dress.

Her aura was warm against my skin. It had a weight to it, as if I could have wrapped her aura in my hands like dough. I'd never met anyone with such weight to their aura. It confirmed my first sense of her. Solid.

She pushed forward suddenly, wrapping her fingers around my hand. She forced my aura back in upon itself like a knife thrust. It made me gasp, but again, I knew what was happening. I pushed back and felt her waver.

She smiled, but it wasn't condescending now. It was almost as if she were pleased.

The hair at the back of my neck tried to crawl down my spine.

"Powerful," she said. "Strong."

I spoke around a tightness in my throat. "You, too."

"Thank you," she said.

I felt her power, her magic, move over me, through me, like a rush of wind. She pulled away so abruptly it staggered both of us.

We were left standing a foot away from each other, breathing hard like we'd been running. My heart thudded in my throat like a trapped thing. And I could taste her pulse on the back of my tongue. No, I could hear it. I could hear it like a small ticking clock. But it wasn't her pulse. I smelled Richard's aftershave like a cloud that I had walked through. When the marks were working through Richard, it was often scent that let me know what was happening. I didn't know what had caused them to act up. Maybe the power of the other lycanthropes or the closeness of the full moon. Who knew? But something had opened me to him. I was channeling more than the sweet smell of his body.

"What is that sound?" I asked.

"Describe it," Marianne said.

"Like a clicking, soft, almost mechanical."

"I've got an artificial valve in my heart," she said.

"It can't be that."

"Why not? When I lean forward to the mirror to apply eyeliner, I can hear it through my open mouth, echoing against the mirror."

"But I can't hear it," I said.

"But you are," she said.

I shook my head. I was losing the sense of her. She was pulling away from me, putting up shields. I didn't blame her, because, for just a second I could feel her heart beating, limping along. The sound hadn't made me sorry for her or empathetic. The sound excited me. I felt it pull things deep inside my body. It was almost sexual. She'd be slow, an easy kill. I looked at this tall, confident woman, and for a split second all I saw was food.

Fuck.

Chapter 25

We followed Marianne and her guard, Roland, through the darkened trees. I'd have caught that damn dress on every twig and deadfall. Marianne floated through the woods as if the trees themselves let her and the dress pass gently through. Roland paced at her arm, gliding through the woods like water down a well-worn channel. Jamil, Nathaniel, and Zane moved just as gracefully. It was the rest of us that were having trouble.

My excuse was that I was human. I didn't know what Jason and Cherry's excuse was. I tried to step on a log and missed. I ended up on my stomach, arms scraping along the rough bark. I straddled it like a horse and couldn't seem to get my leg over the other side. Cherry tripped on something in the leaves and fell to her knees. I watched her get to her feet and trip over the same damn thing. This time she stayed on her knees, head down.

Jason fell in a tangle of dry tree roots at the end of the log I was sitting on. He fell on his face and cursed. When he got to his feet, there was a scrape on his chest deep enough to show blood, black in the moonlight. It reminded me of what Raina had done to him. She'd cut his chest to rags, and there wasn't a scar on him from it.

I closed my eyes and leaned over the log, resting my forearms on it. My arms hurt. I raised myself slowly and looked at them. I'd scraped them up enough so that blood was slowly filling the wounds in spots. Great.

Jason leaned against the end of the log, far enough away that we wouldn't touch. I think we were all still afraid of that. Didn't want a repeat.

"What's wrong with us?" Jason asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know."

Marianne was just suddenly there. I hadn't heard her come up. Was I losing time? Was I that out of it?

"You cast out the munin before it was ready to release you."

"So?" I said.

"So, that takes energy," she said.

"Fine, that explains me stumbling around. What about them? Why do they feel like shit?"

She gave a very small smile. "You are not the only one who fought the munin, Anita. It was you who called it, and if you had not been willing to fight it, then the other two would have been helpless before it, but they fought it as well. They struggled against the memories. That costs."

"You sound like you know," I said.

"I can call the munin. These chaotic flashes are what happens when you have a munin that hunts you, and that you do not want to embrace."

"How did you know it was chaotic?" I asked.

"I caught a glimpse or two of what you saw. The merest touch," she said.

"Why don't you feel awful?" I asked.

"I did not struggle. If you simply allow the munin to ride you, it passes much more quickly and relatively painlessly."

I half-laughed at her. "That sounds like the old advice of lie back, close your eyes, and it'll be over soon."

She turned her head to one side, long hair sliding over her shoulders like a pale ghost. "Embracing the munin can be pleasant or unpleasant, but this munin hunts you, Anita. Most of the time, a munin that tries to bond with a pack member does so out of love or shared sorrow."

I just looked at her. "It isn't love that motivates this one."

"No," she said, "I felt both the strength of her personality and her hatred of you. She chases you out of spite."

I shook my head. "Not just spite. What little is left of her enjoys the game. She's having a really good time when I channel her."

Marianne nodded. "Yes. But if you would embrace her instead of fighting, you could pick and choose among the memories. Strong ones will come easiest, but you could control more of what comes and how strongly it comes. If you would truly channel her, as you put it, then the images would be less like a movie and more . . . like wearing a glove."

"Except that I'm the glove," I said, "and her personality overwhelms mine. No thanks."

"If you continue to fight this munin, it will get worse. If you will cease struggling and meet her even partway, the munin will lose some of its strength. Some feed off of love. This one feeds off of fear and hatred. Was this the old lupa? The one you killed?"

"Yeah," I said.

Marianne shivered. "I never met Raina, but even that small touch of her makes me glad she's dead. She was evil."

"She didn't see herself that way," I said. "She saw herself as more neutral than evil." I said it like I knew, and I did know. I knew because I'd worn her essence like a dress more than once.

"Very few people see their own actions as truly evil," Marianne said. "It is left to their victims to decide what is evil and what is not."

Jason raised his hand. "Evil."

Cherry echoed him. "Evil."

Nathaniel and Zane and even Jamil, raised their hands.

I raised my hand, too. "It's unanimous," I said.

Marianne laughed, and again, it was a sound equally at home in the kitchen or the bedroom. How she managed to be both wholesome and suggestive in the same breath puzzled me. Of course, a lot of things puzzled me about Marianne.

"We'll be late," Roland said. His voice was deeper than I thought it would be, low and careful, almost too old for his body. He looked peaceful enough, but I could look at him with things other than my eyes. You couldn't see it, but you could feel it. He was a mass of nervous energy. It danced along his skin, breathing out into the dark like an invisible cloud, hot, almost touchable, like steam.

"I know, Roland," she said. "I know."

"We could carry them," Jamil said.

A thrill of power flowed through the trees. It caught at my heart as if some invisible hand had touched me.

"We must go," Roland said.

"What is your problem?" I asked.

Roland looked at me with eyes that were a nice, solid darkness. "You are," he said. He spoke in a low voice, and it sounded like a threat.

Jamil moved between us so that my view of Roland was almost completely blocked, and I assumed, his view of me.

"Now, children," Marianne said, "play nicely."

"We will miss the ceremony entirely if they do not hurry," Roland said.

"If you were a true lupa," Marianne said, "you could draw energy from your wolves and give it in return like a great recycling battery." It sounded like she'd given this lecture before. I guess every pack needs a teacher. I know ours needed one sorely. I was beginning to realize that we were like children that had been raised by neglectful parents. We were grown-up, but we didn't know how to behave.

"You're psychic enough that you might be able to do it in a small way without being lukoi," Marianne said.

"I don't think I'd call being a necromancer the same thing as being psychic," Jamil said.

Marianne shrugged. "It's all much more alike than most people wish to acknowledge. Many religious groups are comfortable with psychic ability but not with magic. But call it what you will, it's either that or we call some more wolves and throw you across our shoulders."

The real trouble was that I only knew two ways to call power. One was ritual, the other was sex. I'd realized a few months ago that sex could take the place of ritual for me. Not always, and I had to be attracted to the person involved, but sometimes. I didn't really want to admit to strangers that sexual energy was one of the ways I performed magic. Even though no actual sex was involved, it was still embarrassing. Besides, doing anything sexual seemed like putting out the welcome mat for Raina's munin.

How could I explain all this to Marianne without sounding like a slut? I couldn't think of a way to explain it that didn't make me sound bad, so I wasn't going to try.

"Go on without us, Marianne. We'll get there on our own. Thanks, anyway."

She stamped her foot under that flowing gown. "Why are you so reluctant to try, Anita?"

I shook my head. "We can discuss magical metaphysics tomorrow. Right now, why don't you take your wolf and go. We'll get there, slow but sure."

"Let's go," Roland said.

Marianne looked to him, then back to me. "I was told to see if you were a danger to us, and you are not, but I don't like leaving you out here like this. The three of you are weak."

"We'll get over it," I said.

She cocked her head to one side again, hair sweeping like a white veil to frame her face. "Are you planning some sort of magic that you don't wish me to see?"

"Maybe," I said. Truth was, no. No way was I voluntarily touching Jason or Cherry again, not tonight. But if Marianne thought we were going to do something mystical but private, she might go away. I wanted her to go away.

She stood looking at me for nearly a full minute, then finally smiled, dim in the moonlight. "Very well, but do hurry. The others will grow impatient to greet Richard's human lupa. You have everyone's curiosity piqued."

"Glad to hear it. The sooner you go, the sooner we can start."

She turned without another word and started off through the trees. Roland trailed her, then took the lead. We all stood around waiting for Marianne's white dress to grow distant and ghostlike through the forest.

Finally, Jason said, "Start what?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just wanted them gone."

"Why?" Jamil asked.

I shrugged. "I don't want to be carried like a sack of potatoes." I started walking, slow but sure, towards the lupanar.

Jamil fell into step beside me. "Why not try what she was suggesting?"

I walked carefully, paying a lot more attention to my feet than I usually did. "Because outside of raising the dead, I'm still an amateur. It will probably take less time for us to walk to the lupanar than for me to do something mystical."

Jason agreed with me, which made me frown at him, but it was still true. I was like someone with a loaded gun that didn't know how to shoot. I would be struggling to figure out how to undo the safety while the bad guys shot me a million times. About two months ago, the only other necromancer I'd ever met had offered to teach me real necromancy, not this voodoo dabbling I was doing. He'd ended up dead before he could teach me much of anything. Funny how many people ended up dead after they met me. No, I didn't kill him.

Cherry stumbled and went down again. Zane and Nathaniel were just suddenly there, one on either side of her. They helped her stand, hugging each other for a moment. Cherry slipped a hand around the waist of both men, leaning her head for a second on Zane's shoulder. They walked this way through the treacherous dark, Cherry leaning heavily on her fellow wereleopards. There was a camaraderie between them that hadn't been there before. Had I done that? Had just having someone to protect them forged some sort of bond? Or had it been Richard's prickling energy? I had a lot of questions and didn't even know if there was anyone who would know. Maybe Marianne would know, if I decided I could trust her.

Jamil offered me his arm. I waved him away. I knew that Raina had slept with him, and I did not want the memory. "Help Jason," I said.

Jamil looked at me for a second, then went and offered his arm to Jason, who refused the offer. "If Anita doesn't need help, neither do I."

"Don't be a hard case," I said.

"Now, that's the pot calling the kettle black," Jason said.

"If I offered you my arm, you'd take it," I said.

"An excuse to hang all over a pretty girl? Sure." Then he seemed to think about it. "But maybe not tonight. I can't call the munin, but there's something in

the air tonight." He shivered, rubbing his hands along his bare arms. "Of all the memories Raina had of me, why that one?"

We were both slowly walking as we talked. "The three things Raina liked best were sex and violence and terrorizing people. Making you lukoi hit all her buttons."

Jason stumbled, fell to his knees, and just stayed that way for a second or two. I waited with him, wondering if I should offer to help him up. "I know you wondered why I never did any of her porno movies."

"I guess. I mean you're not exactly the shy type."

He looked up at me, and even by moonlight, there was a sorrow in his face that was deeper and wider than most people ever saw. He was too young for the look in his eyes, but there it was. Innocence lost.

"I'll always remember the look on her face when she killed me."

"She didn't kill you, Jason."

"She tried. It didn't matter to her whether I lived or died. It really didn't."

That one shared memory, and I couldn't argue with him. Raina's pleasure had been more important to her than his life. Like a serial killer.

Jason hunched in upon himself. "But she was my sponsor, and I had to stay with her until my probation period was over. When I could, I got away."

"Is that why you went to stay with Jean-Claude, as his lapwolf? To escape Raina?"

Jason nodded. "Partly." He looked up suddenly and grinned. "Of course, Jean-Claude is way cool."

I shook my head and offered him my hand.

"Think we can risk it?" he asked.

"I think so. I'm not feeling particularly muninish right now."

He took my hand and it was just a hand. His hand in mine. I helped him stand, and he staggered just a bit on his feet, which made me wobble. We clung to each other for a second like two drunks leaving a party. I hugged him, and he hugged me back. It was quick. He pulled away first, and looked almost embarrassed. "Don't tell anyone I didn't take my chance to grope you when it was your idea."

I patted him on the back. "Not a soul."

He gave me his usual grin, and we started through the woods, walking close enough to catch each other if we fell. A breeze blew through the trees, rustling everything. The woods were suddenly alive with sound. I turned my face to the wind, hoping it would be cool, but it was hot like the air from an oven.

Jason's baby fine hair moved gently in the breeze. I heard him take a deep breath, then he touched my arm. He spoke low. "I smell the man that I threw into the truck yesterday."

We kept walking as if nothing were wrong. "Are you sure?" I asked.

I saw his nostrils flare as he tested the air. "He smelled like peppermint Lifesavers and cigarettes."

"A lot of people smell like peppermint and cigarettes," I said.

We kept moving, his hand on my arm now. "I also smell gun oil."

Great.

Jamil was waiting for us just up ahead. The three wereleopards waited among the trees. Jamil came back to us, smiling, and enveloped both of us in a big, hearty hug. "You guys are so damned slow tonight." He hugged us against him and whispered, "I smell two, maybe three, to our left."

"One of them is a guy I beat up yesterday," Jason said, smiling as if we were talking about something else entirely.

"Revenge maybe?" He made it a question.

"How far away are they?" I asked.

He drew back with a big very un-Jamil grin. He whispered, "A few yards. I can smell the guns."

I encircled his slender waist with my arm and whispered against his chest. "We don't have any guns. Any suggestions?"

Jason leaned in, laughing, and said, "I don't feel good enough to outrun them."

I patted his arm. "Me, either."

"If they're here for revenge," Jamil said, "then maybe, they'll settle for just the two of you."

I drew back from him. I wasn't sure I liked his reasoning. "So?"

"You stay here and make out. They move up to get you, and I get them."

"They've got guns. You don't."

"I'll send Zane and Cherry to the others. They'll bring reinforcements. But we can't let them follow us to the lupanar. We can't take danger there."

"Some werewolf rule?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"All right," I said. "But don't let them kill me, okay?"

"What about me?" Jason said.

"Sorry. Him either."

Jamil leaned into both of us. "I suggest the two of you get a lot more cozy, fast, or they're not going to buy it."

I transferred my arm to Jason's waist, but said, "How long have they been watching?"

"Make them think you're drunk, just in case they saw the screaming. Make out, but get on the ground as soon as possible in case they just decide to shoot you." With that comforting thought, Jamil went back to the others. He walked away into the dark with the wereleopards. Zane looked at me as they walked away, but I nodded once, and that seemed to satisfy him. He turned and let Jamil lead him away. I really was going to have to find the leopards a true alpha. They were all so damn submissive.

Jason pushed me up against a tree.

"Watch it," I said.

He grinned at me. "We want it to look real, don't we?"

"I thought we had a moment of real friendship bonding back there," I said.

Jason leaned in towards me as if he were going to kiss me. "Just because we're friends doesn't mean that I don't want to sleep with you." He kissed me, a soft brush of lips.

I frowned at him, not kissing back. "Please tell me that you don't want to sleep with all your female friends."

He put a hand on either side of my head, propping himself against the tree. "What can I say? I'm a guy."

I shook my head. "That's not an excuse."

He leaned his whole body into me in a sort of standing push-up. The muscles in his arms swelled with the effort. "How about because it's me."

I smiled. "That I'll buy." I put my hands on his waist. He was leaning against me but not too hard. He could have been taking a lot more advantage of the situation than he was. I realized that he was being a gentleman. There was a time not long ago that Jason wouldn't have made the effort. We were friends. But we needed to get down on the ground, and this wasn't getting us there.

I glanced, as casually as I could, at the others. I could still see Zane, and Cherry's hair gleamed through the trees. I had a sense that Jamil and Nathaniel was still with them, but it was all that blond hair that made them so visible. If the bad guys had a high-powered rifle, they could shoot us both through the tree. Once the others got out of sight, they might do just that.

I slid my hands up Jason's chest. The skin was soft, but underneath, he was very firm. I knew what that smooth flesh felt like shredding under claws. It wasn't the munin coming back. It was just me flashing on the vision. I balled my hands into fists and forced my hands to his face. I didn't want to do anything that would remind either of us of what we'd just shared. There was always the extra danger that it could bring Raina back. No, I didn't want to be channeling Raina with armed goons in the woods.

I cradled Jason's face in my hands, moving just my head towards him. As I leaned into him, he leaned more into me. I was suddenly very aware that his body was pressed down the length of mine. It made me hesitate, but when his lips brushed mine, I kissed him. I ran my hand back through his hair, until I had a handful of it.

I whispered into his mouth, "We need to get on the ground as soon as possible."

He kissed me harder, hands dropping to my belt. He slid his fingertips inside the belt, and knelt in front of me, pulling me down with him. I let him. He fell back into the leaves and pulled me down on top of him. I propped myself on my scraped forearms against his chest, sort of startled. I just wasn't a good enough actress for this.

I could feel his heart thudding under my hands. He rolled me suddenly, and I let out a little yip of surprise. He ended very firmly on top, and I didn't like it.

"I want on top," I said.

He put his lips next to my cheek. "If they shoot us, I can take a bullet better than you can." He rubbed his cheek along my face, and I realized he was doing the werewolf greeting. Maybe it was their version of a handshake, but I'd never been tempted to shake hands while making out.

I whispered into his ear, which was very close to my mouth, "Do you hear them?"

"Yes." He raised his face enough to kiss me.

"How close?" I kissed him back, but we were both listening, straining to hear. Here we were, lying on top of each other, bodies perfectly matched up, and we were both tight enough that I could feel the muscles along his back knotting.

"A few yards," he said. "They're good." He rested his cheek against mine. "They move quietly."

"Not quiet enough," I whispered.

"Can you hear them?" he asked.

"No."

We were both just staring at each other. Neither of us was making much of an effort to kiss or anything else. I could feel that his body was happy to be pressed up against mine, but it was all secondary. Men with guns were coming. Men who didn't like us very much.

I stared up into his eyes from inches away. I knew they were pale blue, but by moonlight they looked almost silver. "You're not going to do anything stupid like shield my body with yours."

He pushed just a little with his hips and grinned. "Why do you think I'm on top?" The grin and the hip movement were to distract me from how very serious his eyes were.

"Get off of me, Jason."

"Nope," he said. He propped himself up on his arms, pressing into me, leaning over like we were kissing. "They're almost here."

I slid a knife out for either hand.

He whispered against my mouth. "We're supposed to look helpless, remember? Bait doesn't go armed."

I could feel how very smooth his cheek was, smell his cologne. I stared past the pale halo of his hair. "We just trust that Jamil and the rest will save us, is that it?"

He licked my chin, then my mouth. I realized he was doing the submissive greeting. He was begging me to go along. His tongue was very wet and very warm.

"Stop licking me, and I'll do it," I said.

He laughed, but it was high with an edge of tension to it. I couldn't resheath the knives with him pressed on top of me, so I laid them down in the leaves. I kept my hands on them, lightly, but tried to relax and look harmless. With Jason pressed on top of me, kissing down my neck, it was easy to look helpless. The relaxed part wasn't going to happen.

I heard them now, moving through the dry leaves. They were quiet. If I hadn't been listening for it, I might have thought it was wind, an animal moving through the undergrowth. But it wasn't. It was men moving heavy and secretively through the forest. Hunting. They were hunting. They were hunting Jason and me.

I saw the first one round the tree, and I wasn't a good enough actress to look surprised. I just stared up at him with Jason on top of me, still kissing the side of my neck.

He'd looked big yesterday. From flat on my back, he was enormous, like a two-legged tree. The rifle in his hand looked long and black and hostile. He didn't point it at us, just held it in the crook of one arm. A big smile split his pale face.

I heard the second man before he touched Jason's shoulder with the tip of a double-barreled shotgun. The moment I saw the shotgun, I knew they'd come to kill us. You didn't go after people with shotguns if you just meant to scare them, not as a general rule, anyway.

If it were silver shot at this range, he could have killed both of us. I wasn't scared yet. I was pissed. Where the hell was our backup?

Jason raised his face slowly. The shotgun tapped his cheek almost gently. "My brother Mel sends his regards."

I rolled my eyes to look past the shotgun. The man was wearing a black T-shirt with a Harley logo on it. His belly hung out over his belt. There was a family resemblance.

I said very calmly, each word careful but not scared, "What do you want?"

Mel's brother laughed.

The first man joined him.

They stood over us with the guns and laughed. Not a good sign. Where the fuck was Jamil?

"Get off of her real slow," the first man said. The rifle was at his shoulder now, snuggled against his chin like he knew what he was doing.

Jason leaned over me until I was as hidden as I could get under his body. Being short made it hard for him to shield me completely.

I told him. "Get off of me."

"No," he said. He'd seen the shotgun, too. And I realized he understood what it meant. I was not going to let him die a hero. I was certainly not going to let him die by spattering his brains all over me. Some things you recover from. Some things you don't. Wiping Jason's brains off my face might be one of the latter.

I let go of the knife in my right hand, letting the blade lie in the leaves. It took everything I had not to tighten my grip on the one in my left. I tried to keep my hand very still. In the dark, they might not notice. They hadn't, so far.

"Get off of her," the man repeated, "or I will shoot you both where you lay."

"Off, Jason," I said softly.

He moved enough so we could see each other's eyes. I looked to my right at the rifleman. Then I touched my chest and looked at Mel's brother. I was trying to tell him that the rifle was his problem and the shotgun was mine. I hoped he understood. Either he did, or he had his own plan, because he raised very slowly and got to his knees. I sat up, not too fast, not too slow. I kept my left hand in the leaves, knife gripped tightly.

The rifleman said, "Hands on your head, boy."

Jason didn't argue. He just clasped his hands on his head like he'd done it before.

No one told me to put my hands on my head, so I didn't. If we were lucky, they'd treat me like a girl. The rifleman had been unconscious when I hurt Mel. The one with the shotgun hadn't been there. What had Mel told them?

The rifleman said, "Remember me, asshole?"

"Is he asking you or me?" I asked. I scooted in the leaves a little closer to the guy with the shotgun.

"Don't get cute, chickie," the rifleman said. "We came here for both of you, but I want my piece of this one first."

Jason flicked his eyes to me. "You must be losing some of your charm, Anita. He wants a piece of me instead of you."

The rifleman had the rifle aimed very steadily at the middle of Jason's chest. If it were silver ammo, he was gone. The rifleman said, "Chuck."

Chuck, the one with the shotgun, grabbed my left arm. I opened my hand and let the knife fall before he raised my hand free of the leaves. The rifle was too steady on Jason for me to try stabbing Chuck. If I were lucky, I'd get another chance. If I wasn't, I was going to come back and haunt Jamil.

Chuck's hands were big and meaty. Thick fingers dug into my arm enough that if I lived, I'd be bruised.

"If you don't do exactly what I say, your girlfriend gets it."

I wanted to say, "Who writes your dialogue?" but I didn't. The shotgun hovered about an inch from my cheek. Pretty clear what it was. I could smell the oil in the gun barrels. It had been cleaned recently. Nice to know of Chuck took care of his weapon.

The rifleman did two things almost at once: He stepped forward and reversed his gun. The rifle butt smashed into Jason's chin. Jason swayed but didn't fall.

The rifle stabbed at him again, catching him high on one cheekbone. Blood spilled in a black line.

I must have moved, because the shotgun was suddenly pressed against my cheek. "Don't do it, bitch."

I swallowed and spoke very carefully with the cool metal against my face. "Do what?"

"Anything," he said. He jerked my arm for emphasis, grinding the shotgun into my cheek.

The rifleman said, "The doc said you could have broken my spine. Said I was lucky. I am going to hurt you, asshole, then I'm going to kill you. If you take it like a man, I'll let the girl go. You wimp out, and I do you both." He smashed the rifle into Jason's mouth. Blood and something heavier flew shining in the moonlight. The beating began in earnest.

I'd seen people hurt on the judo mat. I'd gone to martial arts tournaments. I'd even been knocked out a couple of times for real by bad guys. But I'd never seen a real beating, not like this. It was methodical, thorough, professional.

Jason made no move to protect himself. He never cried out. He just knelt in the leaves and took it. His face was covered in blood. His eyes fluttered, and I knew he was close to passing out. I had to do something before he lost it.

Through it all, Chuck had kept the shotgun pressed to my face so hard I knew I'd have the imprint of it on my skin. He never wavered, never gave me any chance to do anything. I was beginning to think that Chuck wasn't an amateur. I'd given up on Jamil or anyone else. It was just the four of us in the darkened woods. Just the smack of the rifle hitting flesh. The sound of the rifleman's grunt of effort as he tried to make Jason cry out.

Jason finally slipped to his side. He tried to keep his hands up, but he couldn't.

He leaned on his arms in the leaves. There was a fine, visible trembling in his upper body. He was fighting to stay upright.

"Beg me to stop," the rifleman said. "Beg me, and maybe I'll just shoot you. Beg me to stop, or I will fucking beat you to death."

I believed him. I think Jason did, too, because he just shook his head. He knew if he gave the man what he wanted, he would finish it.

I felt something, a prickling rush of warmth. It was Richard. He was out there somewhere. He opened the mark inside my body. It flowed over my skin and across Chuck's hand. "What the fuck was that?" he asked.

I didn't move or say anything.

"Answer me, bitch, you trying some magic shit on me?" He pushed the shotgun in even harder. If he kept it up, he was just going to shove it through my cheek.

"Wasn't me," I said.

He jerked me to my knees, and the shotgun wasn't pressed into me anymore. It was pointed out into the darkness for just a second. It was one of those moments. Everything slowed down, as if I had all the time in the world to draw the big knife down my back. The knife cleared the sheath. The shotgun and Chuck turned back towards me. I used the momentum of drawing the blade to swing it down and across. I felt the tip catch Chuck's throat, and knew it wasn't a killing blow. Something fell from the trees above us. A shadow only a little more solid than the rest. The shotgun's barrels were like two dark tunnels pointed at my face.

I heard the rifle behind me, but there was no time to look for Jason. There was just the gun pointed at my face, the shadow that I didn't have time to look up and see.

The shadow fell between us. The shadow had fur. The shotgun exploded on the other side of that furred shadow. The lycanthrope staggered backwards but didn't fall. The shotgun exploded again, both barrels. Before the echoes died, I was scrambling through the leaves, around the lycanthrope. Chuck's eyes were wild, showing white, but he had the shotgun broken down across his left arm. The two spent shells were gone and two more were being shoved into the breech. He was good.

I shoved the blade just under his big shiny belt buckle. A shudder ran through him, but he slid the shells inside the breech. I shoved the blade in until it grated on bone, spine or pelvic girdle, who knew. He slapped the breech closed against his arm like he was skeet shooting. I pulled the blade out of his body in a gout of blood.

He fell in slow motion, straight down to his knees. I lifted the newly loaded shotgun from his hands, and he didn't fight me. He knelt in the leaves and blinked out into the darkness. He didn't seem to be seeing me now.

Someone was screaming, high and wild. I glanced behind me, and it was the rifleman. He was sitting on the ground with one arm pointed up in the moonlight. The arm was missing from the elbow down. Jason was lying very still in the leaves. Zane was sitting beside him with blood on the back of his yellow T-shirt.

I stood and moved away from Chuck. He fell face forward into the leaves. He was alive enough to put his face to one side, but not to catch himself with his hands. The werewolf that had saved me was lying on his back, gasping for air.

There was a hole in his gut bigger than my two fists. There was a bitter smell almost like vomit but ranker. His intestines had been perforated. The smell told me that. The gut wound wouldn't kill him. Even if it was silver shot, it wouldn't kill him right away.

The second wound was higher up in the deep, broad chest. His black fur was wet to the touch, soaked with blood. I could have shoved my hands in the dark, wet hole, but I couldn't see shit. I couldn't see if the heart was damaged.

His breathing was wet, sloppy, almost strangled. I could hear bubbling coming from the wound. At least one lung had been compromised, that's what I was hearing. He was still struggling to breathe, so his heart had to be working, didn't it?

Real werewolves look sort of like movie wolfmen, but the movies never quite capture it. He, very definitely a he, lay on his back, gasping. It was like watching a dream breathe, except this dream was dying. I thought it was one of Verne's wolves, that I didn't know him. Then I saw the remnants of a white T-shirt caught on one shoulder like a bit of forgotten skin. I pulled gently on the cloth, and saw the smiley face on it. I stared into yellow wolf eyes. Stared down at Jamil. He'd done what a bodyguard is supposed to do. He'd taken my bullet. I took off my shirt and packed it into the hole in his chest. It took both my hands to cover the wound, to try and make a seal so he could breathe again. So he wouldn't bleed to death.

I whispered, "Don't die on me, damn it," then I started screaming for help.

Chapter 26

My hands were wet with blood. The shirt had soaked up what blood it could, but more was pouring out. It was soaking into my jeans, covering my forearms. He stared at me with yellow eyes, mouth open, trying desperately to keep breathing. Long-clawed hands made small convulsive movements in the

leaves. A prickling warmth spread under my hands. His skin moved under my hands like warm, furry water.

Shapes appeared out of the darkness. They looked like people, but I knew it was a lie. Werewolves—I was eyeball deep in werewolves.

"He needs a doctor," I said.

A dark-haired man with small, round glasses knelt on the other side of Jamil. He opened a large brown satchel and pulled out a stethoscope. I didn't question it. Most packs had a doctor. Never knew when you'd need some confidential medical care.

He pushed my hands from the wound. "It's healing. It wasn't silver shot." He shone a penlight into the wound. "What the hell is in there?"

"My shirt."

"Get it out before the skin heals around it."

The wound was healing. My hand barely squeezed into the opening. I got a handful of blood-soaked shirt and pulled. It came out in a long wet sloppy mess. Blood poured in a steady stream from one corner of the shirt. I let the shirt fall to the leaves. I would not be wearing it tonight. I had a thought that I was wearing nothing above the waist except a black bra. I didn't care.

"Is he going to live?" I asked.

"He'll live."

"Promise," I said.

He stared at me and nodded. Stray moonlight made his glasses look like blank silver mirrors. "I promise."

I looked down into Jamil's wolfish face. I stroked the fur across his forehead. The fur was both rough and thick and soft. "I'll be right back."

There were other people with Jason and Zane. Cherry with Zane, cradling him. Nathaniel was kneeling by them, but his eyes were for me. There was even a man leaning over the rifleman. He was tying a belt off on the stump of his arm. Good. I wanted him alive. I had questions for him but not yet.

I knelt by Jason. He lay in the leaves on his side. A woman was tending his wounds. She was dressed in short shorts and a halter top, dark hair tied back in a loose ponytail. It wasn't until she turned her head that I realized it was Lucy. She held a penlight between her teeth and was searching Jason's wounds with sure hands, as if she knew what she was doing.

She answered my question before I asked. "He'll heal, but it's going to take a couple of days." Which meant if Jason had been human, the beating would have been fatal.

She looked at me then. Our eyes met from inches away. The makeup was a little less severe, but the face was still pretty by moonlight.

I turned away from her first. I didn't want to see what was in her eyes. I just didn't want to know. I knelt over Jason, started to touch his face, then stopped because the blood was still wet on my hands.

He said something very soft. I had to lean over him to hear it. "Let me lick the blood," he said.

I stared down at him, eyes just a little wide. "You're not dying, Jason," I said. "Don't get cute."

Verne said, "It's fresh blood, Anita. It's pack blood. It will help him heal."

I stared at him. The local Ulfric stood off to one side, tall and straight and slender, letting his medical personnel do their jobs. I started to ask him where the hell he had been while we got cut up, but Zane made a sound.

Zane seemed to be healing just fine from a rifle blast that would have cost a human his arm. But it hurt, and he made small pain sounds while the doctor worked on him.

"The blood will help them heal," Verne said. "Especially blood from someone as powerful as you are. Marianne feeds the pack sometimes."

Lucy said, "It really will help him." Her face was neutral as she said it.

I looked down at Jason. His face was a mask of blood. One eye was swollen completely shut. He tried to smile at me, but his lips were so badly swollen that the smile didn't work. It was like part of his face just didn't work right now.

I touched those wounded lips with my fingertips, brushed the fresh blood across his lower lip. He rolled his lip under, tasting the blood. But the movement made him wince. It hurt.

I laid two fingers against his lips and slid them gently into his mouth. He tried to suck them, but his mouth wouldn't work right. He licked the blood, swallowing almost convulsively. I drew the fingers out, and his hand came up to grab my wrist. I let him guide two new fingers into his mouth.

Richard spilled into the clearing, going to his knees in the leaves. Shang-Da was at his back like a good bodyguard. Richard's gaze met mine, and just the glance opened me up to him a little more. Without Jean-Claude to act as a buffer, the marks between Richard and I were stronger. He knelt there, his breathing coming in near-painful gasps. I could feel his chest rising and falling, almost as if I were breathing for him. I felt him look at the woman beside me. I saw Lucy for a second as he saw her. I saw the rise of her breasts swelling under the halter top.

The line of her cheek half in shadow, half in moonlight. She raised her face to meet my eyes like she could feel me looking.

"He still wants you," I said.

She gave a very small smile. "But not as much as he wants you."

The marks between Richard and I quieted. I couldn't feel him breathe or what he was thinking. He had cut me off. Afraid of what I'd see, maybe. "What happened, Verne? They were supposed to be safe in your lands," Richard said.

Cherry answered, "Jamil sent the three of us for help. He"—she pointed to a shadowy figure on the other side of the clearing—"wouldn't let us pass into the lupanar. He wouldn't take our request for aid to Verne."

The man stepped forward so a patch of moonlight showed him: tall, muscular, dark-haired, pale. "They are not pack. They have no right to demand passage."

Verne was just suddenly there, and the tall werewolf was on the ground. I hadn't seen him move. It was a speed that was dreamlike, impossible. But I'd almost seen it.

"I am Ulfric. I decide who is worthy and who is not, Eric. You are only Freki, third in the pack. You have one more battle before you can even challenge me."

Eric touched his hand to his face and came away with something dark and liquid. "I am not challenging you."

There was movement behind me in the leaves. Zane was crawling towards me, the wounded arm held close to his chest with a makeshift sling. "I came back to help while Cherry and Nathaniel argued with their watchwolf." I could feel an intensity to his gaze, even in the dark. "The blood's going to dry before he gets to it all." He stayed there in the leaves, just out of touching distance. His shirt had been ripped off one side of his slender chest. It hung in rags to one shoulder. He stared at me and even by scattered moonlight, I could see the need, not in his face but in his body, the way he held himself. He was asking for more than the healing of his body. If he hadn't been there, Jason would be dead now. Even a lycanthrope has a limit to the damage he can take.

Jason held the palm of my hand to his mouth, licking with long, lingering movements.

"You need the other hand?" I asked.

"It will be dried before he can use it," Lucy said.

I stared at her and hated her just a little. Hated her for having been in Richard's bed. Hated her for doing things with him that I'd never allowed myself to do.

"The wereleopard doesn't need the blood," Richard said. "He'll heal without it."

I just stared at him and held my hand out to Zane. He crawled to me on his knees and his good arm. I stared at Richard while Zane took my fingers into his mouth. He sucked on them like a hungry child licking the last bit of cake from a spoon.

"He's mine, Richard, mine as much as Jason is. I am Nimir-ra and lupa."

Richard stood. "I know what you are, Anita."

I shook my head. "You have no idea what I am." The moment I said it, I felt that warm, growing presence. Munin rising inside of me like a pool of warm water, spilling upward. Richard's mark seemed to bring it on sometimes. Or maybe it was just the way he made me feel. Lust or anger or both. I didn't fight the munin.

Marianne had said if I stopped fighting, that it would lose some of its control over me. I wasn't even sure I could fight it off completely. The best I could do was control it. I let it flow over me, down my arms into the two men.

Jason had worked his way to my wrist, tongue moving over the veins there. He'd been hesitating over the smell of fresher blood so very close to the surface. Now his good eye stared up at me, wide, a little scared.

I smiled down at him, and I knew that it wasn't just my smile. I was still here, but I wasn't exactly alone. Raina's thoughts lay over mine like a veil. I could see out, but it colored everything I saw. Her body, our body, wanted things, craved things that made me want to run screaming. But if I were careful, I could use her as she used me. It was like walking up a flight of steep, narrow

stairs with a cup of scalding coffee filled to the brim. Careful, oh, so careful or it spills over the edge and you get burned.

The alternative to letting the munin have a little fun was what happened in the woods earlier. I did not want another full-blown memory with Jason and Zane hanging onto me. Not tonight, not ever. Jason couldn't handle it, and neither could I.

I looked down at Jason. "It's all right, Jason. Enjoy the blood while it lasts. I don't think you're going to get this offer twice."

He ran his tongue up my arm, working hard against the skin like a cat washing its own fur. Zane had sucked my fingers clean and had raised my hand up in front of his face, cradled in his good hand. He was licking very slowly, very thoroughly up my palm.

There was a sound behind us. I turned to see the rifleman. He was conscious and in some pain. The doctor with the round glasses was about to give him a shot.

I called, "Bring him to me."

The doctor and the werewolf with him looked across the clearing to Verne and Richard. Richard had moved across to the other Ulfric. They were discussing how everything had gone wrong. They could discuss things all night. I wanted answers.

"Don't look at them. Look at me. And bring him to me!" Raina's munin swelled outward and burst over me, over Jason, over Zane. It spilled over Lucy and brought a gasp from her throat. Everyone in the clearing got a taste, a preview if you like. It was getting harder to hold together. Harder to think.

They dragged the rifleman over to me. I knew what I looked like. I was wearing a black underwire bra that hid more than most bathing suits, but it was still a bra. I was still covered in blood. Jason and Zane were licking blood from my naked skin. It was strange and macabre and would work as a threat very nicely.

The doctor and the other werewolf threw the rifleman down in front of me. Jason and Zane ignored him, mouths on my skin. Zane slid his mouth along the edge of my skin, teeth grating ever so gently on the skin. His eyes slid to the rifleman, and I knew we would put on a show for him.

I felt Raina's munin like a warm glow. She, it, whatever, wanted to cover Zane's mouth with ours and taste Jamil's blood. Wanted to rip the bandage off his shoulder and lick the wound. With the thought came the knowledge that licking the wound would make it heal faster. Surely not.

The rifleman stared at me, his eyes showing mostly white. I could feel his breath, smell his fear. I could smell his fear like a miasma of sweat. I could taste in his scent how injured he was. I knew his skin would be cool to the touch from blood loss. All this from a smell. Shit.

"What's your name?"

The question seemed too hard for him.

"We can check your wallet. What's your name?"

He made an involuntary move to his back pocket with a hand he didn't have anymore.

"If we get him to a hospital soon," the doctor said, "they might be able to reattach the arm."

"If he answers my questions truthfully, you can take him to the hospital."

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Terry, Terry Fletcher."

"Okay, Terry. Who sent you to kill us?"

"I wanted to pay you back for making us look bad. That's all. Nobody was supposed to die."

Jason had cleaned my arm to the elbow. I could feel the passage of his tongue like a cool line running over and over my skin. Hot where he still touched me, cool where he'd just been.

"Lies won't get you to a hospital, Terry. Lies won't save your arm. Who paid you to hurt us?" I asked.

"He'll kill me."

I looked at him and laughed. The laugh was rich and thick enough to hold. It rolled out of my mouth and it wasn't my laugh. The sound raised the hairs on the back of my neck and made Jason hesitate, mouth pressed to my arm.

"Do you really think I won't kill you?"

A breeze had finally come up, hot and stale. Jason's mouth was cooler.

His mouth had healed enough to suck at my skin, but there was an edge of swelling to the side of his mouth. I wanted to kiss the wound, lick it, see if what I was being told was right. Could I really heal him?

I looked at Terry. "Tell me who paid you to hurt us. Tell me who sent you to kill us. Tell me everything I want to know, and the good doctor will take you to a hospital where they may save your arm. Lie to me, and your arm is just so much meat. Lie to me, and you die tonight, here, in this clearing. You think it over, Terry. I've got all night."

I leaned over Jason, drawing his mouth away from my arm. We kissed, and I could taste Jamil's blood, my skin, the faint remnant of the perfume on my wrist, and Jason's blood. His mouth had bled, and I could taste that, too. But it wasn't bleeding now. It was healing, and I could make it heal faster. It took everything I had not to press my mouth hard against his and force that warmth into him, everything I had not to press Jason's wounded body into the leaves and ride him.

I drew away from him, eyes closed. I opened my eyes and looked at the man. Jason moved to my stomach, licking along the top of my jeans. They were soaked in blood, and wouldn't really dry while I was still wearing them. Zane curved around to my back, licking along my spine. There was no blood there, and he had to stop at the spine sheath, but it looked good for our captive audience.

"Talk to me, Terry. Once I start fucking one of them, I really don't want to be interrupted." I leaned towards him just a little, and he flinched. I drew away from Jason and Zane and crawled towards Terry. I made the movement everything it was supposed to be: fluid, dangerous, sexual. Even now, his eyes kept flicking to my breasts so white against the blackness of the lingerie. Even

now, he was still a man. I felt Raina's utter disdain of men. All that sex, and it was mostly hate. How terribly odd.

She was enjoying terrorizing the man. His wide eyes, the quick breath, the pounding of his heart. I could hear it. Hell, I could almost taste his skin on my tongue. Food, he smelled like food.

"Who sent you, Terry?" I made it a whisper, intimate, for his ears only. I reached out to him, and when I trailed my finger down his cheek, he whimpered. I leaned forward and licked a quick line the length of his face. "You taste like food, Terry."

I could feel the others at our back. Verne's pack responding to Raina's call. To my call. Through Richard, I was more lupa than I wanted to be. But now, tonight, it had possibilities. They came from every side, moving like shadows. Creeping closer, nearer, drawn by my desire and the man's terror.

He stared at them, watched them coming closer with wide eyes. He turned his head to watch them moving in. I kissed his cheek while he wasn't looking, and he screamed.

"Oh, God, please don't."

Raina's laugh fell from my lips. "Names, Terry, names."

"Niley, Franklin Niley. He paid us to run you off, said the cops wouldn't be a problem. Then he said kill you. You especially. He said kill that bitch before she queers my deal."

"What deal?" I whispered. Frank Niley was the employer of the muscleman Milo Hart. I hadn't seen him since. He was here for land speculation. Was he the buyer for Greene's land?

Terry's eyes flicked around to the waiting werewolves. "I don't know, honest to God. I don't know. He paid us five hundred apiece to hurt you. He made it five thousand for Chuck and me to kill you."

"Five thousand apiece?" I asked.

He nodded.

"It wasn't enough," I said.

"We didn't know you was a werewolf. We didn't know what you were." One of the shadowy throng was sniffing his leg. Terry's voice rose a little higher with every word. His next "I didn't know" was almost a scream.

Raina's munin was like a warm pulse behind my eyes. I leaned into the man, as if I'd kiss him. He backed away but bumped into the good doctor. My mouth hovered over the man's, but it wasn't a kiss I wanted. I stayed there, hovering over his mouth, frozen, fighting not to lower my mouth to his neck. Fighting not to sink teeth into his throat and tear. Fighting not to draw first blood and let the pack feed.

I started crawling back from him, as if I were the one that was afraid.

"Take him to the hospital."

"You can't let him live," Zane said.

"I promised him if he talked, we'd take him." I caressed Zane's face. We stayed kneeling in the leaves, close enough to embrace when I didn't remember moving that close. "Take him, take the arm. And Terry," I said.

The man wasn't looking at me. He was staring at the waiting wolves.

"Terry," I said again. I was still caressing Zane, one hand buried in his short, white hair.

The man looked at me, eyes flicking back and forth madly as if he were trying to keep all of us in sight at once. "What? What do you want? You said I could go to the hospital."

"If you tell Niley about tonight, about what I am and what happened, I'll kill you." I lowered Zane's face until I planted a gentle kiss on his forehead.

"I won't tell. I won't tell anyone. Niley'd kill me if he knew I gave him up. He'd fucking kill me."

"Good," I said. I cradled Zane against me. He began to lick down my neck. He passed over my shoulder, licking a small line down my collarbone. He went lower, and I pushed him away, rough enough that he fell on his wounded shoulder. The world was narrowing down. I was losing the fight with Raina.

"Get him out of here—now!" I felt like I was going blind. I could see, but it was all different. I was fighting her and she didn't like it. She'd asked for violence, and I'd refused. She'd asked for sex, and I'd refused. Even dead, she was a hard lady to say no to.

I covered my eyes with my hands. I heard someone moving towards me. "Don't touch me."

"It's Marianne, child. Tell me what's happening."

I lowered my hands until I could see Marianne. She was still in the white dress with her long, pale hair. "You never met Raina, did you?"

"No, child."

I reached for her hand, and it was just a hand. There was no memory attached to it. No horror that the munin could share. "Help me."

She gripped my hand with both of hers. "It's too late to force the munin out. It must be made to want to leave."

I shook my head. "She won't leave."

"She's left you before."

I shook my head harder until my hair slapped my face. "You don't know what she wants. You don't understand what she wants. I can't. I won't."

Richard was there. He started to touch my shoulder, and I fell back into the leaves. One hand raised as if to ward off a blow. I did not want to know what Raina had done with him or to him. That was one image I did not need.

"What's wrong?"

"The munin will not leave until Anita does something it wants."

"You knew Raina," I said. "Tell her the kind of thing Raina enjoyed." It was rising inside me. I couldn't stop it. It rose higher and higher until the power spilled out of my mouth in a shriek.

He started to touch me and I crawled away from him. "No, no, no, no."

Marianne caught me, held me against her. She smelled like Ivory soap and lilacs. I knew I could have broken her hold, but I didn't want to. I wanted to be held. I wanted help. I needed help.

She smoothed my hair, rocking me like I was a child. "Anita, you must give in to the munin in part. You've done it before. Richard has discussed past

events with me. When the munin leaves you this time, we will work together to make sure this does not happen again."

I raised up enough to see her face. "Can you really stop this?"

"I can teach you how to stop it."

I stared into her pale eyes for a space of heartbeats. I could hear the strange click of her artificial heart valve. The munin was hinting that food would do as well as sex. Not as well, but it would do.

I pushed gently away from Marianne. "You're just food to her." I crawled back from her, slowly.

Marianne just watched me, kneeling in the leaves in her white dress. She was the only one in the clearing that was more than a shadow. All that whiteness caught the moonlight and glimmered. She looked like a target.

I stood, my breath coming in ragged gasps. I could taste my heart in my throat like a ball that I could have touched and played with. I looked around the clearing, desperate for a way out. Something that Raina would be content with and I could live with.

Zane was staring at me. Raina wanted him. But what she wanted had very little to do with sex. I went to him. He knelt in the leaves, staring up at me with large eyes gone silver with moonlight.

I fell to my knees in front of him and ripped the sling off his shoulder. He made a small grunt of pain, and Raina liked it. The problem with doing something to get the munin out was that the munin had to be in control enough for me to be willing to do what it wanted. Giving her more control seemed like a bad idea. But what she wanted was to plant our mouth over the wound in his shoulder, and I couldn't do it sober. There wasn't enough Raina in me yet to put my tongue in an open wound.

I crawled away from Zane and found Jason. I stared at him. He was almost a safety zone for me when the munin had me. The munin liked him, and I wasn't afraid of him.

I went to him, kneeling on all fours in the leaves, but knew if I touched him and I was still fighting the munin, we'd get another rush of horror. If I went to him, it had to be for real. I had to be willing to give in, at least a little.

His mouth was almost completely healed. The swelling in his eye was better. The blood or the munin—it really was working. He was healing. I knew the munin could be used for healing on lycanthropes. I'd done it once before, but not like this. That was back when Raina first made an appearance, and I hadn't realized how much trouble I was in. Now I knew, and I was scared and hated it. Raina thought that was hilarious, that dead, she scared me more than she had when she was alive.

I could feel her pleasure like a line of warmth through my body. The echo of her laughter chased through my mind and made gooseflesh on my arms. Being possessed by anyone would have scared me. Being possessed by a sociopathic nymphomaniac sadomasochist that I had killed personally was too frightening and too ironic for words.

Jason lay back in the leaves. I was very careful not to touch him as I crawled over his body on all fours. I knelt there on hands and knees and stared down at him, legs and arms wide so that we didn't accidentally touch.

His voice came hoarse, rough, as if something in his throat were still hurting, "You have a plan?"

"If I don't fight the munin, Marianne says no memories, just power."

He stared up at me. "You going to kiss it and make it all better?"

I nodded, my hair sliding over his face. "All better." I leaned my face towards his in a sort of push-up motion. Our lips brushed in a trembling line, and what not an hour before had been chaste and a little uncomfortable was suddenly changed. I broke the kiss and held my body off of his with fingertips and toes, my body above his. I could feel the trembling energy of his aura underneath me, pushing against the power of my aura, the power that was munin. I stayed above him, not touching, staring into his face. When we kissed again, the power poured from my mouth into his in a warm breath that burned through our bodies.

I let my body drop against his in an abrupt, violent movement that brought a cry of pain from him. The sound fell into my mouth and was swallowed in a wave of heat and power. I poured the munin into Jason. I poured me into him. I poured in through his mouth, down through my pores. Everywhere that skin touched skin, I seeped into him. I felt as if I were draining away into his body.

He behaved himself at first, hands at his sides, but the power rode us both. His arms locked behind my back. His mouth searched mine as if he were climbing inside. I straddled his body and felt him hard and ready even through our jeans.

He rolled me over suddenly so that he was on top. My body did nothing to protect itself. I locked my legs around his waist, and felt him pumping against me. Each thrust made things low in my abdomen jerk and tighten.

I swam upward through the power and started pushing at his chest. We were not doing this again. I was not doing this. "Off. Get off." My voice was strangled, hoarse. I swallowed the munin back enough to struggle inside and out.

Jason froze over me, then collapsed on top of me. His heart beat frantically against my chest. His breathing was rushed. He swallowed and managed to say, "If I said it was too late to stop, would you believe me?"

I started crawling out from under him. "No," I said.

He rolled onto his back, freeing me to stand. The bruises were gone. His face stared up at me as clean and innocent as it started. If I could only get this shit to work without the sex.

"My turn?" Zane asked. I turned, and he was kneeling in the leaves. He'd stripped off the remains of his shirt. I never really thought of Zane as a guy, not like that. But now he was kneeling in a splash of moonlight so that the shadows and light showed the muscles in his chest and stomach. His arms were lost in darkness. His face was a pattern of strong, clean flesh, gleaming pale, one half caught in shadows, like pieces of darkness. His nipple ring glinted silver, like a wink of an eye, an invitation. And that was all it took.

I stood in front of him, staring down, and did what the munin wanted. I grabbed his wounded arm and jerked it upward, forcing the shoulder to its fullest extension. He cried out in pain. The skin had closed over the wound, but it was there below the surface. I pressed my mouth to the wound and felt the muscles torn. The bone already knitting, broken. I bit him, sinking teeth in enough to leave a mark and blew power into his skin. I healed it and fought Raina. She wanted to take a chunk out of his skin. A sort of joke, heal him and hurt him at the same time.

I pushed away from him before I could give in. I stumbled to my feet and realized that each time I used it, the power was growing. It was filling me like another person, something growing inside of me, pushing at my skin.

I staggered to Jamil and fell beside him to my knees. He'd changed back to human form, which meant he had been very hurt. I stared down at his nude body and fought with Raina not to touch him. Not to do what she wanted. Or not to do everything she wanted.

I ran my hands over Jamil's chest until I touched the wound. The skin was closed, but soft. I knew I could force my fingers inside him. I knew I could reach in and snatch his heart. Instead, I lowered my face to his chest and kissed the wound, gently, softly. I closed my eyes and took in the scent of him, the feel of his soft skin. Healing skin was always so soft, like a baby's flesh, tender and smooth. I put my hands over the wound and thrust that warm building power into him like a sword.

Jamil's eyes flew wide, and his spine bowed. He tried to scream, and I stole it with a kiss. I rode his body, straddling not his groin but the second, lower wound. I drew back from his lips and forced my hands low on his body. I healed him. I felt it leave my body in a warm rush. My hands slid lower. I brushed him and he was beginning to grow hard. I threw myself off of him. She'd healed him. Raina felt somebody owed her something for the healing.

I fought it until I fell back into the leaves and screamed. My body writhed and it was like my left side wasn't talking to my right. Like something was breaking inside me. That large, warm presence, that second body was trying to rise to the surface, trying to break the surface. Raina's beast was trying to come out. Trying to make me lupa in truth, but my body couldn't hold it. Couldn't give it a home. I was human, and no matter how much power you shoved into me, that didn't change.

Hands held me down. Richard's voice as if from a great height. "What's happening to her?"

"She's fighting the munin." It was Marianne's voice. I heard her voice close to my face, but I couldn't see her. It was like the world was vanishing into the dark. "Don't fight, Anita. Whatever happens tonight, tomorrow I can help you. Give in and live, or the munin will kill you."

"Anita, please, please!" Richard again.

"She will kill you if she can. She will kill you from the grave itself, Anita. Stop fighting. Embrace it, or it will destroy you."

I screamed, "No!" Then, suddenly, I could see again. I stared up into the tree-lined darkness. There was a sparkle of moonlight through the leaves. It

seemed as bright as sunlight, only softer. I lay very still, blinking up at them all. Richard had my shoulders pinned. Verne had my legs. Shang-Da had my right arm. Lucy had my left. I'd been having convulsions. I remembered that.

Marianne was kneeling near my face, keeping my face still between her hands. "Anita?" she made it a question.

"I'm here." My voice was quiet but clear. I felt light and empty, but not alone. I wasn't fooled. The munin hadn't left. It wasn't finished.

"Is the munin gone?" Richard asked.

Marianne shook her head. "It's still here."

It made me think better of her that she wasn't fooled.

"Do we let her up?" Verne asked.

"Anita?" Marianne asked me.

"Let me up."

They let me go, slowly, as if almost afraid. Afraid of me or for me, I wasn't sure which. They moved away from me. Only Richard stayed kneeling. I leaned my back against him and let him hold me in his arms. I closed my eyes and let him take it all away for just an instant. I'd never had anyone's arms feel as safe as his. No one's.

My leg brushed something in the leaves. I pulled away from him enough to find my knife. I sheathed it.

From across the small clearing, Jason said, "Here's the other one." He held it up by the blade.

I went to him, taking the blade from his hand. I could feel all of them watching me. Like I was something new and uncertain that had just appeared. I sheathed the second blade.

Jason grinned up at me. "Don't take this wrong, Anita, but someday I'd like to do that for real."

"Why not tonight?" I said.

Jason stared up at me. "What did you say?"

I walked back across the clearing. I felt their eyes following me as I moved. I smelled of blood and power and flesh, and there was nothing better than that for attracting werewolves.

Richard stood there in his jeans and T-shirt. His hair foamed around his shoulders, a soft, rich brown in the moonlight.

I grabbed a fistful of his T-shirt and forced his face low enough for me to kiss. The kiss was long and full, and he tasted all the blood I'd had. Every skin I'd touched. I pulled his shirt out of his pants in a long motion, running my hands across his bare stomach, across the smooth hardness of his chest.

He grabbed my arms and pulled my hands away. "What's wrong with you?"

"Is she not good enough for you either?" It was Lucy striding towards us. Her impressive breasts strained against the white material of her halter top. Either she had very large nipples or she was cold, because the outline of her nipples was clear, even in this dim light.

I stared up at Richard. I'd been sleeping with Jean-Claude. He'd been sleeping with Lucy and Mira—mustn't forget Mira. It was fair that he had other

lovers. Really. But I hated it and hated me for minding. Hated me for wanting him. Hated me for being with Jean-Claude and not being happy with it. Hated me for knowing that even if I'd been with Richard instead, I'd have been missing Jean-Claude. I was fucked no matter what I did.

I knew as I stared at her that the hands that held my arms with such tender strength had cupped those large, round breasts. I knew that she'd touched him, all of him. That she'd held him naked inside her. And I knew jealousy so strong that the only word for it was hate.

I pulled away from Richard and unsheathed one of the knives.

Shang-Da moved forward as if to step between us, but Richard stopped him and made him step back. He just stared at Shang-Da until he stepped out of reach, but you could tell from his face that he was really unhappy about it. I didn't blame him. Richard turned back to me, stared at me, but made no move to protect himself. I don't know if he didn't believe I'd hurt him or was sure I couldn't. I was sure I could.

My hand was already on the downward stroke before I could stop myself. I sliced through his shirt, not deep, but the wound bled.

He winced, eyes so lost, hurt. Fuck him.

Shang-Da was there, and it was Richard who struggled with him. Richard who kept him from grabbing me, disarming me, hurting me.

I put the tip of the blade against my chest and drew downward over my heart. The pain was sharp and immediate, but it was shallow. I wasn't hurt. The blood trickled down between my breasts like tickling fingers. The blood was very dark against the whiteness of my skin.

Richard started towards me, and Verne caught him. "It's her choice," Verne said.

"It's not her. It's Raina," Richard said.

But in a way he was wrong. Raina had finally found something that called to both of us. We both wanted him to suffer. We both felt betrayed. And neither of us had a right to it. We'd both betrayed him in our own ways.

Words that I didn't know spilled from my lips. "Your heart to mine, mine to yours. Lupa to your Ulfric. But not to your bed, nor you to mine." I threw the knife into the ground so it stuck, thrumming. I could feel the blade in the earth as if I'd disturbed some large, sleeping beast. The power burst over me from the ground, from me, and something let loose in a liquid rush inside me. I was dizzy and on my knees without meaning to fall.

I stared up at Richard, still struggling, and said, "Help me." But it was too late. I felt the munin blow outward like a wind. And every man it touched caught the scent. I could almost feel their bodies react. I knew what Raina had done, and if it were to be her last night in the driver's seat, she couldn't have chosen better. Short of killing me, it was the perfect revenge.

I fell to my knees, fighting not to finish the ritual, but I could feel them in the dark, eager. I was giving off scent, and it wasn't just the blood. The words were pulled from my throat as if by a hand. Each word squeezed out until it hurt to speak.

"Claim me again if you can, my Ulfric." I stared up at him and saw the look on his face. It was wild, and part of me was pleased. God help me. My own jealousy had given her the keys to me. I stared around at the shapes in the dark. I could feel them like a growing tension in the air. It was like the air before a storm, so heavy it was hard to breathe through the growing power. You could feel the lightning growing in the air, coming closer, but this storm was waiting for me. Waiting for me to move.

Marianne was beside me. "Get up," she said.

I struggled to my feet, and she helped me.

"Now, run," she said.

I stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"You've declared yourself Frejya. Now, run, before they lose patience and take you here."

I knew what she meant, but I had to have her say it out loud. "Take me?"

"If the munin does not come to the front, it will be rape, but it will still happen. Now, go!" She pushed me towards the dark. I stumbled and stared around the clearing one last time. Richard's face was tormented, horrified. Shang-Da was at Richard's shoulder, and he was angry. Angry with me. Jason's face was as neutral as I'd ever seen it as if afraid to show me what he was feeling. I caught Roland's face, too. I'd met him an hour or two before, but his face wasn't neutral. His face was hungry, anticipatory. And I knew that they'd do it. That someone, somewhere would have me unless I killed them. Two silver blades and an entire pack of werewolves. Not good odds. And Richard would do everything he could to save me—everything.

"Shang-Da," I said.

The tall bodyguard stared at me. I could feel the weight of his gaze in the moonlit dark.

"Richard's life means more to me than my own safety, Shang-Da. Don't let him die," I said.

He stared at me, then gave one sharp nod.

Marianne grabbed my arm and said, "Go!"

I went. I flung myself into the trees, into the dark beyond, and ran. I ran as if I could see in the dark. Flinging myself into half-perceived openings, trusting to the forest the way you trust to water, knowing it will part before you without question. I gave myself over to the night woods like I'd learned to do as a girl. You don't run in the dark in the forest with your eyes. You run with the same part of your brain that makes the back of your neck prickle. I ran and leaped and dodged, and knew it wouldn't be enough.

Chapter 27

A howl cut the night in a long, mournful line. There were growls and a sharp whimper, cut so short I knew someone was hurt, maybe dead. Would they really kill each other for the privilege? Real wolves didn't do this shit. Only people could take a nice, sane animal and screw it up this badly.

I slipped going over a log that was bigger around than a small car. I fell, sprawling. I lay there for a moment on the ground, catching my breath, and I didn't have the faintest idea what to do. I didn't so much hear the werewolves as feel them in the ground under my hands. I knew they were out there in a way I hadn't before the munin invaded. I pressed myself against the huge log, and my hands found an opening. It was partially hollow. I crawled into the black opening, hand with knife in front of me, half expecting to meet a raccoon or snake, but there was nothing but the feel of the cool, rotted wood under my bare stomach and the weight of the great fallen tree above me.

I knew they'd find me. That wasn't the point. It would take them a little time to get me out of the hole. I was trying to buy time. I wasn't even sure time for what. I needed a plan, and I didn't have one. The munin thought that Richard might save us. That thought scared me all on its own. Richard was sort of squeamish when it came to killing. The thought that he might get himself killed trying to save me was almost worse than me getting caught. I would probably survive being raped. I wasn't at all sure I'd survive Richard's death. Of course, having never been raped, maybe I was jumping to conclusions. Maybe I wouldn't survive.

I heard them moving around the log. More than one, more than two. Three, four? Shit.

Claws ripped at the rotted log, and I screamed, one of those short yips that is almost exclusively a girl sound. I heard one of them rolling around on the ground. I felt the rush of energy as he shifted into wolf form. And just like that, he was out of the running. If you lost human form before the lupa you were chasing, you couldn't mate with her. You went furry, you lost. The rules about going Frejya had never been written for a human who had no other shape. We'd lose the lesser wolves to their beasts, this close to full moon with sex and violence in the air.

We'd maybe lose half a dozen, maybe a dozen, to their beasts. Fifty wolves in Verne's pack altogether, a dozen helped.

Something heavy hit the side of the log. I managed not to scream. At least that was an improvement. I heard the sounds of scuffling. At least two of them were fighting. But I was almost sure there was a third.

The fighting stopped, and there was a loud crack as if something brittle and wet had broken. The silence was so heavy, my heartbeat was thunderous.

The log moved. I froze as if just holding very still would save me.

The end of the log near my feet lifted into the air. The cavity that had hidden me kept me trapped as that one end raised slowly into the air. The fallen tree was at least six feet around. I didn't know how much it weighed, but it was heavy. A tall, bearded man was lifting it. He pushed it overhead, palms flat against the wood. He smiled down at me, his teeth white against the beard.

His voice was more growl than words, "Come out, little one."

Little one? I crept very carefully out from under the huge log. It was a crushing weight. A fine trembling ran through his body all the way to his feet. It was not effortless to hold the fallen giant up. I stayed crouched just beside his leg. He'd have to put the log down before he could touch me. His smile widened, as if not moving away from him was a good sign for him.

I shoved the knife into his belly and rolled away from him, tearing the blade along the meat of his stomach as I moved. He looked surprised as he fell to his knees and the tree fell on top of him. It pinned him to the ground, and I didn't wait to see if he could get out from under it. There were two bodies on the ground. One man's skull was smashed open, and thicker things than blood licked onto the ground. In the dark, everything was grey and black. The second guy might have had a pulse, but I didn't check. I ran.

I felt the rushing of air and looked in time to see a blur of motion. A man hit me from the side in a flying tackle. I was on my back with him on top of me, one arm pinned between us. I had a second to recognize Roland, then I slashed at him with the knife. He jerked back too fast to see, and his fist was suddenly connecting with my chin.

I didn't pass out, but my body went limp. The knife fell from my fingers, and I couldn't stop it. Part of me was screaming silently. The other part was saying, "Oh, what pretty trees." When I could move again, my jeans were halfway down my thighs. The only thing that kept me that much dressed was the jeans were tight and wet with blood. Wet jeans peel slowly.

"Roland, don't do this."

He kept pulling on my jeans like I hadn't said anything. I didn't want him to hit me again. If I passed out, it was all over. He was having trouble getting my jeans over my Nikes, because the jeans won't go over my Nikes.

I raised up on my elbows and tried to be friendly, reasonable, and wondered where the hell my knife was. "Roland, Roland, the shoes have to come off first." Maybe if I were helpful, I'd get brownie points. At least maybe I could stall. Where was Richard?

Roland wrapped my jeans in one hand, effectively trapping my feet. "Why help me?" he said. His voice was still too deep for his slender chest, his words still carefully spoken. That nervous energy still crawled along his skin, vibrating like summer heat on a road. He was no different, but everything else had changed.

"Maybe I just don't want you to hit me again," I said.

"I don't want to be stabbed, either," he said.

"Fair enough."

We stayed that way, staring at each other, me propped on my elbows, him kneeling at my feet. It was almost as if he didn't know what to do next. I think he hadn't expected me to be calm. Crying, anger, maybe even eagerness, he was ready for, but I gave him nothing. I was friendly, helpful, as if he'd asked me directions to a restaurant I knew. I even felt calm, strangely. It had a faintly surrealistic air, as if it wasn't really happening. If he touched me, it was going to seem all too real, but as long as he stayed where he was, I was fine.

He pinned my jeans with his knee and started taking off his shirt. The shirt was okay. I was fine with that. He had a nice chest, pleasant to look at. As long as his pants stayed on, I was fine. Where the hell was Richard?

He undid the snap to his pants, and my nerves just weren't that good. I didn't want to try and contact Richard in case he was fighting. Using the marks was distracting. But I wanted some help. I was betting that Roland didn't wear underwear. I won my bet.

I sent out a call to Richard, and he was fighting. I saw through his eyes for one dizzying second. He was fighting Eric. Great. I broke contact as quickly as I could, but I knew it cost him a second of concentration. I was on my own.

Roland pushed his jeans to his knees and seemed to think that was sufficient, because he started to crawl up my legs. Oh, this was romantic.

It wasn't Richard who came to the rescue. It was a man I didn't know. He tackled Roland, much as Roland had tackled me. They rolled off me and down a small incline into a hollow. I started pulling my pants up as fast as I could.

There was a movement behind me, and I turned, pants just above my knees and no weapon in sight. It was Zane, one arm held tight to his chest. Nathaniel came out of the dark behind him. Nathaniel held out his one good hand to me. "Hurry."

I hurried. Nathaniel took my hand and pulled me into the trees. He ran like liquid spilling through every crack and shadow. I tried to stay behind him, trusting that if his body could go through the openings, so could mine. I jumped when he jumped, weaved when he weaved, even if I couldn't see the obstacle. His night vision was better than mine, and I didn't question it. I had a sense of Zane behind us, following like smoke in our wake.

A chorus of howls broke out to our right. Nathaniel pulled me faster through the trees until I fell headlong, and a jagged branch sliced my cheek open. It missed my eye by a wish. "Shit, Nathaniel."

"They're coming," he said.

"I know." I touched my hand to my cheek and came away with blood. "Fuck."

"I won't let them take you," Nathaniel said.

I stared up at him. He was only three inches taller than I was. He couldn't have outweighed me by thirty pounds. It was muscle, but he was small. Size counts if everyone you're fighting can lift large trees.

"They'll kill you, Nathaniel."

He didn't look at me, just kept staring out into the dark as if he could hear things I couldn't.

Zane leaned against a tree, looking at me. His good hand was rubbing his bound arm like it hurt. I bet it did.

"If they take you, you'll fight," Zane said. "They'll kill you." He closed his eyes. "This is one time when you can't protect yourself, but maybe we can."

"You'll both die," I said.

Zane shrugged with his one good shoulder, casual, like it didn't matter.

The thought came that it would all be over if I had sex. It would end then, and only then. Raina came back in full force, spilling through me. She wanted

Nathaniel, and that she could not have, not with my body. Fucking Nathaniel would be like child molesting. I wouldn't do it.

Zane. Zane would do. Raina had always been fickle. I got a sudden visual so strong it made me blush. Was there anyone that Raina hadn't slept with? I wasn't going to do either of them. No way.

Then they'll die. I wasn't sure if it was my thought or the munin. Either way, we were right.

Jason limped into sight. I knew him just by the shape of his shoulders and his hair. Either I hadn't healed him completely, or he'd been in a fight. Maybe both. I'd broken contact before I finished. The munin was saving the deeper healing for sex. For her it was the toll to be paid for services rendered. No payment, no healing. Like a drug dealer giving just a taste.

Jason gave me a very strange smile as he entered the trees near Nathaniel and Zane. He slid down until he was sitting with his back against a small tree trunk. He let out a sigh.

We all looked at him. A scream tore our gaze back to the woods. Out there, close, they were fighting. Another howl rode the still, hot air. The sound was close enough to make my scalp prickle.

The trees we had stopped at were at the bottom of a hill. It was familiar. "Are the cabins just up there?"

"Yes," Zane said.

"If you go to the cabins, they'll follow," Jason said. "Can't have the tourists seeing it."

"Fuck that," I said, "Some of them won't follow to the cabins because of the tourists. I say we go and board ourselves in."

"It won't end until someone wins," Jason said. He sounded tired or maybe discouraged.

"And up there are two vampires who are on my side." I started up the hill. Nathaniel and Zane followed at my heels. Jason just sat there. We were a quarter of the way up the hill before he pushed to his feet to follow. When all this shit was over, I'd ask what was wrong. Right now, there was no time.

Figures appeared through the trees. Zane gave a little push to my back. "Run," he said, "I'll delay them."

Nathaniel turned with him, facing down into the dark and the danger.

"No," Zane said, "you go with her, Nathaniel." He looked at me. "I'm learning what it means to be an alpha. Nathaniel doesn't know how to fight."

Nathaniel looked from one to the other of us. He finally settled on me. "What do you want me to do?"

I thought about that for a second, studying Zane's so-careful face. "I'd say come with me, but I'm not leaving Zane behind."

I reached back and touched Zane's hand. "I won't leave you to die."

"Damn it, Anita, if you're not here, they won't kill us. They'll just hurt us and go after you," Zane said.

"I'm sort of bait," I said.

"Yes."

"Don't die on me, okay?"

"I'll do my best," Zane said.

I squeezed his hand. "Don't do your best, just don't die. You, either," I said to Jason.

He shook his head. "I have to stay with you. Richard's orders."

"Why?"

He shook his head and glanced back at the dark figures moving through the trees. Closer, always closer. "Later. Now, we move."

He had a point. We moved and left Zane alone in the dark with at least five figures gliding through the trees. They put on a burst of speed as we neared the crest of the hill. I cleared the hill on my knees, and we were at a flat-out run across the gravel parking lot.

I thought, *Damian*. He opened the door as if I'd spoken. He was standing there with a surprised look on his face. It isn't often you see a thousand-year-old vampire shocked. I had a moment to think how we must look. Me bloody, in just the black bra and blood-soaked jeans. Jason running with a noticeable limp. Nathaniel running full out behind us.

We cleared the doorway. Damian shut the door behind us. He locked it without being told. Smart vampire.

"What—" he started to say.

"Block the windows and door," I said.

Asher grabbed the heavy wooden desk like it weighed nothing and shoved it over the window. "Do we have nails, or am I forced to hold it in place."

Something struck the window, shattering glass around the edges of the desk like glittering rain. Asher was staggered backwards. Damian joined him, and they shoved the desk against the window. The door shuddered as something heavy threw itself against it.

"He's not going to make it in time," Jason said.

Nathaniel stood in the center of the room like he was lost. "What now?"

The door shuddered again.

Jason went to the door, leaning against it. "Nathaniel, help me!" Nathaniel joined him, putting his shoulder against the quaking wood.

Hands pushed past the edge of the table. Asher took one hand off the table to break the wrist like match wood. There was a scream, and the hand pulled back.

He spoke as if he wasn't using almost all his strength to hold the table against the broken window. "May one ask why the local werewolf pack is trying to kill us?"

"They're not trying to kill us," Jason said. "They're trying to fuck her." He leaned his entire back against the door. Whatever was at the door left abruptly, and Jason almost fell against the suddenly quiet door.

The window cleared, too. It was suddenly terribly quiet, too quiet, as the old saying goes.

"What is going on?" Damian said.

"Later," Jason said. His eyes looked almost wild. "Ask me why Richard told me to stay with you."

I stared at him. "Okay, why did Richard tell you to stay with me?"

"This ends when you have sex with any of the lukoi."

I stared at him harder. "Come again."

"If it looks like someone else will get there first, he told me to do it."

"Do it?" I said. I walked around to the nightstand. "You mean, do me."

Jason had the grace to look down. He nodded.

I opened the drawer and took out the Firestar. I tucked it down the front of my jeans. I took the Browning out next and clicked off the safety. "Nothing personal, Jason, but I've got a different plan."

"I didn't say I liked the plan," Jason said. "I may joke about it, and I would love to be with you, but Jean-Claude is my master, too. He'd kill me."

I glanced at Asher. He gave a very small nod. "Probably."

"And if you let someone else get to me because you were squeamish?" I let it be a question.

"Richard doesn't kill easily," Jason said, "but if I let someone rape you, for that he'd make an exception."

I waggled the gun in the air, barrel pointed at the ceiling. "Lucky for you I'm armed."

Jason nodded.

Glass broke in the bathroom. "Shit!" We'd been stupid. "Stay at the doors," I said. I kicked the bathroom door in, already sighting down my arm. I had a glimpse of a man trying to squeeze a large body through the small window. I hit the wildly swinging door with one hip and fired into the mass of the man. He screamed and fell back through the opening.

I yelled, "I've got this window covered."

Sounds of fighting came from outside the cabin. Screams turned into growls. I felt the rising energy and knew that people were losing human form. I could feel them slipping away, slinking through the trees. I could almost smell the musk of their fur. The munin swam back up so suddenly and so purely that I staggered against the door that I was using to steady my aim.

I turned away from the window to stare across the room at Jason. Raina was fine with that. She didn't care who. If it caused Jean-Claude distress or cost Jason his life, that was dandy. I slid down the door slowly, eyes closed, the flat of the gun barrel pressed to my forehead.

"Someone else needs to do this window," I said. I hoped I'd spoken aloud. I was having trouble telling.

Jason must have filled them in because no one asked what was wrong. I felt Damian brush my legs as he went into the bathroom. The feel of his passing caused things low in my stomach to clench. I glanced up at him, and he was frozen in the doorway as if he'd felt my body's reaction.

He stared down at me with his cat green eyes, and I knew as surely as I knew anything that if I told him to come to me, he would have done it. What I didn't know for sure was why.

"Damian," Asher said, "the window."

Damian stayed where he was, staring down at me. "I can't."

"Order him to watch the window, Anita," Asher said.

I went to my knees, free hand sliding up Damian's pants leg. I slid my hand up his thigh and shook my head. I grabbed a handful of his green silk shirt and pulled him down to me. He stayed on the balls of his feet, knees on either side of my body. I went to my knees and kissed him.

I slid my tongue between the delicate points of his fangs. I'd perfected the art of French kissing a vampire. Practice, practice.

He tried not to kiss me back. He drew back enough to whisper, "You taste like blood, other people's blood." Then he locked his mouth to mine like he would breathe me into himself. His long, pale hands cupped my face, slid behind my head in the warmth of my hair.

I pressed my body against him. The Firestar was still in front of my pants. The gun pressed into his groin. I ground it into him until he made a small pain sound. The Browning was lost on the floor.

There was a sound at the bathroom window. I drew back from the kiss, and Damian began to run his lips down my neck. I saw the man crawling through the window as if down a long crystalline tunnel.

I tugged the Firestar from my pants and pointed it. I sighted at the center of his forehead. His eyes widened, and he suddenly spilled backwards into the night. Not so far gone that he didn't want to live. The question was, how far gone was I?

Damian's mouth hovered over the big pulse in my throat. His tongue curled over it, caressing. He was asking for permission. But it wasn't that kind of blood I wanted to donate tonight. Raina had no interest in just opening a vein.

I wrapped my free hand in his long, blood-red hair and jerked his face up to me. "Don't bleed me, fuck me."

Asher yelled, "Jean-Claude will kill him."

"I don't care." The moment I heard myself say it, I swam back up. It was like pushing aside a wet curtain that clung to my face, suffocating, trying to mold itself to my body and keep me, drown me.

I crawled away from Damian into the room. I said, "Watch the damn window, Damian, and stay away from me."

He stood in the doorway, uncertain.

Asher said, "You heard your mistress. Do as you're told."

I heard him walk into the bathroom. Heard his boots crunch on the broken glass. I stayed on all fours, my head hanging down, my breath coming in gasps. The Firestar was still gripped in one hand. I squeezed it tight until my hand ached. I ground the feel of the gun butt into my skin. This was real. This was real. Raina was dead. She was just another kind of ghost, damn it.

I heard someone crawling towards me. I raised my head to find Nathaniel staring at me with lilac eyes. I screamed and scrambled back from him. He was a victim and Raina liked victims. I held my hand out to him as if to ward off a blow.

I ended with my back against the bed, gun squeezed in both hands, rocking back and fourth.

Nathaniel crawled towards me. He crawled like he had muscles in places he shouldn't have, in a graceful roll that was almost snakelike, as if his spine had too many parts. He put his face so close to mine that when he spoke, I could feel his breath on my face. "I'm yours, Anita. You are my Nimir-ra. My queen." He was very careful not to touch me. He stayed that last fraction of an inch away, so that it was my decision. But it wasn't mine.

I tried to tell him to get away from me, but my voice wouldn't work. I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. All I could do was hold onto that last ragged edge of control and not move my mouth that last space. I fought with all I had left not to kiss Nathaniel. Because whoever I fell on next was it. The munin was wearing me down. Even my self-control wasn't limitless. I didn't want it to be Nathaniel. That helped me hold on.

There was a knock at the door. It was so unexpected that I screamed. The scream pushed Nathaniel back to his knees, a little farther out of reach, but still too close.

Asher asked, "Do you open it?"

I shook my head, not as a no, but I couldn't say. I couldn't think. I was fighting too hard to not throw my clothes off and fuck something in the room. That was taking about all my concentration.

Maybe Asher figured that out for himself, because he said, "Who is it?" Very civilized.

The answer shocked us all, I think. "It's Richard."

Jason was on his feet, opening the door, before anyone could tell him to do it. The outer surface of the door was clawed and broken. Richard stood there in the doorway. His T-shirt was in rags, still clinging to his shoulders but so ripped apart that you could see the bloody wounds in his tanned skin. He walked through the door a little unsteadily. Zane and Shang-Da came behind him.

Zane looked unhurt, but Shang-Da's face had been opened from forehead to chin. His eye sat in a mask of blood. He closed the door and looked at me with cool eyes.

I was glad to see all of them. But I couldn't move. If I moved, it was over. I was putting everything I had into just staying where I was. If I moved anything, the control was gone. A tear squeezed out of one eye and fell in a hard, hot line down my cheek. I stared up at Richard and wanted to say so many things and couldn't say any of them. Words would break me into a million glittering pieces.

Richard walked to me. He stood over me, staring down. I didn't look up. He didn't so much kneel as collapse to his knees in front of me.

I put out a hand to steady him, and the munin spilled across my skin like a flame. The Firestar fell to the floor with a thunk. I grabbed a handful of the torn T-shirt, balled it into both my fists, and pulled him those last few inches into a kiss.

His lips were dry. I licked his mouth, running my tongue over his lips until they were like wet, rubbed velvet to kiss. I slid my hand inside one of the tears to trace the cut I'd made over his heart.

His breath came out in a sharp hiss as if it hurt. He grabbed my wrist. I slid my other hand inside the tear and found another wound to probe. He grabbed both my wrists in his hands. You forget how large Richard is. He doesn't seem intimidating physically, but he could have held both my wrists in one hand. He forced my arms back at my sides. I tried to pull my hands free, and his grip tightened. He leaned over me, but not for a kiss.

He licked the edge of the knife wound on my chest.

I gasped, half in pain, half in pleasure.

He ran his mouth down the wound until he came to the soft upper part of my breast. He bit gently into my flesh, not hard enough to leave a mark, just hard enough that I felt his teeth. I made a small moan.

He raised his face to look at me. He let go of my wrists and put a hand on either side of my face. He trapped my face between the strength of his hands and forced me to stare into the perfect chocolate brown of his eyes.

"Anita, can you hear me?"

I tried to move forward for a kiss, but his hands held me trapped. My hands found his chest, explored the smooth flesh, the torn wounds. I tried to press my body forward against his, but his hands held my face, and I couldn't go closer.

"Anita, Anita, talk to me. Are you in there?" The grip on my face was almost painful.

I didn't push the munin aside. It fell back. I felt Raina leave me enough for me to answer. "I'm here." It was a whisper.

"Do you want this?" he asked.

I started to cry; huge, silent tears slid down my face.

"Do you want me now, like this?" He shook my face between his hands, as if he could shake me back to myself.

I slid my hands over his, cupping him against me while I cried. Did I want him? "Yes," it was a whisper.

"Now, like this?"

The question was too hard for me. I curled my fingers against his hands, trying to move them from my face. I started tugging at his hands. "Kiss me, please, kiss me. Please, Richard, please!" I was crying again and couldn't have said why.

He leaned into me, hands still on either side of my face. He kissed me. His lips pressed against mine like heat. His tongue parted my lips, and I tried again to move forward, but his hands held me. He leaned into me, pressing his mouth against mine. He kissed me like he was tasting me, as if he'd reach into my mouth with his tongue and his lips and pull me inside out.

I shuddered in his hands from the feel of his mouth. Eyes closed, my hands limp at my sides, letting him do it all. His hands slid, very slowly, from my face. He never stopped kissing me as his fingertips slid down my bare shoulders. His hands hesitated over the shoulder straps for the spine sheath, as if he didn't know what to do with it.

I opened my eyes, started to lift my hands up to help him. He grabbed my hands and held them down at my sides. "I'll figure it out," he said softly.

I stared up at him. I could barely breathe around the need. I wanted his naked skin pressed against mine. I grabbed one of the tears in the T-shirt and ripped it wider. "Off."

He shook his head. "Not yet."

I wanted to fall on him like a ravening wolf, and he was so controlled. I could feel his need. Feel his need as great as my own, and yet he could kneel there, so close, so very close.

"Everyone out," Richard demanded.

I'd forgotten that we still had an audience. I hid my forehead against Richard's chest. My hands slid behind his back, trying to press myself against him.

Asher said, "What of the other wolves?"

"I made a pact with Verne. It's over except for this."

I stared past Richard's broad shoulder into Asher's scarred face. His face was carefully blank, empty, unreadable. I had a thought: what was he hiding? But most of my thoughts were the scent of Richard's skin. The smell of fresh blood. The clinging scent of earth and pine and leaves. The light, salty dew of sweat on his body. There was no room for regrets. There was only the warmth of his body pressed against mine.

"If you take her like this, it will be very like rape," Asher said.

"I'm going to try very hard for it not to be," Richard said.

Asher gave a small sound that might have been a laugh. "*Bon heur*," he said, and left. Good luck, he'd said. He'd said it in French, and it made me think of Jean-Claude.

So close to the warmth of Richard's body I could feel him hard and ready, and I thought of Jean-Claude. I wanted to wrap myself in Richard. I wanted to pull him around me like a blanket, but what would my other lover say? That thought pushed the *munin* away better than anything else had.

Months in Jean-Claude's bed, and I still wanted Richard. *I* wanted Richard, not Raina, not *munin*. *I* wanted him. I wanted him so badly I couldn't think about anything but the feel of him in my arms. But it wasn't fair, not like this. Not with Raina riding me.

She poured over me like a warm bath. This was her price. This. That she be here with us for the first time. That even this would always be part hers. My skin ached to be touched. My body hurt with a need I'd never known.

When the door closed behind them, Richard pulled me away from his body. He held me away from him with his hands on my forearms while I struggled to get closer. I needed him. Needed him.

I reached for him, crying, "Richard, please, please."

He spun me around until I fell against the foot of the bed. He put a hand in the middle of my back, keeping me turned away from him. He slipped the shoulder straps of the spine sheath off, sliding them down my arms. He threw the sheath across the room to bang into the wall. Then he leaned over me, a hand on either side of the bed. He leaned his face over until his hair brushed my face. He molded his body against mine, arms wrapping my arms against my

chest. He held me with his body and his arms, pressing us so close I could feel his heart beating against my back.

He whispered against my cheek. "If at any time you want to stop, say so, and it's over. I'll go."

I made a small sound very like a whimper, and said, "Fuck me, Richard, fuck me, please."

A shudder ran through his body from toes to head, and his breath fell out in a long sigh. He pulled back enough to undo the back of my bra, then he slid it slowly off my shoulders. He used the bra straps to lower my arms to my sides again. He pushed the bra off my arms, and it fell to the floor.

His hands slid over my waist. His hands felt hot. He slid upward slowly, so slowly that I wanted to cry out. His hands spilled over my breasts, cupping them, kneading them. His fingers rolled my nipples, and I did cry out.

He turned me to face him, almost throwing me against the bed. His arms locked under my buttocks, and he lifted me, still on his knees. His mouth found my breasts. His tongue flicked across my nipple, fast, quick, wet.

I leaned into him, and his mouth slid over my breast, sucking it. The feel of his mouth on me was almost too intense. It made me want to cry out, to squirm, to say stop, and never stop. I made a small sound like a sob as he released my breast in one long pull so that the nipple stretched between his teeth. He moved to the other breast, harsher this time, using more teeth. He bit gently around the soft tissue of my breast, then licked the nipple, rolling it with his tongue. He gave one quick bite that hurt, and I was suddenly on the floor looking up.

He knelt over me and put his hands into the tears in his T-shirt and ripped it open, exposing the hardness of his chest, his arms. There were two slashing claw wounds, one high and one low. The high one had gone over his nipple, and blood had dried on the tip of it.

I sat up and reached for him. He didn't stop me. I ran my tongue over his chest, over the wounds, and he gasped. I licked a quick tongue over the bloody nipple, and when he didn't chase me away, I locked my mouth around it and fed. I sucked the wound clean, pulling hard enough that I reopened the wound.

It was his turn to cry out. He pushed me back to the floor, gently. He took off my shoes and socks, and I let him. My heart was beating so fast it hurt, pounding in my throat like a trapped thing.

His hands went to the tops of my jeans. When the top button went, it made my stomach jerk. He unzipped my pants and started sliding them down my hips. I helped him push the drying cloth down my legs. He pulled the jeans off in one last motion, and I was left lying, wearing nothing but the black panties that had matched the bra.

He was on his knees, staring down at me. His hands went to his own jeans, unsnapping them. He hesitated. "I've wanted this for so long, Anita. Wanted you like this, but not . . ."

As much as Raina and I hated each other, her essence and I had a moment of perfect understanding. I went to him, kneeling.

"Oh, no, you don't. Don't go all Boy Scout on me now." My hands finished unzipping his pants.

He caught my hands, eyes searching my face. "It's you again."

"Yes," I said, "it's me." I pulled my hands out of his, and he let me.

"Undress for me, Richard; let me see you naked."

"You've seen me naked before," he said softly.

"Not like this," I said. "No stopping, no questions."

He stood up. "This will change everything for me, Anita. It has to change some things for you, too."

I covered my eyes with my hands and gave a little scream. "Oh, for God's sake, Richard, stop talking. I want your hands on my body. I want you inside me so badly I can't think. How can you stand there and be reasonable?"

Something fell across my hands and face. It was his jeans and underwear. I sat up and found Richard naked. I just looked at him. The perfect golden brown of his skin was uninterrupted from the curve of his calves to the narrowness of his hips, the swelling of his groin, the flat hardness of his chest, and the sweep of his shoulders. His hair fell across one side of his face in a golden brown mass that left half his face in shadow.

I stood and walked towards him. I was scared. Nervous didn't cover it. Scared and eager. I put my hands on his chest and rose on tiptoe to offer him my lips. We kissed, and the movement made my body fall full against his. The feel of him hard and naked with nothing between us but the black lace panties made me shudder and fall back from the kiss.

His hands caught me around the waist and kept us pressed together. Then he was suddenly on his knees, hands pulling down my panties in a motion so quick, it was violent. I was suddenly naked, with him kneeling in front of me, staring up. There was a look in his eyes that made things all over my body tighten.

He put his large hands on the insides of my thighs and spread my legs. He slid his hands along my thighs until they cupped my buttocks, bringing my groin against his face. He laid his cheek against me, licking a quick line along my hip. My heart was beating so hard, I couldn't get a good breath, but I could talk. "Please, Richard, please. Please."

He slid one hand between my thighs. One finger slid inside me. I shuddered, head back, eyes closed.

"You're wet," he said.

I opened my eyes and stared down at him. "I know." My voice sounded breathy.

"Raina was like that."

"She still is," I said. "Make her go away."

He licked the inside of my thigh, forcing me to spread my legs just by licking, nuzzling his mouth against my skin. The first touch of his tongue between my legs made me gasp.

He kissed me there like he'd kissed my mouth, all tongue and exploring. He licked me in long, sure strokes, then he found just the right spot and sucked. I could see his eyes staring up at me while he did it. There was a dark light in

his eyes, something more primitive than we have words for. It had nothing to do with being a werewolf and everything to do with being a man. It was waves pulsing along my body. The sensations were overwhelming. It felt so good it was almost too much, a pleasure so great it was almost pain. He pulled me into his mouth until the warmth spread from my groin upward in a golden rush that left the world hazy and edged with white gauze like I was seeing through a mist. With the last drop of pleasure, I felt Raina leave. The munin was gone when he lowered me to the floor.

His mouth was glistening. He used the remains of his shirt to wipe his mouth. He said, "I could always go brush my teeth."

I just shook my head. "Don't you dare." I held my arms out to him.

"Is she gone?" he asked.

I nodded. "Just me, just us."

"Good," he said. He moved over me and laid his naked body the length of mine. He was too tall for missionary position. I'd have suffocated against his chest. He propped himself up on his arms in a sort of push-up position. He slid inside me, and it was tight and wet and I could feel every inch of him working its way inside of me. When he was sheathed inside of me, he stared down at me. His eyes had gone that startling amber of a wolf. They were almost orange gold in the tan of his face.

He worked in and out, once, twice, three times, gently, as if making room. Then his hips caught the rhythm. I slid my hands to his buttocks until I could cup them while he pushed himself inside me. I dug my fingernails into the smooth hardness of his flesh. He pumped faster, harder, still holding most of his weight on his arms and shoulders.

I raised my hips to meet his body. Without his body trapping me under him, I could move. A rhythm began between us, a wave of movement and heat and muscles moving together.

Something opened inside of me, inside of him. I felt the mark that bound us open like a door. What fell through that door was a warm, golden, rush of power. It spilled over me, into me. It raised every hair on my body as if it were an electric current.

Richard lifted me in his arms, still sheathed inside me. He half-carried me, half-flung me to the bed. He collapsed on top of me, and I was lost under the warmth of his skin and the weight of his chest. It was as if his power rode my skin; every thrust sent a line of warmth pouring inside of me. It was as if I were bathing in the golden warmth of his body inside and out. It grew in golden pulses with every thrust. The pulses turned to waves that made my body tighten around him.

He cried out, but didn't come. He raised back up on his arms, only his hips and legs pinning me to the bed. His eyes were still amber, still not human, and I didn't care. I watched his beast ride up through those alien eyes. I watched it look down at me from Richard's face. I watched thoughts slide across that handsome face that had more to do with food than sex, and nothing to do with love.

His hands flexed in the bed on either side of me. I heard the cloth tear, ripping. I turned my head and saw his hands lengthening, turning into human claws. Those claws ripped the mattress with a thick, tearing sound.

I stared up at Richard and couldn't keep the fear off my face. "Richard," I said.

"I would never hurt you." He whispered it, and when his hands convulsed in the bed, bits of white bedding sprang in the air.

I said, "Richard!" My voice was high, not panicked, but close.

He sliced claws down the length of the bed and pulled out, rolled off me. He rolled onto his side into a tight ball. His hands, his claws were long and thin with his fingernails turned into something monstrous, dangerous.

Shit.

I smoothed my hands down his back. "I'm sorry, Richard. I'm sorry."

"I won't change during sex, Anita, but this close to the full moon, it's hard." He turned his head to look up at me, and his eyes were still amber. His hands began to re-form, shrinking back to human. I watched them change, felt the rush of energy like a wave of dancing insects on my skin.

I knew that if I left him like this, he'd never recover. It wasn't my loss, not really. It was that this would confirm his deepest fears: that he was a monster and only fit to be with other monsters. Richard was not a monster. I believed that. I trusted him not to hurt me. I trusted him more than I trusted myself sometimes.

"Roll over," I said.

He just looked at me.

I rolled his hips over, and he let me. He wasn't completely hard now. Nothing like having your lover scream for help to take the fun out of it. I touched him, and he shuddered, eyes closing. I held him in my hands and stroked him until he grew warm and hard.

I slid over him, and he was almost too big from this angle, almost too much. It was more intense with me on top, sharper somehow. A small moan escaped him.

"I love you, Richard. I love you." I moved above him with him so deep inside me, it felt like I should be able to taste him.

His hands slid around my waist, then to my breasts. The feeling of his hands on me while I rode his body was almost too much. I moved my hips gently at first, then faster. I forced him into me, hard and fast and deep, until I wasn't sure if it felt good or hurt.

I felt the orgasm growing. I felt it filling me up like warm water in a cup, filling from the bottom up. I felt it flow over me in small spasms.

Richard's breathing changed, quickened, and I knew he was close. "Not yet," I whispered, "not yet."

He dug his hands into the bed on either side of me. I felt his hands go. I felt them slip their skin. I felt it like the small release it was, like an echo of what his body was doing inside of me. The claws tore into the bed like nails. I heard the mattress material make that heavy ripping sound, and it was too late.

The orgasm caught me in a burst that bowed my spine and made me cry out. It washed over me in a skin-shifting, nerve-jumping dance as if every part of me were trying to leave every other part behind. For a shining second, I felt skinless, boneless, nothing but the warm roll of pleasure and the feel of his body underneath me. Only his body anchored me, only the feel of him going inside me in one great release reminded me where I was, who I was.

I opened my eyes and found his eyes brown and human. He raised his hands to me, and I fell against his body. I laid my head on his chest and felt his heart beating against my cheek. I lay there feeling his body pulse underneath me. His arms holding me.

He laughed, and it was joyous. He raised my face to his and kissed me lightly and carefully. "I love you, too," he said.

Chapter 28

Warm. He was so warm. He? My eyes were wide open, and sleep fell away like a crash of glass. I was left lying in bed with my heart pounding and a tanned arm flung across my stomach. I stared up that arm and found Richard on his stomach, hair flung over his face like a curtain. I was lying on my back, sheets down past my waist, trapped under Richard's arm.

I raised my head back and found Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* above the bed. Richard's cabin. We'd done too much damage to mine.

I had a very strong urge to pull the sheets up and cover my breasts. Okay, okay, Richard had seen the whole show last night, but this morning, I wanted to cover up. I was embarrassed. Not big, awful embarrassed, but little, confused embarrassed.

I realized I was lying there with my arms tucked across my chest, as if I was hiding. Richard's arm looked very dark against the pale white skin of my stomach. Jean-Claude had remarked that my skin was almost as pale as his. I'd had enough moral problems with premarital sex with the undead. My one comfort had been that I was monogamous. Now I didn't even have that. Whoredom had finally arrived just as my Grandmother Blake had always warned. In a way, she was right. Once you have sex with anyone, sex becomes more of a possibility with others.

The drapes in the cabin hadn't been pulled completely. Morning sunlight fell through the white sheers and spilled over the bed. I'd never seen a man's body by morning light. I'd never slept with a man and awakened beside him. Oh, once with Stephen, but fully clothed with guns and bad guys about to come through the door isn't quite the same thing.

I reached out towards Richard's arm, tentative. You'd think after what we did last night, I'd be braver, but I was almost afraid to touch him. I'd had sexual

fantasies about Richard, but this—this was the big one. To wake up beside him, warm and alive. God forgive me, but I valued that.

I touched his arm lightly so that all I really touched were the small golden hairs, no skin. I brushed upward just above the skin until there was nothing but the bare skin of his upper arm and shoulder. I drew my fingertips over the warmth of his skin. He was incredibly warm. Warmer than skin temperature, almost fevered.

I felt him wake, a tension in his shoulder and back that hadn't been there before. I turned my head, and his brown eyes were staring at me through the thick curtain of his hair.

He rose up on one elbow and smoothed his hair back from his face. He smiled, and it was the same smile that had melted me into my socks a hundred times. "Good morning," he said.

"Good morning," I said. I had pulled the sheets up over my breasts without thinking about it.

He wiggled closer, which made the sheets at his waist slide down to reveal the smooth expanse of his buttocks. He kissed me, soft, tender, then rubbed his face along my cheek until his breath was warm against my ear, then farther back into my hair. He was giving me a wolf greeting. He kissed lightly down my neck and stopped at my shoulder, which was about all that was uncovered.

"You seem tense," he said.

"You don't," I said.

He laughed, and the sound made me shiver and smile at the same time. It was a laugh I'd never heard from Richard. It was very masculine, very . . . something: possessive, satisfied maybe.

I felt heat creep up my face. Being that embarrassed made me feel silly for being embarrassed. "Oh, hell."

"What?" he asked. He stroked the side of my face.

"Cuddle with me, Richard. Sex is great, but when I thought of this moment, I thought of you holding me, spooning me."

His smile was gentle, pleased. He turned on his side and even spilled the sheets back over his waist. He raised his upper arm.

I rolled onto my side so my back faced him and snuggled against his warm body. He was a little tall for spooning, but we wiggled around with much giggling and stupid comments until we found a position that felt right. I wrapped his arm around me, sinking into the warm curve of his chest and all the rest, and let out a sigh. The feel of his naked groin pressed against me wasn't so much exciting as it just felt right. I felt possessive of his body, of him. I wanted to hold him like this forever.

His skin was almost hot. "You feel like you've got a fever," I said.

"It's the full moon," he said. "By tomorrow night when the moon is completely full, my base temperature will be over a hundred and one."

He pushed my hair aside until he could nuzzle the back of my neck. It made me break out in gooseflesh. I squirmed. "That tickles."

"Yes," he said, "it does." I could feel him growing larger against my body.

I laughed and rolled over on my back. "Why, Mr. Zeeman, you seem happy to see me."

He leaned in for a kiss. "Always."

The kiss grew, becoming more. I moved my body against his and had one leg wrapped around his buttocks when he scooted back, going onto his knees.

"What's wrong?" I asked. We'd already established last night, after it would have been too late, that I was on the pill. He'd been nicely horrified when he thought of it. Since werewolves can't get or carry disease, once the pregnancy issue was addressed, you were safe. Which also explained why I wasn't worried about licking blood off of the lycanthropes last night. Gross, but not dangerous.

"I can't," Richard said.

I looked down the length of his body. "Oh, I'd say you're ready."

He blushed for me. "You saw me last night, Anita. One day closer to the full moon, my control will be worse, not better."

I lay back on the bed. "Oh." I was disappointed. Minutes before, I'd been worried that we'd given in to our lust, and now I was sad that we couldn't do it again. Trust me to be logical about my men.

"I'm glad you're disappointed, too," he said. "For a minute there, I thought you were going to get up out of bed, say it had all been a terrible mistake, and go back to Jean-Claude."

I covered my eyes with my hands, then made myself look at Richard while I said it. He sat there looking too scrumptious for words, but I couldn't let it slide. If he was thinking this meant I'd dump Jean-Claude, I couldn't let it slide. But I wanted to. "What do you think last night meant, Richard?"

The smile faded around the edges but didn't disappear completely. "It meant something to me, Anita. I thought it meant something to you."

"It did. It does. But . . ."

"But what about Jean-Claude." Richard said it softly, but it had to be said by someone.

I nodded, hugging the sheet to my chest. "Yeah."

"Can you go back to just dating him after last night?"

I sat up and reached for his hand. He gave it to me. "I've missed you so much, Richard. The sex is nice, but . . ."

He raised eyebrows. "Nice, just nice?"

I smiled. "It was wonderful and you know it. And you know that's not what I meant."

He nodded, hair swinging into his eyes. He brushed it back. "I know. I've missed you, too. I'm lost on weekends without you."

I pressed his hand to my cheek. "Me, too."

He sighed. "So you're going to be with us both?"

I let his hand fall to my lap, still holding it. "You'd go along with that?"

"Maybe." He leaned in and kissed my forehead, ever so gently. "Notice I didn't ask you to give him up and just date me."

I touched his face. "I know, and I'm both relieved and surprised. Thank you for not asking."

He pulled back enough to see my face clearly. He looked very serious. "You don't like ultimatums, Anita. If I push you, I'll lose."

"Why do you want to win, Richard? Why don't you just dump me?"

He smiled. "Now she gives me the choice."

"I've given you the choice before," I said. "I mean, I know why Jean-Claude puts up with me. I help his power base. You'd be better off if you picked out a nice, safe werewolf for your lupa. I hurt your power base."

"I'm in love with you," he said simply.

"Why do I feel like apologizing for that?" I asked.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking about why I couldn't hate you. Why I couldn't let you go."

"And?" I had pulled the sheets around me like a nest so I wouldn't be naked. If somewhere in this conversation he did dump me, I didn't want to be naked. Silly but true.

Naked didn't seem to bother Richard. Frankly, it was distracting to me. "I need a human girlfriend. I need someone who isn't a monster."

"A lot of humans would be happy to be your snuggle bunny, Richard."

"I found that out," he said, "but I didn't have sex with any of them."

"Why not?"

"Farther away from the full moon I have better control. The eyes don't go, let alone the hands. I can pass for human, but I'm not human. You know what I am, and even you almost couldn't accept it."

There was nothing I could say to that, so I didn't try.

He looked down at the bed, fingers playing along the edge of the sheet. His voice grew very soft. "My first year in the pack, one of the other new wolves had a human girlfriend. He crushed her pelvis while they were making love."

My eyes widened. "A little too rough," I said.

Richard shook his head. He let his hair fall this time, hiding most of his face. "You don't understand, Anita. Strength is strength. We can pick up small cars and throw them. If you don't realize your own strength, you can't control it." He looked at me suddenly, staring out at me through his hair. It was a gesture that Gabriel had been fond of, as if the hair were comforting or reminded them of fur. "You're the first nonlycanthrope I've ever had sex with since I became one."

"I'm flattered, I guess."

"I was still scared I'd hurt you like my friend had hurt his girlfriend or in a thousand other ways. During sex you lose control. That's part of the fun. I can never lose control, not completely, unless I'm with another lycanthrope."

I looked at him. "What are you trying to say, Richard?"

"I'm saying you date both of us. Have sex with both of us. I will hate it, but . . ."

I stared at him. I didn't like that he didn't want to finish the sentence. Made me nervous. "What, Richard?"

He brushed his hair back with both hands until his face was clean and tight. "You date both of us, and I'll keep dating other lycanthropes."

I just kept staring at him.

"Say something," he said.

I opened my mouth, closed it, tried again. "You mean you'll keep having sex with Lucy."

"Not Lucy, she's . . . You've met her. She could never be lupa of our pack."

"So you're going to keep auditioning lupas?"

"I don't know if I am or not, but I know if you sleep with Jean-Claude, I have the right to sleep with other people."

I couldn't exactly argue with him, but I wanted to. "You're still trying to get me to give up Jean-Claude."

"No," he said. "I'm just saying that if you're not monogamous to me, then why should I be monogamous to you?"

"No reason, I guess. Except . . . I thought we loved each other."

"We do. I do." He stood and picked up his jeans from the floor. "But you don't love me enough to give up Jean-Claude. Why should I love you enough to give up everyone else?"

I stared at him and felt tears begin to fill my eyes. "You bastard."

He nodded. He slipped into his pants without underwear, zipping carefully. "The real bitch is that I do love you enough to give up everyone else. I just don't know if I can share you with Jean-Claude. I just don't know if I can stand the thought of you in his bed. The thought of him being with you like that drives me . . ." He shook his head. "I'm going to take a shower. I've still got trolls to study."

I couldn't even begin to think about what he'd just said. It was too much all at once. When confused, concentrate on business.

"I need to come with you and talk to the biologists. We need to find out if Franklin Niley is the buyer for the land. The guy who lost his arm last night was afraid of him. It takes someone pretty scary to make a man hesitate when he's surrounded by werewolves. Your normal real estate types don't have that kind of juice."

Richard strode back to the bed. He picked me up around the waist and kissed me. He crushed me against him, like he'd crawl in through my mouth and pull me around him. I was breathless when he sat me back down on the bed.

"I want to touch you, Anita. I want to hold your hand and do silly, goofy grins. I want us to act like people who are in love."

"We are in love," I said.

"Then for today, let's throw all the doubts out. Just be with me the way I've always wanted you to be. If I want to touch you today, I don't want to be afraid not to. I want what happened last night to change things."

I nodded. "All right."

"You don't look sure," he said.

"I'd love to go around holding your hand, Richard. I'm just realizing that . . . Oh, hell, Richard, what am I going to tell Jean-Claude?"

"I asked Jean-Claude how much difference the marks made to you, how much harder you were to hurt physically. He figured out why I was asking. I ended up telling him the whole sad story about my friend and his dead girlfriend."

I looked at him. "What did he say?"

"He said, 'Trust yourself, *mon ami*. You are not your friend with his so-sad tale. And Anita is not human. Through us she is more than that. Both of us huddle around her humanity like it is the last candle flame in a world of darkness. But by our very love, we make her less human, and more.' "

My eyebrows went up. "You remembered all that?"

Richard looked at me, and it was a long, considering look. He nodded. "I remembered because he's right. He's right. We both love you in our ways for similar reasons. It isn't just power that draws him to you. You saw him as a monster. The fact that you don't anymore makes him feel less like one."

"It sounds like you guys have been having some long conversations."

"Yeah, it's been a real male bonding experience." He sounded bitter, tired.

"It also sounds like you discussed whether you were going to make love to me with Jean-Claude before you discussed it with me."

"Never directly," he said. "Never word for word."

"It still sounds an awful lot like asking permission," I said.

Richard was back in the bathroom doorway. "What would you have done if we'd made love and Jean-Claude had tried to kill me afterwards? Would you have killed him protecting me?"

I just looked at him. "I don't know. I . . . I wouldn't have let him kill you."

Richard nodded. "Exactly. Whether Jean-Claude killed me or I killed him or whether you killed one of us, even if we survived the death with the marks dragging us down to the grave, even if you and I survived, you'd never forgive yourself for killing him. You'd never recover from it. We'd never have a life together. Even dead and gone, Jean-Claude would haunt us."

"So you tested the waters," I said.

Richard nodded. "I tested the waters."

"You asked his permission," I said.

He nodded, again. "I asked his permission."

"And he gave it," I said.

"I think that Jean-Claude knows if he kills me, you would kill him. That you'd sacrifice all of us for one of us."

It was true. It sounded sort of stupid put that way, but it was still true. "I guess I would."

"So if I can stand it, and you want to do it, you date both of us. You share both of our beds." His hands balled into fists at his sides. "But if I can't have monogamy from you, you can't have it from me. Fair?"

I looked at him and gave the barest of nods. "It's fair, but I hate it. I hate it a lot."

Richard looked at me. "Good," he said and closed the door. A moment later, I heard water running. And I was left naked in his bed with everything I'd

ever wanted offered to me on a silver platter. So why was I sitting there, hugging my knees to my chest and fighting not to cry?

Chapter 29

I wanted to get dressed. I'd brought my suitcase over from my cabin for just that reason, but I needed a shower. I'd had too much fighting, too much sweating, too much blood, too much sex last night not to shower. So I sat huddled in a nest of sheets that smelled of Richard's cologne, my perfume, the sweet scent of his skin, and sex. I had managed not to cry. In fact, if Richard had just admitted undying monogamy to me, I'd have joined him in the shower. But he hadn't, and I was confused.

There was a knock on the door. It startled me, and I almost just ignored it. Almost pretended we were still asleep or otherwise occupied, but the second knock was more insistent. The third was so firm, the door shook.

"Police, open up."

Police? "I'm not dressed. Just a minute." I really hadn't packed a robe. But I also had a sudden bad feeling. If he just wanted us out of town, why come this early? Why wouldn't he give us time to pack and get out? Unless he didn't care if we left anymore, at least not on our own. Maybe he'd known about the hit last night. Maybe he meant to kill us. I'd dealt with rogue cops before, once. It made everything harder. If I met them at the door with a gun, it would give them an excuse to shoot me. If I didn't protect myself and they shot me anyway, I'd be pissed.

"Open the fuck up, Blake."

I didn't pick up my gun, I picked up the telephone. I didn't call a lawyer. Carl Belisarius was good, but not good enough to help me stop a bullet. I called Dolph. What I wanted was another witness that couldn't be shot. A cop in another state seemed a good bet.

The phone was near my pillow. The pillow had the Browning under it, but if I had to go for the gun, I was dead.

Dolph answered with "Storr."

"It's Anita. Wilkes and his deputies are about to break down my door."

"Why?"

"Don't know yet."

"I'm putting a call through on the other line for the state cops there."

"Why? Because the cops broke down my door when I didn't open it?"

"If you don't want help, why are you calling, Anita?"

"I want to be on the phone to another cop when they come through the door."

I could hear Dolph breathe for a second or two, then, "Don't have your gun in your hand. Don't give them an excuse."

And the door burst open. Maiden was first through the door. He cleared the door going low. The tall deputy with the scar took high. They both trained guns on me. Maiden's big forty-five looked right at home in his big hands.

I just stood there, one hand clutching the white sheet to my chest, the phone in my other hand. I was very careful not to move. I stood frozen with my heart beating so hard it filled my throat like air.

Dolph's voice was in my ear: "Anita?"

"I'm here, Sergeant Storr." I didn't yell it, but I made sure my voice carried.

Sheriff Wilkes came in behind his deputies. His gun was holstered. "Put down the phone, Blake."

"Why, Sheriff Wilkes, fancy meeting you in Richard's cabin on such a lovely morning."

He strode across the room to me. He yanked the phone from my hand, and I didn't fight him. I didn't think he was here to kill anyone, but he was here to hurt. I was going to try very hard not to give him an excuse to do it. Whatever he did today, I wouldn't make it easier for him.

He put the phone to his ear just long enough to hear Dolph, then hung it up. "A phone call won't save you this time, Blake."

I looked up at him and gave him big brown eyes. I did everything but flutter my lashes at him. "Do I need saving, Sheriff Wilkes?"

The phone rang. We stood there, letting it ring. Seven rings and Wilkes picked it up and hung it up again without putting it to his ear. He was so angry, he was shaking. A fine tremor ran through his hands, his arms. His face was flushed with the effort not to do something violent or regrettable.

I stood there as neutral as I could manage. Looking as harmless as I could manage. With my long hair tousled from sleep, wearing nothing but a sheet, it wasn't hard to look harmless.

The bathroom door opened, and Richard just stood there in nothing but a towel. Guns turned and pointed at him. He froze in the doorway with steam curling around him, spilling out into the room like clouds.

There was a lot of screaming. Cops yelling, "Hands up! Get on the floor!" Richard laced his fingers on top of his head and took it all pretty calmly. He'd heard them. He'd stepped out of the shower, knowing they were out here. He could have gone out the window, but he hadn't.

Of course, if they really thought we were dangerous, they'd have gone in after him. But they'd let him come out to us. They weren't treating us like criminals. They were acting like the criminals.

Richard was on his stomach with Maiden's gun pressed to his back. Handcuffs went on. The scarred deputy pulled him to his knees, using his long, wet hair. The towel stayed on. Tough towel.

The phone rang. It rang three times. Each one seemed louder than the last.

Wilkes grabbed the entire phone and jerked it out of the wall. He threw it against the far wall, where it lay silenced. He stared down at me, breathing so hard it looked painful.

He spoke very carefully, as if afraid to yell, afraid that if he lost control of even his voice, it would be over. "I told you to get out of my town."

I kept my voice very soft, very unthreatening. "You gave me until sundown today, Wilkes. It's not even nine o'clock in the morning. What's the rush?"

"Are you going today?"

I opened my mouth to lie. Richard said, "No."

Shit.

Wilkes grabbed me by the arm and pulled me towards Richard. I tripped on the sheet, and he dragged me the last few feet. I put most of my effort into clutching the sheet to my chest. Bruises were okay; being naked in front of them was definitely not okay.

Wilkes half-threw me, half-dropped me on the floor beside Richard. Richard tried to get to his feet, and the scarred deputy hit him in the shoulder with the butt of the shotgun.

I touched Richard's arm. "It's all right, Richard. Everyone just be calm."

The scarred deputy said, "God, you are a cold bitch."

I just looked at Wilkes. He was the one in charge. He was the one who would dictate how bad this was going to be. If he stayed calm, so would the others. If he lost it, we were in deep shit.

Wilkes just stared down at me. His breathing had eased, but his eyes were still wild. "Leave town, Mr. Zeeman. Leave town today."

Richard opened his mouth, and I squeezed his arm. He'd tell the truth unless I made him shut up. The truth was not what we needed right now.

"We'll leave, Wilkes. You've made your point," I said.

Wilkes shook his head. "I think you're lying, Blake. I think Richard here is planning to stay. I think you'd say anything to get us out of this room right now."

It was the truth, and that made it hard to argue. "We'd be fools to stay, Wilkes."

"I think Richard is a fool. A softhearted, tree-hugging liberal. It's not you we have to convince, Anita. It's your boyfriend."

I didn't argue with the boyfriend part. I couldn't anymore. I leaned a little into Richard. "How do you plan to convince him?"

Wilkes said, "Thompson."

The scarred deputy gave up his place in back of Richard to Maiden. Maiden looked uncertain, as if things were moving too fast for him, but he kept his gun out, not pointed at Richard, sort of resting against his face.

"Thompson, we never patted Ms. Blake down for weapons."

Thompson smiled, a big, good-humored smile. "No, we did not, Sheriff." He grabbed two handfuls of sheet and dragged me to my feet. He jerked hard enough that I stumbled into him. He locked one arm behind me, holding me

against him. His Sam Brown belt pressed into my stomach but kept the rest of him from touching me.

I felt more than heard Richard behind me. I looked back. Maiden had traded his gun for his baton. He had the baton underneath Richard's chin, pressed against his throat above the Adam's apple so he wouldn't accidentally crush his windpipe. It looked like Maiden had had training.

Thompson said, "Don't struggle yet, lover. You ain't seen nothing to get excited about yet."

I didn't like the sound of that at all. He grabbed the sheet and tried to tear it out of my hands. I fought him. He stepped back from me, holding the sheet, and yanked. It was hard enough I stumbled, but I kept the sheet.

"Thompson," Wilkes said, "stop playing goddamn tug-of-war and do it."

Thompson slid his fingers down the front of the sheet and gave it all he had. It pulled me to my knees in an ungraceful heap, but I won. I kept the sheet. I was pissing him off, not my best idea, but I'm not good naked. I never feel nude. I feel naked.

He grabbed me by the back of the head and used my hair to throw me up against the bed. I could have pulled away if I wanted to leave a handful of hair and blood in his hands, but it would hurt, and unless I was willing to start killing people, this was going to happen. The more I fought it, the worse it was going to be.

As long as it was just a little slap and tickle for Richard's benefit, I could handle it. That's what I told myself while Thompson yanked me half across the bed by my hair.

He held me down by my head, putting enough weight on that one arm that it almost hurt. The sheet had pulled down from my back to my waist. He jerked it down farther, exposing my butt.

I struggled just a bit then. He pressed down so hard on my head that my face was pressed into the bed enough that it was difficult to get a full breath. The mattress wasn't firm enough for this shit. I lay very still. I did not want him to push my face down into the mattress. Passing out would be bad. You never wake up better off than you started.

"Stay," Thompson said, "or I'll put handcuffs on you."

I did what he said. Richard could break a pair of handcuffs. I couldn't. As much as I loved Richard, I didn't want him to be the only person free in a room full of cops gone bad. If it really came down to having to fight our way out it would mean killing. To my knowledge, Richard had never killed a human being. He was squeamish enough about killing other shapeshifters.

Thompson pulled my arms out from under my chest and spread my arms to either side on the bed. He slid his hands over my hands, my arms, as if bare skin could hide any weapons. His hands slid down my bare back, sloping along my waist and lower. His hands slipped over my buttocks and between my thighs, spreading my legs. It was too reminiscent of last night with Richard, too intimate.

I raised up. "What is this, a rape theme down here?"

Thompson slapped me on the back of the head. "Be still, or I'll make you be still." But his hands weren't playing with my thighs. He could hit me more and harder if his hands didn't wander lower.

"This can all stop, Richard," Wilkes said. "This can all be over. Just leave."

"You'll kill the trolls," Richard said.

I turned to look at Richard. I wanted to scream at him, "Just lie!" We'd figure it out later, but I wanted him to just lie now. I couldn't say that out loud. I stared at him and did something I had rarely attempted. I tried to open the bond between us. I reached out to him not with my hands or with my arms, but it felt like reaching. I moved out towards him with things I couldn't see but could feel. I opened something inside him. I felt it give. I saw the widening of his eyes. I felt the beat of his heart.

Thompson grabbed my shoulder and shoved me back to the bed. It broke my concentration.

There was a knock on the door. The other deputy, who had been with Thompson that first day, stepped into the doorway. He gave the room a once-over, eyes lingering on me on the bed, but his face stayed neutral. "There's a crowd gathering, Sheriff."

"A crowd?" Wilkes said. "The tree-huggers are out studying their precious trolls. If it's just the bodyguards, fuck them."

The deputy shook his head. "It's a shit load of people, Sheriff."

Wilkes sighed. He looked at Richard. "This is your last warning, Zeeman." He walked over to me, and Thompson backed off. He squatted so we'd be eye to eye. I gathered the sheet and turned to meet his gaze.

"Where are Chuck and Terry?" he asked.

I blinked and kept my face neutral. Once, not long ago, I wouldn't have been able to do it. Now my face gave nothing away. I was as blank and empty as the white sheet around my body.

"Who?"

"Thompson." Wilkes stood.

I felt Thompson move in from behind me.

"Does he do all your dirty work, Wilkes? You aren't man enough to abuse an unarmed woman?"

Wilkes hit me a backhanded slap that rocked me against the bed. I tasted blood. I probably could have blocked the slap, but that would have made the second blow harder. Besides, I'd asked for it. I don't mean I deserved it. I mean I preferred Wilkes to Thompson for abuse. I never wanted to be at Thompson's mercy without Wilkes there to rein him in. Thompson wasn't a cop. He was a goon with a badge.

The second blow was a slap, the third was another backhand. The blows were quick and hard and left my ears ringing. I saw spots of light against my vision. The proverbial stars, and he hadn't even closed his fist.

Wilkes stood over me, breathing too hard, hands in fists at his side. That fine trembling was back again, as if he was fighting not to close his fists. We both knew if he did, he wouldn't stop. If he hit me even once with his fist, it

would be over. He'd hit me until someone pulled him off. I wasn't a hundred percent sure that there was anyone in the room who would pull him off.

I stared up at him with a trickle of blood at the corner of my mouth. I licked at the blood with my tongue and stared into Wilkes's brown eyes. I saw the abyss down at the end of his gaze. The monster was there, barely caged. I'd underestimated how close to the edge Wilkes was. I knew in that moment that this last warning was just that: a last warning. A last chance, not just for us, but for Wilkes. A last chance for him to walk away without any actual blood on his own lily-white hands.

The deputy by the door said, "Sheriff, we've got over twenty people outside here."

"We can't do this with an audience," Maiden said.

Wilkes kept staring down at me, and I held his gaze. It was almost like we were both afraid to look away, as if even that small movement would uncage the monster. Maybe it wasn't Thompson I should be afraid of.

"Sheriff," Maiden said softly.

"In twenty-four hours," Wilkes said, voice squeezed down until it was almost painful to hear, "we'll file a missing person's report on Chuck and Terry. Then we'll be back, Ms. Blake. We'll be back, and we'll take you in for questioning regarding their disappearance."

"What are you going to write down in the report as to why you thought I might know where they are?"

He went back to staring at me, but at least the fine trembling had stopped.

I kept my voice neutral but said, "I'm sure some of the tree-huggers called the cops last night. But no one came. You're the law in this town, Wilkes. You're all these people have between them and the bad guys. Last night, you didn't come because you thought you knew what was happening. You thought Chuck and Terry had gotten carried away. So you come by this morning to pick up the bodies, but there aren't any bodies."

"You killed them," he said, his voice soft and tight.

I shook my head. "No, I didn't." Which was technically true. I hadn't killed *them*. I'd killed Chuck but not Terry.

"You're saying you never saw them last night."

"I didn't say that. I just said I didn't kill them."

Wilkes glanced behind at Richard. "The Boy Scout didn't do them."

"Never said he did."

"That little guy you were with, Jason? Schuyler? He couldn't have taken both of them."

"Nope," I said.

"You are pissing me off, Blake. You don't want me angry."

"No, I don't, Sheriff Wilkes. I really don't want you angry. But I am not lying. I did not kill them. I don't know where they are." That at least was totally true. I was beginning to wonder if Terry had ever made it to the hospital, and I was beginning to think he probably hadn't. Did Verne's pack kill him after I promised him we wouldn't? I hoped not.

"I've been a cop for longer than you've been alive, Blake. You make my bullshit meter go off. You're lying to me, and you're good at it."

"I didn't kill your two friends, Sheriff. I don't know where they are now. That's the truth."

He hunkered back down beside me. "This is your last warning, Blake. Get the fuck out of my town, or I am going to drop-kick you into the nearest hole. I've lived here a long time. If I hide a body, it stays hid."

"A lot of people go missing around here?" I asked.

"Missing people are bad for tourism," Wilkes said. He stood. "But it happens. Don't let it happen to you. Get out now, today. If you're not gone by dark, it's over."

I stared up at him and knew he meant it.

I nodded. "We're history."

Wilkes turned to Richard. "What about you, Boy Scout? You agree? Is this enough? Or does it have to get worse?"

I looked across the room at Richard and urged him to lie. Maiden still had a baton stretched across his throat. The towel had slipped down, and he was naked, with his wrists still in cuffs behind his back.

Richard swallowed, then said, "It's enough."

"You're out by dark?" Wilkes made it a question.

"Yes," Richard said.

Wilkes nodded. "I can't tell you how happy I am to hear that, Mr. Zeeman. Come on, boys."

Maiden very slowly took his baton away from Richard's throat and stepped back. "I'll take the cuffs off if you promise to behave yourself."

"It's over, right, Richard?" Wilkes said. "Take the cuffs off. They won't give us any more trouble."

Maiden didn't look as convinced as Wilkes seemed to be, but he did what he was told. He took the cuffs off.

Richard rubbed his wrists but didn't bother grabbing at the fallen towel. Without clothes, Richard was nude, not naked. He was comfortable. Most lycanthropes were.

Maiden followed Wilkes to the door, but he kept an eye on both of us, as if still expecting trouble. A good cop never turns his back completely.

Thompson was the last to move towards the door. He said, "Lover's thing is almost as big as you are."

Nothing else he'd done had made me blush, but that did. I hated it but couldn't stop it.

He laughed. "I hope you don't leave town. I hope you stay, because I really do want another chance to be alone together."

"My new goal in life, Thompson, is to never be alone with you."

He laughed again. He laughed while he walked out the door. The deputy that kept complaining about the crowd left. Only Maiden waited in the door for Wilkes.

The sheriff said, "I hope we never meet again, Blake."

"Ditto, Sheriff," I said.

"Mr. Zeeman." He gave a nod as if he'd just pulled us over for a traffic stop and let us go with a warning. His entire body language changed as he moved through the door. Just a good ol' boy talking to some strangers about that disturbance last night.

When the door closed behind them, Richard crawled to me. He started to touch my face, then stopped, fingers hovering helplessly around my face. "Are you hurt?"

"A little."

He hugged me, pulling me gently in against his body. "Go home, Anita. Go back to Saint Louis."

I pulled away enough to meet his eyes. "Oh, no. If you stay, I stay."

He cradled my face in his hands. "They'll hurt you."

"Not if they think we really left. Can Verne's people hide us?"

"Who do you think is outside in the crowd?"

I looked up into his open face. "Did they kill the other man? Did Verne's people kill Terry after they left?"

"I don't know, Anita." He hugged me again. "I don't know."

"I promised him he'd live if he told us what he knew."

He pulled back, holding my face in his hands. "You could have killed him during the fight last night and not blinked, but because you promised him safety, you're upset."

I pulled away from Richard, standing, tugging the sheet out from under his knees. "If I give my word, it means something. I gave my word that he'd live. If he's dead now, I want to know why."

"The cops are on the other side. Don't piss Verne and his pack off, Anita. They're all we have."

I knelt by the suitcase on the other side of the bed and started getting out clothes. "No, Richard, we have each other and we have Shang-Da and Jason and Asher and everyone we brought with us. If Verne's people went behind my back last night and killed Terry, we don't have them. They have us. Because we need them, and they know it."

I stood with an armful of clothes and shuffled towards the bathroom with the sheet still around me. For some reason, I just didn't want to be naked in front of anyone right now, not even Richard. I made one stop on the way. I got the Browning out from under my pillow and piled it on top of the clothes. No more going unarmed for the rest of the trip. If someone didn't like it, they could lump it. That included my nearest and dearest. Though, to Richard's credit, he didn't say a word about the gun or anything else as I closed the door.

Chapter 30

I wanted a long, hot shower. I settled for a brief, hot shower. I'd called Dolph back first to let him know I wasn't dead. But all I managed to do was leave a message. I was hoping to give him the name Franklin Niley and see if there was any criminal connection. Dolph didn't usually share police info with me unless we were involved in a case together, but I was hoping he'd make an exception. Dirty cops are one of Dolph's least favorite things. He might help just to spite Wilkes.

I put on white jogging socks, blue jeans, and a royal blue tank top. I'd put a short-sleeved dress shirt over the tank top to camouflage the Browning. The holster would chafe a little around the edges, but when it comes to summer wear for concealed carry, the options are not limitless. I'd have worn shorts if I hadn't planned on tramping through the woods after trolls and biologists. I was trading being cooler for protection from the underbrush.

I smeared hair goop through my curls while they were still damp, combed it, and the hair was done. Since I didn't bother with makeup, it was a quick shower. I stared into the oval of mirror that I'd cleaned off with the towel. The rest was still lost to steam. The bruises from the original beating were gone, swallowed into my skin as if they'd never been. But my mouth was slightly puffy on one side, and a spot of red sat on my skin near my mouth like a wound. At this rate, I could have a beating a day and be healed in time for the next one.

There were voices on the other side of the door. One of the voices was Richard. The other voice had a low bass rumble to it that sounded like Verne. Good; I needed to talk to him. There were more voices. I heard Nathaniel's voice, high and clear: "I didn't know what else to do."

The gang was all here. I wondered what the topic of conversation was. I had a few ideas.

I put the Browning down the front of the jeans. As long as I didn't sit down, I was okay. The barrel was too long for comfortable sitting. I opened the door, and the conversation stopped like I'd pulled a switch. Guess I was the topic of conversation.

Nathaniel was standing the closest to me. He was wearing silky jogging shorts and a matching tank top. His long hair was in a thick braid down his back. He looked like an ad for an upscale gym. "I was on guard, Anita, but they're cops. I didn't know what to do." He looked away, turned away, and I had to catch his arm to turn him back to me.

He turned those big lilac eyes to me.

"Next time, just yell a warning. That's all you could have done differently."

"I suck as a bodyguard," he said.

This was sort of true, but I didn't want to say it to his face. There really wasn't much he could have done.

I looked across the room at Shang-Da. He was sitting with his back to the wall, balanced effortlessly on the balls of his feet. He was dressed in black slacks and a white, short-sleeved shirt. The claw marks on his face had turned

to angry red welts. What should have been scars that he would carry for the rest of his life would be healed in a couple of days.

"If you'd been on duty, Shang-Da, what would you have done differently?" I kept hold of Nathaniel's arm while I asked it.

"They would not have gotten past me without your permission."

"Would you have fought them if they tried to handcuff you?"

He seemed to think about that for a second or two, then looked up at me. "I don't like being handcuffed."

I pulled Nathaniel into a half-hug. "See, Nathaniel, there are bodyguards who would have given them an excuse to start shooting. Don't worry about it." But secretly, I planned on Nathaniel never doing guard duty alone again. I also planned on the same for Shang-Da. For very different reasons, I didn't trust either of them alone.

Verne sat in the big chair by the window. Except for the T-shirt being different, he was dressed as I'd first seen him. Maybe that was all he had. Jeans and an endless supply of different T-shirts. He'd tied his long, greying hair in a loose ponytail.

Richard had put on a pair of jeans and blow-dried his hair, but that was it. He'd go an entire day wearing nothing but jeans or shorts, slipping on shoes only if he had to go outside. The shirt only appeared when he was going out. Richard is comfortable with his body. Of course, when you've got a body like his, why wouldn't you be?

"Are you okay?" Verne asked.

I shrugged. "I'll live. Speaking of living, how is ol' Terry? Did the hospital get his arm reattached?"

Richard reached his hand out to me. I hesitated, then took his hand. I let him draw me to my knees beside him. I took the Browning out from my jeans so I could sit between his legs. He folded me back against his bare chest, jean-clad knees on either side of me. His arms were warm and very solid. I leaned my head back against his chest. I kept eye contact with Verne the entire time.

It didn't hurt that I had the Browning naked in my hand.

Richard kissed my damp hair. He was trying to remind me to be a good girl. To not start another fight. He was right, in a way. We certainly had enough fights on our plate without starting another one.

"Answer me, Verne," I said.

"Most of my pack passes for human, Anita. Do you really think some shithead would have kept his mouth shut?" He leaned forward in the chair, hands clasped together. Mr. Sincere.

"He was our only link to the other bad guys, Verne. The only one that was willing to talk to us."

Richard's arms wrapped just a little tighter around my arms. I realized that if he squeezed, I wouldn't be able to point the gun. "I'm not going to shoot him, Richard. Chill, okay?"

"Couldn't I just be hugging you?" he asked, voice so close to my ear I could feel his breath.

"No," I said.

His arms slid to either side, loosely around my waist, which put his hands almost in my lap, since I had my knees up. Under other circumstances, it would have been an interesting position, but when I have a point to make, I don't distract.

"The pack is my priority, Anita. It has to be."

"I would never do anything to endanger your pack, Verne. But I gave my word that if he told us what he knew, we'd take him to the hospital and let them try to reattach his arm. I gave my word, Verne."

"You take your word that seriously," he said.

"Yes."

"I respect that," he said.

"You killed him, didn't you?" I asked.

"Not personally, but I gave the order."

Richard's arms tightened around me. I felt him struggling to relax against me. He rubbed his chin against my wet hair, hands rubbing up and down my bare arms like you'd soothe a dog that you were afraid was going to bite someone.

"And I gave my word," I said.

"What can I do to make this right between us?" Verne asked.

I wanted to say, "Nothing," but Richard was right. We needed them. Or we needed someone, and they were all we had. What could he do to make this right? Raising the dead was my department, and bringing him back as a zombie wouldn't be the same thing, anyway.

"Truthfully, Verne, I don't know. But I'll think of something."

"You mean, I'll owe you a favor," he said.

"A man's dead, Verne. It would have to be one hell of a favor."

He looked at me for a long, measuring moment, then nodded. "I guess so."

"Okay," I said, "okay. We'll leave it there for now, Verne, but when I come up with something to ask for or of you, disappointing me again would not be a good idea."

He gave a quick smile. "I don't know if I'm looking forward to you and Roxanne meeting or dreading it."

"Who's Roxanne?" I asked.

"His lupa," Richard said.

Verne stood. "Richard said you and Roxanne would like each other if you didn't kill each other first. I know what he meant now." He walked over to us. He held his hand down, as if offering to help me off the floor. But call it a hunch, I thought it was more than that.

Richard's arms opened, and I took Verne's hand. He didn't so much pull me to my feet as just hold my hand while I stood. The other hand still held the Browning.

"If you ask for something that harms my pack, I can't promise that. But short of that, you have my word. Ask it of me, and it's yours." He grinned suddenly, then looked past me to Richard. "God, she is a tiny thing."

Richard, wisely, did not comment.

Verne knelt in front of me. "To seal my word, I'm going to offer you my neck. You understand the symbolism?"

I nodded. "If I were a wolf, I could tear your throat out. It's an act of trust."

He nodded and bent his head to one side so the big vein in his neck was just below the surface stretched tight under the skin of his throat. He kept hold of my hand the entire time.

I glanced back at Richard. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Kiss the big pulse in his neck, or bite gently over it. The harder you bite the less you trust the person, or the more dominant you see yourself to them."

I stared down at Verne. He was being very good. No trickle of power escaped him, and I was holding his hand, skin to skin. I'd felt how powerful he was; he could have made my skin crawl if he'd wanted to.

I squeezed his hand and moved to stand behind him. I tossed the Browning on the bed. I ran my hand along his neck, finding the big pulse with my fingertips.

I looked at Richard. You could almost see the "no" on his face—the near-warning not to do what I was thinking of. Which in a way made it all the more tempting.

Verne drew me down towards him, pulling my hand across his chest like I was hugging him. It brought my mouth down to his neck, as if he'd done this before.

He smelled warm, as if he'd been out in the sun. The scent of trees and the ground itself clung to his skin. I ran my nose just above his skin. I could smell the blood. It was as if the skin on his neck was growing thinner and thinner, until there was nothing between the smell of sweet blood but a pliable warmth, as if the skin itself almost didn't exist.

My mouth hovered over that pulsing warmth. I was drowning in the smell of his body. The need to place my mouth over that pulsing, living thing was almost overwhelming. I didn't trust myself to do it, or rather, didn't trust myself not to do too much. Did Richard go through life tasting other people's blood? Could he feel their life like something fragile and touchable?

Maybe I hesitated too long. Maybe Verne felt the power that was trying to overwhelm me. His power broke over my body in a shivering rush that made me gasp. And it was too much. Too tempting a drink to offer a starving man.

My teeth closed over that evaporating warmth. The meat of his neck filled my mouth. My tongue found his pulse, and I bit down, trying to carve that jumping, beating thing out of the flesh.

His power roared over me, and something inside of me poured back like two tidal waves crashing, churning, destroying. Far below, there was a land and a beach, and it was all washed away in the pounding, drowning depths.

I felt eyes open, and they weren't my eyes. Jean-Claude opened his eyes all those miles away, surprised from a sleep that should have lasted hours yet. Shocked awake by his hunger, my hunger, our hunger, being fed.

Hands dragged me off of that pulsing warmth. Hands prying me away. I came to myself with Richard pulling me into the air, completely helpless. Verne still had my hand. He was holding on, trying to drag me back. His neck

was bleeding. A near perfect imprint of my teeth sat in his flesh. His hand fell away as Richard pulled me off of him.

Verne's eyes looked heavy-lidded. He drew in a large, shaking breath and laughed. The low chuckle made my body react. "God, Jesus, girl, what the hell was that?"

I didn't fight to get back to him. I didn't fight to finish it. I lay passive in Richard's arms, blinking in a spill of morning light, staring at what I'd done to Verne's neck and not understanding.

When I could talk, I asked, "What the hell was that?"

Richard cradled me in his arms like I was a child. Since I wasn't sure I could stand, I wasn't bitching about it. I felt distant and light and horrible.

He hugged me against him, kissing my forehead. "Us being together has strengthened the marks. Jean-Claude thought it might."

I stared up at Richard. I was still having trouble focusing. "Are you saying that us having sex strengthened his hold on both of us?"

Richard seemed to think about that for a second or two. "It strengthened our hold on each other."

"Put me down."

He did what I asked. I slid to my knees, unable to stand, and pushed his hands away when he tried to help. "You knew and you didn't tell me."

"Would it have made a difference last night?" he asked.

I stared up at him, tears threatening, and I wanted to say yes, but I didn't lie. "No," I said, "no." Last night it would have taken a hell of a lot more than the knowledge that the marks would strengthen to keep me out of Richard's bed. Of course, last night I hadn't understood what it meant. Last night I hadn't just tried to eat my way through a man's throat.

I got to my feet and fell a second time. It wasn't lack of energy. It was almost like being drunk. But it wasn't a downer. It was defiantly an upper. "What is wrong with me?"

Shang-Da answered, "I've seen vampires do this. If they drink someone powerful or drink too much . . . power."

"Shit."

"I'm feeling pretty damn good, myself," Verne said. He touched the bite on his neck. "I've never let a vampire do me before. If it feels that good, maybe I've been missing out."

"Better," Nathaniel said. "It can feel much better than that."

"It wasn't vampire," Richard said, "it was power. Verne's power, mine, Anita's, and Jean-Claude's."

"Sort of a preternatural suicide cocktail," I said and giggled. I lay on the floor, hiding my face behind my hands and fighting an urge to roll in the afterglow. I wanted to take the feeling and wrap it around my body like a blanket. And down the long, glowing warmth, I felt a darkness. I felt Jean-Claude like a black hole sucking in all our warmth, all our life. And in that moment, I knew two things. One, that he'd known when Richard and I made love. That he'd felt it. Two, that as he ate from our lives, we ate of his darkness. We drank that still, cold death as surely as he tasted the sun-warmed flesh and

pulse of our bodies. And we all drew power from it. The light and the dark. The cold and the hot. Life and death. As the marks drew us closer, the lines between life and death would blur. I felt Jean-Claude's heartbeat earlier than it had ever beat in over four hundred years. I felt his gladness, his joy in it. At that moment, I hated him.

Chapter 31

Two hours later, Richard, Shang-Da, and I were tramping through the woods in search of biologists and trolls. We had until dark to get out of town, and since we really weren't getting out of town, we might as well continue with our original plans. We left everyone else behind scurrying like ants, packing, packing, packing. We would pack and leave. In fact, we were supposed to call the sheriff when we were ready to leave. Wilkes had kindly offered us an escort out of town—before dark. After dark, I think the offer was a bullet and a hole somewhere.

I followed Richard through the woods. He moved among the trees like he could see the openings or as if, as he moved forward, the trees moved around him. I knew that wasn't true. I'd have felt the presence of that much preternatural energy, but Richard made it look easy. It wasn't being a werewolf. It was being Mr. Outdoorsman. His hiking boots were nicely broken in. His T-shirt was blue green with a picture of a sea cow, a manatee, swimming on front and back. I had the identical T-shirt at home, a gift from Richard. He'd been disappointed that I hadn't packed mine. Even if I had, I wouldn't have worn it. I wasn't much into the Bobbsey Twin look for couples. Besides, I was still angry with him in a vague sort of way. I should not have been the only one of the three of us who didn't know what it would mean for Richard and me to have sex. I should have been told that it would bind us all closer.

Of course, it was hard to be mad at him when the T-shirt clung to his body like a thin, second skin. His thick hair was tied back in a loose ponytail. Every time he passed through a bar of sunlight, his hair glowed with streaks of copper and gold. It was hard to be angry when the sight of him made my chest tight.

Richard moved smoothly ahead of us. I followed in my Nikes, not doing too bad a job. I'm okay in the woods. Not as good as Richard, but not bad.

Shang-Da, on the other hand, was not a woodsman. He moved through the woods almost daintily, as if afraid of stepping in something. His black dress slacks and fresh white shirt seemed to catch on things that didn't bother either Richard or me. Shang-Da's shoes had started the trip black and polished to a fine sheen. They didn't stay that way. Dress shoes, even men's dress shoes, aren't meant for walking in the woods. I'd never met a city werewolf before, but

no amount of physical grace made up for his total lack of familiarity with the out-of-doors.

There was a breeze today. The trees rustled and hushed with the wind. It was a cool sound high up in the trees, but the wind never came near the ground. We moved through a world of green heat and solid brown tree trunks. Sunlight glittered on the leaves, hitting the ground in shining yellow patches before we moved into heavier shade. The shade was a few degrees cooler but still heavy with heat. It was almost dead-up noon, and even the insects had fallen quiet with the heat.

Richard stopped just ahead of us. "Do you hear that?" he asked softly.

Shang-Da said, "Someone crying. A woman."

I didn't hear a damn thing.

Richard nodded. "Maybe a woman." He eased through the trees in a movement that was almost a run. Crouched, hands almost touching the ground. His power spilled back from him like the bubbling wake of a ship.

I followed him. I tried to look where I was going, but I stumbled and fell. Shang-Da helped me to my feet. I jerked away from him and ran. I stopped looking at my feet or the trees. I stared only at Richard's back, his body. I mimicked his movements, trusting that if he could make the openings, so could I. I leaped over logs that I didn't see until he moved over them. It was almost hypnotic. The world narrowed down to his body speeding through the trees. Again and again I almost careened into trees, pushing my body to move too fast. I was moving faster than my mind could work. If Richard had jumped off a cliff, I'd have followed, because I was just moving. It was like I'd given up everything to my body. I was just muscles working, legs running. The world was a blur of green and light and shade and Richard's body sliding at a run through the trees.

He stopped like a switch had been thrown. One minute running, the next stopped, no in between. But I didn't bump into him. I was stopped, too. It was like a part of my brain I couldn't access had known he would stop.

Shang-Da was at my back. He stepped close enough for me to smell his faint, expensive aftershave. He whispered, "How did you do that, human?"

I glanced at him. "What?"

"Run."

I knew that *run* meant more to the lukoi than the word said. I stood there, covered in a light dew of sweat, barely breathing hard, and knew that something had happened that hadn't before. Richard and I had tried to jog together before, and it hadn't worked. He was two inches shy of being an entire foot taller than me. A lot of that was leg. His speed for jogging was running to me, and even then, I couldn't keep up with him. Add the fact that he was a lycanthrope, and, well, he was too fast for me. The only other time I'd kept up with him had been with him holding my hand, with him pulling me along with the marks and his power.

I turned to look at Shang-Da. There must have been something on my face, some soft astonishment, because his expression softened to something almost like pity.

Richard moved away from us, and we both turned back to follow his progress. As my pulse slowed, I could hear what they had heard ages ago: crying—though that was too soft a word for it. Someone was sobbing as if their heart were breaking.

Richard moved toward the sound, and we followed him. There was a huge sycamore in the middle of a clearing. On the other side of the tree's large, (patchy) trunk, a woman huddled. She had squeezed herself down into a small, tight ball, her arms hugging her knees. Her face was thrown up to the sparkling sunlight, eyes squeezed shut, blind.

She had brunette hair so dark it could have passed for black, cut very short. She was white with a fringe of dark lashes pasted to her pale cheeks. Her face was small and triangular, but beyond that I couldn't describe it. Her face was ravished with tears, eyes swollen, skin reddened. She was small, dressed in heavy khaki shorts, thick socks, hiking boots, and a T-shirt.

Richard knelt in the leaves beside her. He touched her arm before he said anything, and she screamed, eyes flying wide. There was a moment of utter panic on her face, then she threw herself against his chest, wrapped her arms around him, and fell into a fresh bout of sobbing.

He stroked her hair, murmuring, "Carrie, Carrie, it's all right. It's all right."

Carrie. Could it be Dr. Carrie Onslow? It seemed likely. But what was the head biologist on the troll project doing having hysterics in the woods?

Richard had slid completely down into the leaves. He'd pulled her into his lap like she was a child. It was hard to judge, but she seemed tiny, smaller than I was.

The crying eased. She lay cuddled in his lap, held in his arms. They'd dated. I tried to feel jealous, but I couldn't manage it. Her distress was too extreme.

Richard stroked the side of her face. "What's wrong, Carrie? What's happened?"

She took a deep breath that shuddered as it escaped her lips, then she nodded and blinked up at Shang-Da and me.

"Shang-Da." Her eyes turned to me. She seemed embarrassed that we'd seen her lose control. "I don't know you."

"Anita Blake," I said.

Her cheek rested against Richard's chest, so all she had to do was roll her eyes upward to look at him. "You're his Anita?" She made it a question.

He looked up at me. "When we're not mad at each other, yes."

I watched her rebuild herself, gathering her personality back around her like layering clothes against winter weather. Her eyes filled while I watched until her face burned with intelligence, with a force, commitment, a determination that shone so fiercely it seemed to thrum through her skin. I watched her and knew instantly why Richard had dated her. Staring down at her, I was glad she was human, glad he wouldn't be having sex with her. Because just a few moments in her presence, and I knew that this one, this one could be trouble. That was the real danger with not being monogamous. It wasn't really the sex, though that bugged me a lot. It was the fact that it meant

the other person wasn't satisfied, that they were still looking. If you're still looking, sometimes you find it, whatever it is.

I didn't like staring down at this woman who was obviously in pain and thinking about my own problems. I didn't like the fact that I was a little afraid of her. I mean, I was human, and he'd had sex with me. I hated that this was what I was thinking before anything. Hated it a lot.

She started to push away from Richard's arms.

I said, "Don't move on my account." It came out dry and sarcastic. Good, better than wounded and confused.

Richard looked up at me. I couldn't read his expression, and I made sure mine was pleasant and gave him nothing.

Dr. Carne Onslow glanced up at Richard, frowned, then finished pushing away. She slid out of his lap to lean against the tree trunk. Small frown lines had formed between her eyes, and she kept glancing from Richard to me, as if she were confused and didn't like it.

"What's happened, Carrie?" Richard asked again.

"We went out today just before dawn, as usual." She stopped talking, staring at her lap, then took a deep, shaking breath. Three breaths and she seemed better. "We found a body."

"Another hiker?" I asked.

Her eyes flicked to me, then back to her lap, as if she didn't want any eye contact for the story. "Maybe, it was impossible to tell. It was a woman, beyond that . . ." Her voice failed her. She looked up at us, small eyes shimmering with fresh tears. "I have never seen anything so horrible in my life. The local police are saying that our trolls did it. That this is proof that that hiker was a troll kill."

"Lesser Smokey Mountain trolls don't hunt and kill humans," I said.

She looked at me. "Well, something did. The state police wanted my expert opinion on what could have done it if it wasn't trolls." She buried her face in her hands, then raised her face like someone coming out of deep water. "I looked at the bites. They were made by something with a primate jaw structure."

"Human?" I offered.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't think so. I don't think a human mouth could do that kind of damage." She hugged herself, shivering in the heat. "They'll use this to try and call in some bounty hunters and kill our trolls, if they can prove that the trolls did this. I don't see how we can stop them from either killing them all or shipping them to zoos."

"Our trolls did not kill a human being," Richard said. He touched her shoulder when he said it.

"Something did, Richard. Something that wasn't a wolf or a bear or any large predator that I've ever seen."

"Did you say that the state cops are on site?" I asked.

She looked up at me. "Yes."

"Did you call them?"

She shook her head. "They arrived shortly after the local police."

I'd have loved to know who called them, though if the local cops suspected it was either a homicide or a preternatural kill, it was standard op for them to call either the stacies or the local vampire hunter, though admittedly only if they thought the kill was some form of undead.

"Was the body found near a cemetery?" I asked.

Dr. Onslow shook her head.

"Why?" Richard asked.

"It could have been ghouls. They're cowards, but if she'd fallen and knocked herself unconscious, ghouls would have fed on her. They are active scavengers."

"What's that mean?" Dr. Onslow asked. "Active scavenger?"

"It means if you're wounded and reduced to crawling, you don't want to be in a ghoul-infested cemetery."

She stared up at me, then finally shook her head. "No graves. Just in the middle of our land. In the middle of the trolls' territory."

I nodded. "I need to go see the body."

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Richard asked. He kept his voice as neutral as he could.

"They're expecting her," Dr. Onslow said.

It surprised us all. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"The state police found out you're in the area. Evidently, your reputation is good enough that they wanted you to see the body. They were trying to reach you at your cabin when I left."

How convenient. How weird. Who had called the stacies? Who had put my name in front of them? Who, who, who?

"I'll go look at the body then."

"Take Shang-Da with you," Richard said.

I looked up at the tall man's face. The claw marks were still red and sort of gruesome looking on his face. I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"I don't want you going alone," Richard said.

Funny how he wasn't offering to come with me himself. He was going to stay here and comfort Dr. Onslow. Fine. I was a big girl.

"I'll be okay, Richard. You stay here with the good doctor and Shang-Da."

Richard stood. "You're being childish."

I rolled my eyes and motioned him over away from Dr. Onslow. When I was sure she couldn't overhear us, I said, "Look at Shang-Da's face."

He didn't glance back. He knew what it looked like. "What about it?"

I stared up at him. "Richard, you should know as well as I do that if you have someone eaten to death by a mysterious critter, werewolves are always top of the hit list to blame."

"They try to blame a lot of things on us," he said.

"So far, Wilkes and his men don't know what you are. If we show up with Shang-Da cut up like this and then he turns up healed, they'll figure it out. With a body on the ground, you don't want them to figure it out."

"Shang-Da won't be healed by nightfall," Richard said.

"But he'll be more healed than he is right now. It isn't human to heal that fast. If Wilkes finds out that we haven't really left town, he'll use everything he has. He'll out you or charge you with this crime."

"What could have killed this woman?"

"Won't know until I see the body."

"I don't want you going there alone. I'll go with you."

"The police don't like it when you bring your civvie boyfriends to crime scenes, Richard. Stay here; comfort Dr. Onslow."

He frowned at me.

"I'm not being catty, Richard." I smiled. "All right, not very catty. She's shook. Hold her hand. I'll be okay."

He touched my face gently. "You don't need much hand-holding, do you?"

I sighed. "One night with you and I nearly eat Verne's neck. One night, and I just ran through the woods like . . . like a werewolf. Just one lovemaking session, and you say you knew it was a possibility. You should have at least tried to tell me last night, Richard."

He nodded. "You're right, I should have. I don't have any excuse good enough. I'm sorry, Anita."

Staring up into his so-sincere face, it was hard to be angry. But it wasn't hard to be distrustful. Maybe Richard had been learning more from Jean-Claude than just how to control the marks. Maybe lying by omission was contagious.

"I need to go see a body, Richard."

Dr. Onslow pointed me in the right direction. I started off through the woods. Richard caught up with me. "I'll walk you."

"I'm armed, Richard. I'll be okay."

"I want to go with you."

I stopped and turned and stared up at him. "I don't want you with me. Right this moment, I need you to be somewhere else."

"I didn't mean to hide things from you. Everything happened so fast last night. I just didn't have time. I didn't think."

"Tell it to someone who cares, Richard. Tell it to someone who cares." I walked away into the trees, and he stayed where I'd left him. I felt him watch me as I moved through the trees. I could feel the weight of his gaze like a hand on my back. If I looked back, would he be waving? I didn't look back. I loved Richard. He loved me. I was sure of those two things. The one thing I wasn't sure of was whether that love would be enough. If he slept with other women, it wouldn't be. Fair or not, I wouldn't survive it.

Richard said he hadn't asked me to give up Jean-Claude. He hadn't. But as long as I shared my bed with Jean-Claude, Richard would sleep with other women. As long as I wasn't monogamous, he wouldn't be, either. He hadn't asked me to give up Jean-Claude. He'd just made sure that I wasn't going to be happy in either bed. I could have them both as long as Richard slept around. I could have Richard all to myself, as long as I gave up Jean-Claude. I wasn't ready to make the second choice, and I couldn't live with the first. Unless there were a third choice, we were in trouble.

Chapter 32

The murder scene was in the middle of the woods. Five miles from the nearest road good enough to take even a four-wheeler, according to Dr. Onslow. It was a great place for trolls, but not for conducting a police investigation. They were going to have to hike everything in, and when the time came, hike the body out. Not pleasant, not fast.

One good thing about the isolated location was no gawkers. I'd been to a lot of murder scenes, but the only ones without an audience were either at really odd hours or in the middle of nowhere. The odd hours weren't enough if there were people nearby. People would climb out of their beds before dawn to see a corpse.

Even without the civvies, there was a crowd. I spotted the uniforms of Wilkes and one of his men. I was really looking forward to seeing them again today. The state troopers were thick on the ground along with some plainclothes state detectives. I didn't have to be introduced to them to know they were cops. They moved around the scene with little plastic gloves on, squatting on the balls of their feet rather than kneeling on the evidence.

Yellow crime scene tape wrapped around it all like a ribbon on a package. There was no uniform on this side of the tape because no one expected company from the direction opposite the road. I was wearing the Browning and the Firestar and the knife down my spine, so I dug out my license and held it aloft as I ducked under the tape. Eventually, someone would see me and some uniform would get yelled at for letting me cross the perimeter without being spotted.

A state trooper spotted me before I'd come down the hill very far. They'd made a wide circle of tape, and he'd been standing near the upper edge of it. He had brown hair and dark eyes and a sprinkling of freckles across his pale cheeks. He walked towards me, hand out, "I'm sorry, miss, but you can't be in here."

I wagged the license at him. "I'm Anita Blake. I heard you guys were looking for me. Something about a body you want me to take a peek at."

"A peek," he said. "You want to take a peek at the body." He said it sort of soft, not like he was teasing me. His dark eyes stared past me for a second, then he seemed to remember where he was. He held his hand out for my license.

I let him take it, look at it, read it twice. He handed it back to me. He looked down the hill to the knot of people. He pointed. "The short man in the black suit, blond hair, that's Captain Henderson. He's in charge."

I just looked at him. He should have taken me to the man in charge. No way would a cop who didn't know me let me walk a crime scene

unaccompanied. Vampire executioners aren't civilians, but most of us aren't detectives, either. I'm one of the very few who deals so intimately with the police. In Saint Louis where most of the cops knew me by reputation or on sight, I could see it. But here, where no one knew me, no way.

I read the trooper's nameplate. "Michaels, is it?"

He nodded, and again his eyes weren't looking at me. He wasn't acting like a cop. He was acting scared. Cops don't spook easily. Give them a few years on the job, and they perfect jaded indifference: been there, done that, wasn't impressed, didn't bother to get a T-shirt. Michaels had sergeant bars on his uniform. You didn't get sergeant stripes in the state troopers by getting shook at every crime scene.

"Sergeant Michaels," he said. "Is there something I can do for you, Ms. Blake?" He seemed to be rebuilding himself before my eyes. It reminded me of the way Dr. Carne Onslow had recovered. His eyes lost that vague, glassy look. He looked at me straight on, but there was still a tightness around his eyes, almost like something hurt. What the hell was down at the bottom of this hill? What could make a seasoned cop look like this?

"Nothing, Sergeant, nothing. Thanks." I kept my license out because I was almost sure to be stopped again without a police escort. A woman was throwing up by a small pine tree. She and the man holding her forehead wore Emergency Medical Services uniforms. It's a bad sign when the EMS techs are throwing up. A very bad sign.

It was Maiden who stopped me. We stood there for a second or two just looking at each other. I was standing uphill, looking down at him.

"Ms. Blake," he said.

"Maiden," I said. I left off the officer on purpose, because as far as I was concerned, he wasn't an officer. He'd stopped being a cop when he became a bad guy.

He gave a small, odd, smile. "I'll take you through to Captain Henderson. He's in charge."

"Fine."

"You might want to prepare yourself, Blake. It's . . . bad."

"I'll be all right," I said.

He shook his head, looked at the ground. When he looked back up, his eyes were empty, cold cop eyes. "Maybe you will, Blake, maybe you will. But I won't be."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Who the hell is she?" It was Captain Henderson. He'd spotted us. He came up the hillside in his dress shoes, sliding just a bit. But he was determined and knew how to walk in the leaves even in the wrong shoes. He was about five-eight. with short, blond hair. He had odd eyes that changed color as he moved through the dappled sunlight. One moment pale green, the next grey. He came up to stand between the two of us. He looked at Maiden. "Who is this, and why is she inside my perimeter?"

"Anita Blake, Captain Henderson," Maiden said.

He looked straight at me, and his eyes were cool and grey with swirling flecks of green. He was handsome in a clean-cut, ordinary sort of way. He might have been more than that, but there was a harshness to his face, a sourness, that robbed him of something likeable and pleasant.

No matter how funky the eye color when he looked at me, the eyes were distant, judging, cop eyes. "So you're Anita Blake?" His voice was almost angry.

I nodded. "Yes." I didn't let the anger get to me. He wasn't angry at me. Something was wrong. Something beyond the crime itself. I wondered what.

He looked me up and down, not sexual, but as if he were taking my measure. I was used to that, though it was usually a little less blatant. "How strong's your stomach, Blake?"

I raised eyebrows at that, then smiled.

"What in the hell is funny?" Henderson said.

"Look, I know it's bad. I just left your sergeant at the top of the hill so spooked he wouldn't come near it a second time. Maiden here's already told me it's awful. Just take me to the body."

Henderson stepped up, invading the hell out of my personal space. "You that confident that you can take it, Blake?"

I sighed. "No."

The no seemed to take some of the anger away. He blinked and took a step back. "No?" he said.

"I don't know if I can take it, Captain Henderson. There's always the chance that the next horror will be something so awful, I'll never recover. Something that stains my mind and sends me screaming. But so far, so good. So, take me to see the grisly remains. The foreplay is getting tiresome."

I watched the emotions play over his face: amusement, then anger, but finally, amusement won. Lucky me. "The grisly remains. Are you sure you're not a reporter?"

That made me smile. "I'm guilty of a lot of sins, but that's not one of them."

That made him smile. When he smiled, he looked ten years younger and was more than just ordinarily handsome. "Okay, Ms. Blake, follow me. I'll take you to see the grisly remains." He laughed soft, low, and deeper than his speaking voice, as if when he sang he might be a bass. "I hope you're as amusing after you've seen the show, Ms. Blake."

"Me, too," I said.

He gave me a strange look, then led the way down the hill. I followed because it was my job. An hour ago, I'd have said the day couldn't get much worse. I had a sinking feeling it was about to get worse—much worse.

Chapter 33

The body lay in a small clearing. I knew it was human because they told me it was. It wasn't that the body didn't look human, exactly. The shape was there enough that I could tell it was lying on its back. It was more that my mind refused to acknowledge that this could have been a human being. My eyes saw it, but my mind kept refusing to put the pieces together, so it was like looking at one of those pictures where you stare and stare until the hidden shapes spin out in 3-D relief. It looked as if there had been an explosion of blood and flesh, and the body had been at the center of it. Dried blood spread out from the body in every direction, as if when the body were moved there'd be a body-shaped clean spot, like an ink blot.

I could see all that, but still my eyes couldn't make sense of it. My mind was trying to protect me. It had happened before—once or twice. The smart thing would be to turn and walk away. Let my mind have its confusion because the truth was going to be one of those mind-blasting moments. I'd jokingly told Henderson at the top of the hill that some things stain the mind. It wasn't funny now.

I forced myself to look at it, forced myself not to look away, but the summer heat wavered around me in a sickening rush. I wanted to cover my eyes with my hands, but I settled for turning away. Covering my eyes would look silly and childish, like blotting out the worst of a horror movie.

Henderson turned when I did. If I wasn't going to look at the body, then he wouldn't, either. "You okay?"

The world stopped spinning like a ball that had slid to a stop. "I will be." My voice sounded breathy.

"Good," he said.

We stood that way for a few seconds more, then I took a shallow breath. I knew better than to take a deep one this close to the body. I had to do this. Trolls didn't do this. No natural animal did this. I turned slowly around to face the body. It hadn't gotten any better.

Henderson turned with me. He was the man in charge. He could take it if I could. I wasn't sure I could, but since I was out of other choices . . .

I'd borrowed surgical gloves. Someone had offered me heavier plastic gloves to go over. AIDS, you know. I declined. One, my hands would sweat. Two, if I had to feel the body for clues, I wouldn't be able to feel shit. Three, with three vampire marks on me, I didn't sweat AIDS anymore. I was free from blood-borne disease, so I'd been told. I believed Jean-Claude on this one because he wouldn't want to lose me. I was a third of his triumvirate. He wanted me safe. In the back of my head a voice said, *He loves you*. The voice in the front of my head said, *Yeah right*.

"Can I track up the blood pattern?" I asked.

"You can't get close to the body unless you step in the blood," Henderson said.

I nodded. "True. So you've videotaped it, gotten all your pictures?"

"We know how to do our job, Ms. Blake."

"I'm not questioning that, Captain. I need to know if I can move the body around, that's all. I don't want to fuck up the evidence."

"When you're done with it, we'll be bagging it up."

I nodded. "Okay." I stared down at the body and suddenly could see it. All of it. I hugged my arms across my stomach to keep my hands from covering my eyes. The nose had been bitten off so that it was just a bloody hole. The lips were torn away until teeth and the bones of the jaw were visible under the drying blood. The muscles of the jaw were missing on the side facing me. Whatever had done this hadn't just taken a quick bite. It had sat down and fed.

So many bites, so much missing flesh, but most of it too shallow to kill. I said a short prayer that most of the bites were postmortem. Even as I prayed, I was pretty sure I wouldn't get a good answer; there was too much blood. She'd been alive through most of it. Intestines spilled out of the ripped jeans in a dried nest covered in thicker things than blood. The outhouse smell of her lower intestines being ripped would have faded by now. One smell dies, but there's always another. Her body had started to ripen in the summer heat. It is a smell that is hard to describe, both overwhelmingly sweet and bitter enough to gag. I took shallow breaths and stepped onto the dried splatter.

Something moved through me like a phantom blow. The hair on the back of my neck tried to crawl down my spine. That part of my brain that had nothing to do with cars or indoor plumbing and everything to do with running and screaming and not thinking at all, was whispering now. It was whispering that something was wrong. Something evil had been here—not just dangerous, evil.

I waited to see if the feeling would grow stronger, but it faded. It faded like a bad memory, which probably meant I'd walked through the edge of some kind of spell—or rather, the remnants of one, a nasty one.

You didn't call something this evil without a circle of protection either for the sorcerer to stand in or for the beastie to be put inside of. I searched the ground, but there was nothing but blood. The blood didn't form a circle of protection. It was just splatter, mess, no pattern.

I should have known there wouldn't be anything that obvious. The police aren't practitioners of the arts, though that is beginning to change, but you can't be a cop long and not look for signs of magic when the shit is this strange.

The scene looked undisturbed, but that didn't mean it was undisturbed. If someone were really good at magic, they could make you not see something. Not true invisibility. Humans don't do that. Physics is physics. Light hits a solid object and bounces. But they can make the eye reluctant to see, so that you keep looking past something and your mind doesn't register it. Like looking for a set of car keys that is sitting in plain sight, lost for two days.

I squatted beside the body. I didn't have the coveralls I usually wore at murder scenes and didn't want the blood to soak into my jeans. I was still hugging myself. There were things here that someone didn't want us to see. But what?

Henderson called, "We found the wallet. Do you want the ID?"

"No," I said. "No." I wasn't being clever. I just didn't want a name, an identity for the thing at my feet. I'd done the trick of turning the body into an it. It wasn't real. It was just something to be studied, examined. It had never been real. To think anything else at that moment would have had me vomiting all over the evidence. I'd done that only once, years ago. Dolph and the gang had never let me live it down.

The eyes had been clawed out and left to dry into blackened lumps on the cheeks. Long hair was plastered along the side of the face, stuck to one shoulder. Maybe blond hair from the color. But it was hard to tell with all the soaked blood. The long hair made me think female. My eyes traveled down and found the remains of clothing. The blouse had been reduced to a lump of cloth under one arm. The chest was bare. One breast torn completely off. The other deflated like a balloon as if something had eaten the flesh out of the middle, like a kid sucking the jelly out of a donut.

It was an unfortunate choice of metaphors, even in my own head. I had to stand up. I had to walk away, blowing air out very fast and too shallow. I went to stand beside one of the trees that edged the clearing. I had to take deep breaths, but that meant the odor went down strong. That sweet, sweet smell slid along my tongue and coated the back of my throat until I couldn't stand the thought of swallowing but didn't know what else to do. I swallowed, and the smell slid down, and my morning coffee inched up.

I had two comforts. One, I'd managed to get outside the blood pattern to vomit. Two, I didn't have much in my stomach to come up. Maybe this was one reason that I've stopped eating breakfast. I get a lot of early-morning body viewing.

I knelt in the dry leaves and felt better. I hadn't thrown up at a crime scene in a long time. At least Zerbrowski wasn't here to rib me about it. I wasn't even embarrassed. Was that a sign of maturity?

Male voices behind me. Sheriff Wilkes saying, almost yelling, "She's just a civvie. She shouldn't be here. She isn't even licensed for this state."

"I'm in charge here, Sheriff. I say who stays and who goes." Henderson wasn't yelling, but his voice carried.

I grabbed the tree trunk to help me stand, and my arm tingled so hard it almost went numb. I stood, pushing away from the tree, nearly falling, but I kept my feet. I looked up the smooth trunk. About eight feet up was a pentagram carved into the bark of the tree. The cut had been darkened with blood. With the dried blood rubbed into it, it was almost invisible against the dark grey bark, but there was also a spell of reluctance on it. So that no one had looked, not even me. Only when I touched the tree did I sense it. Like all illusion, once you see it, you know it's there.

I looked at the other trees and found a bloody pentagram carved into each one. It was a circle of power, of protection. A circle formed of blood and the land itself. Wiccans—witches—can use their power for evil if they're willing to pay the price in karma. Whatever you do, good or ill, comes back to you threefold. But even a wiccan gone bad wouldn't carve up a tree. Had the trees, the land, themselves, been invoked? That might mean an elemental. They could

be nasty. But they didn't feel evil. They felt angry if you messed with their land, but they weren't evil, more angry-neutral. I'd gotten that whiff of evil as I passed through the circle. Evil with a capital *E*. There just aren't that many preternatural critters that trip that particular wire.

"Captain Henderson," I said. I had to say it twice before they stopped arguing and looked at me.

They both looked at me. Neither looked friendly, but at least I knew who they were mad at: each other. Local cops don't like anybody horning in on their turf. It was normal for the local police to resent outsiders. But I knew that Wilkes had more to protect than his turf. He must be frantic having real cops here now. But now wasn't the time to spill the beans. I had no proof. Accusing a policeman of corruption tends to upset the other cops.

"Did you see the pentagrams on the trees?"

The question was strange enough that they both stopped being angry and paid attention. I pointed the pentagrams out, and like all good illusion, once I showed them, they could see it. The emperor has no clothes.

"So?" Wilkes said.

"So, this was a circle of protection, of power. Something was called here to kill her."

"The marks on the trees could have been here for days," Wilkes said.

"Test the blood on the pentagrams," I said. "It won't be hers, but it will be fresh."

"Why isn't it the victim's?" Henderson asked.

"Because they used the blood to seal the circle. They had to have the blood before the death."

"It was a human sacrifice then," Henderson said.

"Not exactly," I said.

"This was a troll kill," Wilkes said. He didn't sound sure; he sounded desperate.

Henderson turned to him. "You keep saying that, Wilkes. You keep saying it was trolls."

"That biologist herself said it looked like primates. It sure as hell wasn't a person. There aren't that many primates running around the Tennessee hills."

"She said humanoid," I said.

They both looked at me again.

"Dr. Onslow said humanoid. A lot of people assume humanoid means primate, but there are other options."

"Like what?" Wilkes said. His beeper went off. He checked the number, then looked at me. "Excuse me, Captain Henderson."

Henderson looked at me. "Do you and the sheriff have some sort of history, Ms. Blake?"

I frowned. "History? How?"

"He was very certain that you shouldn't be anywhere near this body. He was also very certain that this was a troll kill. Very certain."

"Who called you guys then?"

"An anonymous tip."

We looked at each other. "Who suggested I get to join the fun?"

"One of the EMS crew. The man's usual partner met you last night."

I shook my head. "I don't know him."

"His regular partner is a girl. Lucy something."

That explained Lucy's medical knowledge, and why she wasn't working on the day of the full moon. Don't want to be around fresh blood with the moon almost full. Too tempting. Too chancy.

"I remember her vaguely, I guess." I remembered her more than vaguely, but the last time I'd seen her was just after I'd murdered someone, so I was going to be fuzzy on the details. For one awful moment, I wondered if Henderson had been trying to trick me and the body was really Lucy. But the height was wrong. The woman had been tall, not my size. Most of the women that Richard dated were short. I guess if you've got a body type you like, you stick to it. My choice of victims seemed to be a lot wider.

"Why did they need a power circle, Ms. Blake?" Henderson asked.

"To keep in what they called."

He frowned at me. "Like you said before, the foreplay is getting tiresome. Just tell me what the fuck you think it was."

"I think they called a demon."

His eyes widened. "A what?"

"A demon," I said.

Henderson just looked at me. "Why?"

"When I crossed the circle, I got that feeling of evil. No matter how monstrous the critter, it doesn't feel the same as something dedicated to evil and no other purpose."

"You see many demons while you're out slaying vampires, Ms. Blake?"

"Once, Captain, just once. It was . . ." I stepped out of the circle of power, and I felt better. They'd done their best to hide the traces, but things like this have a tendency to cling. "I was called into a case that they thought was a vampire, but it was demonic possession. The woman . . ." I stopped again because I didn't have words for it, or no words that wouldn't seem silly, melodramatic. I tried to tell the story by sticking to the facts. Me and Sergeant Friday.

"The woman had been an ordinary housewife, mother of two. She'd been a diagnosed schizophrenic, Captain. Her particular brand of craziness was almost a multiple personality disorder, but not that clear-cut. She was like the little girl with a curl in the middle of her forehead. When she was good, she was very, very good. A model churchgoer, teacher of Sunday school. She canned her own vegetables, sewed doll clothes for her girls. But when she was bad, she slept around, abused the kids, hung the family dog from a tree."

Henderson raised an eyebrow at that. For a cop, it was pure shock. "Why wasn't she in a hospital?"

"Because when she took her medicine, she was the good mother, the good wife. I talked to her when she was 'well,' and she was a very nice person. I saw why the husband tried to hold on to her. It was tragic in the true sense of the word that her own brain chemistry was destroying her life."

"It's sad, but it's not demonic," Henderson said.

"Neighborhood pets were vanishing, showing up drained of blood. I traced it to the woman. Her history of mental illness had raised flags with the cops. So far, just sad, right." I stared off up the hill at the cops and the techs and everyone. They were not looking down the hill. No one wanted to hang around this one. Even if you aren't truly sensitive to the psychic, we all have survival instincts that work better than we do. Everyone would be reluctant on this one, and they wouldn't know why.

"You still with me, Blake?" Henderson asked.

"Sorry. The night we arrested her, two uniforms had had to drag her out of another man's bed, handcuffed. They didn't have another female on site that night, so I rode in back with her. She was loud and boisterous, flirting with the men, being snotty with me. I don't even remember what I said, but I remember the look on her face when she turned to me. We're riding in this dark police car, and as she turns her head to look at me, the hair on my body stood up. There were no glowing eyes, no smell of sulfur, Captain Henderson, but I felt evil rise off of her like some disturbing perfume." I looked at him, and he was scrutinizing my face like he was trying to memorize it. "I don't scare easy, Captain, but for that instant, I was scared. Scared of her, and it showed on my face, and she laughed, and the moment was gone."

"What did you do?"

"I recommended they do an exorcism."

"Did they?" he asked.

"Not the police, but her husband signed the papers for it."

"And?" Henderson said.

"And it worked. If she stays on her medication, the mental illness is under control. The possession didn't cause the schizophrenia."

Henderson nodded. "We all get the lecture in training that mental illness can open a person up to demonic possession, Ms. Blake. It's like PCP but weirder."

"Yeah," I said. "PCP doesn't cause people to levitate."

He frowned at me. "Did you witness the exorcism?"

I shook my head. "I won't talk about it. I especially won't talk about it here and now. Words have power, Captain. Memories have power. I won't play into it."

He nodded. "Are you positive humans didn't do this?"

I shook my head. "They ate her to death. It ate her to death. A person might be able to bite your throat out and do some of this damage, but not all of it."

"If you told me this was a possession, I'd call my chain of command and start looking for a priest; but Blake, do you know how rare overt demonic attacks are?"

"Probably better than you do, Captain. I get called in for all sorts of weird shit."

"Have you ever seen a demon kill a person by straight attack, not trickery?"

"No."

"Then how can you be so sure?" he asked.

"I told you why I'm sure, Captain. Once you've been in the presence of the demonic, you don't forget what it feels like." I shook my head and fought the urge to take another step away from the body.

"But I'm not an expert on demons, Captain Henderson. I suggest you contact a priest. I'm also not an expert on this kind of magic. Call a local witch to look it over. They may be able to give you more information. The best I can do is general stuff."

"Could you have called a demon and made it kill her?"

I frowned at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Just answer the question, Ms. Blake."

"I raise the dead, Captain. I don't do demons."

"A lot of people don't see that big a difference between the two."

"Great, just great. You call me down here. I tell you it's black magic, and now you're going to blame me. I don't feel like being the toasty end of a witch hunt, Captain Henderson."

He smiled. "Just answer the question. Could you do it?"

"No, I could not do this. Trafficking with the demonic taints the soul. I may not be a perfect Christian, but I am trying."

"Fucking vampires taints the soul, too, Blake."

I stared up at him. I looked at him for several long seconds, because what I wanted to do was hit him or scream at him. No, hit him. But I couldn't do that. I settled for one of those smiles you get sometimes when what you really want to do is hurt someone.

"Fine, Captain, fine. This was powerful magic, and I have a reputation for powerful magic. It's not your fault that you don't understand the vast difference between the two schools of magic. Lack of education, can't hold that against you." My voice said plainly that I wanted to. "But if I were going to kill someone, I'd probably just shoot them. That would at least put me near the middle of the suspect list, not the top."

"I heard that about you. That you were a shooter."

I looked at him. "Heard from whom?"

"Cops talk to one another, Ms. Blake. If she'd shown up with a bullet in her head, then I might believe you did it."

"Why would I kill some unknown woman?"

"But she isn't unknown, Ms. Blake." He was watching me very closely.

I glanced back at the body. I looked down the length of it. There was nothing that I recognized. Of all the women I'd met since I came here, none were tall enough for the body. Except one.

I turned back to him and felt the blood drain from my face. "Who is it?"

"Betty Schaffer, the woman who accused your lover boy of rape."

The world swam in stripes of color and heat. Someone was holding my elbow, and only that kept me standing. When my vision cleared, Henderson had my arm, and Wilkes was back. "Are you all right, Ms. Blake?" Wilkes asked.

I looked him right in the eyes and didn't know what to say. Betty Schaffer had been worse than murdered. If the ritual was done right and the person was in jeopardy, not pure, like being a traitor or a liar or lecherous, then the soul could be taken with the life. I'd only seen one body that had been killed in ritual for a demon, and it had been nothing like this. The sacrifice had been killed with a knife, but the soul had been taken. And I couldn't raise the body. If a demon was involved with the death, then the body was just so much clay. I had no power here.

Wilkes couldn't have called a demon. None of his men had the power. Who could have done it? No one I'd met since I arrived had that kind of power and that kind of taint.

Before I could think of anything to say, Wilkes spoke first. "You've got a call. I think you should take it."

He was afraid I'd talk. Trouble was, I didn't have any proof of anything. Hell, I didn't even know what was going on. What was on this ordinary looking land that was worth killing over? Why did the trolls have to be gotten rid of? Was it just so the land could be sold? Or was there a darker purpose? Someone had called a demon to try to make it look like a troll kill. I knew why they'd done it, but not who. I even knew why it was Betty. She'd compromised herself, put herself at risk for that kind of ceremony.

Movies try to give us shit about needing virgins and purity for sacrifice, but true evil doesn't want to kill and send purity to heaven. True evil wants to corrupt good, and once the good are dead, they are beyond the devil's reach. But the impure, to sacrifice them, to kill them—well, the devil gets his due.

Wilkes took my arm as if to help me.

"Don't touch me, Wilkes. Don't ever touch me again."

He let his hand fall. Henderson was watching us like he was seeing more than we were telling. Cops are good about that. Give them anything suspicious, and they'll put two and two together and make ten to twenty-five to life.

Wilkes looked at me. "Could it be werewolves?" His voice was quiet.

I couldn't keep the shock off my face. I fought to regain my nice, blank face, but it was enough. Wilkes knew what Richard was—somehow he knew—and he'd try to blame Betty's death on Richard. Werewolves were a good scapegoat, and a lot more fun to believe in than demons.

He pulled a cell phone from his pocket. He punched up a number. "She's right here." He handed the phone to me.

Henderson was watching us like we were entertaining. I took the phone. The voice on the other end was a man, and I didn't know him.

"I am Franklin Niley, Ms. Blake. I think it is time we meet face-to-face."

"I don't think so," I said.

"Wilkes told me that you have spoiled our little plan about blaming those pesky trolls for the death. But it is not too late to blame your lover. How many people will believe his innocence once they find out he is a werewolf?"

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

I had to turn my back on Henderson's alert eyes. His attention was a little too intense. Wilkes wasn't watching me. He was watching Henderson.

Unfortunately, turning around put me back to staring at the corpse. I turned to the side and stared off through the trees.

The voice on the phone was cultured, almost too well-mannered for comfort. "Come, Ms. Blake, let us not play games, the two of us. I know what Mr. Zeeman is, and once he's accused, a simple blood test in the jail will prove me right. He'd lose his job, his career, and perhaps be executed. You have hired an excellent attorney; my congratulations. But if he is convicted, then it is an automatic death sentence. Juries have a strong tendency to convict monsters."

"I'm listening."

"Meet me at the diner in town. A public place, so you'll feel safe."

"Why do you want to meet?" My voice was growing progressively lower, whispering.

"To beg you one last time to leave town, Ms. Blake. I have no wish to come against you. The spirits say that to come against you is death."

"Spirits?" I whispered.

"Meet me, Ms. Blake. You and Mr. Zeeman. Meet me, and I promise you it will all be over. You will leave town and all will be well."

"I don't trust you."

"Nor should you," Niley said. He laughed, deep and rich. "But meet me at the diner, Ms. Blake. I'll answer your questions. I'll tell you why I want the land. Once my people have made sure you're not wearing a wire, I'll answer any direct question you have. Surely that tempts you."

"You sound like a man who knows a lot about temptation, Mr. Niley."

He laughed again. "Money tempts many people, Ms. Blake, and I have a great deal of it."

I'd been walking slowly away from Henderson. "You going to offer me money?"

"No, Ms. Blake, that is what won a certain officer of the law to my camp—and his men. I do not think money is the key to your soul."

I didn't like the way he said that. "What do you want, Niley?"

"To talk, that is all. I would swear to you or promise you your safety, but I do not think you would believe me."

"You got that right."

"Come to me, Ms. Blake. Let us talk. After I have answered your questions, then you can decide whether to leave or stay. Now, would you be so kind as to put the sheriff back on the phone?"

I turned back to the waiting men and held up the phone. "He wants to talk to you again."

Wilkes came for the phone. It was just the two of us by the body when he tried to take the phone. I held onto it. I leaned in close to him and said, "Money doesn't spend in hell, Wilkes. The devil deals in a different coin."

He jerked the phone from my hand and walked away into the trees, listening to the voice in his ear. The voice that had offered him money to sell out everything he was or might have been. The motive I understood least of all for murder or betrayal was greed. But damned if it wasn't a popular motive for both.

Chapter 34

Richard hadn't said a word since we started the drive to the diner. He'd pulled the rubber band out of his hair and played with it, stretching it wide, letting it relax, open, close, open, close. He didn't usually have nervous habits. It wasn't a good sign. I pulled into the parking lot and shut off the engine. Richard was sitting in the middle with his long legs drawn up. He'd wanted me to drive. Something about being more easily distracted this close to the full moon. Shang-Da sat on the other side, his face calm. Every time I looked at him, the horrible claw marks seemed to be smoothing out. By nightfall tomorrow, he'd be clean. It was impressive, and it would mark him in everyone's eyes who saw him as what he was: a shapeshifter.

We sat there a moment, listening to the engine tick. "You're not going to do anything stupid, are you?" I asked Richard.

The rubber band broke with a snap, jumping for the floorboard. "Whatever makes you think that?"

I touched his arm. He looked at me. His eyes were perfect chocolate brown, human, but there was something in the depths of those human eyes that was other. His beast crawled just behind those true, brown orbs.

"Can you sit through this without losing it?" I asked.

"I can."

"Will you?" I asked.

He gave me a tight smile, and I didn't like the look on his face. "If I let this much anger out in public with the moon overhead, I might shift. Don't worry, Anita. I know how to deal with my rage." He seemed very self-contained, as if he'd pulled back into himself, behind walls of careful construction. But behind those walls was a vibrating, menacing thing. If Niley's sorcerer were inside, he or she would recognize something was wrong. Of course, they knew what Richard was, so it was all right, I guess.

Shang-Da handed Richard a pair of black wraparound shades. He took them and slipped them on, running his hands through his hair, fluffing it around his shoulders. Another nervous gesture.

"I've never seen you wear sunglasses," I said.

"It's in case my eyes change," Richard said.

I glanced at Shang-Da and his naked eyes. "What about you?"

"I didn't date the girl. I didn't even like her."

Ah. "Great, let's go."

The men walked at my back like bodyguards. Their energy swirled behind me like some kind of psychic wall. It made the skin along my back tight and

itchy. I pushed through the glass doors of the diner and stood there for a moment, searching for Niley.

The diner was a 1950s throwback, long and narrow in front, with a wider area to one side that looked like a later addition. There was a long counter with little, round stools. The place was full of locals and families that matched the out-of-state license plates in the parking lot.

The waitresses wore pink uniforms and small, useless aprons. A blond waitress came up to us, smiling. "Richard, Shang-Da, haven't seen you in here all week. Knew you couldn't stay away from Albert's hash browns."

Richard flashed her that smile of his that has been known to melt women into little quivering puddles. The fact that he's unaware of the effect makes it all the more devastating.

Shang-Da nodded at her, which for him was a rousing hello.

"Hi, Aggie," Richard said. "We're meeting someone. Frank Niley."

She frowned, then nodded. "They're over there at the big table around the corner. You know the way. I'll bring water and menus in just a sec."

Richard led the way through the crowded tables. We went around the L-shape, and at the end of it, against a bank of windows that overlooked a very pretty mountain view, was our party.

The African American bodyguard, Milo, was one of three men at the table. He stood when he saw us. He was still tall, leanly muscled, with square-cut hair, handsome in a cold sort of way. He had a long coat on, and it was too hot for long coats.

I grabbed Richard's arm, slowed him. "Please," I said.

Richard stared down at me from behind black lenses, his eyes lost. I'd never realized how much of his expression was in his eyes. I couldn't read what he was thinking. With some effort, I might have found out, but the last thing I wanted to do was activate the marks in front of Niley's people.

Richard let me walk a little ahead of him. Shang-Da had put a sport jacket on over the white shirt and black slacks. He'd surprised me by having a snub-nosed thirty-eight, chrome-plated. It had a paddle holster and fit at the small of his back without breaking the line of his jacket. When I'd questioned the gun, he'd said, "These are not policemen."

The logic was sound, and he'd checked the gun automatically to see it was loaded. He handled the gun like it was habit. He was the first lycanthrope I'd ever met who carried and seemed comfy with it.

It was actually nice to not be the only person on our side with a gun.

There were two men still sitting. One was under twenty-five, with curly brown hair cut short and a wide, almost surprised face. Not Niley. The other one was well over six feet and must have weighed close to three hundred pounds. He gave the impression of size without being exactly fat. His hair was black and receding sharply in front. He'd done nothing to hide this fact. Rather, the rest of his hair had been buzzed very close to his head, making it all the more obvious. The lack of hair made his face seem too small for his broad shoulders.

The dark pin-striped suit sat over his white shirt, smooth and costly. He wore a vest but no tie. The wide, white collar showed a curl of greying chest hair. He smiled as he watched us move through the tables of tourists and their screaming children.

His eyes were pleasant and empty like an amused snake. He waved large blunt-fingered hands. Gold rings glittered from every finger. "Ms. Blake, so good of you to come." He didn't stand for me, which made me wonder what was in his lap. A sawed-off shotgun, maybe. Or maybe his overly mannered speech was an affectation, and he didn't know the actions that went with it. Or maybe he didn't consider me a lady. Maybe.

Shang-Da had moved to one side so that he and Milo were facing each other. I narrowed my focus to Niley and the younger man. He looked benign, like he should have been sitting at one of the other tables, surrounded by normal people doing normal things.

Niley offered me his hand. I took it. His handshake was too quick, barely touching. "This is Howard."

Howard didn't offer me his hand, which made me offer my hand to him. His big brown eyes got even bigger. And I realized that Howard was afraid of me. Interesting.

"Howard doesn't shake hands," Niley said. "He's a rather powerful clairvoyant. I'm sure you understand."

I nodded. "I've never met a strong clairvoyant that would willingly touch a stranger. Too much crap to pick up."

Niley nodded, small head bobbing on his wide shoulders. "Exactly, Ms. Blake, exactly."

I sat down. Richard slid into the chair beside me.

Niley's eyes moved from me to Richard. "Well, Mr. Zeeman, we meet at last."

Richard stared at him from behind dark glasses. "Why did you kill her?"

The abruptness of it made even me wince.

I must have made some movement, because Richard said, "I didn't come here to play games."

"Nor did I," Niley said. "If you will accompany me to the men's room, I will check you for listening devices. Milo will check your bodyguard."

"Shang-Da," Richard said. "His name's Shang-Da."

Niley smiled even more broadly. If his smile kept getting wider, soon his face would just split open.

"Of course."

"Who gets to search me?" I said. "Howard?"

Niley shook his head. "My other associate is running a little late today." He stood and there was nothing in his lap. Paranoia. "Shall we, Mr. Zeeman? May I call you Richard?"

"No," Richard said, voice deep and low, as if he wanted to say more.

I touched his arm as he moved past me. I looked up into his face, trying to tell him with a look not to do anything stupid.

Niley took Richard's other arm, slipping it through his like you'd walk arm and arm with your lover. He patted Richard's arm. "My, aren't you a handsome fellow."

Richard gave me a look as Niley led him away. I'd have given a great deal to see his eyes at that moment. Usually the bad guys make moves on me.

Shang-Da moved back so Milo could come out from behind the table. They moved off together, not touching, the tension between them thick enough to swing on.

I was left with Howard and my back to the door. I changed chairs, sitting where Milo had been, so I could see the entrance. It put me closer to Howard, and he didn't like that much. I smelled a weak link.

"How good are you?" I asked.

"Good enough to be scared of you," he said.

I frowned at him. "I'm not one of the bad guys, Howard."

"I can see your aura," he said in a voice that I could barely hear above the murmur of voices and silverware.

The waitress came with glasses of water and menus. I assured her the others were coming back to the table, but I wasn't sure if all of us were ordering. She left with a smile.

I turned back to Howard. "So you can see my aura. So what?"

"I know how powerful you are, Anita. I can feel it."

"I can't see your aura, Howard. I can feel a little of your power, but not much. Dazzle me. Show me what you can do."

"Why?"

"Maybe I'm bored."

He licked his lips. "Give me something benign. No weapons, nothing magic."

That sort of cut down on my options. I finally took the cross around my neck off and handed it to him. I pooled the chain into his hand. "Don't touch my skin with your hand," he said.

I let the last of the chain spill into his hand and was careful not to touch him. He closed his hand over the cross. He didn't close his eyes, but he wasn't seeing the restaurant. He looked past it all, and I felt his power ripple over me like a tiny electric current.

"I see a woman, older, your grandmother." He blinked and looked at me. "She gave you this when you graduated high school."

I nodded. "Impressive." I'd started wearing this particular cross just recently. I valued it, and I'd had a lot of crosses taken from me over the years. But lately, I'd felt the need of something special. Grandmother Blake had given it to me with a note that said, "May your faith be as strong as this chain and as pure as this silver." Lately, I needed all the purity I could get.

Howard's eyes went past me, staring at something at the end of the room. His breathing had stopped for just a second, like an inaudible gasp.

I turned to see what had captured his attention so thoroughly. The man was close to seven feet tall and had to weigh over five hundred pounds. His face was totally hairless, not just clean shaven. He had no eyelashes, nothing;

smooth and unreal. His eyes were a nearly colorless grey too small for his large face. He wore a black shirt untucked over black slacks, black shoes. The skin of his arms and face were unbelievably white as if the sun never touched him.

The man didn't make my skin creep with power. In fact, he was too empty, walking towards us, as if he were shielding himself.

I stood up. Partly it was his size. Partly it was the lack of anything from him, like he wasn't there. I didn't like it when someone worked that hard to shield themselves. It usually meant they had something to hide. If this was the sorcerer that had killed Betty, I knew exactly what he was hiding.

The man stopped in front of us. Howard hugged himself and made introductions. "Linus, this is Anita Blake. Anita, this is Linus Beck." Howard's voice was higher than it should have been, like he was scared. He seemed to be afraid of a lot of people.

Linus Beck smiled down at me. His voice, when it came, was shocking, a delicate soprano of a voice. "So happy to meet you, Anita. So seldom do I meet a fellow practitioner of the arts."

"We don't practice the same brand, Linus."

"Are you so sure?" he asked.

"Positive." Even standing, I had to crane my neck upward to see his face. "Why does Niley need a first-rate clairvoyant and a sorcerer?"

Linus Beck smiled, and it looked genuine. "You know the correct term. I am pleased."

"Glad to hear it. Now, answer the question."

"When I have checked you for wires, then all will be answered."

I looked at those large, white hands and didn't want him to touch me. There was almost no hair, even on his arms. It was like a golden down, like the arm of small child. Something clicked in my head, and I stared up at him. Maybe it showed on my face. Maybe he read my mind, though I don't think so.

"My manhood was sacrificed many years ago so I could better serve my master."

I blinked at him. "You're a eunuch."

He gave a small nod.

I wanted to ask why but didn't. There was no answer that would make sense, so why bother? "What flavor are you, sociopath, psychopath, or schizophrenic?"

He blinked small eyes, the smile fading. "Misguided people have told me I was crazy, Anita. But I did hear voices, my master's voice."

"Yeah, but were the first voices your master or just bad brain chemistry?"

His frown deepened. "I don't know what you mean."

I sighed. He probably didn't. Sorcerers were people who got their magic through demonic—or worse—power. They bargained for what they got and bartered their souls for money, comfort, lust, power. But some were a version of possession. People weakened by some flaw: mental illness or even a flaw of character. The right kind of flaws can attract evil.

Niley led the other men back around the corner. He and Richard were not holding hands anymore. Richard's face was tight and angry. Shang-Da and

Milo's faces gave nothing away as if nothing had happened. Niley looked happy, pleased with himself. He clapped Linus Beck on the back, and the eunuch raised the other man's hand to his mouth and kissed it.

Maybe I didn't know as much about eunuchs as I thought I did. I thought it meant sexless. Maybe I was wrong.

"Linus will search you for wires, then we can talk."

"I don't want him touching me. Nothing personal, Linus."

"You fear my master," he said.

I nodded. "You bet."

"I must insist it be Linus, in case you have some magic or other about your person that would disturb us."

I frowned at him. "Like what? The holy hand grenade?"

Niley waved the comment away. "Linus must search you, but if you like, you can have one of your men accompany you."

I didn't like it, but it was probably the best offer we were going to get. The waitress came to take our order, and I realized I was hungry. You learn to be able to eat in the midst of disaster and gore, or you get another line of work. They served breakfast all day. I ordered pancakes and maple-cured bacon.

Richard looked shocked. "How can you eat?"

"You either learn to eat in the middle of disaster and gore, or you get another day job, Richard."

"Very practical, Ms. Blake," Niley said.

I looked at him and felt a small, unpleasant smile curve my lips. "Just of late, Mr. Niley, I've become very, very practical."

"Good," he said, "very good. Then we understand each other."

I shook my head. "No, Mr. Niley, I don't understand you. I know what you are, and what you'll do, but I don't understand why."

"And what am I, Ms. Blake?"

The smile grew. "A bad guy, Mr. Niley; you're a bad guy."

He nodded. "Yes, I am, Ms. Blake. I am a very, very bad guy."

"Guess that makes us the good guys," I said.

Niley smiled. "I know what I am, Ms. Blake, and I am content with it. Are you content?"

We looked at each other for a long moment. "My state of mind isn't really any of your business."

"Answer enough," he said.

"Let's order," I said.

Everyone ordered, finally even Richard. When the waitress walked away, Linus, Richard, and I headed for the rest room so he could search me for listening devices and magical booby traps.

I only had one question. "Which bathroom are we going to use?"

Chapter 35

We used the men's room. Linus's hands felt strangely soft as if there were no muscles under his skin, just bones and flesh. Maybe he'd given up other things to serve his master. He was creepy, but he was thorough. He even ran his fingers through my hair, which most people forget to do. He behaved himself, even when his hands were on delicate areas. He didn't give Richard any reason to grump at him. Me, either.

We all trooped back out to the table. The food hadn't arrived yet, but my coffee had. Everything goes down better with coffee.

We were again in the chairs with our backs to the door. If we'd gotten there first, they'd have had these chairs, so it was hard to bitch. Linus sat on Niley's right. I realized why we weren't in a booth. Linus wouldn't have fit.

"You wanted to talk, Niley. Talk." I sipped coffee. It was bitter and had been on the burner too long, but there's no such thing as undrinkable coffee. I did hope the food was better.

"I want you to leave town, Anita."

"Wilkes and his men already covered that. We told them we were leaving by sundown," I said.

"I know what you told the good sheriff," Niley said. He wasn't smiling now. His eyes were cool, the humor dying from his face like the sun sinking away, leaving the world to darkness.

"I don't think he believes we're leaving, Richard," I said.

"I don't care what he believes," Richard said.

I glanced at Richard. He was sitting with his arms crossed, staring at Niley. It would have been more unnerving without the manatee T-shirt, but he got the point across. So much for Richard playing clever repartee with me. I left him to his quiet anger and plowed ahead alone.

"Why is it so important that we get out of town, Niley?"

"I told you. The spirits say to come against you is death."

I shook my head. "What spirits?"

"Howard uses the Ouija board as well as his other gifts. The spirits warned of a Lady Death. A woman that would be my undoing. We were warned of this in connection to this purchase. When I heard your name mentioned, I suddenly knew who Lady Death was. The spirits say that if I come against you directly, you will slay me."

"So you sent Wilkes and his bully boys around to scare me off."

"Yes, and I hired two locals to kill you. Are they dead?"

I smiled. "I didn't search you guys for wires, now did I?"

He seemed to find that amusing. "I suppose not. But I assume the two men will not be coming back for the second half of their payment."

"You can assume that," I said.

The waitress came with our food. We were all utterly quiet as she set the plates down. She put syrup in front of me and asked if we wanted anything else. We all shook our heads, and off she went.

I stared down at my pancakes and bacon and wished I hadn't ordered them. I wasn't in the mood to spar anymore. I just wanted this over.

"If you're not supposed to confront me directly, then why the change of plans? Why this meeting?"

He smiled and cut a piece of his country omelet. "Anita, do not be coy. I think we both know that Wilkes does not have the stomach for this work. He may work himself up to shooting you, but he is not up to truly scaring you away. His threat, shall we say, lacks a certain fright factor." He took his bite of omelet and chewed.

"Is the threat next?" I said, pouring syrup on my pancakes.

He smiled, dabbed at his mouth with a napkin, and shook his head. "Let us save that for last. Now, ask your questions."

"Why do you want this piece of land?"

Richard shifted in his chair, leaning forward. He'd been wondering about that particular question longer than I had.

"There is a relic on that land somewhere. I need to own the land so I can tear it up and search for the relic."

"What relic?" I asked.

He smiled. "The lance that pierced Christ's side."

I stared at him. I stared at him longer. He didn't seem to be kidding. "That is a myth, Niley."

"You don't believe in Christ?"

"Of course I do, but a Roman lance doesn't last for thousands of years. It was lost long ago."

"Do you believe in the Grail?" he asked.

"The Grail is a historical fact. It's been found and lost twice in recorded history. The spear has never been authenticated. It's passed around like the bones of some saint, but it's just bait for the gullible."

"Do I look gullible, Anita?"

"No," I said. "How did it get to the mountains of Tennessee?"

"The spear was given as a private gift to President James Madison."

I frowned at him. "I don't remember that from history class."

"It is listed among the gifts from a certain Mideastern principality. One spear. Roman. Unfortunately, it was one of the items that went missing after the British burned and sacked Washington, D.C., in 1815."

"I remember reading about the burning of the White House during the War of 1812. Valuables went missing. So, say you're right. How did it end up here?" I asked.

"Howard has chased it here through his psychic gifts. The spirits have led us to this place. We hired a diviner, and he traced off the boundaries of our search area. That area lies within Greene's land."

"Search the land," Richard said. "You don't have to buy it to do that. You don't have to disturb the trolls to search for a spear."

"It could be buried anywhere on the land, Richard. I don't think Greene would appreciate us tearing up his property unless we owned it."

"I'm amazed that Greene is still alive," I said.

"We looked into his father's will. Did you know that if the man's son dies, the land becomes an animal preserve? He was enamored of your trolls, Mr. Zeeman, was the late Farmer Greene."

"I didn't know that," Richard said.

"Why should you? John Greene, the man's son, is trying to sell to us. He told us all the provisions of his father's estate. He was complaining about them, but it saved his life. So we must buy the land, and the trolls must be gone for that—unless you will simply stop fighting the sale in court." Niley smiled at Richard. "Would you do that for me, Richard? Would you just let us buy the land? I promise we will disturb your trolls as little as possible."

Richard leaned over to me and whispered, "Are you running your foot up and down my leg?"

I looked at him. "No."

Richard scooted his chair back with a loud scrape. He moved closer to me, one arm going around the back of my chair. "Once you own the land, Niley, you can bulldoze it, and we can't stop you. The only thing we can do is stop your purchase."

"Richard, you disappoint me. After our little tête-à-tête in the bathroom, I thought we were friends."

Richard blushed almost purple from his neck to the roots of his hair. "Why did you kill Betty?"

"Why, to frame the trolls for the death of a person. I thought you would have figured that out by now."

"Why Betty?"

Linus answered in his high, musical voice. "She was a liar, a traitress, and a wanton thing. She opened herself to evil."

Power breathed off of Richard from the arm against my back. An almost visible aura of heat rose around him. It clicked with something deep inside of me. I put a hand on his thigh. He jumped until he realized it was me, then settled back. I thought soothing thoughts at him. But what he was thinking of was Betty, and the thought was strong enough that he made me flash on her body. I had one quick visual of her torn breasts, and he stood so abruptly his chair fell to the floor. His hands were on the table, and he swayed softly. I thought he might faint.

I started to touch him, but was afraid to, afraid he'd see more. Shang-Da came to take his arm.

The voices around us had quieted, hushed. Everyone was looking. "Please, Richard, sit down," I whispered.

Shang-Da helped him sit. We all waited quietly, watching each other until the voices around us rose and everyone went back to eating. Howard whispered, "Your auras converged for a moment. They became one piece and flared. What are you to each other?"

Richard's voice squeezed out, "Betty wasn't perfect, but she didn't deserve to die like that." He leaned his face down toward the table, and I realized he was crying.

I touched his back, tentatively, rubbing it in small circles. "Your plan to blame her death on the trolls is a bust. Now what?"

"It doesn't matter what we're going to do next, Anita. You will be out of town."

"We told Wilkes we were leaving," I said.

Richard took off the sunglasses and wiped at his eyes with his palms.

"Look at me, please, Richard," Niley said.

Maybe it was the please; for just an instant, Richard looked across the table. For an instant, Niley saw his eyes. "Such pretty brown eyes. You are a lucky woman, Anita."

Richard started to push to his feet. I laid a hand on his arm. His muscles were hard and so tense they thrummed with, I think, a desire to jump across the table and hurt Niley.

"I want to make sure that you are gone. Lately, the spirits have told Howard of a beast that will aid the lady. I think I am looking at the beast."

"How did you find out?" I asked.

Richard slid the glasses back in place and slid his chair back into the table. His shoulders were hunched so hard, the T-shirt was straining at the seams.

"The local vampires don't like you much," Niley said. "I approached them, trying to gather information about the spear. Some of them have been in this area for long enough to have witnessed the event. Sadly, they had not, but they told me interesting things about you and Richard and the Master of the City in Saint Louis. They said you were a ménage à trois, though Richard seems reluctant to admit an interest in men."

"Don't believe everything that you're told, Niley, especially from people who don't like us. Your enemies always make up better rumors than your friends."

Niley pouted. "Oh, dear. Then my advances have been very unwanted indeed." He laughed. The smile faded. "I think it is time for the threat."

"Knock yourself out," I said.

"I think a tranquillizer dart from a distance for Richard. When he wakes, he will be bound by silver chains and on his stomach, naked. I will rape him, and I will enjoy it. Then I will let Linus slit his throat, and Linus will enjoy that." He turned cold eyes to me. "You, Anita, I will give to Linus for his master."

Linus turned to me. He looked the same, but the skin on my back tried to detach itself and crawl away and hide. Every hair on my arm stood up in nervous rows. Evil whispered through that bright diner.

Howard gasped, hugging himself.

I stared at Linus and didn't try to hide it. I was scared of him and what lay inside him.

Niley laughed, deep and pleasant. "I think we understand each other at last, Anita."

Richard turned and looked at Linus. The hair on his arms was standing at attention, too. He spoke, looking directly at the sorcerer. "How you are fallen from Heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!"

At the first line, that awful power receded, the skin creeping a little less. Linus's face was no longer pleasant.

Richard said, "How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to Heaven; Above the stars of God I will set my throne on high.' Isaiah." With the last line, the scent of evil retreated. It lingered like perfume in an empty room, but it was closed down for now.

"Impressive, Richard," Niley said. "So you are a true believer."

Richard rose slowly from his chair. He put a hand flat on the table and leaned across it. I felt the prickling rush of energy like a hot thread pulled across my skin. He lowered his sunglasses just enough for Niley to see his eyes, and I knew what he was doing. I knew that Niley was watching those brown eyes change to wolf amber.

Richard spoke low and carefully. " 'And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.' " He slid his glasses back over his eyes, stood, and stepped away from the table. He held his hand out for me. I took it. I let him lead me out of the restaurant. Shang-Da followed at our backs.

I risked a glance back. I didn't turn to a pillar of salt, but I saw Niley's face. And I knew, knew without doubt, that he would see us dead.

Chapter 36

I didn't even ask Richard if we were leaving town for real. I knew the answer, and frankly, I was with him. On the off chance that Niley was right and the spear was here, we couldn't let him have it. But it was more than that. Richard had drawn a line in the sand; good versus evil. Good can't tuck tail and run. It's against the rules.

It took about three hours for us to pack and pretend to leave town. We put Jamil in the back of the van with a coffin on either side of him to keep the stretcher from sliding around. Nathaniel had managed to get his lower back sliced up defending my honor. Though he admitted that he hadn't been fighting so much as getting in the way of an eager werewolf. However it happened, he got to ride in the back with the injured, probably stretching on top of a coffin, for all I knew. Cherry rode in back with them—I think to act as a peace officer. Jamil didn't seem to like Nathaniel much. I drove the van. Richard followed in his four-by-four with Shang-Da, and all the equipment he'd brought for an entire summer of camping and studying large primates. Everybody else rode with me.

Sheriff Wilkes sent Maiden and Thompson to escort us out of town in a black and white, or in this case, a blue and white, but the effect was the same. Thompson waved merrily as we drove past them out of the city limits. It would

have been childish to give him the finger, so I didn't do it. Zane did it for me. Jason blew them a kiss.

We drove for over an hour to a prearranged rendezvous with Verne. We couldn't all stay at one house. Too many new people might raise suspicions, so we divided up. I didn't like it, but I had to agree that all together we made too good a show.

I ended up driving to Marianne's house. I rode in the back of her truck with Zane, Cherry, and the coffins. Nathaniel got to ride in the truck cab because of his claw wound. Zane's gunshot wound seemed to be healing a lot faster than the claw marks. I wasn't sure if it was because Nathaniel was a slow healer or if bullet wounds just healed faster than claws.

The open bed of the truck was a very rough ride. I wedged myself in the corner near the cab, with Damian's coffin pressed against my ribs. If I pressed my head back against the truck to brace my neck, my teeth rattled. If I sat up more, my neck snapped with every pothole. It was like an endless beating, until my bones thrummed with it and I had a headache the size of Idaho in the middle of my forehead. The sun was like a smear of yellow fire in the sky. It beat down unblinking, unrelenting, until sweat ran down my face and arms.

Zane was in the corner opposite me, shoved against Asher's coffin. His black T-shirt had molded to him like a sweaty second skin. Cherry had chosen a white T-shirt today. The reddish dust of the road clung to the white material and mingled with the sweat until it was like dried blood.

My hair had turned into a mass of sweaty ringlets. Not those cute Shirley Temple ringlets. Nothing that neat, just a curled mess. Zane and Cherry's hair just lay slick and flat against their heads.

The three of us made no effort to talk. We settled into the heat and bone-jarring ride like it was a kind of coma, something to be endured rather than shared.

The road spilled onto a paved road, and the sudden smoothness was almost startling. I could hear again.

"Thank God," Cherry said.

Marianne yelled back to us, "Car coming, hide."

We all wiggled under the top layer of the tarp covering the coffins. There was a second tarp and ropes underneath me. The tarp smelled musty and dry. It was a toss-up whether it was cooler because of the shade or hotter because of the lack of air. I thought I heard a car go by in a spill of gravel, but Marianne didn't tell us to get up, so I didn't. I could see Zane through the hot dimness. We looked at each other with dull eyes; then I smiled. He smiled. It all started to be funny. You just reach a level of discomfort where you either scream or laugh.

The truck lurched to a rattling stop. In the sudden silence I could hear Zane laughing. Cherry's voice came clearly, "What in hell is so funny?"

"We're home, boys and girls," Marianne said. "You can come out now."

Zane and I crawled out into the open air, still giggling. Cherry frowned at both of us. "What is so funny?"

We both shook our heads. You either got the joke, or you didn't. It could not be explained, not even to ourselves.

Marianne came to stand near me. "I'm glad to see you're in a better mood."

I ran my hands through my hair and could almost squeeze the sweat out of it. "Might as well be in a good mood. The day's not going to improve."

Marianne frowned. "Pessimism is unbecoming in one so young."

She stood there, looking cool and collected, wearing a sleeveless white shirt tied off at the waist. It wasn't a midriff but gave the illusion of one. A pair of pale blue shorts and flat, white tennis shoes completed the outfit. Her pale hair was in a bun. The hair was all streaks: silvery grey, pale blond, and white. Fine lines showed at her eyes and mouth that hadn't been visible last night. Over fifty, but like Verne, her body was still thin and firm. She looked cool, comfortable, and far too clean.

"I need a shower," I said.

"I second the motion," Cherry said.

Zane just nodded.

"Welcome to my home," Marianne said.

The truck was parked in a gravel driveway of a two story white house. The house had yellow shutters and a pink climbing rose up one side of the front porch. There were two tubs of white and pink geraniums at the bottom of the wide porch steps. The flowers were lush and well watered. The yard was brown and dying in the summer heat. Actually, I approved. I didn't believe in watering grass. A small flock of speckled hens pecked in the dry dirt of the yard.

"Nice," I said.

She smiled. "Thank you. The barn is over that way, hidden by the trees. I've got some dairy cows and horses. The garden's behind the house. You'll be able to see it from your bedroom."

"Great, thanks."

She smiled. "Why do I think you don't care about my tomato crop?"

"Let me take a shower, and I'll care," I said.

"We can unload the coffins, then your two wereleopards can take a bath. I hope there's enough hot water for three baths. If two of you could double up, it would conserve water."

"I'm not sharing," I said. I looked at Cherry.

She shrugged, "Zane and I can share."

It must have shown on my face, because she added, "We aren't lovers, Anita. Though we have been. It will be . . . a comfort to touch each other. It's not sexual. It's . . ." She looked at Marianne, as if for help.

Marianne smiled. "One of the things that binds a pack or a pard into a unit is touch. They touch each other constantly. They groom each other. They care for each other."

I shook my head. "I'm not sharing a bathtub."

"No one is asking you to," Marianne said. "There are many ways to forge a pack bond, Anita."

"I'm not part of the pack," I said.

"There are many ways to be part of the pack, Anita. I have found my place among them, and I am not lukoi." She left Zane, Cherry, and me to unload the

coffins while she took Nathaniel off to lie down. Cherry and Zane helped stow the coffins in the basement, then went off to take their communal bath.

The entrance to the basement was outside, like an old-fashioned storm cellar. The back door was all screen and wood. It clanged loudly as the wereleopards went inside. Marianne met me at that door, stepped through that door, and blocked my way.

She was smiling and calm and seemed at peace in the center of her universe. Just seeing that content look on her face made me itchy and uncomfortable. Made me want to scream and lash out until her universe was as messy as my own. How dare she be content when I was so confused?

"What is so very wrong, child? I can hear your confusion like bees buzzing in the walls."

There was a stand of pine trees near the back of the house like a line of soldiers. The air smelled like a perpetual Christmas. I usually like the smell of pine, but not today. I just wasn't in a Christmas mood. I leaned against the weathered boards of the house, while she stayed on the small back porch looking down at me.

The Firestar dug into my back. I pulled it out and shoved it down the front of my jeans. Fuck it if somebody saw.

"You saw Verne," I said.

She looked at me, grey eyes calm, unreadable. "I saw what you did to his neck, if that is what you mean."

"Yeah, that's what I mean."

"Your mark on his neck proves two things to all of us. That you consider yourself his equal—no small boast—and that you are not happy with his hospitality to date. Are either of these untrue?"

I thought about that for a moment, then said, "I don't acknowledge anyone as dominant to me. Maybe they can beat the shit out of me or kill me, but they're not better than I am. Stronger doesn't mean better or more dominant."

"There are those who would argue with you, Anita, but I am not one of them."

"And no, I'm not happy with the hospitality to date. I destroyed most of Colin's vampires for you guys. Verne was pleased as punch, but he still didn't let me have my guns last night. If I'd had my guns last night, then the bad guys wouldn't have nearly killed Jamil and Jason and Zane—hell—and me."

"Verne regretted last night or he would not have offered himself to you."

"Great, fine, but I didn't mean to mark him. I didn't mean to do it. Do you understand, Marianne? I didn't do it on purpose. Just like last night with the munin, this morning I wasn't in control. I was seduced by the scent of blood and warm flesh. It was . . . creepy."

She laughed. "Creepy? Is that the best word you can come up with, Anita? Creepy. You are the Executioner and a force to be feared, but you are still so . . . young."

I looked up at her. "You mean naive."

"You are not naive in the sense that it is usually meant. I am sure you have seen more blood and death than I have. It stains your power, this violence. You

both attract it and pursue it. But there is something about you that stays fresh and somehow perpetually childlike. No matter how jaded you grow, there will always be a part of you that would be more comfortable saying 'golly' than 'goddamn.' "

I wanted to wiggle under the intensity of her gaze, or run. "I am losing control of my life, Marianne, and control is very important to me."

"I would say that control is one of *the* most important things to you."

I nodded, my hair catching on the peeling paint of the house. I pushed away from the boards to stand in front of her in the dusty yard. "How can I get back control, Marianne? You seem to have all the answers."

She laughed again, that wholesome-bedroom sound. "Not all the answers, but the answers you seek, perhaps. I know that the munin will come for you again. It may be when you least expect it or when you need your precious control the most. It may overwhelm you and cost the lives of people you hold dear as it could have last night. All that saved Richard from having to kill to get to you was Verne's intercession."

"Raina would love that, to drag one of us down to the grave."

"I felt the munin's pleasure in destruction. You are attracted to violence, but only as it serves a greater purpose. It is a tool that you use well. Your old lupa was attracted to violence for its own sake, as a destructive thing. Destroying was what she was about. It is nicely ironic that someone so dedicated to negativity was also a healer."

"Life is just full of little ironies," I said. I didn't try to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"You have a chance to make her munin, her essence, into something positive. In a way, you might help her spirit work through some of its karma."

I frowned at her.

She waved her hands. "My apologies. I'll keep the philosophy to a minimum. I believe I can help you call and tame the munin. I believe that together we can begin to harness all the different kinds of power you are being offered now. I can teach you to ride not just the munin but this master vampire of yours, and even your Ulfric. You are their key to each other, Anita. Their bridge. Their feelings for you are part of the binding that has been wrought between the three. I can make you the rider and not the horse."

There was a fierceness in her face, a force that made my skin react. She meant what she said; she believed it. And strangely, so did I.

"I want to control it, Marianne, all of it. I want that more than almost anything right now. If I can't stop it, I want to control it."

She smiled, and it made her eyes sparkle. "Good; then let's begin with our first lesson."

I frowned at her. "What lesson?"

"Come into the house, Anita. The first lesson is waiting for you if your heart and mind are open to it." She went back inside without waiting for me.

I stood there for a moment in the summer heat. If my heart and mind were open to it. What the hell did that mean? Well, as the cliché goes, only one way

to find out. I opened the screen door and walked inside. Lesson number one was waiting for me.

Chapter 37

Marianne led me to the room where she'd settled Nathaniel. It was a large bedroom downstairs. Hours earlier, the room would have been filled with morning light, but now, at nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, the room was dim, almost dark. The window was open, and a breeze had finally found us, spilling the white lacy curtains into the room. A small oscillating fan sat on a kitchen chair so the fan could cool the bed. The wallpaper was off-white with a fine line of pink flowers. There was a large brown water stain in the corner of the ceiling like a giant Rorschach ink blot.

The bed was a brass four-poster that had been painted white. The bedspread was quilted and looked homemade with a lot of purple- and pink-flowered fabric. Marianne had folded the bedspread and placed it on top of a large cedar chest that was under the window. "Too hot for quilts," she'd said.

Nathaniel lay naked on the pink sheets. Marianne tucked the sheets to the tops of his thighs, patting his shoulder in a motherly sort of way. I would have protested his state of undress, but I could see the wounds clearly for the first time.

Something with claws had swiped him wide and deep, starting about the middle of his back and slashing downward across the right side of his buttocks. The wound was deep and ragged on his back, growing more shallow as it worked down his body. It must have hurt to have clothes over it, hurt a lot.

I was surprised that Nathaniel hadn't flashed me his wounds earlier. He usually went to great lengths to show me his body. What had changed?

Marianne pointed to the phone beside the bed. "In case your police friend calls you. I've got a cordless phone for normal calls, but I use the bedside phone for pack business."

"So no one can accidentally monitor the cordless phone," I said.

Marianne nodded. She walked to the vanity, which had a heavy oval mirror and marble knobs on the drawers. "When I was a little girl and I was hurt or lonely, especially when it was so hot, my mother would unbraid my hair and brush it. She'd brush it until it lay like silk down my back." She turned with a brush in her hands. "Even now, when I am low, one of my greatest pleasures is for some friend to brush my hair."

I looked at her. "Are you suggesting I brush your hair?"

She smiled, and it was bright and charming, and I didn't trust it. "No, I am suggesting you brush Nathaniel's hair."

I kept staring at her. "Come again?"

She walked towards me, offering me the brush, that too-cheery smile on her face. "Part of what makes you vulnerable to Raina is your own squeamishness."

"I'm not squeamish."

"Prudishness, then," she said.

I frowned at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that every time one of the lycanthropes disrobes, you get embarrassed. Every time one of them touches you, you take it sexually. That isn't always what they mean. A healthy pack or pard is built up of a thousand gentle touches. A million small comforts. It's like building a relationship with a boyfriend. Every touch builds and strengthens it."

My frown deepened. "I thought you said it wasn't sexual."

It was her turn to frown. "A different metaphor then. It is like building your relationship with a newborn baby. Every touch, every time you feed him when he's hungry, change him when he's wet, comfort him when he's frightened—the everyday intimacies forge a bond between you. True parenthood is built over years of interdependency. The bond between the pack is built much the same way."

I glanced back at the bed. Nathaniel was still lying there naked except for the sheets on his legs. I turned back to Marianne. "If he was a newborn baby, I'd be fine with him being naked. I might be afraid I'd drop him, but I wouldn't be embarrassed."

"And that is precisely my point," she said. She held the brush out to me. "If you could control the munin, you could heal his wounds. You could take his pain."

"You're not suggesting that I purposely try to call Raina?"

"No, Anita. This is the first lesson, not the graduation exercise. Today, I simply want you to begin to try and be more comfortable around their nudity. I believe that if you can desensitize yourself to the more casual sexual situations, that Raina will have less hold on you. You draw away from situations like this, and that leaves a void, a place where you will not go willingly. So Raina spills into that void and forces you to go much farther than you would have gone on your own."

"And what good will brushing Nathaniel's hair do?"

She held the brush inches from me, arms folded. "It is a small thing, Anita. A thing to give him comfort while we wait for Dr. Patrick to come. Patrick will give him a local for the pain, but sometime before he is finished stitching him up, the painkiller will wear off. Their metabolism is too fast for a local, and giving more than that can be tricky. It can be deadly in one with such a low aura of power as Nathaniel."

I stared up at her, meeting those calm, serious grey eyes. "You're saying that he'll be stitched up without a painkiller."

She just looked at me.

"And that's my fault because I could heal him if I could control the munin."

Marianne shook her head. "It is not your fault, Anita, not yet. But the munin is a tool like your guns or your necromancy. Once you learn how to control it, it can do wonderful things. You must look at the ability to call the munin not as a curse but as a gift."

I shook my head. "I think you've exceeded the lesson for the day, Marianne."

She smiled. "Perhaps. But take the brush, do this one small thing. Not for me. Not for Nathaniel, but for yourself. Take back that piece of you that looks away from his body. Give Raina less ground in your heart."

"And if I can't help being embarrassed or thinking sexual thoughts and Raina comes up and tries to eat me, what then?"

Marianne's smile widened. "Then I will help you, child. We will all help you. That is what a pack is for."

"Nathaniel isn't lukoi any more than I am," I said.

"Lukoi or pard, it makes no difference to you, Anita. You are queen of both castles. Growing comfortable with one will help with the other."

She actually took my hand and pried it out from under my elbow. She put the hairbrush in my hand and closed my fingers over it. "Be with him, child. Wait for your phone call. Answer only the bedside phone. Only pack will call that number. You can't possibly answer my other phone because you are in another state. Do not answer the door, either."

"You sound like you're going somewhere," I said.

"You must learn to be comfortable around your people, Anita. That means without me looking over your shoulder."

She pulled me towards the bed by the arm. She tried to make me sit on the bed, but I just didn't bend with it. Short of pushing me onto the bed, she had to leave me standing.

She tsked at me. "Stand here and do nothing. It is your choice, child, but at least stand here." She left.

I was left standing in the middle of the room where I'd followed her, like a child not wanting to be left alone on the first day of school. The brush was still in my hand. The brush looked as antique as the rest of the room. It was wooden but painted white with a shine of varnish. The varnish had a webbing of cracks but held. I ran the pale bristles over the back of my other hand. They were as soft as they looked, silken like a baby's brush. I had no idea what the bristles were made out of.

I glanced back at Nathaniel. He was watching me out of those eyes of his. His face was neutral as if it didn't matter, but his eyes weren't neutral. They were tight, waiting for the rejection, waiting for me to leave him alone in the strange room, naked and waiting for a doctor to come and stitch him up. He was nineteen, and lying there with that raw look in his eyes, he looked it. Hell, he looked younger. The body was great. When you're a stripper, you've got to take care of yourself. But the face . . . the face was young and in the same gaze old. Nathaniel still had the most jaded eyes of anyone I'd ever met under the age of twenty. No, not jaded, lost.

I walked around to the far side of the bed. I laid the hairbrush on the pillow on the empty side of the bed.

Nathaniel moved just his head, turning to look at me. No, to watch me. He watched me like every movement was important. It was a level of scrutiny that made me want to squirm or blush or run. It wasn't exactly sexual, but it wasn't exactly not sexual, either.

No matter what metaphores Marianne used, this was not the same thing as caring for an infant. Nathaniel was young, but he was definitely not a child. At least not childlike in the way that would have made this comfortable.

I slipped off the short-sleeved shirt. There was no one to see the shoulder holster, and it would be cooler. Of course, it would really be cooler if I took off all the guns and the spine sheath, but I wasn't that hot. I did lay the Firestar under the pillow. It had a short enough barrel to sit or lie down with it, but there is no such thing as a truly comfortable gun to wear if you're lounging around. Guns aren't designed for comfort. It's one of the few things that are worn, mostly by men, that are as uncomfortable as a pair of high heels.

I crawled onto the bed, kneeling, still not within touching distance. He was so easily hurt that I had to say it out loud. "I'm not upset with you, Nathaniel. I just don't like playing student."

"You like Marianne, but you resent her," he said.

That made me blink a couple of times and stare at him. He was right, and it was more perceptive than I'd ever expected from Nathaniel. Hearing him say something that smart made me feel better. If there was a brain in that body, then he wasn't just a submissive mess. And maybe, just maybe, he was salvageable, saveable. It was the most positive thought I'd had all day.

I crawled to Nathaniel's side, brush in hand. I stared down at him stretched across the bed, eyes watching me. The look in his eyes stopped me. It was too intense.

Maybe he sensed it, because he turned his head back so that I couldn't see his face. All I could see was all that long, auburn hair. Even in the dim light, it was an incredibly rich color. The darkest auburn I'd ever seen that was still truly auburn and not brown.

I smoothed my hand through his hair. It was like heavy silk, warm to the touch. Of course, that could have just been the room. The fan swept over the bed, ruffling the sheets, passing like a cool hand over my back. Nathaniel's long hair stirred in the fan's caress, the sheet over his thighs blowing like a hand had moved them. He shifted as the fan passed over his bare body. Then stillness. His hair, the sheet, everything utterly still while the fan made its circuit. It swept back, spilling over everything in reverse; the pink sheets, Nathaniel's hair, my chest this time, blowing my own hair back from my face, then past us, and the heat wrapped around us like a suffocating hand.

The breeze from the window had died. The white curtains lay like a painting until the small fan spilled over them. I knelt in the hot room with the only sound the whir of the fan and the small tick it made every time it came to the end of its cycle.

I stroked the hairbrush through his hair, and the stroke ended long before I got to the end of the hair. I'd had hair down to my butt once upon a time when I was about fourteen. But Nathaniel's hair was knee length. If he'd been a woman, I'd have said his hair fell like a dress around him. The hair lay in a soft, silken pile beside his body so it wouldn't brush the wound. I lifted the hair in my arms, and it was like holding something alive. The hair poured through my hands with a sound like dry water, a rushing noise.

I had enough trouble taking care of shoulder-length hair. I couldn't imagine the amount of effort that just washing it must take. I was either going to have to divide the hair to either side and actually get up and move from side to side, or sweep the hair back behind his head so it spilled across the bed. I voted for that.

I pulled his hair behind his back and spilled it behind his head. He moved his head as if snuggling into the pillow, but other than that made no movement and said nothing.

"How you doing?" I asked.

"I'm fine," he said. His voice was soft, neutral, almost empty.

"Talk to me, Nathaniel," I said.

"You don't like it when I talk to you."

I leaned over him, smoothing the hair back so I had a clear view of his face. "That's not true."

He turned his face enough to look up at me. "Isn't it?"

I leaned back from that direct gaze. "It's not you talking I mind, Nathaniel. It's your choice of topics."

"Tell me what you want me to say, and I'll say it."

"I can tell you what not to say," I said.

"What?" he asked.

"Don't talk about pornographic movies, sadomasochism, sex in general." I thought about it for a second or two. "That hits the usual things you say to piss me off."

He laughed. "I don't know what else to talk about."

I started combing his hair across the bed. The stroke was firm and flowing, then I actually had to pick the hair up to finish the stroke. The fan hit me with an armful of hair, and the hair spilled around my face in a vanilla-scented cloud that tickled my face and neck.

"Talk about anything, Nathaniel. Talk about yourself."

"I don't like to talk about myself."

"Why not?" I asked.

He raised up enough to look at me. "You talk about yourself."

"Okay." Then I didn't know what to say. I just suddenly couldn't think of where to start. I smiled. "Good point, forget I said it."

The phone rang, and I gave a little yip. Nervous? Who me? It was Dolph. "Anita?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Franklin Niley, unless it's a different guy with the same name, is an art dealer. He specializes in mystical artifacts. He's not picky about how he gets them, either."

"How not picky?" I asked.

"He's based out of Miami. The cops there would like to tie him to at least half a dozen homicides but don't have enough proof. Every town he visits on business, people disappear or turn up dead. Chicago P.D. nearly got him on the death of a wiccan high priestess last year, but the witness went into a mysterious coma and hasn't come out yet."

"Mysterious coma?" I made it a question.

"The doctors think it was magic of some kind, but you know how hard that is to prove."

"What do you have on his associates?"

"One hasn't been with him long, a psychic named Howard Grant, young, no criminal record. There's a black bodyguard, Milo Hart. He's got a second-degree black belt in karate and has been in the pen once for attempted murder. He's been beating people up for Niley since he got out of prison five years ago. The third is Linus Beck. He's been in twice. Once for assault with a deadly, second time for murder."

"Lovely," I said.

"It gets better," Dolph said.

"Better?" I asked. "How much better can it get?"

"Beck's murder conviction was a human sacrifice."

I let that sink in for a second or two. "How was the victim killed?"

"Knife wound," Dolph said.

I told him about the body I'd just finished seeing.

"Direct attack by demons went out with the middle ages, Anita."

"They wanted to make it look like a troll attack."

"You've talked to them," he said.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"They wanted to threaten me," I said.

I heard papers rustling on the other end. "Why did they want to threaten you?"

I told Dolph almost everything. I also told him I couldn't prove a damn thing.

"I talked to a cop in Miami. He said that Niley admitted two murders to him, told him details, but not under Miranda and not useable in court. He likes to taunt."

"He thinks he's untouchable," I said.

"But the spirits say you're going to kill him."

"So his pet psychic says."

"When I put out the name and asked for info, police all over the country and out of it are willing to give me anything they got, if we can just nail this guy," Dolph said.

"A bad guy's, bad guy," I said.

"He's not above doing his own killing, Anita. At least two of the dead men down in Miami, they think were Frank's personal kills. You watch your ass like a son of a bitch. If you have anything that even looks like proof of a crime, call me."

"You don't have any jurisdiction here," I said.

"Trust me on this, Anita. You come up with some proof, and I can get you somebody down there with jurisdiction, ready and willing to put this guy away."

"He on the blue hit parade?"

"He's made a career out of breaking the law and has never seen the inside of a jail cell for more than twenty-four hours. A lot of people in a lot of states would like to see him gone."

"I'll see what I can do," I said.

"I don't mean dead, Anita. I mean arrested."

"I knew what you meant, Dolph."

He was quiet for a second. "I know you knew what I meant, but I thought I should say it, anyway. Don't kill anyone."

"Would I do something so illegal?"

"Don't start, Anita."

"Sorry. Thanks for all the info. It's more than I'd hoped for. After meeting him, I'm not exactly surprised by any of it. He is a very creepy guy."

"Creepy—Anita, he's a hell of a lot more than creepy."

"You sound worried, Dolph."

"You're down there without a safety net, Anita. The cops are not your friends."

"That's an understatement," I said. "But the state cops are down here on the murder now."

"I can't come down there," Dolph said.

"I would never ask you to."

He was quiet so long that I said, "Dolph, you still there?"

"I'm here." He didn't sound happy. "You know how I told you not to kill anyone?"

"Yeah," I said.

"I'll deny this in court, but don't hesitate, Anita. If it comes down to him or you, make the right choice."

My mouth was hanging open. "Dolph, are you telling me to murder him if I get the chance?"

Dolph was quiet again. Finally, he said, "No, not murder, but I am saying don't let him get the drop on you. You do not want to be at this man's mercy, Anita. Some of the bodies they've found have been tortured. He's real creative about it."

"What's in that file that you haven't told me about, Dolph?"

"They found one man's head floating in his pool. There were no marks of a weapon, like the head had been pulled off. They never found the body. It all reads like that, Anita. Not just violent but weird shit."

"You going to post bail if I nail him and get caught?"

"You get caught, we never had this conversation."

"Mum's the word," I said.

"Watch your back, Anita. Niley doesn't have any limits. That's what all this paperwork means. He's a total fucking sociopath, Anita, and Beck and Hart are the same thing."

"I'll be careful, Dolph. I promise."

"Don't be careful, be ruthless. I don't want to be identifying what's left of your body after he gets through with it."

"You trying to scare me, Dolph?"

"Yeah," he said, then he hung up.

I hung the phone up and sat on the bed in the hot, hot room, and I was afraid. I was suddenly more afraid than I had been since we got here. Dolph didn't spook easily. I'd never heard him like that, not about anything or anybody.

Nathaniel touched my leg. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head. I couldn't shake the bad feeling. Dolph, Mr. Law and Order, had encouraged me to kill someone. Unprecedented. The police were telling me to break the law. Too weird. But underneath the wonderment of it was the fear, a fine, trembling sense of unease. Demons. I didn't like demons. They didn't give a shit about silver bullets or much of anything else. Richard felt strong in his faith. I envied him that. *I* was having a crisis of faith right now. I mean, I was sleeping with the undead and had cheated on one lover with another. I also had a few more kills to my credit than the last time I'd been touched by the demonic. I wasn't feeling particularly pure and holy right now. You needed that against demons. You needed surety.

Nathaniel laid his head on my thigh. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I stared down at the naked man with his head in my lap. No, if I ran up against a demon now, my house was made of glass, and nothing throws stones like the demonic. They know just where to hit so that the whole damn thing comes crashing down around your ears. I was really not in the mood to find out how far from grace I'd actually fallen.

Chapter 38

Cherry came into the room. She'd slipped into a pair of jean shorts, and a white midriff tank top. Her small breasts were pressed against the thin material. I was a little too well-endowed to ever dream of going without a bra, but small or not, in that top she needed a bra. I was a prude.

Her short yellow hair was still damp. She stalked into the room on those long legs, managing to look both slutty casual and unnaturally graceful.

Just watching her walk into the room made me want to move Nathaniel's head out of my lap. Force of will alone kept me from scooting away from him. We weren't doing anything wrong. But it bothered me.

"Your turn," Cherry said. "I'll wait with Nathaniel."

"Is Zane out yet?"

I caught movement in the hall, and it was Zane. He was wearing jean shorts, too, and nothing else. The ever-present nipple ring was the only thing on his pale, thin chest.

"Don't you ever take that thing out of your chest?" I asked.

He smiled. "If I take the ring out, the hole will close up and I'll have to get it pierced all over again. I might get the other nipple pierced, but I don't want to have to redo the first one."

"I thought you liked pain," I said.

He shrugged. "In some situations with naked women, yeah." He touched the ring, pulling on it until the nipple stretched just a little. "The actual piercing hurt like a son of a bitch."

I looked at the slender, too-thin chest, especially the part right next to his right arm. There was a dark area where the shoulder attached to the chest, but that was all.

"Is that all that's left of the bullet wound?" I asked.

Zane nodded and sat down at the foot of the bed, crawling onto the covers so he was beside Nathaniel and far too close to me. "You can touch the wound if you want."

I frowned. "No, thanks." I started to back off the bed on all fours, spilling Nathaniel's head gently to the covers. I stopped myself. Marianne said that Raina fed on my embarrassment, my prudishness, that if I could be more comfortable around small stuff, Raina would lose some of her power over me. Was it true?

I wasn't attracted to Zane. That moment last night had been pure Raina. She seemed to have been attracted to anything that had a pulse and some things that didn't. I gritted my teeth and reached out towards Zane.

He went very still, face suddenly serious, as if he had some clue how much it cost me to reach out to him. I ran my fingertips over the wound. The skin was smooth, shiny like a scar but softer and more pliable. I found myself running my hand over the wound, exploring it. It felt strangely plastic, and at the same time soft, like baby's skin.

"This feels . . . cool."

Zane grinned. It reminded me of Jason and that one thought relaxed a tension in my shoulders that I hadn't even known was there.

Cherry came up behind him to slide her hands over his shoulders, massaging them. "I never get over being amazed at how we heal."

I wanted to take my hand back, just because Cherry had touched him, too. I forced myself to keep my hand on the wound, but I'd stopped exploring it, just touching it was all I could manage.

"The muscles can get tight when it's healing," Cherry said. "You get spasms around it, like the body heals too fast for the muscles to keep up."

I took my hand away slowly. I sat on the bed watching Cherry massage Zane's shoulders. Nathaniel nuzzled my leg, rolling his eyes up to me. I didn't move away from him, and he seemed to take that as permission to roll his head onto my thigh. He nestled against me with a contented sigh.

Zane rolled onto his back on the other side of me, not touching me, but watching me. His eyes were very careful.

Cherry stayed kneeling on the foot of the bed, watching my face. They all watched me like I was the center of their world. I'd seen dogs in obedience trials watch their owners that way. In dogs it was a good thing. In people it was unnerving. I didn't have a dog because I didn't feel responsible enough to take care of one. Now I suddenly had three wereleopards, and I knew I wasn't responsible enough for them.

I laid my hand on Nathaniel's warm hair. Zane stretched his full six-foot frame, fingers and toes straining, spine bowing like a big cat.

I laughed. "What am I supposed to do, rub your tummy?"

Everyone laughed, even Nathaniel. I realized with a shock that it was the first time I'd ever heard him laugh. The laughter was young, high-schoolish. Lying naked in my lap with claw marks on his butt, and he was laughing, a full-throated, happy sound.

I was happy to hear it, and nervous. They were trying to make me their home. Because that was what an Ulfric was supposed to be, and a Nimir-ra, or Nimir-raj, for a guy, was the equivalent. Strangely, there didn't seem to be a werewolf equivalent of a queen wolf. Sexism? Or some arcane shit I didn't understand yet? I'd ask Richard later.

"I've got to go take my bath, guys."

"We could help," Zane said. He licked my arm, grimaced. "I like the taste of sweat, but the gravel dust . . ."

Nathaniel raised his face enough to lick my other arm. His tongue ran down my arm in a long slow glide. "I don't mind the dust," he said, voice low and soft.

I slid off the bed, calmly, slowly. I did not go yuck, or scream. I was very calm and very relieved to be standing on the floor. The bed had suddenly become crowded. "Thanks, but the bath will be fine. Don't answer any phone but the one by the bed, and don't open the door to anyone but Dr. Patrick."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Zane said.

I slid the Firestar down the front of my jeans and picked up my suitcase from against the wall. I glanced back at the three of them from the doorway. Zane had lain down on the other side of Nathaniel, only propped on his elbow, one hand touching Nathaniel's back. Cherry had curled at the foot of the bed. She was running her hand up and down his thigh. Either the sheet had slid off or she'd moved it so she could touch him. There was nothing sexual on their faces, nothing overt.

They looked like the opening scene for a porno movie to me, but I was sure that when I left the room, nothing would happen. There was no anticipation between them, no eagerness to have me gone so they could be

alone. Their eyes still followed me. They touched each other for comfort, not for sex. The discomfort was mine, not theirs.

"I'm sorry I went with Mira," Nathaniel said suddenly.

That stopped me in the doorway. "You're a big boy, Nathaniel. You had every right to find someone. It was just your choice of partners that was bad."

Zane began to rub his hand up and down Nathaniel's back, like you'd pet a dog. Nathaniel lowered his head so his hair slid around him like a veil, hiding his face. "I thought you were going to be my mistress, my top. I thought for a long time that you understood the game. That you were telling me not to have sex with anyone. I was so good. I didn't even touch myself."

I opened my mouth, closed it, opened it, and didn't have a damn thing to say.

"When you finally gave me permission to have sex with you, it could have been straight vanilla. It was the waiting, the build-up, the teasing that would have made it enough."

I found my voice. "I don't know what vanilla means, Nathaniel."

"Straight sex," Zane said, "normal stuff."

I shook my head. "Whatever, I am not playing with you, Nathaniel. I would never do that."

He looked at me sort of sideways as if afraid to look me full in the face. "I know that now. It was this trip that I realized you didn't even know we were playing a game. You aren't teasing me. You don't think about me at all."

That last sounded sort of pitiful, but I couldn't help that. "I keep having to apologize to you, Nathaniel. Half the time I don't even know what I'm apologizing for."

"I don't understand how you can be my Nimir-ra and not be my top, but I know now that you see it as two separate things. Gabriel didn't."

"What is a top?" I asked.

Zane answered for him again. "A dominant to Nathaniel's submissive. A submissive is called a bottom."

Ah. "I am not Gabriel," I said.

Nathaniel laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "Would you get mad if I said sometimes I wish you were?"

I just blinked at him. "I'm not mad, Nathaniel, you just puzzle the hell out of me. I know I'm supposed to be taking care of you, but I don't know how to do it." He was like some exotic pet that I'd been given as a gift, but the instructions didn't come in the box.

He lay back down on the pillow, head turned so he could see me. "I went with Mira when I realized you weren't there for me."

"I am there for you, Nathaniel, but not in that way."

"Is this where you tell me we can still be friends?" He laughed, and it was harsh.

"You don't need a friend, Nathaniel, you need a keeper."

"I thought you were going to be my keeper."

I looked at Cherry and Zane. "How about you guys?"

"Nathaniel is the most . . ." Cherry hesitated, "the most broken of us. Gabriel and Raina made sure we were all bottoms; it was all we were trained for. They were the tops, always, but . . . but Nathaniel . . ." She finally shrugged.

I knew what she meant. Nathaniel was the weakest of them. The one who needed the most care.

I set the suitcase down and went to kneel by the bed. I brushed his hair from his face so I could see his eyes. "We'll all be there for you, Nathaniel. We are your pard. Your people. We'll take care of you. I'll take care of you."

Tears filled his eyes. "But you won't fuck me."

I took a deep breath and stood. "No, Nathaniel, I won't fuck you." I shook my head and picked up my suitcase. I'd had all I could take for one afternoon. If Marianne wasn't happy with this little lesson, then screw her. Maybe it wasn't supposed to be sexual, but thanks to the way Gabriel and Raina had treated the wereleopards, sex did keep coming up. I was almost afraid to hear what Marianne's solution to that one would be.

Chapter 39

I ran out of hot water before I filled the tub, and I didn't care. The small white-tiled room was hot enough that a truly hot bath seemed a bad idea. The single window was set high in the wall, so if I was careful, I wouldn't flash. So I kept the window open, even the drapes, hoping for a stray breeze. I sank down into the lukewarm water without a bubble in sight. There was nothing but Ivory soap and a partially burned white candle on the corner near the faucet. I put the Firestar on the small corner beside my head. I'd tried the Browning there, but it was too big and kept trying to slide into the water.

I was completely underwater, rinsing off my hair, when I heard the door crash open. I surfaced, sputtering, groping for the Firestar. I had the gun pointed before I even saw what was coming through the door. Even when I could see, it didn't make any sense.

There was a woman in the doorway. Physically, she was small, about my size, but she seemed to fill the room as if she took up more space than the eye could see. Her hair was long and brown. The bangs had been allowed to grow and were thinned until the hair covered her face past her nose like a veil. The hair was tinted ever so slightly blue. She wore a jean jacket with no sleeves. One bare, muscular, tattooed arm was holding the door so that the force of its being kicked in didn't send it flying back in her face. Under other circumstances, I'd have been sort of disdainful, except for the roil of power pouring from her. She looked like she'd gotten lost on her way to a punk biker bar. Psychically, she felt like a wind from the mouth of hell, hot and unfriendly.

There was so much power in the tiny room, I felt like the bathwater should start to boil. I kept the gun very steadily pointed at her chest. I think it was the only thing that kept her just inside the door. The look on her face was pure rage.

Water dripped down my face from my hair, tangling in my eyelashes. I blinked, resisting the urge to wipe the water away with my hands. "One step, just one, and I will pull this trigger," I said.

Roland appeared behind her in the doorway. This just got better and better. He was still tall, tanned, with his short, curly hair. His brown eyes swept the room and stayed on me, crouching naked in the tub. I kept the gun on the woman, but it was tempting.

He touched the woman's shoulders. He spoke in that low, rolling voice of his. "Roxanne, trust me, she will kill you."

It made me not want to shoot him after all.

A second man peeked into the room. He was taller than Roland, which made him over six feet. I had enough of a glimpse to know he was Native American and had long, black hair. Then he ducked back, eyes averted, a gentleman. He said, "Roxanne, this is not appropriate."

Roxanne shook off Roland's hands and started to walk farther into the room.

I fired the gun inches from her head. The sound was thunderous. The bullet took a bite out of the door and buried into the wall behind. It was a Glazer Safety Round, so the wall stopped it. I wasn't afraid of it going through the wall.

My ears rang with the shot in this tiny, tiled room. For a second, if someone spoke, I couldn't hear it. I kept my eyes on Roxanne. She had stopped moving. I had the barrel of the gun sighted in the middle of that pretty face. It took a second or two of staring to realize that under all the tatoos, the funky hair, and the power, she was pretty. It was a traditional, girl-next-door pretty. Maybe it was the reasons for the tatoo and the hair. When nature makes you look wholesome, there are ways to cheat.

"Come on, Roxanne," Roland said, "back away."

She just stood there. Her power breathed around me like a warm cloud. It was continuous and nearly suffocating. I'd never been around any shapeshifter that had this kind of raw power. Or never around one this powerful who didn't even try to pass for human. Roxanne didn't vibrate with power. She was power. And I was about two seconds away from snuffing it out.

"You would really kill me," she said.

"In a heartbeat," I said. I was getting tired of crouching in the water. Made it hard to be tough. Of course, being naked didn't help, either.

"Why didn't you kill me just now?"

"You're the lupa for Verne's pack. Killing you would rain all sorts of crap down. But I will do it, Roxanne. Now, back out of the room, close the door, and let me get dressed. If you still want to talk, fine, but don't ever, ever pull shit like this again."

"Without that little gun you wouldn't be so confident."

"Yeah, it's a real confidence booster. Now, get the fuck out of the room, or I will shoot you."

Marianne was suddenly in the doorway. "Roxanne, let's go have some tea and let Anita get dressed." I don't know what Marianne did, but even I felt calmer. It was like she projected calm and peace into the room.

Roxanne let Roland and Marianne drag her back through the door. Roxanne pointed a finger at me. "You insulted my Ulfric, and you will pay for that, with or without the gun."

"Fine," I said.

The door closed behind them. The lock had shattered in a pile of splinters. Cherry's voice came through the door. "I'll stay outside the door until you're out. I can give you a warning if any more bad guys come."

Bad guys. Was Roxanne a bad guy or just psycho? I was betting on the latter.

Chapter 40

I got dressed in record time. Black jean shorts, red short-sleeved knit top, white jogging socks, black Nikes. Normally, I'd have left off the shoulder holster inside a house, but I threaded it through the belt and slipped it on. The black holster looked very stark against the red shirt. I put the Firestar down the front of the shorts in the Uncle Mike's Sidekick holster that it usually rode in. I left off the spine sheath. The leather was beginning to smell like sweat. I was going to have to let it dry out before I could wear it again.

I smeared hair goop on the hair and let it go. It'd dry on its own. Call it a hunch, but I didn't think Roxanne was the patient type. If I took the time for makeup or blow-drying my hair, she might come looking for me. I don't normally fuss, anyway. In truth, the only reason I'd planned on it was the fact that Richard was coming with Dr. Carrie Onslow, and I was feeling insecure. Me, insecure. How sad.

Richard had spent a great deal of the day with Dr. Carrie Onslow. I was jealous and hated it.

Of course, first I needed to go confront a pissed-off werewolf. I could figure out what the hell I was going to do with Richard after I talked to Roxanne. One thing I was pretty sure of, if I killed her, it would be war between the two packs. I did not want to bring that on our people, not if it could be avoided. Anita, the politician—now, *that* was sad.

I opened the door. Cherry looked up at me from her seat on the floor. There was something on her face, a hesitation, that made me say, "What?"

She pushed to her feet, using the wall. "You just look . . . aggressive."

"You mean the guns?"

"The guns, the red and black. It's all very stark and out there."

"You think I should be wearing pink and something frilly to cover the guns?"

Cherry smiled. "I think that Roxanne is almost psychotically dominant, and if you go down there dressed like that, she'll take it as a sign that she's got to be just as aggressive."

"You don't even know her," I said.

She said, very simply, "Do you think I'm wrong?"

Put that way . . . "I don't have anything pink and frilly in my suitcase."

"How about something not black, not red?"

I frowned at her. "Will purple do?"

"It would be better," she said.

I went back in and changed into a top that was identical cotton knit, scoop necked, but royal purple. I had to admit that the purple was softer. I kept the shoulder holster on but transferred the Firestar to the small of my back. Theoretically, I could draw it from there, but it was not my favorite position. The only shirt I could find to match the purple and cover the shoulder holster was thin and black and nylon, which half defeated the point of wearing the cotton shirt to begin with, but I had to admit that it looked better. It was still black and not cheery, but it wasn't so aggressive. You couldn't see the guns. I could have walked into any mall in the country and not gotten a second glance. Of course, if I moved fast, the shirt would blow back and flash, but hey, I wasn't planning to go jogging.

I opened the door a second time and said, "Better?"

Cherry nodded, smiling. "Much better. Thank you for listening to me. I know it's not one of your best things."

"I am not going to drag Richard's pack into a war because I couldn't tone it down a little."

The smile widened into something gentle and almost heart-warming. "You are a good lupa, Anita, a good Nimir-ra. For a human, you're positively excellent."

"Yeah, but the human part is still true."

She touched my shoulder. "But we don't hold it against you."

I looked at her to see if she was kidding me, but I just couldn't tell. "I think Roxanne will hold it against me."

Cherry nodded. "Probably. They're all waiting in the kitchen."

The kitchen was tiled in black and white with some cracks starting in the high-traffic areas, but the floor was mopped within an inch of its existence. The tile gleamed softly in the indirect light that touched the windows. Like the bedroom Nathaniel was staying in, it would get morning light but not afternoon. Roxanne sat with her back to the door. The edges of the white tablecloth trailed in her lap. There was a stiffness to the way she held herself that said she knew I was there, but she didn't turn around.

Marianne sat across from her with a china teacup and saucer in front of her. She looked at me like she was trying to tell me something with her eyes, but I didn't know what that something was.

Roland stood in the corner next to a hutch that held the china that matched the cup. He had his arms crossed and looked very bodyguardish.

The other man I'd glimpsed stood in the opposite corner like a second bookend. His arms were crossed, and he looked very bodyguardish.

That was the only thing that was similar. Okay, one other: They both had great tans. But I suspected, like Richard, that the new guy wasn't just tanned. His skin was a rich brown, his brown eyes almost perfectly almond shaped. They were almost too small for the rest of that face. It was all angles, high cheekbones, broad forehead, hooked nose. Every feature he had was aggressively male and ethnic. His hair was long and black and moved like silky water as he looked at me. The hair was a solid blackness like my own, that black that has blue highlights in the sun.

He was also at least six foot two, maybe an inch taller, with shoulders to match. He leaned against the wall, exuding a sort of easy physical energy like someone who knew his potential and didn't sweat proving it.

"That's Ben. He's your replacement Sköll until Jamil is healed."

I wanted to turn down the offer of putting my life in a stranger's hands, but was almost sure it would be considered an insult. I nodded. "Hi."

He nodded back. "Hello."

Roxanne turned in the chair, sliding her legs so she was sitting sideways in the chair. "Verne meant our wolf to be an apology for allowing your people to be injured on our lands." She looked full at me and those brown eyes were not friendly. "I think it is you who owes us an apology."

"Apology for what?" I asked.

She stood, and that energy spilled through the room like water, swirling around the ankles, rising to the knees. Her power spilled outward, upward, as if she would fill the room with the breathing warmth of her presence.

She was so powerful, it made my throat tight just standing this close to her. "Shit," I whispered.

"You marked Verne as if he were the least of us and not the greatest."

"You mean the neck thing," I said.

She slammed the chair back into the floor. It fell with a loud crash.

I didn't go for a gun, but it was an effort.

Roxanne stood there breathing far too fast and far too shallow. Strong emotion makes the energy spill worse, and her anger made the power bite and dance over my skin in a tight, electric dance.

Cherry moved up a little behind me. Zane appeared in the doorway and flanked her. They stood to either side and a little back like bodyguards. They'd do their best, but I didn't want to test them against Roland and Ben. I was pretty sure who would win, and it wouldn't be us.

"I am sorry that I marked Verne," I said.

"Lies," Roxanne said.

"I truly didn't mean to do it."

She took a trembling step forward. I didn't step back, but maybe I should have. She was too damn close. At this range, I might get the Browning out, but if I did, I'd have to use it, because she'd be on top of me in seconds.

"Can someone please explain why she's so pissed, and what we can do about it that won't end with one of us dead?"

Marianne stood slowly. Roxanne's head pivoted, and the intensity in that gaze, even turned to another, made my skin jump. Marianne held her hands palm out and advanced slowly around the table towards her lupa.

"Roxanne sees the marking as an insult to Verne and the entire pack," Marianne said.

"I got that," I said. "I didn't mean it to be insulting. I didn't mean to do it at all."

Roxanne's head turned slowly until she was staring at me. Her eyes bled from brown to a rich, startling yellow while I watched.

I put my hand on the butt of the Browning. "Ease down, wolf-girl."

A low, rumbling growl crawled out of that slender throat.

Marianne said, "If you truly didn't mean to be insulting, then would you be willing to make amends?"

I kept my gaze on Roxanne but answered, "How would I make amends?"

"We could fight," Roxanne said.

I looked into her nearly glowing yellow eyes. "I don't think so."

Marianne was standing sort of between us without actually standing between us. "You could offer your neck to Roxanne in a public ceremony."

My eyes slid to Marianne, then back to the werewolf. "I am not letting her near my neck in public or private, not on purpose."

"You don't trust me," Roxanne said.

"Nope."

She took another painfully slow step forward. Marianne did step between us then. If Roxanne moved forward another inch, her shoulder would bump Marianne.

"There is another ceremony," Marianne said.

"I am not offering Roxanne my neck," I said.

"No neck offering, but you do exchange blows."

I felt my eyes widen. I stared at the nearly snarling woman across from me. "You must be joking. She'd kill me."

"I'll let you hit me first," Roxanne said.

"I've read this story. No thanks."

Roxanne frowned. "Story?"

"*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," I said. She still looked puzzled. "The Green Knight lets Sir Gawain have the first blow. Gawain cuts off his head. The Green Knight picks up his head under one arm and says, 'My turn, a year from now!'"

"Haven't read it," she said.

"It's not top twenty reading list, I guess. Anyway, the point is the same. I can hit you as hard as I can, and it won't hurt you. You can flick your fingers in my direction and break my neck."

"Then we fight," she said.

My hand was still resting on the Browning. "I'll kill you, Roxanne, but I won't fight you."

"Coward!"

"You bet," I said.

I felt Richard brush over me, through me, like wind. He'd recognized Roxanne's car and was letting me know he was about to bring a human into the mess. A human who didn't know who the monsters were.

I looked away to see his shape outside the kitchen door, and I shouldn't have. I didn't so much see Roxanne's fist as sense the movement. My hand was already on the Browning, only seconds to pull it, but that blur of movement caught me in the chin. I had the sensation of falling, but I didn't remember hitting the floor or didn't feel it.

I was on the floor looking up at the white ceiling. Marianne was beside me. Her lips were moving, but no sound came out. Sound finally came through with an almost audible pop like a small sonic boom.

Screaming. Everyone was screaming. I heard Richard's voice and Roxanne's and others. I tried to sit up and couldn't.

Marianne touched my shoulder. "Don't try to move."

I wanted to see what was happening, but I couldn't make my body move. I could feel it, but it was like a great weight along my body, as if what I really wanted to do was sleep.

I flexed my right hand, and it was empty. I'd dropped the Browning somewhere. Frankly, I was just happy to be able to move my hand. I wasn't joking when I'd told Roxanne she could break my neck without trying hard.

I kept flexing things, waiting to be able to stand up. I was finally able to move my head enough to see the rest of the room. Richard had Roxanne around the waist, feet completely off the ground. Roland and Ben were trying to pull Richard off of her. Shang-Da was trying to get Dr. Carrie Onslow to go back outside the kitchen door.

Roxanne squirmed out of Richard's arms. She strode over to me, and Zane and Cherry moved like a wall between us. She shoved between the two of them, screaming, "Your turn, bitch! Your turn!"

She was standing there, sideways, with the two wereleopards trying to hold her without hurting her. Her right leg was flexed forward. I think only Marianne heard me say, "My pleasure."

I kicked Roxanne just below the kneecap, aiming up. The kneecap popped out of its socket, and she went down shrieking. I kicked her twice in the face. Blood blossomed from her nose and mouth.

I got to my feet. No one tried to help me. The room had suddenly fallen so quiet, you could hear Roxanne's breathing, too loud, too fast. She spat blood on the floor. I walked around her and the wereleopards until I was close to the table. Ben and Roland still held Richard, but it was like they'd forgotten why they were doing it. Shang-Da picked Carrie Onslow up and carried her out the door with her yelling, "Richard!"

It was one of those moments when time seems to slow and stretch and happen too fast all at the same time. I heard Roxanne say, "I will kill you for that!" But I don't honestly remember whether I picked the chair up before or after she said it. I only remember having the chair and when she leaped at me, I

smashed the chair into her like you'd use a baseball bat, taking the arms way back, throwing my shoulders and back muscles into it. The shock of the blow left my fingers and hands tingling, but I kept the grip on the chair.

Roxanne was on all fours on the floor, but she wasn't down. I raised the chair for another blow as her power flowed over me like a scalding wind. I smashed the chair down with everything I had. She caught it and tore it out of my hands.

I backed up and pulled the Firestar.

Roland yelled, "No guns!"

I glanced at Richard. He said, "No guns." The look on his face was enough. He was scared for me. So was I.

No guns. Were they kidding? Roxanne tried to get to her feet, but the knee wouldn't hold. She fell, and the chair thudded into the floor. She screamed and threw the chair at me. I had to dive for the floor to avoid it.

She came for me on hands and one leg in a movement almost too fast to follow. I had plenty of time to shoot her, but I wasn't supposed to shoot her. I crab walked backwards, trying to stay away. The Firestar was still in my hand. I yelled, "Richard!"

The marks suddenly opened between us like a floodgate. I was bathed in the scent of his skin and the distant musk of fur.

Roxanne hesitated in that maniac, skittering crawl. Her pretty face began to stretch outward as if a hand were pushing out from the inside. A muzzle bloomed in the middle of that human face, covered in human skin with a line of lipstick where lips used to be.

I reached down that line of power between Richard and myself. I wrapped the scent of him, the feel of him, the jittering play of energy. I could suddenly feel the moon in the daylight sky, and knew—knew in every cell of my body—that tomorrow night was it, tomorrow night I would be free. And for an instant, I wasn't sure whose thought that was, Richard's or his beast's.

I left the Firestar on the floor and got to my feet with the window behind me. I knew Richard wouldn't let her kill me, but I also knew she was going to hurt me. I'd thrown a werewolf through a window once upon a time. It had stopped the fight. It was all I could think of. Of course, Roxanne had to cooperate and run at me like a maniac to set herself up for the throw. If she came at me slower, it wouldn't work.

She came at me slower, in a limping run. I was out of ideas. One thing I knew: If she touched me with those claws or that mouth, I might be a lupa for real next month. Time was in that crystalline run, slow and fast, slow and glitteringly fast. I thought of several things to do and wouldn't be fast enough to do any of them. But I'd go down trying.

Richard was yelling, "No claws, Roxanne, no claws."

I don't think Roxanne heard him. She swiped at me with those monstrous claws, and I ducked under the swinging arm. I ducked blows that were too fast to see, avoided her like I knew where she'd be. It was Richard, the marks, but it was too confusing, too new for me to be able to fight with it. I could use it to avoid her, but only for so long.

I ended up on my back, on the floor, pointing the Firestar up at her. She was coming with claws and teeth, and I was out of options.

The door burst open, and Verne yelled, "Roxanne, no!" I felt his power crash through the room like the lid on a boiling pot, something thrown over the heat, to hold it, contain it, but it didn't stop it.

Ben and Roland were suddenly hanging onto Roxanne, dragging her back from me. If Verne had given an order to them, I hadn't heard it. Roxanne was cutting them up, slicing their arms open, and they were taking it.

Verne was still yelling, "I lied, Roxanne. I lied. She didn't proposition me."

Roxanne went very still in their arms. She spoke around that only partly human mouth, "What did you say?"

Lucy came in behind Verne, through the still-open door. She shut the door and leaned against it, smiling, enjoying the show.

"I said, I lied," Verne said. "I'm an old man, and you are beautiful and powerful and thirty years younger than I am. I told you when she marked my neck that she propositioned me. She didn't."

Roxanne relaxed in the grip of her bleeding bodyguards. You could feel the tension seep away, and with it her flesh. Her face, her hands, flowed until she stood human again. Her nose was bloody where I'd kicked her.

"You can let me go," she said. "I won't hurt her."

They didn't let her go. They looked at Verne.

"How about me, darling?" he said. "You going to hurt me?"

"When we get home, I'll kick the shit out of you, but not here, not now."

Verne smiled. Roxanne smiled. And both smiles were the same. It was more than lust, though that was mixed in with it. It was a look that couples have, like a secret language, a look that excludes everyone else and cannot be explained.

I looked at Richard. "They be crazier than we are."

He smiled at me, and the smile warmed me down to my Nikes. I smiled back, and realized with a jolt that tingled through my entire body that we had our own secret look. God, I'd missed him.

Lucy stalked into the room on a pair of platform shoes, purple short-shorts, and what looked like a lavender bra but probably wasn't. She sashayed up to Richard, slipping both of her arms through one of his.

"He's rejected me for you, sweetie," she said in a voice that was too pleasant for the anger in her eyes.

I looked at Richard. "I don't think he dumped you because of me."

She pushed away from Richard to stand in front of me. I had the gun in my hand. I figured I was safe. The marks with Richard faded, pulled back, replaced with the knowledge that we were a couple again. I valued that a hell of a lot more than the marks.

"I can do things for him in bed that your human body could never do. I can take every ounce of strength, every thrust, and it just feels good. It doesn't have to be gentle with me, careful with me."

Which hit a little close to home, which is my only excuse for what I said next. "Gee, Lucy, I don't know. He spends one night with me and drops you like yesterday's news. Either you're not that good a lay, or I'm better."

Her face narrowed down, eyes wide; for a second, I thought she might cry. I didn't want her to cry. That would spoil it and make me feel like a shit.

Lucy turned away from me, bringing her hands to cover her face. Damn.

I looked past her to Richard. The look on his face was not happy with me. I couldn't blame him on this one.

I didn't see Lucy turn, I felt it. I felt the air move as she whirled. Her hand caught me across the face. I had the sensation of falling, but if I hit the ground, I didn't remember it.

Chapter 41

I woke to darkness and the smell of clean sheets. I blinked at the strange windows and the spill of moonlight on the floor. I didn't recognize the room. Once I realized I wasn't anywhere I'd ever been, tension filled me like water. I heard someone behind me, and that raised the tension another notch. I tried to lie still, but I knew my breathing had changed. If they were human, they might not have noticed, but I just didn't know that many humans right now.

"Anita, it's Damian."

I rolled over onto my right side, and it hurt. My right arm was bandaged from my palm to about the middle of my forearm. It didn't hurt that much, but I couldn't remember how I'd injured it. The vampire was sitting in a chair by the door. His long, red hair looked a strange pale brown in the dark. He was wearing the vest and pants of a very nice, probably tailored, business suit. It might have been black or navy or even dark brown. His skin glowed pale against the darkness of the cloth.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"You're the only one wearing a watch," he said.

I raised my left hand in front of my face and hit the little button that made it glow. The glow seemed brighter than it should have because of the darkness. "God, it's after eleven. I've been out for hours." I lay back on the bed. "Did it occur to anyone to take me to a hospital?"

"The sun's only been down for a little over two hours, Anita. I don't know what choices were made. When Asher and I woke, we were in the basement here. We fed, then I took Richard's place here by your bed."

"Where is Richard?"

"I think he's at their lupanar, but I'm not certain."

I glanced at him. He seemed somehow distant. "You didn't ask any questions?"

"I was told to stay here and guard your rest. What more did I need to know?"

"You aren't a slave, Damian. You're allowed to ask questions."

"I got to sit here in the dark and watch you sleep. What more could your pet vampire ask?" That last had a bitter edge to it.

I sat up slowly because I still felt wobbly. "What's that supposed to mean?" I tried to prop my back against the heavy wooden headboard but needed more pillows under me. I tried to push them under me with my right hand, and it hurt. It was a nice, sharp ache.

"I remember Lucy hitting me, but what happened to my arm?"

Damian put one knee on the bed and helped prop the pillows under my back. He even found an extra one for me to lay my right arm on. "Richard said Lucy tried to pull your arm off."

That bit of knowledge left me cold and scared. "Jesus, a woman scorned."

"Pillows better?" he asked.

"Yeah, thanks."

He got to his feet and started to move back to the chair.

I said, "Don't." I held my left hand out to him.

He took my hand. His skin was warm to the touch. There was a light dew of sweat on his palm. Vampires can sweat, but they don't do it often. I squeezed his hand, staring up into his face. The moonlight was strong, so I could see his face. His skin was pale, almost luminous. Those brilliant green eyes were just liquid darkness by moonlight. I drew him to sit beside me.

"You've fed tonight or your skin would be cold, so why the sweat?"

He drew his hand out of mine, turning his face away. "You don't want to know."

"Yeah, I do." I touched his chin with my fingertips, turning his face back to me. "What's wrong?"

"Don't you have enough to worry about without bothering with me?"

"Tell me what's wrong, Damian. I mean it."

He let out a long, shaking breath. "There; you've done it. A direct order."

"Tell me," I said.

"I was happy to sit here in the dark and watch you sleep. I think if Richard had known just how happy, he would have made Asher do it."

I frowned at him. "You've lost me."

"You feel it, too, Anita. Not as strongly as I do, but you feel it."

"Feel what, Damian?"

"This." He placed his hand against my face, and I wanted to rub my face against his skin. I had a momentary urge to pull him down on the bed beside me. Not for sex, necessarily, but to touch him. To run my hands over that pale skin, to bathe in the power that animated his flesh.

I swallowed hard and drew back from his hand. "What is going on, Damian?"

"You're a necromancer, and I'm the walking dead. You've raised me from the dead twice. You've called me once from my coffin and once back from the edge of true death. You've healed me with your powers. I am your creature. I

have made vows of loyalty to Jean-Claude as my Master of the City, and I honor them, but you I would follow into hell itself. Not out of duty, but out of desire. I can think of nothing better than to be by your side. Nothing pleases me more than doing what you ask. When I'm near you, I find it very hard to do almost anything large, like feeding or leaving your presence, without asking your permission."

I just stared at him. I didn't know what to say, not uncommon for me today. But with him sitting so close in the dark room, I had to say something. "Damian, I . . . I didn't mean for anything like this to happen. I don't want you to be some sort of undead servant."

"I know," he said. "But I also understand why the vampire council made it a habit to kill necromancers. I don't serve you out of fear. I want to do it. When I am with you, I am happier than without you. It's a little like being in love, but . . . much more frightening."

"I knew we had a connection. I even knew why we had it. I just didn't have any idea it was this strong for you," I said.

"I didn't realize you felt drawn to me as I am to you until last night. You could have chosen Asher. He adores you, and you remember being in his bed. But you chose me to kiss. Me to hold. I don't think it was an accident."

I shook my head. "I don't know. I don't remember everything clearly from last night. The munin is sort of like being drunk."

"Do you remember what you said to me?"

"I said a lot of things." But my voice was soft, and I was very afraid I did remember the phrase he was searching for.

"You said, don't bleed me, fuck me."

Yep, that was the phrase. Just remembering it was so embarrassing, I squirmed. It was my turn to look away. "It was the munin talking," I said. "You're one of the few males that I hang around with that Raina never had sex with. Maybe she wanted something different."

He touched my face, turned me back to meet his eyes. "That isn't it, and you know it."

I pulled back from his hand. "Look, my plate is like full to overflowing with guys right now. I'm flattered, thanks for the offer, but no thanks."

"And how happy are you with the two men in your bed right now?" he asked. "You've had sex with Richard now, and the marks are binding you tighter than ever."

"Did everyone know that was a possibility but me?" I asked.

"Jean-Claude forbade me from telling you. I thought you had a right to know."

"I felt Jean-Claude wake this morning before ten. I felt him wake, Damian. I felt the fierceness of his joy, his triumph." I tried to cross my arms over my chest, and the right one wouldn't cooperate. "Damn it to hell."

"I was the servant of my original mistress for a very long time, Anita. The thought of being your servant, anyone's servant, terrifies me." He touched the bandages on my right arm. "But I see them using you, Anita. I see them withholding information from you." He cradled my bandaged hand in both of

his. "I swore oaths to Jean-Claude, but it's your power that makes my heart beat, your pulse I can taste like cherries on my tongue."

I drew my hand out of his. "What are you saying, Damian?"

"I'm saying that you shouldn't be the only one of the three that doesn't know what's going on."

"And you can tell me," I said.

He nodded. "I can answer your questions. In fact, if you make them orders, I can't refuse to answer them."

"You're handing me the keys to your soul, Damian. Why?"

He smiled, teeth a dim whiteness in his face. "Because I serve you before I serve anyone else. I tried fighting it, but I can't. So I'm through fighting. I give myself to you willingly, even eagerly."

"If you mean what I think you mean, didn't Asher say something last night about if I had sex with you, Jean-Claude would kill you?"

"Yes," he said.

I looked at him. "I may be good, Damian, but no one's worth dying for."

"I don't think he'd kill me. Jean-Claude has questioned me about the bond I feel with you."

"He has, has he?"

"Yes, and he's pleased. He thinks it's another sign of your increasing powers as a necromancer. He's right."

"Jean-Claude knew you were obeying me without wanting to, and he didn't tell me?" I said.

"He thought it would upset you."

"When was he going to mention this little fact to me?"

"He's the Master of the City. He doesn't answer to me. I don't know what he plans to tell you or when."

"Okay, what other powers can I expect to gain through the marks?"

He lay down on the other side of the pillow he'd gotten for my injured arm. He propped himself up on one elbow, long legs stretched out the length of the bed. "Their physical strength, their sight, hearing. You could gain almost every power they have without giving up your humanity. Though you'd probably have to take the fourth mark to gain the full powers."

"No, thanks," I said.

"Eternal life without having to die for it, Anita. It's tempted many over the centuries."

"I've had too many surprises in the last two days, Damian. I'm not tying myself any closer to Jean-Claude."

"You say that now, but let a few more years pass, and you may change your mind. Eternal youth, Anita. It's not a small offering."

I shook my head. "What else can I expect from the marks?"

"Theoretically, any power they possess."

"That's not typical for a human servant, is it?"

"They all gain some strength, stamina, healing, resistance to injury, immunity to disease and poison. Though again, without the fourth mark, I'm

not sure how much of that you've gained. I'm not sure Jean-Claude or Richard know, either, until you pull another rabbit out of your hat."

"Was the munin a surprise to them?"

"Oh, yes," Damian said. He lay his head on the edge of the pillow I wasn't using. He rolled onto his back so he was looking up at me. "Jean-Claude knew of the munin, but hadn't really thought that they were the spirits of the dead and what that would mean for you. Even necromancers of legend don't control the munin."

"The necromancers of legend don't have a bond with an alpha werewolf," I said.

"That's what Jean-Claude thinks, too."

I settled lower in the nest of pillows. "It's so great that he's talking about me to everyone but me."

Damian rolled so that he was staring up at me. "I know how much you value honesty, and in all honesty, Jean-Claude could not have known that you would gain these powers. A human servant is a tool to be used, so it is good if it is a powerful tool, but you seem to be gaining such power that it may, at some point, be questionable who is master and who is servant. Perhaps it is the fact that you are a necromancer."

"Jean-Claude told me before I took the marks that he wasn't sure who would be master and who would be servant because of my necromancy. But he didn't really explain it. I guess I should have asked."

"If he'd told you all this before the marks were offered, would you have taken them upon yourself?"

"I took the marks to save both their lives, not to mention my own."

"But if you'd known, would you have done it?" He rolled onto his side, face so close to my arm, I could feel his breath against my skin.

"I think so. I couldn't let them both die. One, maybe, I could have lost one of them, but not both. Not both, if I could have saved them."

"Then Jean-Claude has kept all this from you for nothing. He's angered you for nothing."

"Yeah, I'm pissed."

"It makes you not trust him." Damian moved that one inch closer until his cheek rested against my upper arm.

"Yeah, it makes me not trust him. Worse yet, it makes me not trust Richard." I shook my head. "I never thought he'd keep anything from me, let alone things this important."

"It makes you doubt them," Damian said.

I stared down at the vampire. Just his cheek rested against my arm. The rest of his body stretched down the length of the bed but didn't touch me. "This doesn't seem like you, Damian."

"What doesn't seem like me?" he asked. His hand slid from where it rested on his side to the sheets. That one pale hand lay between our bodies, not touching, just . . . waiting.

"This, all this, it's not you."

"You don't know anything about me, Anita. You don't know what I'm like, not really."

"What do you want from me, Damian?"

"Right now, to put this hand around your waist."

"And if I said yes?"

"Is that a yes?" he asked.

What would Richard say? What would Jean-Claude say? Fuck them.

"Yes," I said.

He slid his hand over my waist until his arm rested across my stomach. It would have been natural to cuddle the body after the arm, but he didn't. He kept that artificial distance between us.

I ran my left hand up and down that pale arm, playing over the small hairs on his arm. It felt terribly right to touch him, as if I'd been wanting to do it for a very long time. I didn't want him to hold me. I wanted to hold him. It was a very different feeling than what I felt for Richard or Jean-Claude. Damian was right; it was the necromancy. It wanted to touch him, explore the edges of the power that bound us, the power that animated him.

My own personal power is closer kin to Jean-Claude's than to Richard's. It is a cool power, like an unfelt wind that plays over the mind and body. I let that cool thread spill out through my hand, down Damian's arm. I thrust it into him like an invisible hand, shoved it into that pale body and felt an answering spark deep inside him. I felt my power flare and recognize a piece of itself. Whatever had animated Damian before was gone. I animated Damian now. He was truly mine, which, of course, was not possible.

He slid his body that last inch so that the length of him lay against me from my waist to my feet. He slid one leg over my legs, pressing himself against me.

"You're trying to seduce me," I said. But my voice was too soft, too private.

He laid a soft kiss on my arm. "Am I seducing you, or have you already seduced me?"

I shook my head. "Get up and get out, Damian."

"You want me. I can feel it."

"The power wants you, not me. I don't want you the way I want Richard or Jean-Claude."

"I'm not asking for love, Anita, just to be with you."

I wanted to run my hands down his body. I knew that I could explore that body, touch every inch of it, and he wouldn't stop me. It was both inviting and frightening.

I slid off the bed, letting Damian have the whole thing to himself. I could stand, no dizziness; great. "We are not doing this Damian. We are so not doing this."

Damian propped himself up on his elbows, watching me. "If you give me a direct order, I must obey you, Anita. Even if that order contradicts one that Jean-Claude has given me."

I frowned at him. "What are you saying?"

"Don't you wonder what else he's forbidden me to tell you?" Damian asked.

"You little bastard."

He sat up, swinging his long legs off the side of the bed. "Don't you want to know?"

I stared down at him for a heartbeat. "Yes, damn you, yes, I want to know."

"You have to order me to tell you. I can't do it otherwise."

I almost didn't do it. I was afraid of what he would say. Afraid of what else Jean-Claude had been hiding from me. "I order you, Damian, to tell me all the secrets that Jean-Claude has forbidden you to tell me."

His breath came out in a long sigh. "Free at last. Jean-Claude, Asher, and even my master are all descended from the line of Belle Morte, Beautiful Death. She is our council master. Have you ever wondered why hundreds of years ago, most personal accounts of vampires said they were hideous monsters, walking corpses?"

"No, and what does that have to do with anything?"

"I've waited a long time to tell you this, Anita. Let me tell it."

I sighed. "Fine, tell me."

"No one thought of a vampire as a sexual object in the seventeen hundreds. There were a few tales of beautiful vampires, but they were all tricks, not real. But then things changed. Most personal accounts speak of beauty and great sexual allure." He slid off the bed, and I backed up. I didn't want him too close. I wasn't sure who I trusted less: him or me.

When I backed up, he stopped moving and just stood there, looking at me. "The Council decides which of them will send their vampires out to make more. For thousands of years, it was the Queen of Nightmares, our leader; or Morte d' Amour, the lover of death, and the Dragon; but they grew tired of the games and retreated inside the council chambers. You rarely see them. She-Who-Made-Me took me to court with her more than once. It's where I met Jean-Claude. Belle Morte, Beautiful Death, sent forth her people to populate the world with vampires. Jean-Claude, Asher, and I descend from her line. Even her blood cannot make the ugly beautiful, though all is improved by her touch, but it is more than that. Some in her line have the power of sex. They live on it, breathe on it. They feed on it like Colin and my old master fed on fear. They can gain power through sex and use it as a second lure for mortals." He stopped and looked at me.

"Finish it, Damian," I said.

"Jean-Claude is one of these. In another time, he would be considered an incubus. Asher and I are not like him. It is a rare power, even among those who descend more directly from Belle Morte."

"So Jean-Claude can feed off of sex like Colin can feed off fear. So what?"

Damian moved towards me, and I let him touch my shoulder. "Don't you understand? Jean-Claude gains power through sex, not just intercourse, but sexual energy, lust. It means that every time you have sex, it is power. That

every intimate act between the three of you binds the marks tighter and increases your power."

I felt almost faint. "When was he going to tell me?"

"In Jean-Claude's defense, he says it didn't work this way the first time he marked you. The sex wasn't such a strong power focus. You were three marks deep before you broke away, and it didn't work like this between you. He thinks it's the addition of Richard that's pushed it over the edge."

"What do you get out of this, Damian? What do you get out of telling me all this?" I stared up at him in the dark.

"My mistress controlled me for centuries with her fear and her sex. You deserve the truth, all of it."

I pulled away from him, turned my back on him. It made perfect sense. Jean-Claude gave off sex like other people wore cologne. It explained why his first business was a stripper club—lots of sexual energy to feed off. Did it change anything? I wasn't sure. I just wasn't sure.

I stared out the window, forehead pressed to the cool glass. The curtains blew gently in the night breeze. "Does Richard know that Jean-Claude is some kind of incubus?"

"I don't think so," Damian said.

Power breathed on the wind. I could almost smell it like ozone in the air. It raised the hair at the back of my neck. It wasn't vampire or shapeshifter. I recognized it for what it was: necromancy. Somewhere close by, someone was using a power very similar to mine.

I turned to Damian. "Colin's human servant, is she a necromancer?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Shit." I cast outward, searching for Asher. My power touched him and was thrown backwards, out, away. I ran for the door.

Damian followed me, asking, "What is it? What's wrong?"

I had the Browning naked in my hand when I hit the yard. Damian saw them before I did, and he pointed at them. Colin's human servant stood at the edge of the trees, almost lost in shadows and darkness. Asher stood a few yards in front of her. He was on his knees.

I fired at her as I ran. The shots went wild, but it broke some of her concentration and I could feel Asher again. His life was being pulled out of him like a fish on a string. I could feel his blood thundering against his skin. His heart leaped in his chest like a caged thing struggling to get out, and it was her his heart was trying to get to, as if she could pull his heart from his chest from a distance.

I forced myself to stop running. I stood there and sighted down my arm. I felt movement from above. I looked up in time to see Barnaby's pale face coming at me like some giant bird of prey, then Damian was off the ground and the two vampires rolled into the sky, struggling.

I was close enough to see Asher's face now. He was bleeding from every opening; eyes, mouth, nose. He was a mask of blood; his clothes were soaked in it. He fell forward onto all fours.

I shot the woman. I shot her in the chest twice. She fell slowly to her knees, looking at me. She looked surprised. I heard her say, "We're not allowed to kill each other's human servants."

"If Colin hadn't known I'd kill you, he'd have come himself."

That made her smile for some reason. She said, "I hope he dies with me." Then she collapsed facedown on the ground. Even by moonlight I could see the exit holes in her back like great gaping mouths.

Asher stayed on all fours, blood dripping from his mouth. I knelt by him, touched his shoulder, and the shirt was blood-soaked. "Asher, Asher, can you hear me?"

"I thought it was you," he said, in a voice thick with things that should never be in a living throat. "I thought it was you calling me." He coughed blood onto the ground.

I looked up into the sky, and there was no sight of Damian and Barnaby. I screamed for help, and no one answered.

I put my arms around Asher, and he collapsed into my lap. I cradled as much of him into my lap as I could get. I had to lean over him to hear his voice.

"I thought you had called me out into the night for a rendezvous. Isn't that ironic?" He coughed so hard that it was hard to hold him. Thicker things than blood spilled from his mouth. I held him while he bled his life away on the ground and screamed, "Damian!"

I heard a distant scream, but that was all. "Don't die, Asher, please, don't die."

He coughed until something dark and black came out his mouth. Blood poured out of his mouth in a near steady stream. I touched his skin, and it was cool to the touch.

"If you fed off of one of the lycanthropes, would it be enough to save you?"

"If it's soon, perhaps." His voice was soft and thick.

I touched his forehead and came away with chill sweat. "How badly are you hurt?"

He ignored me, speaking very softly, "Know this, Anita, that seeing myself through your eyes has healed my heart."

My throat was tight with tears. "Please, Asher, don't."

A drop of pure blood slid out of his eye. "Be happy with your two beaux. Don't make the same mistakes that Jean-Claude and I made all those long years ago." He touched my face with a hand that was slick with blood. "Be happy in their arms, *ma cherie*."

His eyes fluttered. If he passed out, we might lose him. There was nothing in the night but the sounds of cicada and the wind. Where the hell was everyone?

"Asher, don't pass out."

His eyes fluttered open, but he was having trouble focusing. I felt his heart hesitate, skip a beat. He could live without his heart beating, but I knew that this time, when the heart went, it was over. He was dying. Nikki had broken him inside too badly for healing.

I put my right wrist, encased in white bandages, in front of his mouth.
"Take my blood."

"To drink from you is to give you power over any of us. I do not want to be your slave any more than I already am."

I was crying, tears so hot they burned. "Don't let Colin kill you. Please, please!" I held him against me and whispered, "Don't leave us, Asher." I felt Jean-Claude all those miles away. I felt his panic at the thought of losing Asher. "Don't leave us, not now, not now that we've found you again. *Tu es beau, mon amour. Tu me fais craquer.*"

He actually smiled. "I shatter your heart, eh?"

I kissed his cheek, kissed his face, and cried, hot tears against the harsh scars of his face. "*Je t'embrasse partout. Je t'embrasse partout.* I kiss you all over, *mon amour.*"

He stared up at me. "*Je te bois des yeux.*"

"Don't drink me with your eyes, damn it, drink me with your mouth." I tore the bandages away from my right wrist with my teeth and put my bare, warm flesh against his cold lips.

He whispered, "*Je t'adore.*" Fangs sank into my wrist. It was sharp and deep. His mouth locked against my skin. His throat convulsed, swallowing. I stared into his pale eyes and felt something in my head part like a curtain, some shield shattered. One moment it was one continuous ache almost nauseating, then there was nothing but the spreading warmth. I didn't even have time to panic. Asher rolled over my mind like a warm lip of ocean, pleasurable, caressing. It burst over me in a skin-tingling, breath-stealing rush that left me gasping and wet. Then Asher was kneeling above me, laying me gently on the ground.

I lay, staring at nothing, riding the sensations up and down my body. I'd never let any vampire do me like this, never let them steal my mind while they stole my blood. I hadn't even known he could do it. Not to me.

He kissed me on the forehead. "Forgive me, Anita. I did not know that I could embrace your mind. I did not know that any vampire could." He stared down at my face, searching for some reaction. I couldn't give him one yet. He drew back enough to see my face clearly. "I feared you would possess me as you possess Damian if I fed from your blood without using any of my powers. I did try to scale your shield, break your barriers, but I did it to protect myself from your power. I did not dream that I could breach such impenetrable walls." He started to touch my face, then stopped, his hand falling to his lap. "The marks that bind you to Jean-Claude protect you from him embracing your mind. But he was never as good at this as I was. I should have thought of that before."

I just lay there, half-floating. Nothing was real yet. I couldn't think, couldn't speak.

He raised my hand and pressed it against his scarred cheek. "I drew back as soon as I realized what I had done. It was just, how do you say, a quickie. It was only a small taste of what it could have been, Anita. Please, believe me."

He stood, and I couldn't follow the movement. I lay on the ground and tried to think.

Jason knelt beside me. I was aware enough to wonder where the hell he'd come from. He wasn't staying at Marianne's. Or was he? "It's your first time?" he asked.

I tried to nod but couldn't.

"Now you know why I stay with them," he said.

"No," I said, but my voice was distant as if it wasn't my voice at all. "No, I don't."

"You felt it. You rode him. How can you not love it?"

I couldn't explain it. It had felt wondrous, but as the glow began to fade, the fear welled up big and black enough to swallow the world. It felt amazing, and that had been a "quickie," as he put it. I never wanted anything more from Asher. Because if it was much better than this, I might chase the rest of my days for another taste. And Jean-Claude could not give it to me. The marks prevented him from rolling my mind. It was one of the things that made the difference between servant and slave. I would never get this with Jean-Claude, never. And I wanted it. I hadn't wanted Asher to die. Now I wasn't so sure.

Asher came back to stand over me. We stared at each other. There were people in the dark now. Someone had a flashlight. They flared it over me. I was left staring in the brightness, nearly blind. The light stood harsh on Asher's face, highlighting the reddish tracks of tears. "Don't hate me, Anita. I could not bear it if you hated me."

"I don't hate you, Asher." My voice still sounded thick and heavy with that golden edge of pleasure. "I fear you."

He just stood there, tears sliding down his face. The tears slid in reddish lines down the smooth skin of his left side. The tears got lost in the scars on the other side, and were beginning to collect in a reddish stain on the stiff skin.

"Worse," he whispered, "worse, I think."

Chapter 42

I kicked everyone out except Jason. He got to stay because they started arguing that I couldn't be left completely alone. Had I forgotten that people were trying to kill me? Had I forgotten that Jean-Claude had said he'd kill them all if I died? That last did not win friends and influence people with me. My comment had been, "If we all died, I guess that'd solve everything." Which sort of put an end to the arguments.

Jason lay on the bed propped in the nest of pillows. He tried to roll onto his side, then stopped in midmotion with a small sound of pain. He moved

stiffly, like things hurt, which was what had gotten him a place on the bed instead of the chair.

I was pacing the room. I had a little circuit mapped out. Foot of the bed, windows, far wall, near wall with the door.

"You know that you've walked past the foot of the bed twenty times, and that's just since I started counting," Jason said.

"Shut up," I said. I'd put all my guns back on, not because I thought I needed them, but because they were familiar. The tightness of the shoulder holster, the digging of the Firestar in its inner-pants holster made me feel more like myself. I was the only one of the three of us who carried guns. It was one thing I knew that I hadn't gotten from either of them. It was mine. Guns, this particular brand of violence, was all mine. I needed something that was all mine right now.

Jason moved over on his side, slowly, an inch at a time. It took him until I'd made the circuit and was back at the foot of the bed before he made it to his side with a look of relief. He and Jamil had been moved to this house so that all the injured could be in one place. Roxanne was just down the hall with Ben sitting guard. Apparently, I'd been channeling enough of Richard's power that they thought she might have a concussion. I wasn't sure if Ben was supposed to be guarding her from me or the other way around. Dr. Patrick was down in the kitchen stirring the stew that Marianne had left us. Zane and Cherry were here, but all the other shifters had gone to the lupanar. They were going to finish the ceremony that had been interrupted last night. Bully for them.

Asher was somewhere in the house. I didn't know where and didn't want to know. Too much was happening too damned fast. I needed some time to regroup. And I wasn't going to get it.

There was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"It's Damian."

"Go away."

"There's a vampire down here with one of Sheriff Wilkes's deputies. They say they have to talk to you or Richard. They aren't treating this like police business."

That got my attention. I stopped pacing and went to the door. Damian stood there, still wearing the vest that Barnaby had ripped all the buttons off of. When Colin's human servant died, Barnaby had given up the fight and flown away. Damian's suit was black in bright light and made his skin look unbelievably white.

"What did they say exactly?" I asked.

"Just that they had a message for the two of you from Frank Niley."

"Fuck," I said, softly.

"They're sitting in the kitchen with Dr. Patrick and Asher."

"Tell Roxanne and Jamil that the bad guys are here. I'll go down and talk to them."

"The man has a gun," Damian said.

"So do I," I said. I walked down the hall, and Damian fell in step behind me.

Jason called from the door. "Wait for me."

"Follow at your own pace, Jason. I'm not waiting for you to trip down the stairs."

"Don't let her get killed, Damian," he said.

I called back over my shoulder, "He'll do what I tell him to do." An hour or so of thinking about everything I had learned had not improved my mood.

I clattered down the stairs. Damian followed like a soundless shadow at my back. Why hadn't Wilkes and his men stormed the place? I'd really expected them to just start shooting if they found out we hadn't left town. What message could they have from Niley? And where did the vampire come in? Dolph hadn't mentioned anything about Niley traveling with a vamp. Dolph hated vamps enough that he would have mentioned it. So many questions, and for once, I was going to get them answered almost as soon as I thought of them. How refreshing.

The kitchen looked normal. They'd scrubbed the blood off the linoleum and placed a fresh lace tablecloth on the table. Deputy Thompson sat in one of the kitchen chairs. He was in civvie clothes, no uniform. A tall, thin vampire that I'd never seen before sat in the chair beside him. Dr. Patrick sat in the chair facing them with his back to the hallway, to us. Nathaniel took up the last chair. He was staring at the vampire.

Zane stood with his back against the sink. Asher leaned against the china cabinet close enough to Thompson that he could have touched him and certainly could prevent him from pulling the gun. The gun in question was a Berretta 10 mil in a shoulder holster. Same gun as on duty, just in a different holster. Letting Asher that close was careless, but Thompson didn't seem to think that.

He smiled at me, and the smile was confident, arrogant, like he had me where he wanted me, and I couldn't do anything about it. What was going on?

"How'd you find me?" I asked.

He stuck a thumb in the vampire's direction. "The local Master of the City told us he could still feel you in town. They helped us hunt you down. Evidently, you're easier to find than your boyfriend. Something about your power attracts them."

I stared at the vampire. His face was unreadable, pale and empty. His eyes were dark grey, his hair straight and black. It was cut short and smoothed back over his forehead in a pompadour. That was what they'd called it in the fifties. The hairdo matched the feel of him in my head. He wasn't fifty years dead yet.

"What's your name?"

"Donald."

"Hi, Donald, missed you at the wienie roast."

Anger flared across the vampire's face. He wasn't old enough to hide it. "You told my master that you were here just to get your third out of jail. Once you had accomplished that, you should have gone home. You pretended to leave town but did not. If you had simply left, we would have accepted the

murder of our people. By staying, you show that you intend to possess our lands and my master's power."

"Have you talked to your master lately?" I asked. "Or more importantly, has he talked to his human servant lately?"

The vampire glared at me, but there was no power to it. "Colin is injured but not yet dead. But the Council will slay you for . . . killing his servant."

Asher said, "A human servant gives up their safe conduct if they attack another vampire directly. That is Council law. Anita did nothing that the Council will hunt her for. If Colin persists in trying to harm us, it is he the Council will hunt down and destroy."

"Enough of the vampire crap," I said. I turned back to Thompson. "So, what's the message? I thought if we were still here after dark, Frank was going to do us all personally."

"Ol' Frank seems scared shitless of you. Howard keeps mumbling that the signs are real bad, that they need to leave town now. That if they stay, you'll kill them all."

I raised an eyebrow. "Having met Niley and his crew, I'm flattered at being their bogeyman. Now, what the fuck is the message?"

Thompson brought a small white box out of his pocket. It was like something you'd buy an inexpensive necklace in. He held it out to me with a smile that was so unpleasant, it made me afraid to take the box.

"It won't bite," he said.

I glanced at Asher. He shrugged.

I took the box. It was tacky on the bottom. I raised it to see a brownish stain on the white cardboard. The box was light but not empty. "What's in here?"

"Don't want to spoil the surprise," Thompson said.

I took a deep breath and lifted the lid off. There was a lock of hair, curled over some cotton. The hair was long and thick and chestnut brown, tied with a bit of red ribbon like you'd use on a present. I lifted the lock of hair and it fell across my palm. The cotton it had been resting on was stained at one corner. Stained reddish brown.

I fought to keep my face blank. "So?" I said.

"Don't you recognize it? Zeeman's baby brother donated that."

"You didn't get blood cutting Daniel's hair," I said.

"No," he smiled, laughed, squirming in his chair like a kid who couldn't wait for the rest of the joke, "There's another little present in the box. Lift up the cotton."

I laid the hair on the table. It lay there curled and gleaming. I didn't want to lift the cotton. I didn't want to see what else they'd cut off of Daniel. The one consolation I had was that of the many awful possibilities that flashed through my mind, most of them were too big to fit into the box.

I lifted the cotton and fell to my knees like someone had struck me. I knelt there, staring down at the tip of a little finger that was far too delicate to be Daniel's. The nail polish on the finger was still perfect, smooth, pale. Nothing déclassé about Richard's mother.

Dr. Patrick had to leave the table and throw up in the sink. Soft touch for a doctor and a werewolf.

"What is it?" Cherry asked.

I couldn't speak.

Asher answered because he could see over my shoulder into the box. "It's a woman's finger."

Jason had just entered the room. "What did you just say?"

The vampire, Donald, said, "What have you done, human?"

"We have Richard's brother and his mother," Thompson said. "I thought we'd just kill you, but Niley's paying the money. He wants to give you a way out besides killing. He seems to think if he doesn't try to kill you, you won't try and kill him. Funny, ain't it?"

I finally looked up, away from Charlotte Zeeman's finger. "What do you want?"

"You leave town tonight. We release Richard's mother and brother tomorrow morning, when we're sure you really are gone. If you don't leave this time, Niley will keep trimming pieces off of Zeeman's family. Maybe an ear next time, maybe something bigger." He was grinning as he said it. Thompson was a sadistic brute, but he didn't understand me at all, or he wouldn't have been smiling.

There was a look on Donald the vampire's face that said he did understand me.

I stood up very slowly. I laid the box on the table beside the lock of hair. My voice was amazingly calm, almost empty of inflection. "Where are they?"

"We left them safe and sound," Thompson said.

"I did not know what they had done," the vampire said. "I did not know they had mutilated your third's family."

I shook my head. "You see, that's the problem, Donald. When you play with bad guys, you can't control how bad they are. You both just left Daniel and Charlotte, just left them there."

"Yeah," Thompson said. "Ol' Don here picked me up in his car."

I was staring at the finger. I couldn't seem to not look at it. I raised my eyes to Donald the vampire. "So, you both know where they are," I said.

Donald's eyes went wide. He whispered, "I didn't know."

Asher moved forward and laid hands on Thompson's shoulders.

Thompson wasn't worried. "If anything happens to us, they'll do worse to both of them. Richard's mom is a real attractive woman. Be a shame to change that."

Donald said, "I am sorry about what they did, but my orders are the same. You must leave our territory tonight."

"Use the kitchen phone. Tell them we give. Tell them don't hurt them, and we're out of here."

Thompson smirked. "No, no phone calls. They're giving us two hours. Then, if we're not back, they'll start cutting things off that will affect a lot more than her typing."

I nodded and pulled the Browning. I pointed it and shot it in one motion. I didn't even remember aiming. The vampire's head exploded in a cloud of blood and brains. The body rocked back and fell, taking the chair with it.

Asher held Thompson in his seat. Some of the blood had splattered Thompson's face. A glob of something thicker than blood was trailing down his forehead. He was trying to bat at the piece of flesh, but Asher held him.

I took the gun out from under his arm and pointed the Browning at his forehead.

Thompson stopped fighting and glared up at me. I had to give him credit. Covered in blood and brains, held down by a vampire, staring at the barrel of a gun, and he was putting on a brave show. "Kill me, it won't get you anything but them cut to pieces."

"Tell me where they are, Thompson, and I'll go get them."

"Fuck you! You're going to kill me, anyway."

"I give you my word that if you tell us where they are, and we get them out alive, you get to live."

"I don't believe you, bitch."

"Problem with being a traitorous, untrustworthy, wretch, Thompson, is you begin to believe everyone else is the same way." I put the safety on the Browning and reholstered it. He watched me do it, puzzled. "I keep my word, Thompson. Do you want to live or not?"

"Niley and Linus Beck are a hell of a lot scarier than you will ever be, chickie."

He'd called me bitch and chickie. He was either stupid, or . . . "You're trying to get me to kill you."

"If I talk, my life is over. And Niley won't just shoot me." Thompson stared up at me, and there was a knowledge in his eyes that he was already dead. It was only a matter of how and who. And he preferred me, now, to Niley, later.

"He doesn't fear death," Asher said softly.

I shook my head. "No, he doesn't."

"We could call the cops," Jason offered.

"If he's not scared of you guys, he won't be scared of the state cops." I stood staring down at Thompson. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you, Thompson, but I'll tell you what I won't do. I won't sit here for two hours and watch the time tick away. I won't let Daniel and Charlotte die."

"Then leave town," Thompson said.

"I've met Niley, Thompson. Do you really expect me to believe that he's going to let them go?"

"He said he would."

"You believe him?" I asked.

Thompson just looked at me.

"I didn't think so."

Asher's fingers kneaded the man's shoulders almost like he was massaging them. "There are other things to fear besides death, Anita. If you have the stomach for it."

I looked into that beautiful, tragic face and couldn't read it. "What do you have in mind?"

"An eye for an eye, I think," the vampire said.

I stared into crystalline blue eyes and let the idea grow in my head like a horrible flower. A lot of people who could face being shot, quick death, blanched at torture. I was one of them. And that's what we were talking about.

"I believe the deputy will tell us where they are within the next half hour, if we are ruthless," Asher said. "I will do the dirty work, as it were. You need only permit it."

Thompson looked worried. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Jason," I said.

He came to stand beside me. He stared down at what lay on the table. He didn't say anything, but tears slid silently down his face. He'd been over at the Zeeman house for a lot of Sunday dinners.

"Help hold Thompson," I said.

Jason went to stand on the other side, pinning one arm to the top of the table. Asher still held his shoulders.

I looked at Asher and nodded. "Do it."

"Damian, if you would be so kind as to fetch me a knife. One with a serrated edge would be best. It will go through bone better."

Damian just turned and walked across the kitchen. Zane and he started opening drawers.

"What are you going to do?" Thompson said.

"Guess," I said.

"I didn't cut anything off of that bitch. I didn't touch them. It was that strange goon that Niley has. Linus Beck. He cut the finger off. He did it. I didn't do anything."

"Don't worry, Thompson. We'll get to Linus. But right now, you're all we've got."

Damian had a big serrated butcher knife. He stalked towards the table with it.

Thompson was struggling now. It was hard to hold him sitting. "Better take him to the floor," I said.

Nathaniel helped. They held him facedown, one on each arm, Nathaniel pinning his legs. Thompson was a big, strong man, but he couldn't fight them. They were too strong. Far too strong.

Thompson was screaming. "Fuck you!"

Damian held the knife out to Asher. "I'll hold him."

I touched Damian's arm and shook my head. "No, I'll do it."

Damian looked at me.

"The rule is never ask anyone to do something you won't do yourself. If I can't do this, then we won't do it at all. We'll find another way."

Jason looked up from holding the struggling man. "There is no other way." I'd never seen such rage in his eyes.

"Could you do it?" I asked. "Could you chop him up?"

Jason gave a slow nod. "I could bite his fucking fingers off one by one for what's in that box." He seemed to mean it, and it made me think I didn't know Jason at all.

"We can do this, Anita," Asher said, "and it will cost us nothing."

"It should cost, Asher. If we're going to do something this evil, it should bother whoever does it."

"It isn't evil," Asher said. "It is practical. It is even justice."

I held my hand out for the knife. "It's evil, and we all know it. Now, give me the knife. Either I can do this, or we do something else."

Damian just stood there, holding the knife. "Let me do this for you, Anita, please."

"Give me the damn knife."

He gave it to me because he couldn't do anything else. I knelt down by Thompson. "Where are they, Thompson?" I asked.

"No, no, Niley told me what they'd do to me if I helped you. He's fucking crazy."

"Wait," Zane said. He had found a small cleaver. "This will work better."

"Thanks." I took it, checked it for balance. I wasn't sure I could do it. I wasn't even sure I wanted to be able to do it. In fact, I knew that I hoped I couldn't do it. But if we were really going to do this, I had to be the one. I did it, or we found another way. Charlotte Zeeman's finger was lying in a box. In less than two hours, they'd cut something else off. I'd killed the vampire, splattered Thompson with blood and brains, and he wasn't talking. He was a mean son of a bitch, but he was tough, too. Charlotte and Daniel didn't have time for him to be tough. We had to break him, and we had to break him fast. I gave myself all the reasons. They were good reasons, real reasons. And still, I didn't know if I could do it.

"We'll start with a finger, Thompson. Just like Linus did," I said.

He was screaming, "Don't, please, don't! Oh, God, don't!"

Asher was leaning almost his full weight on the flat of the man's palm, forcing his fingers to spread wide. "Tell me where they are, and it won't happen," I said.

"Niley said they'd cut me open and make me eat my own intestines. Says he did it once in Miami. I believe him."

"I believe him, too, Thompson. And you don't believe we'll do it, do you? You don't believe we're as crazy as Niley."

"No one is as crazy as Niley."

I raised the cleaver up. "You're wrong." I stayed frozen for one long moment. I couldn't make myself start the stroke. I couldn't do it. Daniel, Charlotte.

"Has Niley raped Daniel yet?" I asked it in a voice that was so empty, it was like I wasn't there.

Thompson stopped struggling. He lay very still. He rolled his eyes upward. "Please don't."

I stared into his eyes when I said the next, "Did you rape Charlotte Zeeman?" I saw the fear in his eyes. That flash that said he'd done it. It was

enough. I could do it. God forgive me. I got the little finger and the tip of the next one, because he moved. But they got better at holding him down, and I got better at cutting. Thompson told us where they were keeping Daniel and Charlotte Zeeman. In less than fifteen minutes he would have told us the ingredients to the secret sauce or anything else. He'd have confessed to killing Hoffa, or dancing with the devil. Anything, anything to make it stop.

I threw up in the corner until there was nothing but bile, and my head felt like it was going to explode. And I knew that I'd finally done something that I wouldn't recover from. Somewhere in the first blow or the second, I'd broken something inside myself that would never heal. And I was content with it. If we got Daniel and Charlotte back, I was content with it. A hard, cold knot filled me. It was beyond hate. I would make them pay for what they'd done. I would kill them. I would kill them all.

I felt strangely light and empty, and I wondered if this was what it was like to be crazy. It didn't feel too bad. Later, when the shock wore off, I'd feel worse. Later, I'd wonder if there had been another way to get Thompson to talk. Later, I'd remember that I wanted to hurt him, wanted him to crawl and beg. That I wanted to take all the hurt that had happened to Charlotte and Daniel and carve it out of his flesh. Now we had to go rescue Daniel and Charlotte. Oh, one last thing. Thompson was screaming, high and piteously, like a wounded rabbit.

I shot him in the head. The screaming stopped.

Chapter 43

I was driving the van down narrow gravel roads in the dark. I'd insisted on driving because I wanted something to do. I didn't want to just sit and stare out the window. But I was beginning to think I should have let someone else drive, because I didn't seem to be too real yet. I felt light and empty, shocky, but not guilty. Not yet. Thompson had earned his death. He'd raped Richard's mother. They'd tortured Richard's mother. They'd raped Daniel. They'd tortured Daniel. They all deserved to die.

Jamil and Nathaniel were in the back of the van with Roxanne and Ben. The lupa would not be left out of the fight, even though she'd had to be carried out to the van by her bodyguard. I didn't have time to fight with Roxanne, so she got to come.

Jason and Dr. Patrick got to ride up front with me. Zane and Cherry had been sent to the lupanar to get Richard and the rest. But we weren't waiting. I didn't trust Niley not to get creative. No, I didn't trust Linus and his master. How much control did Niley have over his pet psychopath? They'd already

raped them. What else had happened to them by now? Niley had no rules. I knew that.

I was gripping the steering wheel so hard it hurt. The headlights cut a golden tunnel through the blackness. Trees crowded the road so close that they scraped at the van's roof with thick, clawing fingers. The trees seemed to squeeze down around us like a fist. The headlights glowed over the dirt road, but it wasn't enough light. It would never be enough light. There wasn't enough light in the world to chase away this darkness.

"I can't believe you did that," Patrick said. He was on the far side, pressed against the passenger-side door as if afraid to get too close to me.

Jason was in the middle. "Let it go, Patrick," he said.

"She chopped him up like an animal, then she shot him."

This was the third time he'd said pretty much the exact same thing.

"Shut up," Jason said.

"I will not. It was barbaric."

"I'm not having a good night, Patrick. Drop it," I said.

"The fuck you say," he said.

"Thompson was screaming, in pain," I said.

"And you killed him," Patrick said.

"Someone had to finish it," I said.

"What the hell are you talking about? Finish it!" His voice was rising, and I was beginning to debate how angry Roxanne would be if I shot him. After what I'd already done tonight, it didn't seem like such a big deal.

"How long have you been lukoi?" Jason asked.

The question gave us a moment of surprised silence, then, "Two years."

"And what's the rule about hunting?" Jason asked.

"Which one?"

"Don't be coy, Patrick," Jason said. "You know which one."

Patrick was silent long enough that the only sounds were the whir of the engine, the wheels on the road. The van rocked softly over the rutted road. Was it just my imagination or was there a sound underneath the engine's roar, a high, keening, scream? Naw, my imagination. My imagination was not going to be my friend for a while.

Patrick finally said, "Never begin a hunt unless you mean to kill."

"That's the one," Jason said.

"But this wasn't a hunt," Patrick said.

"Yes, it was," Jason said. "We just weren't hunting the deputy."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

I answered, "It means we're hunting the people in that house."

Patrick turned a pale face to me in the dark. "You can't mean that we are to kill all of them. Only one man cut off her finger. Only one man is guilty."

"They watched. They did nothing to prevent it. It's the same as doing it in the eyes of the law," I said.

"You are not the law," he said.

"Oh, yes, I am."

"No, you're not. Damn it, no, you are not!"

"Anyone who harms the pack without just cause is our enemy," I said.

"Don't quote pack law to me, human."

"How do we deal with our enemies?" I asked.

Jason answered, "Death."

"Most packs don't hold to the old laws anymore, and you both know it," Patrick said.

"Look, Patrick, I don't have time to explain it all, so here's the *Reader's Digest* version. Niley and crew raped and tortured Richard's mother and brother. We are going to kill them for that. All of them."

"What about Sheriff Wilkes and his men?"

"If Thompson helped rape Richard's mom, then he wasn't the only one. Anyone who touched either of them is dead. Do you understand that, Patrick? Dead."

"I can't do it," he said.

"Then stay in the car," I said, "but shut the fuck up or I'm going to shoot you."

"See," he said, "see, your conscience is bothering you."

I glanced at him huddled in the dark. "No, my conscience isn't bothering me. Not yet. Maybe later. Maybe not. But now, tonight, I don't feel bad about what I did. I wanted Thompson to hurt. I wanted to punish him for what he did. And you know what, Patrick? It wasn't enough. It will never be enough, because I killed him too fucking quick." Tears were threatening at the back of my throat again. When the numbness and anger wore off, I was going to be in trouble. I had to hold onto the adrenaline, the rage. It would see me through the night. Tomorrow, well, we'd see.

"There had to be another way," Patrick said.

"I didn't hear you offering any suggestions at the time."

"What's bothering the good doctor," Jason said, "is that he didn't say anything. He didn't do anything to stop us."

I appreciated the "us."

"I didn't hold him down," Patrick said. "I didn't touch him."

"All you had to do was say, 'Stop, don't,' but you kept quiet. You let us chop him up. You let us kill him and didn't say a damn word," Jason said.

"Your conscience wasn't working so hard while he was still alive."

Patrick didn't say anything for a long time. We bumped over the road, avoiding tree branches and dirt-filled holes. There was nothing but the darkness, the golden tunnel of headlights, and the engine-filled silence. I wasn't sure silence was my favorite thing right now, but it was better than listening to Patrick tell me what a monster I was. I agreed with him, which made it harder to hear.

Then something filled the silence that was even harder to hear. Patrick was crying. He huddled against the far door, as far from both of us as he could get, and cried softly. Finally, he said, "You're right. I did nothing, and that will haunt me for the rest of my days."

"Join the club," I said.

He peered at me through the darkness. "Then why did you do it?"

"Someone had to."

"I will never forget the sight of you chopping him up. This little girl . . . The look on your face when you killed him. God, you looked blank like you weren't even there. Why did you have to be the one to do it?"

"Would it have been better if one of the guys had done it?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Please don't tell me this is some macho shit. That you're this upset because a girl did it?"

Patrick snuffled. "I guess it is. I mean, I guess it wouldn't seem so horrible if one of the others had done it. You're this pretty little thing. You shouldn't be chopping people's fingers off."

"Oh, please," I said.

"I will go to my grave seeing the look on your face at the last."

"Keep it up, and you'll go sooner than later," I mumbled.

"What did you say?" Patrick asked.

"Nothing," I said.

Jason made a small sound that might have been a laugh. If he only knew how unfunny the comment had been. I was having enough trouble with what I'd just done. I didn't need a sobbing Jiminy Cricket to emphasize the fact that I'd fallen into the abyss. The monster wasn't breathing down my neck; it was inside my head. Inside my head, fat and well-fed. What made me so sure the monster was home was the fact that I didn't feel guilty. I felt bad because I was supposed to feel bad and didn't. I had to have some personal line that could not be crossed, and I'd thought torture was it. And I'd been wrong.

Tears tightened my throat, but I'd be damned if I'd cry. It was done. I had to let it go—or at least push it back long enough to get the job done. The job was to rescue Daniel and Charlotte. If I didn't get them out, then it had all been for nothing. I'd added a new nightmare for nothing. But it was more than that. I couldn't face Richard if I let them die. I'd been angry with him, pissed, but now I wasn't. I'd have given a great deal for him to hold me right now. Of course, he'd have probably agreed with Patrick. Richard would be a very wise man if he didn't attempt to lecture me tonight.

But it wasn't just Richard. I'd met the entire Zeeman clan. They were so close to perfect that it made my teeth ache. The family might never recover from a loss like this. My family hadn't. I was counting on Daniel and Charlotte to recover from the torture. I was counting on them being strong enough to not let that alone be enough to destroy them. I hoped I was right. No. I prayed I was right.

Thompson had told us what room they were keeping them in. It was in the back, near the woods, as far from the road as possible. Not a surprise. There might have been information that Thompson had that could have been useful. Maybe I should have used less torture and more threat. Maybe that would have gotten us more detailed info faster. Maybe, maybe not. I was new at interrogation by torture, lacked the proper technique, I suppose. I would have said I'd get better with practice, except I wasn't doing it again. I might have the screaming meemies forever from just this one incident, but if I did it again, it

was over. They'd have to wrap me up and put me away. I kept flashing on the feel of the cleaver biting into the floor. I remembered thinking that I didn't feel it go through the bone. I just felt it bite into the floor underneath. I saw the fingers go in a wash of blood, but not as much blood as you'd think, for some reason.

"Anita, Anita, the turnoff."

I blinked and slammed on the brakes, throwing everyone forward. I was the only one wearing a seat belt. I usually remember to have everyone buckle up. Careless of me.

Jason peeled himself off the dashboard, pushed back to the seat, and said, "Are you okay?"

I backed the van up slowly. "I'm fine."

"Liar," he said.

I eased the van back until I could see the white sign that said, "Greene Valley House." You didn't expect to find a house with a name at the end of a dirt road, but there you are. Just because the road isn't paved doesn't mean the people don't have style or maybe pretensions. Sometimes it's awfully hard to tell the difference.

This road was gravel. The gravel pinged against the underside of the van, even at less than twenty miles an hour. I slowed down further. Roxanne knew the house. She'd grown up with the Greenes' son. They'd been best friends until the hormones kicked in and he started trying to play boy to her girl. But she knew the house. There was a clearing about halfway down the road where we should park the van. The clearing was right on schedule. I pulled the van into the weeds. They whisked against the metal, whipping the tires. The black van was sort of invisible, parked in the trees. It was also sort of wedged. We wouldn't be moving it quickly. Of course, I wasn't planning on us having to make a run for it. My priority was to get Daniel and Charlotte out as unharmed as possible. I had no other priority. It made things simple. We secured the hostages, then we killed everybody. Simple.

Part of me hoped that Richard got here in time for the assault. Part of me didn't. One, I wasn't sure how he'd take the news about his family. Two, I wasn't sure how he'd take my game plan. And I didn't want to argue. I'd paid the price to get here. We'd play it the way I wanted it.

Someone touched my arm, and I jumped so badly I couldn't speak for a second. My heart filled my throat until I couldn't breathe. "Anita, it's Jason. You okay?"

The passenger-side door was open, and Patrick wasn't in sight. I heard movement coming up on my side of the van. It was Nathaniel. He tapped softly on the window. I lowered it.

"Everyone's out of the back," he said.

I nodded.

"Give us a few minutes," Jason said.

Nathaniel went back to the rear of the van without another word. He did follow orders well.

"Talk to me, Anita."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"You keep staring off into space for minutes at a time. You're not even here. We need you for this to work. Daniel and Mrs. Zeeman need you."

My head turned slowly of its own accord, and I glared at him. "I have done my best for them tonight. I have gone above and beyond my personal best for them tonight."

"Until they're safe, it's not over."

"I know that. Don't you think I know that? If I don't get them out alive, then what I did was for nothing."

"And what do you think you did?" he asked.

I shook my head. "You saw."

"I helped hold him down."

"I'm sorry about that."

Jason put a hand on each shoulder and shook me gently. "Damn it, Anita, get a grip. It isn't like you to wallow in the horror. You're a good soldier. You kill and keep going like you're supposed to."

I pushed him away from me. "I tortured a man, Jason. I reduced him to something that writhed on the floor, mewling with terror and pain. And I wanted to do it. I wanted him to hurt because of what they'd done to Charlotte and Daniel. I wanted to do it." I shook my head. "I'll do my bit tonight, but forgive me if it's a little harder to keep going than normal. Forgive me if I'm not superwoman, after all."

"Not superwoman?" he exclaimed, putting a hand on his chest in mock surprise. "You've lied to me all these years!"

It made me smile, and I didn't want to smile. "Stop it."

"Stop what? Cheering you up? Or is life supposed to stop because you did something horrible? I'll tell you the real horrible truth, Anita. No matter what you do or how bad you feel about it, life just goes on. Life doesn't give a fuck that you're sorry or upset or deranged or tormented. Life just goes on, and you gotta go on with it, or sit in the middle of the road and feel sorry for yourself. And I don't see you doing that."

"I am not feeling sorry for myself."

"You aren't all broken up about Thompson. You're broken up because of what you did to Thompson and how it makes you feel. You don't give a rat's ass about him. You're just weeping and gnashing your teeth about how much of a monster you are. Well, I get enough of that from Richard. I don't need it from you. So get your act together. We've got people we care about to save."

I stared at him. "You know what's really bothering me?"

"No, what?"

"I don't feel bad about cutting Thompson up. I think he deserved it."

"He did," Jason said.

"No one deserves to be tortured, Jason. No one deserves what we did—what I did—to him. That's what the front of my brain keeps telling me. It keeps telling me I should feel sorry about it, horrified. This should be something that breaks me. But you know what?"

"What?" Jason asked.

"It won't break me, because right now the only thing I regret is that I didn't have enough nerve to cut off his dick and keep it as a souvenir for Richard's mom. Killing him, even torturing him, wasn't enough. The Zeemans are like the fucking Waltons. To think that anyone could come in and take that away—spoil it forever—just makes me so angry—so angry that all I can do is kill them. Kill them all. There's no regret in me." I looked at him in the dark. "There should be regret for something, Jason. I can kill and not blink. Now I can torture and not regret it. I've become one of the monsters, and if it will save Richard's family, I am happy to be one."

"Feel any better?" Jason said.

"Yeah, I do. I'm a monster, but it's for a good cause."

"To save Richard's mom, I'd do a hell of a lot worse than cut a few fingers off," Jason said.

"Me, too," I said.

"Then let's do it," he said.

We got out of the van and went to do it.

Chapter 44

Everyone had melted into the woods like stones thrown on the surface of some dark lake. Even Ben, who was carrying Roxanne, had vanished. I moved through the trees at a slower, more human pace. Nathaniel stayed with me like a well-trained dog. I almost wished he'd gone off with the others. His company was not comforting because though he was able-bodied and a wereleopard, I wasn't sure I should be taking him into a fight.

He crouched beside me, hand on my arm, pulling me down. I went to my knees beside him, gun ready. He pointed to our right, and I heard it: someone crashing through the underbrush. It wasn't one of us.

I put my mouth near his ear. "Get behind whoever it is. Drive them towards me."

He nodded and slipped into the trees. I got behind a large tree, using it as a shield. My plan was to shove the Browning into whoever it was and find out what was happening in the house.

Someone gasped, and now they were running full-out. I felt the movement in the trees without really seeing it. The shape-shifters were driving him towards me. Nathaniel had found the others and spread the word. If it was some innocent hiker . . . I couldn't think of an apology strong enough. Oh, well.

A figure crashed through the trees and right past me. I had to grab his arm and spin him around into the tree to get his attention. I shoved the gun barrel under his chin and only then realized who I had. It was Howard the psychic.

"Don't kill me," he gasped.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I can help you."

"Start talking," I said.

"Milo and Wilkes's deputies are up there, arguing about who gets to kill the man."

I pressed the gun barrel into his throat until he had to go on tiptoe. He was making a wild sound high in his throat. "Did you enjoy Charlotte Zeeman? Was she a good lay?"

He tried to talk but couldn't do it around the gun barrel. I thought about shoving the barrel through his throat until he gagged on his blood and died. I took a deep breath and eased down enough for him to speak instead. "Dear God, I didn't touch the woman. I didn't touch either of them. I'm a clairvoyant, for God's sake. I couldn't bear to touch someone during a rape or torture," Howard said.

I believed him. And I knew if later I found out he was lying, the world wasn't big enough to hide him. I knew with a cold certainty that if he were guilty, he would pay. "You said Daniel's at the house? Where's Charlotte?"

"Niley and Linus have taken her to use her blood to call up his demon. They're going to have the demon search the land for the lance. Niley plans on leaving tonight."

"You can't send a demon to find a holy relic," I said.

"Linus thinks the blasphemy of it will appeal to his master."

"Why are you running away, Howard?"

"There is no spear. I lied."

I eased up on the gun more and blinked at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You know how hard it is to make a living as a clairvoyant. So many horrible memories, and you usually end up working with the police for no money. I'd been using my powers to get myself in good with wealthy people who weren't so careful about the law. I'd promise them something, but it wouldn't be real. Then they'd be too embarrassed to go to the police about it. Or couldn't complain that they got cheated out of a stolen object. It worked. I only swindled crooks. It worked."

"Until Niley," I said.

"He's crazy. If he ever finds out I tricked him, he'll kill me and have Linus feed my soul to that thing."

"They're going to kill Charlotte to try and find something that isn't even here, you asshole."

"I know, I know, and I'm sorry. I am really, really sorry. I didn't know what he was capable of. Oh, God, let me go. Let me run away."

"You're going to get us into that house. You're going to help us rescue Daniel."

"There isn't time to rescue them both," Howard said. "They're going to kill the man and sacrifice the woman now. If I get you into the house, the woman will be dead before you can get to her."

Roxanne appeared on the other side of the tree, just there, like magic. Howard gasped. "I don't think so," she said. She opened a mouth full of fangs and snapped them near his face. Howard screamed.

She pressed clawed hands into the bark of the tree on either side of him and clawed long furrows in the bark. Howard fainted.

I left him with Roxanne and the vampires and Ben. When he came to, he'd get them into the house and they'd rescue Daniel. I'd take the rest and rescue Charlotte. There would be no choosing. No either/or. We would save them both. I had to believe it as I threw myself into the black woods. I unleashed that power inside me and sent it outward, casting like a net to catch . . . a faint, ruffling scent of evil. They'd know I was coming now, but it couldn't be helped. I ran like I'd run earlier in the day with Richard. I ran as if the ground told me where to go, and the trees opened up like welcoming hands. I ran in the dark and couldn't see and didn't need to. I felt Richard running, running towards us. I felt the hard edge of his panic and ran faster.

Chapter 45

They'd chosen the top of a hill that had once been meadow, but some time today they'd bush-hogged all the grass and meadow flowers so that the hill was bare and broken under the moonlight.

In the movies there would be an altar and maybe a fire or two, at least a torch. But there was nothing but darkness and a silver wash of moonlight. The palest thing in the clearing was Charlotte Zeeman's skin. She was tied naked to stakes driven into the ground. I thought at first she was unconscious, but her hands flexed and strained against the ropes. I was both happy to see her still fighting and sorry that she hadn't passed out.

Linus Beck was wearing the proverbial black hooded robe. I guess if it saved me from seeing him naked, I could live with it.

Niley stood by Linus. He was dressed in the same suit I'd seen him in earlier. They'd drawn a circle on the ground with something dark and powdery. Charlotte was inside the circle. She was food for the demon, bait.

Wilkes stood not eight feet from me, to my right. He had a high-powered rifle and was searching the darkness.

Linus's voice rose in a singsong rhythm that filled the night with echoes and movement as if the darkness itself shivered at the words.

Nathaniel and I lay on the ground at the line of trees, watching. Jason and Jamil were supposed to be on the other side of the clearing. A moment of concentration told me where they were. The marks with Richard were open and roaring. I'd never been so aware of the scent and sounds of a summer night. It

was like my skin expanded outward, touching every tree and bush. I was liquid and barely contained within my skin.

I felt Richard and the others moving through the trees like a solid wind. The lukoi were coming. But they were miles away, and the spell was almost complete. I could feel it growing, swelling, like a dank, unseen fog. The evil was coming.

There were shots from the house, echoing up the hill. Wilkes turned towards them and I went to one knee and sighted down my arms. The first shot hit him in the middle of his back. The second shot took him a little higher up the back because he was falling to his knees. He stayed motionless on his knees for one of those seconds that lasted an eternity. I had time to put a third bullet in his back.

A bullet hit the tree next to my head, and I rolled back into the underbrush. Three more shots hit the bushes where I had been. Niley had a gun, a semiauto that might hold eighteen bullets if he'd modified the clip. Not good. Of course, it might hold only ten. Hard to tell in the dark from this distance.

I sidled up to a tree, leaned my arm against it, and sighted on his shape in the bright darkness. I pulled off one careful shot and he went down. I wasn't sure how badly he was hit, but I'd hit something. He fired back, and I hit the ground.

Nathaniel crawled to me on his belly. "What do we do?"

Niley yelled, "You cannot cross the circle, Anita. If you kill us, all you can do is watch Charlotte die."

I risked a peek. Niley had taken cover. I could shoot Linus, but I wasn't a hundred percent sure what that would do to Charlotte. I didn't know what the spell entailed. I just didn't know that much about sorcery.

"What do you want, Niley?"

"Throw your gun out."

"You throw yours out, too, or I shoot Linus."

"What happens to Charlotte if Linus dies in midspell?"

"I'll take my chances. Throw out the gun."

He stood and tossed the gun off the side of the hill. I couldn't hear it hit over Linus's chanting, but he'd done it. I moved out of the trees and tossed the Browning away. I still had the Firestar.

"The other gun, too," Niley said. "Remember that Linus searched you earlier today."

I tossed the Firestar away into the broken grass. It was all right. This wasn't about guns anymore.

I felt the spell close. Linus's last word reverberated on the night like a great brass bell that had been struck slightly off-key, but it echoed for all the flatness of the note. It echoed and grew until the skin on my body tried to crawl away and hide, creeping as if every insect in the world were under my skin. For a second, I couldn't breathe or move. Then Niley's voice came, "You are too late, Anita. Too late."

Charlotte was screaming through the gag on her mouth. Screaming, over and over again, as fast as she could draw breath.

I stared across the meadow and found that there was something else in the circle. I wasn't sure if it was the blackness of it that made it hard to see, or if it was like smoke, never exactly one shape. It seemed to be about man height, maybe eight feet, not much more. It was so thin that it looked like it was made of sticks. Its legs were longer than they should have been, bent wrong somehow. I realized that the longer I stared at it, the more solid it was growing. The neck was a long serpentine, bent back on its shoulders like a heron, and it had a beak for a mouth. If it had eyes, I couldn't see them. The face looked blind and only half-formed.

"You are too late," Niley said again.

"No. I'm not." I stood and walked out of the trees. Niley seemed terribly confident now that the demon was here.

"Only Linus can send it back to whence it came. If you harm him, then it will certainly devour the fair Charlotte."

I ignored him because I knew the plan was for the thing to eat Charlotte. Let them think I believed they intended to save her. Let them think she was still useful as a hostage. I wanted to get close enough to see the circle of entrapment they'd put up.

Charlotte had stopped screaming. I could hear her voice trapped behind the gag, but she was speaking now, not screaming. A strong woman, a very strong woman.

The demon paced the edge of the circle, flicking a long, thin, whiplike tail. It was becoming progressively more agitated, moving around the circle like a prisoner trying its cell.

"The circle is complete," Linus said. "You are mine to command."

The demon hissed at him, and the sound made the inside of my skull ache. It turned and gazed at me, though it had no eyes. I was on the edge of the circle now. I could see that Charlotte had closed her eyes, and I knew now what she was doing. She was praying.

I dropped to my knees beside the circle. I didn't feel anything from it. Which meant it wasn't meant for me. Whatever it was meant to keep in or out, I wasn't one of them. "She's pure, Linus. She's pure of heart and soul. She isn't a fit sacrifice for this thing."

"The pure are a rare and fine treat for my master."

"No, you can't feed her soul to it, Linus. Her soul is spoken for, and this thing cannot touch her."

The demon moved as far away from Charlotte as the circle would allow. It wasn't happy. "Give it its orders, Linus," Niley said.

"I offer you a sacrifice of flesh and blood and soul. Take this my offering and do my bidding."

The demon moved to stand over Charlotte. It snapped its beak next to her face, and she shrieked. The prayers stopped, and it laughed, a sound like grinding metal.

"It's a circle against evil, isn't it, Linus? Just evil."

"You're a necromancer," Niley said. "You are evil."

"Don't believe everything you hear or even read, Niley."

The demon raised fingers to the moonlight, fingers that ended in black knives. Charlotte opened her eyes and screamed. The Lord's Prayer would have been reasonable, but I blanked. All I could think of was Christmas. "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over the flock by night." I stepped over the circle. It was nothing to me. It was meant to keep out and in evil. I wasn't evil.

"And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid."

The demon was chattering, snapping at me, razor claws slicing around me like fan blades, but it didn't touch me. "And the angel said unto them. Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." I knelt and started untying Charlotte. When I pulled her gag away, she started to recite with me. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

I cradled Charlotte's naked body in my arms. She clung to me and cried, and I was crying, too. And I knew I had to get us out of that circle because I only remembered about three more verses.

"And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Charlotte couldn't stand, and I had to half carry her. We stumbled near the edge of the circle, and the demon rushed us in a wave of clattering, snapping, horror. "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying . . ." I stared down at the circle as I prayed, that carefully constructed circle . . . "glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill toward men." I erased the circle with my hand. I broke Linus's circle of protection.

The demon threw back its head and shrieked. The sound was like a rooster's crow or maybe a growl or maybe something else. It was as if even hearing it, I couldn't hold it in my mind.

It rushed out of the circle and fell on Linus. It was his turn to scream and scream as fast as he could draw breath. Blood flew in a wash, sprinkling us like rain.

And suddenly, there were flashlights and men yelling, "FBI. Don't move." FBI?

The flashlights found the demon. The light glistened on the beak, and blood shimmered on it as if it had bathed in it. If they hadn't tried to shoot it, I think it would have left them alone. But they fired into it, and I pushed Charlotte to the grass, hiding her body under mine.

The demon rushed into the feds, and they started dying. I yelled, "Bullets won't work! Pray. Pray, damn it, pray!"

I tried to lead by example and found finally that I could remember the Lord's Prayer. A man's voice echoed mine, then another. I heard someone else doing the 'Bless me, oh, Lord, for I have sinned' liturgy. Someone else was praying, and it wasn't Christian. Hindu I think, but every religion has demons. Every religion has prayers. All it takes is faith. Nothing like a real, live demon to give you some of that old-time religion.

The demon stood with a man's body raised to its mouth. The neck was cut and it was lapping the blood with a long, sticky tongue. But at least it wasn't killing anyone else.

Prayers rose up into the darkness, and I bet none of them had ever prayed so hard, in church or out. The demon stood on its crooked legs and walked back to me. Charlotte was muttering a new prayer. I think it was the Song of Solomon. Funny what you'll remember under stress.

It pointed a long finger at me and spoke in a voice that was deep and rusted as if it wasn't much used. "Free," it said.

"Yes," I said, "you're free."

The beak and the blind face seemed to waver. For just an instant I thought I saw a man's face, pure and almost shining, but I would never be sure. It said, "Thank you," and vanished.

Feds were everywhere. One of them gave Charlotte his coat that said F.B.I. on the back. I helped her sit up and slip the coat over her. It hit her at mid thigh.

Sometimes, it was good to be small. One of the feds turned out to be Maiden. I just stared up at him in shock.

He smiled and knelt beside us. "Daniel is all right. He's going to make it."

Charlotte grabbed his coat sleeve. "What did they do to my boy?"

His smile vanished. "They were going to beat him to death. I'd called for backup, but . . . They're dead, Mrs. Zeeman. They won't ever hurt you again. I am so sorry that I wasn't there earlier today to help you, both of you."

She nodded. "You saved my boy's life, didn't you?"

Maiden looked at the ground, then nodded.

"Then don't apologize to me," she said.

"What is a federal agent doing posing as a small-town deputy?" I asked.

"When Niley came nosing around down here, they put me under with Wilkes. It worked."

"You called the state cops," I said.

He nodded. "Yeah."

Another agent came over, and Maiden excused himself.

I felt Richard arrive. Felt them slip through the trees. And I knew that some of them at least weren't in human form.

I called the agent over that had given Charlotte his coat. "There are some werewolves in the woods. They are friends. They were coming to help. Don't let anyone shoot them, okay?"

He stared down at me. "Werewolves?"

I looked at him. "I didn't know the FBI was going to show up. I needed the backup."

That made him laugh, and he started telling everyone to put their weapons up and not to shoot the werewolves. I don't think everyone was happy about it, but they did what they were told.

A woman in EMS gear knelt by us. She started looking Charlotte over, shining lights in her eyes and asking silly questions, like did she know the date and where she was.

Richard was suddenly there, still in human form, though he'd stripped down to jeans and his hiking boots. Charlotte flung herself from my arms to his, crying all over again. I stood up and left Charlotte to her son and the medical crew.

Richard grabbed my hand before I could wander off. He stared up at me, tears shining in the moonlight. "Thank you for my mother."

I squeezed his hand and left them to it. If I didn't leave them alone, I was going to cry again.

Another EMS came up to me. "Are you Anita Blake?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Franklin Niley wants to speak with you. He's dying. There's nothing we can do for him."

I went with him to talk to Niley. He was lying on his back. They'd set up an IV bag and tried to stop the bleeding, but he was cut up pretty bad. I stood so that he could look up at me without straining.

He licked his lips, and it took him two tries to speak. "How did you pass the circle?"

"It was meant to trap evil inside or keep it out. I'm not evil."

"You raise the dead," he said.

"I'm a necromancer. I was kind of doubting where that put me on the scale of good and evil, but apparently God's okay with it."

"You stepped into the circle not knowing if you would be safe?" He was frowning, clearly puzzled.

"I couldn't just sit there and watch Charlotte die."

"You would have sacrificed yourself for her?"

I thought about that for a second or two. "I didn't think about it that clearly, but I couldn't let her die, not if I could save her."

He winced, closed his eyes, then looked at me. "No matter what the cost to you personally?"

"I guess so," I said.

He looked past me, eyes starting to lose their focus. "Extraordinary, extraordinary." His breath sighed outward, and he died. The EMS crew fell on him like vultures, but he was gone. They never got him breathing again.

Jason was suddenly beside me. "Anita, Nathaniel's dying."

"What are you talking about?"

"He caught two bullets in the chest when people were shooting at the demon. The feds were using silver shot because they knew what Linus was."

"Oh, God." I took Jason's hand. "Take me to him."

There were paramedics on either side of him. There was another IV, and they'd set up a lamp. Nathaniel's skin was pale and waxy in the light. Sweat covered him like dew. When I knelt beside him and tried to push my way past the paramedics, his pale eyes didn't see me.

I let the paramedics push me out of the way. I sat there in the weeds and listened to Nathaniel try to breathe through two holes in his chest. The bad guys hadn't shot him. He'd gotten caught in stray fire from the good guys. It was just a stupid accident. He was going to die because he'd been standing in the wrong

place at the wrong time. No, I would not let an accident take him. I would not lose another person I knew to bad timing.

I looked up at Jason. "Is Marianne here?"

"I'll look." He went running into the chaos.

Nathaniel's back bowed upward. His breath rasped out. He lay back on the ground, horribly still. One of the paramedics shook his head and got up. He took some of the equipment and went to help someone else.

I crawled around to take his place at Nathaniel's side. I looked across at the other paramedic. It was a woman with a blond ponytail.

"Is there anything you can do?"

She looked at me. "Are you a friend?"

I nodded.

"Close?"

I nodded.

"I'm sorry," she said.

I shook my head. "No, I won't let him die." I wasn't evil. Everything that I'd done, and my faith was still pure. When I spoke the words, they were just as real to me as when I'd memorized them all those years ago for the Christmas pageant. The words still moved me. I never doubted God. I doubted me. But maybe God was a more generous God than I allowed him to be. Jason was there with Marianne.

I grabbed her hand. "Help me call the munin."

She didn't argue, just knelt beside me. "Remember the feel of his body. Remember his smile. The smell of his hair and skin."

I nodded. "He smells like vanilla and fur." I knelt by him, touching his skin, but it was already growing cool to the touch. He was dying. I didn't feel sexy in the least. I felt sad and frightened. I bowed my head and prayed. I prayed to be opened to Raina. I prayed to open my eyes and look at Nathaniel and feel lust. It was a weird thing to be praying for, but it was worth a try. I felt that measure of calm that I sometimes got when I prayed. It doesn't mean you'll get what you asked for, but it does mean that someone is listening.

I opened my eyes slowly and stared down at Nathaniel. There were leaves in his long, unbound hair. I pulled them away. I held his hair in my hands and buried my face in it. It still smelled like vanilla. I rubbed my cheek against his, burying my face behind his ear into the silk of his hair. I laid a hand over the wounds with my face still buried in his hair. He made a small pain sound when I touched him. I don't know if it was the pain sound, the familiar smell of his body, or the prayer, but Raina spread through my body like flame. The munin rode me, and I opened to it, no fighting, no struggle. I embraced it, and her laughter rolled out of my lips. I rose up on my knees and stared down at Nathaniel.

I wasn't horrified anymore. Raina thought it would be a grand thing to fuck him as he died. I laid my lips against his, and his lips were cool, dry. I pressed my mouth over his and felt that fire pour into his mouth from mine.

My fingers found the wounds in his chest and stroked them, pushing my fingers into the wound. The paramedic tried to pull me off of him, and Jason

and someone else pulled her away. I dug into the wound until Nathaniel's eyes opened and he moaned with pain. His eyes fluttered, pale, pale lilac in the artificial light. He looked up but didn't see me, didn't see anything.

I covered his face in soft kisses, and each touch burned. I went back to his mouth and breathed into him. When I drew back, his eyes focused. His breath eased out in something too low to be a whisper. "Anita."

I straddled his body and laid my hands on his bare chest. I covered the wounds with my hands, but I touched the inside of his chest with something other than my hands. I could feel the damage. I could roll his damaged heart in the heat that fell from my hands, that sank into his skin, that filled his flesh.

I was burning alive. I had to feed the heat into him. Had to share this energy. My hands left the wound on his chest and fumbled at my shirt. The dress shirt came off and vanished into the grass, but the tank top was trapped under the shoulder holster. Hands helped me slip the holster off my shoulders. It flopped heavy and awkward over my hips. I undid the belt and I think it was Marianne who helped me slip the belt out of the loops. I know it was Marianne who stopped me from undoing my pants. Raina snarled in my head.

Hands caressed up my bare back and I knew it was Richard. He knelt behind me, legs straddling Nathaniel's legs, but putting no weight on them. He cradled me back against his body. I was suddenly aware that we were the focus of the pack. They surrounded us like a wall of faces and bodies.

Richard's hands slipped off the spine sheath and the blade down my back. His hands found my bra strap and undid it. I started to protest, started to hold it, and he kissed my shoulders, sliding his lips down my back and sliding the bra away. He whispered, "Bare skin is best for this." That prickling rush of energy filled the watching lukoi, filled them and spread into me. The energy of the munin fed on that power, grew until I thought my skin would burst with it.

Richard guided my body to Nathaniel's. My bare breasts touched Nathaniel's chest, a brush of velvet skin against the torn flesh of his smooth chest. I shuddered against him, and that heat spilled from my bare skin. At first it was as if my naked flesh rode above his skin on a pool of sweat, then I felt the flesh give. My body fell against his with a sigh, and it was as if our bodies became plastic, liquid. Our bodies melded together into one flesh, one body, as if I were sinking into his chest. I felt our hearts touch, beating liquid against one another. I healed his heart, closed his flesh with mine.

Nathaniel's mouth found mine, and the power flowed between us like breath until it raised the skin from my body, and there was nothing but his arms around me, his mouth on me, my hands on his body, and distant like an anchor I felt Richard, and beyond him the rest of the pack. I felt them offer their energy, their power, and I took it. And beyond that, distant as a dream, I felt Jean-Claude. I felt his cool power join with ours and strengthen; life from death. I took it all and thrust it into Nathaniel until he tore his mouth from mine and cried out. I felt his body give under mine, and his pleasure rushed over my skin, and I threw it out into the waiting pack. I took their energy and gave them back pleasure.

The munin left me in that rush of startled voices. Raina had never been able to take power from others. That was my doing. So even the bitch of the west had never pleased this many people at once.

I sat up, still straddling Nathaniel. He looked up at me with his lilac eyes and smiled. I ran my hands over his chest, and there was no wound, only a healing scar. He still looked pale and awful, but he'd live.

Richard offered me the dress shirt I'd dropped. I slipped it over my breasts and buttoned it. I didn't know what had happened to the rest of the clothes. Jason had my shoulder holster and knife. The important stuff.

When I tried to stand, I stumbled, and only Richard's arms kept me standing. He helped me through the crowd. They touched me as we moved through, running their hands along me. I didn't mind or didn't care. I put my arm around Richard's waist and accepted it for tonight. I'd worry about what it all meant tomorrow, or maybe even the next day.

Verne stepped out of the crowd. "Damn girl, you are good."

Roxanne was at his side. "I'm healed. How did you do that?"

I smiled. "Talk to Marianne." I kept walking.

The paramedics were rushing forward. I heard the woman say, "Holy shit! It's a miracle." And maybe it was.

Richard said, "I won't be looking for another lupa."

I hugged him. "No more auditions?"

"You are my lupa, Anita. Together we could be the most powerful mated pair I've ever seen."

"It's not just the two of us that make us powerful, Richard. It's Jean-Claude."

He kissed me on the forehead. "I felt him when you called the power. I felt him give his power to us."

We'd stopped walking. I turned to look at him in the moonlight. "We are a threesome, Richard, like it or not."

"A ménage à trois," he said.

I raised my eyebrows. "Not unless you've been doing more than just talking with Jean-Claude."

Richard laughed and hugged me. "He hasn't corrupted me quite that far."

"Glad to hear it." We walked down the hill, holding each other. Charlotte was lying at the bottom of the hill on a stretcher.

She reached her hands up to both of us. One of the hands was thickly bandaged. She smiled up at us. "Why didn't you tell me, Richard?"

"I thought it would make a difference. I thought you would stop loving me."

"Silly ass," she said.

"That's what I told him," I said.

Charlotte started to cry softly, pressing Richard's hand to her lips. I just smiled and held her hand. Life wasn't perfect, but standing there watching Richard and his mother, holding their hands, it was close.

Chapter 46

Daniel's nose was badly broken. The perfect profile isn't quite as perfect. He says the women love it, makes him look tough. Daniel has never spoken to me about what happened. Neither has Charlotte, but on the first Sunday dinner after they both got out of the hospital, she broke down and cried. I was the one who went into the kitchen first. She let me hold her while she cried, saying how silly she felt, that everything was all right. Why should she be crying?

If I could do resurrection for real, I'd bring Niley and all the rest back and kill them more slowly.

Richard's family thinks I can do no wrong, and they are not being subtle about their plans. Marriage—we should get married. Under other circumstances, not a bad idea. But we aren't a couple. We're a trio. Hard to explain that to Richard's folks. Hard to explain that to Richard.

Howard Grant, the psychic, is in jail for fraud. He confessed to some things he'd done in the past. I told him if he didn't spend some time in jail, I'd kill him. His greed had started everything. He didn't touch Charlotte or Daniel. He was horrified at what Niley was and what was happening, but his lies set it all in motion. He couldn't get away scot free. I just gave him a choice of punishments.

The police think Deputy Thompson fled the state. They're still looking for him, and none of us are talking. I don't know what Verne's pack did with the body. Maybe it's hanging on their tree waiting for a Christmas that will never come. Maybe they ate him. I don't know, and I don't want to know.

The Vampire Council didn't send anyone to kill us. Apparently Colin overstepped his bounds. We were within our rights to kill him, and his people. He didn't survive his servant's death. There is no new Master of the City yet. Verne and his pack are in no hurry for Colin's replacement.

I wake from dreams that aren't my own. Thoughts, feelings, not my own. It is overwhelming enough to be in love, in that first heat of lust, but the marks are sucking me inside both of them. They're swallowing me up. Every act of sex makes it worse. So . . . no more sex. I have to get control of the marks first.

When I was sleeping with both of them, Richard catted around. Now that I've gone celibate, so has he. Jean-Claude, I think, knows I'm still looking for a good excuse to say, "Hah, see, you don't really love me." So he's behaving himself like some dark angel.

I took a month off and went back to Tennessee to learn from Marianne. Learning to control the munin is helping me to control the marks. Jean-Claude as my only teacher is just not a good idea. He has too much invested in me. I'm learning to put up barriers. Barriers so tall, so wide, so solid, that I'm safe from both of them. Safe behind my walls.

But sex brings all the barriers crashing down. It's like drowning. I think if I allowed it, and they allowed it, we could become like one organism with three parts.

Richard doesn't seem to see the danger. He's still naive, or perhaps I just don't understand him. I love him, but even thinking his thoughts, feeling his emotions, he's still a mystery to me.

Jean-Claude knows the danger. He says he can keep it from happening, but I don't trust him. I love him, sort of, but I don't trust him. I've felt his chortling joy as the power of the triumverate grows.

He told me once he loved me as much as he was able. Maybe he does, but he loves power more.

So, celibate again, damn it. How to be chaste with the two preternatural studs of all time at my beck and call? Be out of town.

I've taken every animating job out of town that I could for three months. I spend weekends with Marianne. I have a great deal of power inside me, not the marks, but me. I've avoided confronting that power as much as possible, but Jean-Claude has forced me to face it. I have to learn how to control the magic.

It sounds silly that someone who raises the dead for a living has been ignoring that she has magic inside her, but I have. I've always learned the minimum to get by. That's over.

Marianne tells me that I have the tools to survive in the triumverate. Until I feel confident in those tools, I'm avoiding the boys. Three months of not touching either of them. Of no one sharing my bed. Three months of not being lupa. I had to leave the pack to leave Richard. But I couldn't leave the wereleopards. They don't have anyone else but me. So I'm still Nimir-ra. Marianne is even teaching me how to forge the leopards into a healthy unit. She and Verne.

I've abandoned as much of the preternatural stuff as I can. I have to find out what's left of who I thought I was.

I faced a demon with my faith and prayer. Does that mean God has forgiven me my sins? I don't know. If He has forgiven me, He's more generous than I am.

Obsidian Butterfly

by

Laurell K. Hamilton

Book 9 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Chapter 1

I WAS COVERED in blood, but it wasn't mine, so it was okay. Not only was it not my blood, but it was all animal blood. If the worst casualties of the night were six chickens and a goat, I could live with it, and so could everyone else. I'd raised seven corpses in one night. It was a record even for me.

I pulled into my driveway at a quarter 'til dawn with the sky still dark and star-filled. I left the Jeep in the driveway, too tired to mess with the garage. It was May, but it felt like April. Spring in St. Louis was usually a two-day event between the end of winter and the beginning of summer. One day you were freezing your ass off and the next day it'd be eighty plus. But this year it had been spring, a wet gentle spring.

Except for the high number of zombies I'd raised, it had been a typical night. Everything from raising a civil war soldier for a local historical society to question, a will that needed a final signature, to a son's last confrontation with his abusive mother. I'd been neck deep in lawyers and therapists most of the night. If I heard, "How does that make you feel, Jonathan (or Cathy, or whoever)?" one more time tonight, I'd scream. I did not want to watch one more person "go with his or her feelings" ever. At least with most of the lawyers the bereaved didn't come to the graveside. The court-appointed lawyer would ascertain that the zombies raised had enough cognitive ability to know

what they were signing, then he would sign off on the contract as a witness. If the zombie couldn't answer the questions, then no legal signature. The corpse had to be of "sound" mind to sign a legally binding signature. I'd never raised a zombie that couldn't pass the legal definition of soundness, but it happened sometimes. Jamison, a fellow animator at Animator's Inc., had a pair of lawyers come to blows on top of the grave. What fun.

The air was cool enough to make me shiver as I walked down the sidewalk to my door. I could hear the phone ringing as I fumbled the key into the lock. I hit the door with my shoulder because no one ever calls just before dawn unless it's important. For me that usually meant the police, which meant a murder scene. I kicked the door closed and ran for the phone in the kitchen. My answering machine had clicked on. My voice died on the machine and Edward's voice came on.

"Anita, it's Edward. If you're there, pick up." Silence.

I was running full out and skidded on my high heels, grabbing the receiver as I slid into the wall and nearly dropped the phone. I yelled into the receiver as I juggled the phone, "Edward, Edward, it's me! I'm here!"

Edward was laughing softly when I could finally hear him.

"Glad I could be amusing. What's up?" I asked.

"I'm calling in my favor," he said quietly.

It was my turn for silence. Once upon a time Edward had come to my aid, been my backup. He'd brought a friend, Harley, with him as more backup. I'd ended up killing Harley. Now, Harley had tried to kill me first, and I'd just been quicker, but Edward had taken the killing personally. Picky, picky. Edward had given me a choice: either he and I could draw down on each other and find out once and for all which of us was better, or I could owe him a favor. Some day he would call me up and ask for me to be his backup like Harley. I'd agreed to the favor. I never wanted to come up against Edward for real. Because if I did, I was pretty sure I'd end up dead.

Edward was a hit man. He specialized in monsters. Vampires, shapeshifters, anything and everything. There were people like me that did it legal, but Edward didn't sweat the legalities, or hell, the ethics. He even occasionally did a human, but only if they had some sort of dangerous reputation. Other assassins, criminals, bad men, or women. Edward was an equal opportunity killer. He never discriminated, not for sex, religion, race, or even species. If it was dangerous, Edward would hunt it and kill it. It's what he lived for, what he was—a predator's predator.

He'd been offered a contract on my life once. He'd turned it down and had come to town as my bodyguard, bringing Harley with him. I'd asked him why he hadn't taken the contract. His answer had been simple. If he took the contract, he only got to kill me. If he protected me, he thought he'd get to kill more people. Perfect Edward reasoning.

He's either a sociopath or so close it makes little difference. I may be one of the few friends that Edward has, but it's like being friends with a tame leopard. It may curl on the foot of your bed and let you pet its head, but it can still eat your throat out. It just won't do it tonight.

"Anita, you still there?"

"I'm here, Edward."

"You don't sound happy to hear from me."

"Let's just say I'm cautious," I said.

He laughed again. "Cautious. No, you're not cautious. You're suspicious."

"Yeah," I said. "So what's the favor?"

"I need back up," he said.

"What could be so terrible that Death needs backup?"

"Ted Forrester needs backup from Anita Blake, vampire executioner."

Ted Forrester was Edward's alter ego, his only legal identity that I was aware of. Ted was a bounty hunter that specialized in preternatural creatures that weren't vampires. As a general rule vamps were a specialty item, which was one of the reasons that there were licensed vamp executioners but not licensed anything else executioners. Maybe vampires just have a better political lobby, but whatever, they get the most press. Bounty hunters like Ted filled in the blanks between the police and the licensed executioners. They worked mostly in rancher-run states where it was still legal to hunt down varmints and kill them for money. Varmints still included lycanthropes. You could shoot them on sight in about six states as long as later a blood test proves they were lycanthropes. Some of the killings had been taken to court and were being contested, but nothing had changed yet on a local level.

"So, what does Ted need me for?" Though truthfully I was relieved that it was Ted asking and not Edward. Edward on his own probably meant illegal, maybe even murder. I wasn't quite into cold-blooded murder. Not yet.

Come to Santa Fe and find out, he said.

"New Mexico? Santa Fe, New Mexico?"

"Yes."

"When?" I asked.

"Now."

"Since I'm coming as Anita Blake, vamp executioner, I can flash my executioner's license and bring my arsenal."

"Bring what you want," Edward said. "I'll share my toys with you when you arrive."

"I haven't been to bed yet. Do I have time to get some sleep before I get on a plane?"

"Get a few hours sleep, but be here by afternoon. We've moved the bodies, but we're saving the rest of the crime scene for you."

"What sort of crime scene?"

"I'd say murder, but that's not quite the right word. Slaughter, butcher, torture. Yes," he said, as if trying the word over in his mind, "a torture scene."

"Are you trying to scare me?" I asked.

"No," he said.

"Then stop the theatrics and just tell me what the hell happened."

He sighed, and for the first time I heard a dragging tiredness in his voice.

"We've got ten missing. Twelve confirmed dead."

"Shit," I said. "Why haven't I heard anything on the news?"

"The disappearances made the tabloids. I think the headline was, 'Bermuda Triangle in the Desert.' The twelve dead were three families. Neighbors just found them today."

"How long had they been dead?" I asked.

"Days, nearly two weeks for one family."

"Jesus, why didn't someone miss them sooner?"

"In the last ten years almost the entire population of Santa Fe has changed. We've got a huge influx of new people. Plus a lot of people have what amounts to vacation homes up here. The locals call the newcomers Californicators."

"Cute," I said, "but is Ted Forrester a local?"

"Ted lives near the city, yeah."

A thrill went through me from the soles of my feet to the top of my head. Edward was the ultimate mystery man. I knew almost nothing about him, really. "Does this mean I get to see where you live?"

"You'll be staying with Ted Forrester," he said.

"But you're Ted Forrester, Edward. I'll be staying at your house, right?"

He was quiet for a heartbeat, then, "Yes."

Suddenly, the whole trip seemed much more attractive. I was going to see Edward's house. I was going to be able to pry into his personal life, if he had one. What could be better?

Though one thing was bothering me. "When you said families were the victims, does that include kids?"

"Strangely, no," he said.

"Well, thank goodness for small blessings," I said.

"You always were a soft touch for the kiddies," he said.

"Does it really not bother you to see dead children?"

"No," he said.

I just listened to him breathe for a second or two, I knew that nothing bothered Edward, Nothing moved him. But children ... every cop I knew hated to go to a scene where the victim was a child. There was something personal about it. Even those of us without children took it hard. That Edward didn't, bothered me. Funny, but it did.

"It bothers me," I said.

"I know," he said, "one of your more serious faults." There was an edge of humor to his voice.

"The fact that you're a sociopath, and that I'm not, is one of the things I take great pride in."

"You don't have to be a sociopath to back me up, just a shooter, and you are that, Anita. You kill as easily as I do, if the circumstances are right."

I didn't try and argue, because I couldn't. I decided to concentrate on the crime instead of my moral decay. "So Santa Fe has a large transient population."

"Not transient," Edward said, "but mobile, very mobile. We have a lot of tourism, and a lot of people moving in and out on a semi-permanent basis."

"So no one knows their neighbors," I said, "or what their schedules should be."

"Exactly." His voice was bland, empty, with that thread of tiredness underneath, and under that was something else. A tone—something.

"You think there's more bodies that you haven't found yet," I said. I made it a statement.

He was quiet for a second, then said, "You heard it in my voice, didn't you?"

"Yeah," I said.

"I'm not sure I like that. You being able to read me that well."

"Sorry. I'll try to be less intuitive."

"Don't bother. Your intuition is one of the things that's kept you alive this long."

"Are you making a joke about women's intuition?" I asked.

"No, I'm saying that you're someone who works from your gut, your emotions, not your head. It's a strength for you, and a weakness."

"Too tenderhearted, am I?"

"Sometimes, and sometimes you're just as dead inside as I am."

Hearing him state it like that was almost scary. Not that he was including me in the same breath as himself, but that Edward knew something had died inside of him.

"You ever miss the parts that are gone?" I asked. It was the closest thing to a personal question I'd ever asked him.

"No," he said. "Do you?"

I thought about that for a moment. I started to say yes, automatically, then stopped myself. Truth, always truth between us. "No, I guess I don't."

He made a small sound, almost a laugh. "That's my girl."

I was both flattered and vaguely irritated that I was "his girl." When in doubt, concentrate on the job. "What kind of monster is it, Edward?" I asked.

"I've no idea."

That stopped me. Edward had been hunting preternatural bad guys years longer than I had. He knew monsters almost as well as I did, and he'd traveled the world killing monsters, so he had first hand knowledge of things I'd only read about.

"What do you mean, you have no idea?"

"I've never seen anything kill like this, Anita." I heard an undercurrent in his voice that I'd almost never heard—fear. Edward, whose nickname among the vamps and shapeshifters was Death, was afraid. It was a very bad sign.

"You're shook, Edward. That's not like you."

"Wait until you see the victims. I've saved you photos of the other scenes, but the last one I kept intact, just for you."

"How did the local law enforcement like putting a ribbon around a crime scene and wrapping it up just for little ol' me?"

"The local cops all like Ted. He's a good ol' boy. If Ted tells them you can help, they believe him."

"But you're Ted Forrester," I said, "and you're not a good ol' boy."

"But Ted is," he said, voice empty.

"Your secret identity," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

"Fine, I'll fly into Santa Fe this afternoon, or early evening."

"Fly into Albuquerque instead. I'll meet you at the airport. Just call me and give me the time."

"I can rent a car," I said.

"I'll be in Albuquerque on other business. It's not a problem."

"What aren't you telling me?" I asked.

"Me, keeping secrets?" There was a thread of amusement in his voice again.

"You're the original mystery man, Edward. You love keeping secrets. It gives you a sense of power."

"Does it?" he made it a question.

"Yeah, it does."

He laughed softly. "Maybe it does. Make the ticket reservations and call me with the flight times. I've got to go." His voice went low as if someone else had come into the room.

I hadn't asked what the urgency was. Ten missing, twelve confirmed dead. It was urgent. I hadn't asked if he'd be waiting for my call. Edward, who never spooked, was scared. He'd be waiting for my call.

Chapter 2

IT TURNED OUT that the only flight I could get that wasn't fall was a noon flight, which meant I got about five hours of sleep before I had to get up and run for the airport. I also missed Kenpo class, a type of karate that I'd just started a few weeks ago. I'd have much rather been in class than on a plane. I hate to fly. I'd driven to as many of the out of town appointments as possible, but I'd been doing a lot of flying lately. It had lessened the actual terror, but I was still phobic. I hated to be in a plane being flown by someone I didn't know, who I had not personally drug tested. I just wasn't the trusting sort.

Neither are the airlines. Carrying a concealed weapon on a plane was a pain in the ass. I'd had to take the two-hour FAA course on carrying concealed on a plane. I had a certificate to prove I'd taken the course. I could not get on the plane without the certificate. I also had a letter stating that I was on official business that required me to carry a gun. Sergeant Rudolf (Dolf) Storr, head of the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team, had faxed me the letter on taskforce letterhead, always impressive. Someone who was a real policeperson had to give me something to legitimize my status. If it were real police business, even if Dolf weren't directly involved, he'd usually give me what I needed. If Edward had called me in to help in an unofficial case, i.e., illegal, I would have avoided Dolf. Mr Law and Order wasn't real fond of Edward, a.k.a.

Ted Forrester. "Ted" was around a lot when there were bodies on the ground. It made Dolf not trust him.

I did not look out the window. I read and tried to pretend I was on a very cramped bus. I'd finally figured out that one of the reasons I didn't like to fly was that I also have claustrophobia. A 727 full of people was close enough to make it hard to breathe. I turned the little fan above my seat on high and read. I was reading Sharon Shinn. She was an author that I trusted to hold my attention even hundreds of feet above the ground with a thin metal sheet between me and eternity.

So I can't tell you what Albuquerque looks like from the air, and the little walkway that led into the airport was like every other one I'd ever walked through. Even in the tunnel you could feel the heat pressing like a giant hand hovering over the thin plastic. It may have been spring in St. Louis, but it was summer in Albuquerque. I scanned the crowd for Edward and actually looked past him once before realizing it was him. Part of it was the fact that he was wearing a hat, a cowboy hat. There was a fan of feathers tucked into the front of the hat band, but it had the look of a hat that had been worn well. The brim was curved back on both sides as if he'd worked at the stiff material until the brim had formed a new shape under the constant run of his hands. His shirt was white and short-sleeved like something you'd get at any department store. It was matched with dark blue jeans that looked new and a pair of hiking boots that weren't.

Hiking boots? Edward? He'd never impressed me as a country boy. No, definitely a city fellow, but there he stood, looking sort of down-homey and comfortable. It didn't look like Edward at all until I met his eyes. Wrap him up in whatever disguise you want, you could dress him like Prince Charming on a Disney float, but as long as you could glimpse his eyes, you would still run screaming.

His eyes are blue and cold as winter skies. He is the epitome of WASP breeding with his blond hair and slender paleness. He can look harmless if he wants to. He is the consummate actor, but unless he works at it, his eyes give him away. If the eyes are the mirror to the soul, then Edward's in trouble because no one is home.

He smiled at me, and it thawed his eyes to something close to warmth. He was glad to see me, genuinely glad. Or as glad as he ever was to see anyone. It wasn't comforting. In a way it was unnerving because one of the main reasons Edward liked me was that together we always got to kill more than we did apart. Or at least I did. For all I knew, Edward might have been mowing down entire armies when he wasn't with me.

"Anita." he said.

"Edward." I said.

The smile turned into a grin. "You don't seem happy to see me."

"You being this happy to see me makes me nervous, Edward. You're relieved I'm here, and that scares me."

The grin faded, and I watched all the humor, all the welcome, drain out of his face like water leaving a glass through a crack—empty. "I'm not relieved," he said, but his voice was too bland.

"Liar," I said. I would have liked to say it softly, but the noise of the airport was like the crash of the ocean, a continuous roar.

He looked at me with those pitiless eyes and gave one small nod. An acknowledgment that he was relieved I was here. Maybe he would have verbalized it, but suddenly a woman appeared at his side. She was smiling, her arms sliding around him until she cuddled against him. She looked thirtyish, older than Edward appeared, though I wasn't sure of his actual age. Her hair was short, brown, a no-nonsense style, but flattering. She wore almost no makeup, but was still lovely. I here were lines at her eyes and mouth that had made me jump her from thirty to forty something. She was smaller than Edward, taller than me, but still petite, I thought she didn't look soft. She was tanned darker than was healthy which probably explained the lines on her face. But there was a quiet strength to her as she stood there smiling at me, holding Edward's arm.

She wore jeans that looked so neat they must have been pressed, a white short-sleeved shirt that was sheer enough that she'd put a spaghetti strap tank top under it, and a brown leather purse almost as large as my carry-on bag. I wondered for a second if Edward had picked her up from a plane, too, but there was something too fresh and unhurried about her. She hadn't come off a plane.

"I'm Donna. You have to be Anita." She held out her hand, and we shook. She had a firm handshake, and her hand wasn't soft. She'd worked, this one had. She also knew how to shake hands. Most women never really got the knack of it. I liked her instantly, instinctively, and mistrusted the feeling just as quickly.

"Ted's told me so much about you," Donna said.

I glanced up at Edward. He was smiling, and even his eyes were full of humor. The entire set of his face and body had changed. He slouched slightly, and the smile was lazy. He vibrated with good ol' boy charm. It was an Oscar-winning performance, as if he'd traded skins with someone else.

I looked at Edward/Ted and said, "He's told you a lot about me, has he?"

"Oh, yes," Donna said, touching my arm while still holding onto Edward. Of course, she would be a casual toucher. My shapeshifter friends were getting me accustomed to touchie-feelie stuff, but it still wasn't my best thing. What the hell was Edward—Ted—doing with this woman?

Edward spoke, but there was a slight Texas-like drawl to his voice like an old accent almost forgotten. Edward had no accent whatsoever. His voice was one of the cleanest and hardest to place I'd ever heard, as if even his voice was never touched by the places and people he saw.

"Anita Blake, I'd like you to meet Donna Parnell, my fiancée."

My jaw dropped to the carpet, and I just gaped at him. I usually try and be a little more sophisticated than that, or hell, more polite. I knew that astonishment, nay shock, showed, but I couldn't help it.

Donna laughed, and it was a good laugh, warm and chuckly, a good mom laugh. She squeezed Edward's arm. "Oh, you were right, Ted. Her reaction was worth the trip."

"Told ya, honey-pot," Edward said, hugging her and planting a kiss on the top of her head.

I closed my mouth and tried to recover. I managed to mumble, "That's . . . great. I mean really ...I..." I finally extended my hand and said, "Congratulations." But I couldn't manage a smile.

Donna used the handshake to draw me into a hug. "Ted said you'd never believe he'd finally agreed to tie the knot." She hugged me again, laughing. "But, my god, girl, I've never seen such pure shock." She retreated back to Edward's arms and his smiling Ted face.

I am not nearly as good an actor as Edward. It's taken me years to perfect a blank face let alone outright lying by facial expression and body language. So I kept my face blank and tried to tell Edward with my eyes that he had some explaining to do.

With his face slightly turned from Donna, he gave me his close, secretive smile. Which pissed me off. Edward was enjoying his surprise. Damn him.

"Ted, where are your manners. Take her bag," Donna said.

Edward and I both stared at the small carry-on bag I had in my left hand. He gave me Ted's smile, but he said Edward's line, "Anita likes to carry her own weight."

Donna looked at me for confirmation as if this couldn't possibly be true. Maybe she wasn't as strong and independent as she appeared, or maybe she was a decade older than she appeared. A different generation, you know.

"Ted's right," I said, putting a little too much emphasis on his name. "I like to carry my own bags."

Donna looked like she'd have liked to correct my obviously wrong thinking but was too polite to say it out loud. The expression, not the silence, reminded me of my stepmother Judith. Which made me push Donna's age over fifty. She was either a mightily well preserved fifty-something, forty-something, or a sun-aged thirty-something. I just couldn't tell.

They walked ahead of me through the airport, arm in arm. I followed behind them, not because my suitcase was too heavy but because I needed a few minutes to recover. I watched Donna bump her head against Edward's shoulder, her face turning to him, smiling, glowing. Edward/Ted bent over her, face tender, whispering something that made her laugh.

I was going to be sick. What the hell was Edward doing with this woman? Was she another assassin, as good an actor as he was? Somehow I didn't think so. And if she was exactly what she appeared—a woman in love with Ted Forrester, who didn't exist—I was going to kick Edward's metaphorical ass. How dare he involve some innocent woman in his cover story! Or—and this was a very strange thought—was Edward/Ted really in love? If you'd asked me ten minutes ago, I'd have said he wasn't capable of such depth of emotion, but now . . . now I was just plain confused.

The Albuquerque airport broke my rule that all airports look nearly identical and you can't really tell what part of the country, or even the world, that you're in just from the airport. If there are decorations, they're usually from a different culture entirely, like inland bars having seaside motifs. But not here. Here there were hints of a southwestern flavor everywhere. Multi-colored tile or paint leaning to turquoise and cobalt blue lined most of the shops and store fronts. A small covered stand sold silver jewelry in the middle of the large hallway leading from the gates to the rest of the airport. We'd left the crowd behind and with it the noise. We moved in a world of neatly ringing silence, heightened by the white white walls and the large windows on either side. Albuquerque stretched outside those windows like some great flat plain with a ring of black mountains at the edge, like the backdrop to a play, somehow unreal. The heat pressed down even through the air conditioning, not really hot, but letting you know it was going to be. The landscape was totally alien, adding to my sense of having been cut adrift. One of the things I liked about Edward is that he never changed. He was what he was, and now Edward, dependable in his own psychotic way, had thrown me a curve ball so wild I didn't even know how to swing at it.

Donna stopped and turned, drawing Edward with her. "Anita, that bag is just too heavy for you. Please let Ted carry it." She gave him a little good-natured push in my direction.

Edward walked towards me. Even his walk was a rolling sort of gait like someone who spent a lot of time on horseback or on a boat. He kept Ted's smile on his face. Only his eyes slipped and showed through the mask. Dead those eyes, empty. No love shone in them. Damn him. He actually leaned over, his hand started to close over mine and the handle.

I hissed, "Don't." I let that one word hold all the anger I was feeling.

His eyes widened just a bit, and he knew I wasn't talking about just the carry-on bag. He straightened up and called back to Donna, "She doesn't want my help." He put emphasis on the "my."

She tsked under her breath and walked back to us. "You're just being stubborn, Anita. Let Ted help you."

I looked up at her and knew my face wasn't neutral, but I couldn't drain all the anger out of my face.

Donna's eyes widened just a bit. "Have I offended you in some way?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I'm not upset with you."

She looked at Edward. "Ted, dear, I think she's angry with you."

"I think you're right," Edward said. His eyes had gone back to sparkling with love and good humor.

I tried to salvage the situation. "It's just that Ted should have told me about the engagement. I don't like surprises."

Donna put her head to one side, giving me a long considering look. She started to say something, then seemed to think better of it. "Well, I'll try and make sure you don't get any more surprises from me." She settled herself a little

more securely on Edward's arm, and the look in her brown eyes was just a tad less friendly than it had been before.

I realized with a sigh that Donna now thought I was jealous. My reaction wasn't normal for a mere friend and business acquaintance. Since I couldn't tell her the real reason I was upset, I let it go. Better she think Ted and I had been an item once, than the truth. Though Heaven knew she'd probably prefer we'd been lovers to the real truth about her "Ted." She was in love with a man who did not exist, no matter how real the arm she was holding happened to be.

I tightened my grip on my bag and moved up so I was walking on the other side of Donna as we moved up through the airport. She wasn't comfortable with me trailing behind so I'd keep up. I'm not good at small talk at the best of times, but now, I couldn't think of a damn thing to say, so we moved in a silence that grew progressively uncomfortable for me, and for Donna, Her, because she was a woman and naturally friendly. Me, because I knew silence would make her uncomfortable. I didn't want to make her more uncomfortable.

She broke first. "Ted tells me you're an animator and vampire hunter."

"I prefer vampire executioner, but yeah." In a desperate attempt to be polite I asked, "What do you do?"

She flashed me a brilliant smile that showed the smile lines on either side of her mouth like a frame for her thin, oh-so-slightly lipsticked mouth. I was I glad I'd worn no makeup. Maybe that would help her realize I wasn't after Edward/Ted. "I own a shop in Santa Fe."

Edward added, "She sells psychic paraphernalia." He gave me a smile over her head.

My face hardened, and I fought to keep it blank. "What sort of paraphernalia?"

"Crystals, tarot decks, books, everything and anything that catches my fancy."

I wanted to say, "But you're not psychic," but I didn't. I'd met people before that were convinced they had psychic gifts when they didn't. If Donna was one of the successfully deluded, who was I to burst her bubble? Instead, I said, "Is there much of a market for that sort of thing in Santa Fe?"

"Oh, there used to be a lot of shops like mine. The new age was really big in Santa Fe, but the property taxes have skyrocketed and most of the new psychics have moved further into the mountains to Taos. Santa Fe's energy has changed in the last five years, or so. It's still a very positive place, but Taos has better energy now. I'm not sure why."

She talked about "energy" like it was an accepted fact, and didn't try to explain it, as if I would understand her. She was assuming, like so many people did, that if you raised the dead for a living you were psychic in other areas, too. Which was often true, but not always. What she called "energy," I called the "feel" of a place. Some places did have a "feel" to them, good or bad, energizing or draining. The old idea of genius loci was alive and well in the new age movement under a different name.

"Do you read cards?" I asked. It was a polite way of finding out if she believed she had powers.

"Oh, no," Donna said. "My gifts are very small. I'd love to be able to read cards or crystals, but I'm only a proprietor. My talent in this life is helping others discover their strengths."

It sounded like something a therapist who believed in past lives would have said. I'd been meeting enough of them at graveside to know the lingo. "So you're not a psychic," I said. I just wanted to be sure she knew it.

"Oh, heavens no." She shook her head for emphasis, and I noticed her small gold earrings were ankhs.

"Most people that go into the business usually are," I said.

She sighed. "The psychic I'm going to now says that I'm blocked in this life because of misuse of my gifts last time around. She says I'll be able to work magic next time."

Again, she assumed I believed in reincarnation and past life therapy, probably because of what I did for a living. Either that or Edward/Ted had been lying to her about me just to amuse himself. But I didn't point out that I was a Christian and didn't believe in reincarnation. There are, after all, more religions on the planet that believe in reincarnation than ones that don't. Who am I to quibble?

I just couldn't help the next question. "And have you met Ted before in a past life?"

"No, actually he's brand new to me, though Brenda says he is a very old soul."

"Brenda, your psychic?" I asked.

She nodded.

"I'll agree with the old soul part," I said.

Edward gave me a look over her head where she couldn't see him. It was a suspicious look.

"You've felt it, too, then, the way he resonates. That's what Brenda calls it, like a great heavy bell in her head whenever he's around."

Alarm bells more likely, I thought. Aloud I said, "Sometimes you can make your soul heavy in one lifetime."

She gave me a puzzled look. She wasn't stupid. There was intelligence in those brown eyes, but she was naive. Donna wanted to believe. It made her an easy mark for a certain kind of liar like would-be psychics and men like Edward. Men who lied about who and what they were.

"I'd like to meet Brenda before I go home," I said.

Edward's eyes widened where she couldn't see them.

Donna smiled delightedly. "I'd love to introduce the two of you. She's never met an animator before. I know she'd get a kick out of meeting you."

"I'll bet," I said. I did want to meet Brenda, because I wanted to see if she was truly a psychic or just a charlatan. If she was professing to abilities she didn't possess, it was a crime, and I'd turn her in. I hated seeing supposed psychics take advantage of people. It was always amazing to me with the number of genuine talents around, how many fakes still managed to prosper.

We were passing a restaurant decorated in more blue and fuschia tiles with small daisy-like flowers painted in the edges. There was a mural on one wall

showing Spanish conquistadors and breechcloth-clad Native Americans as we came down the escalators. I was still managing to balance my carry-on without any trouble, all that weightlifting I guess.

There was a bank of pay phones set to one side. "Let me try to get hold of the kids one more time," Donna said. She kissed Edward's cheek and moved off towards the phones before I could react.

"Kids?" I said.

"Yes," he said, voice careful.

"How many?" I asked.

"Two."

"Ages?"

"Boy, fourteen; girl, six," he said.

"Where's their father?"

"Donna is a widow."

I looked at him, and the look was enough.

"No, I didn't do it. He died years before I met Donna."

I stepped close to him, turning my back so that Donna wouldn't see my face from the phones. "What are you playing at Edward? She has children and is so in love with you, it makes me gag. What on God's green earth could you be thinking?"

"Donna and Ted have been dating for about two years. They're lovers. She expected him to propose so he did." His face was still smiling Ted, but the voice was matter of fact and totally unemotional.

"You're talking like Ted's a third person, Edward."

"You're going to have to start calling me Ted, Anita. I know you. If you don't make it a habit, you'll forget."

I stepped into him in the relative silence, lowering my voice to a furious whisper.

"Fuck that. He is you, and you're fucking engaged. Are you going to marry her?"

He gave a small shrug.

"Shit," I said. "You can't. You cannot marry this woman."

His smile widened, and he stepped around me holding his hands out to Donna. He kissed her and asked, "How are the munchkins?" He turned her in his arms so he was half-hugging her, and had her turned away from me. His face was Ted, relaxed, but his eyes were warning me, "Don't screw this up." It was important to him for some reason.

Donna turned so she could see my face, and I fought to give blank face. "What were you two whispering about so urgently?"

"The case," Edward said.

"Oh, pooh," she said.

I raised eyebrows at Edward. Oh, pooh. The most dangerous man I'd ever met was engaged to a mother of two that said things like, "Oh pooh." It was just too weird.

Donna's eyes widened. "Where is your purse? Did you leave it on the plane?"

"I didn't bring one," I said. "I knew I'd have the bag and pockets."

She looked at me as if I'd spoken in tongues. "My god, I wouldn't know what to do without my monstrosity in tow." She pulled the huge purse around in front of her. "I'm such a pack rat."

"Where are your kids?" I asked.

"With my neighbors. They're a retired couple and are just great with my little girl, Becca." She frowned. "Of course, nothing seems to make Peter happy right now." She glanced at me. "Peter's my son. He's fourteen going on forty, and seems to have hit his teenage years with a vengeance. Everyone told me a teenager was hard, but I never dreamed how hard."

"Has he been getting into trouble?" I asked.

"Not really. I mean he's not into anything criminal." She added the last a little too quickly. "But he's just stopped listening to me. He was supposed to come home two weeks ago from school and watch Becca. Instead, he went to a friend's house. When I came home after the shop closed, the house was empty, and I didn't know where either of them were. The Hendersons had been out so Becca wasn't there. God, I was frantic. Another neighbor had taken her in, but if they hadn't been home, she'd have just had to wander the neighborhood for hours. Peter came home and just wasn't sorry. By the time he came home, I'd convinced myself he'd been abducted by someone and was lying dead in a ditch somewhere. Then he just comes strolling in as if nothing's wrong."

"Is he still grounded?" I asked.

She nodded, face very firm. "You bet he is. Grounded for a month, and I've taken every privilege I can think of away from him."

"What does he think of you and Ted getting married?" It was a sadistic question, and I knew it, but I just couldn't help myself.

Donna looked stricken, truly stricken. "He's not too keen on the idea."

Keen? "Well, he's fourteen, and a boy," I said. "He's bound to resent another male coming into his turf."

Donna nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid so."

Ted hugged her. "It'll be all right, honeypot. Pete and I will come to an understanding. Don't you worry."

I didn't like Edward's phrasing on that. I watched his face but couldn't see behind his Ted mask. It was as if for minutes at a time he just vanished into his alter ego. I hadn't been on the ground an hour and his Jekyll/Hyde act was already beginning to get on my nerves.

"Do you have any other bags?" Edward asked.

"Of course, she does," Donna said. "She's a woman."

Edward gave a small laugh that was more his own than Ted's. It was a small sound that made Donna glance at him and made me feel better.

"Anita isn't like any other woman I've ever met."

Donna gave him another look. Edward had phrased it that way on purpose. He'd caught her jealous reasoning just as I had, and now he was playing to it.

It was one way to explain my strange reaction to the engagement news without risk of blowing his cover. I guess I couldn't blame him, but in a way I

knew it was payback for my lack of social skills. His cover was important enough to him to let Donna think we'd been a couple, which meant it was pretty important to him. Edward and I had never had a single romantic thought about each other in our lives.

"I've got luggage," I said.

"See," Donna said, tugging on his arm.

"The carry-on bag wouldn't hold all the guns."

Donna stopped in the middle of saying something to Edward, then turned slowly to stare at me. Edward and I stopped walking because she had stopped. Her eyes were a little wide. She seemed to have caught her breath. She was staring at me, but not at my face. If it had been a guy, I might have accused him of staring at my chest, but that wasn't exactly what she was looking at. I followed her gaze and found that my jacket had slipped back over my left side exposing my gun. It must have happened when I readjusted the bag coming off the escalator. Careless of me. I'm usually pretty careful about exposing my arsenal in public. It tends to make people nervous, just like now. I shifted the bag, so that my jacket slid back over the shoulder holster like a curtain dropping back in place.

Donna drew a quick breath, blinked, and looked at my face. "You really do carry a gun." Her voice held a sort of wonderment.

"I told you she did," Edward said in his Ted voice.

"I know, I know," Donna said. She shook her head. "I've just never been around a woman that. . . Do you kill as easily as Ted does?"

It was a very intelligent question, and meant that she'd been paying more attention to the real Edward than I'd given her credit for. So I answered the question truthfully. "No."

Edward hugged her to him, eyes warning me over her head. "Anita doesn't believe shifters are animals. She still thinks the monsters can be saved. It makes her squeamish sometimes."

Donna stared at me. "My husband was killed by a werewolf. He was killed in front of me and Peter. Peter was only eight."

I didn't know what reaction she expected so I didn't give her one. My face was neutral, interested, far from shocked. "What saved you?"

She nodded slowly, understanding the question. A werewolf tore her husband apart in front of her and her son, yet they were still alive and the husband wasn't. Something had interceded, something had saved them.

"John, my husband, had loaded a rifle with silver shot. He'd dropped the gun in the attack. He'd wounded it but not enough." Her eyes had gone distant with remembering. We stood in the bright airport, three people huddled in a small circle of silence and hushed voices and Donna's wide eyes. I didn't have to look at Edward to know that his face was as neutral as mine. She'd fallen silent, the horror still too fresh in her eyes. The look was enough. There was worse to come, or worse to her. Something she felt guilty about at the very least.

"John had just showed Peter how to shoot the week before. He was so little, but I let him take that gun. I let him shoot that monster. I let him stand his ground in the face of that thing, while I just huddled on the floor, frozen."

That was it. That was the true horror for Donna. She'd allowed her child to protect her. Allowed her child to take the adult role of protector in the face of a nightmare. She'd failed the big test, and little Peter had passed into adulthood at a very tender age. No wonder he hated Edward. Peter had earned his right to be man of the house. He'd earned it in blood, and now his mother was going to remarry. Yeah, right.

Donna turned those haunted eyes to me. She blinked and seemed to be drawing herself back from the past as if it were a physical effort. She hadn't made peace with the scene, or it wouldn't have remained so vivid. If you can begin to make peace, you can tell the most horrible stories as if they happened to someone else, unemotional. Or, maybe you haven't made peace, but you still tell it like it was an interesting story that happened a long time ago, nothing important. I've seen cops that had to get drunk before the pain spilled out into their stories.

Donna was hurting. Peter was hurting. Edward wasn't hurting. I looked up at him, past Donna's softly horrified face. His eyes were empty as he looked at me, as waiting and patient as any predator. How dare he step into their lives like this! How dare he cause them more pain! Because whatever happened, whether he married her or didn't, it was going to be painful. Painful for everyone but Edward. Though maybe I could fix that. If he fucked up Donna's life, maybe I could fuck up his. Yeah, I liked that. I'd spread the rain around all over his parade.

It must have shone in my eyes for a second or two, because Edward's eyes narrowed, and for a moment I felt that shiver he could send down my spine with just a glance. He was a very dangerous man, but to protect this family I'd test his limits, and mine. Edward had finally found something that pissed me off enough to maybe press a button that I'd never wanted to touch. He had to leave Donna and her family alone. He had to get out of their lives. I'd see him out of their lives, or else. And there is only one "or else" when you're dealing with Edward. Death.

We stared at each other over Donna's head while he hugged her to his chest, stroking her hair, mouthing soothing words to her. But his eyes, his face were all for me, and I knew as we stared at each other that he knew exactly what I was thinking. He knew the conclusion I'd come to, though he might never understand why his involvement with Donna and her kids was the straw that broke the camel's back. But the look in his eyes was enough. He might not understand why, but he knew the camel was broken in fucking two and there was no way to fix it except to do what I wanted him to do, or die. Just like that, I knew I'd do it. I knew I could look down the barrel of a gun and shoot Edward, and I wouldn't aim to wound. It was like a cold weight inside my body, a surety that made me feel stronger and a little lonelier. Edward had saved my life more than once. I'd saved his more than once. Yet... yet... I'd miss

Edward, but I'd kill him if I had to. Edward wonders why I'm so sympathetic to the monsters. The answer is simple. Because I am one.

Chapter 3

WE WALKED OUT INTO the heat, and it blasted against our skin on the edge of a hot wind. It had the feel of a serious heat, and considering that it was only May, it probably would be a real barnburner when true summer finally hit. But it is true that eighty plus without humidity isn't nearly as miserable as eighty plus with humidity, so it wasn't horrible. In fact, once you blinked into the sunlight and just got adjusted to the heat, you sort of forgot about it. It was only attention-getting for the first, oh, fifteen minutes or so. St. Louis would probably be ninety plus by the time I got home, and with eighty to a hundred percent humidity. Of course, that meant I'd be going home. If I really drew down on Edward, that was a debatable option. There was a very real possibility that he'd kill me. I hoped, seriously hoped, that I could talk him out of Donna and her family without resorting to violence.

Maybe the heat didn't seem bad because of the landscape. Albuquerque was a flat empty plain running out and out to a circle of black mountains, as if everything of worth had been strip-mined away and the waste had been lumped into those forbidden black mountains like giant mounds of coal. Yeah, it looked like the world's largest strip-mining operation, and it had that feel to it of waste and desolation. Of things spoiled, and an alien hostility as if you weren't quite welcome. I guess Donna would say, bad energy. I'd never felt anyplace that had such an instant alienness to it. Edward was carrying both my suitcases that had come off the carousel. Normally, I'd have carried one, but not now. Now I wanted Edward's hands full of something besides guns. I wanted him at a disadvantage. I wasn't going to start shooting on the way in the car, but Edward is more practical than I am. If he decided I was more danger than help, he might be able to arrange an accident on the way to the car. It'd be tough with Donna in tow, but not impossible. Not for Edward.

It was also why I was letting him lead the way and putting me at his back instead of him at mine. It wasn't paranoia, not with Edward. With Edward it was simply good survival thinking.

Edward got Donna to go ahead of us and unlock the car. He dropped back to walk beside me, and I put some distance between us so that we were standing in the middle of the sidewalk staring at each other like two old-fashioned movie gunfighters.

He kept the suitcases in his hands. I think he knew that I was too keyed up. I think he knew if he dropped the suitcases, I was going to have a gun in my

hand. "You want to know why I wasn't bothered with you following behind me?"

"You knew I wouldn't shoot you in the back," I said.

He smiled. "And you knew I might."

I cocked my head to one side, almost squinting into the sun. Edward was wearing sunglasses, of course. But since his eyes rarely gave anything away, it didn't matter. His eyes weren't what I had to worry about.

"You like the personal danger, Edward. That's why you only hunt monsters. You have to be taking the big risk every time you come up to bat, or it's no fun."

A couple came walking by with a cart full of suitcases. We waited in silence until they passed us. The woman glanced at us as they hurried past, picking up on the tension. The man jerked her back to face front and they pushed past us.

"You have a point?" Edward asked.

"You want to know which of us is better, Edward. You've wanted to know for a long time. If you take me from ambush, the question will never be answered and that would bug you."

His smile both widened and faded, as if it wasn't a humorous smile anymore. "So, I won't shoot you in the back."

"That's right," I said.

"So why go to so much trouble to fill my hands and make me walk in front."

"This would be a hell of a time to be wrong."

He laughed then, soft and vaguely sinister. That one sound said it all. He was excited about the idea of going up against me. "I would love to hunt you, Anita. I've dreamed about it." He sighed, and it was almost sad. "But I need you. I need you to help solve this case. And as much as I'd like the big question answered, I'd miss you. You may be one of the only people in the world that I would miss."

"What about Donna?" I asked.

"What about her?" he asked.

"Don't be cute, Edward." I looked past him to find Donna waving to us from the parking lot. "We're being paged."

He glanced back towards her, lifting one of the suitcases to make a vague wave. It would have been easier to do if he'd dropped one of the cases but in his own way, Edward was being cautious, too.

He turned back to me. "You won't be able to do your job if you're looking over your shoulder for me. So a truce until the case is solved."

"Your word?" I asked.

He nodded. "My word."

"Good enough," I said.

He smiled, and it was genuine. "The only reason you can take my word at face value is that if you give your word, you'll keep it."

I shook my head and started closing the distance between us. "I keep my word, but I don't take most people's oaths very seriously." I was even with him

and could feel the weight of his gaze even through the black lens of the sunglasses. He was intense, was Edward.

"But you take mine."

"You've never lied to me, Edward, not once you've given your word. You do what you say you'll do, even if it's a bad thing. You don't hide what you are, at least not from me."

We both glanced back at Donna, and started walking side by side toward her as if we'd discussed it. "How the hell did you let it get so far? How could you have let Ted propose?"

He was quiet for so long, I didn't think he'd answer. We walked in silence in the sun-warmed heat. But finally, he did answer, "I don't know. I think one night I just got too caught up in my role. The mood was right and Ted proposed, and I think for just a second I forgot that I'd be the one getting married."

I glanced at him. "You've told me more personal shit in the last half hour in the entire five years I've known you. Are you always such a jabberbox when you're on Ted's home turf?"

He shook his head. "I knew you wouldn't like Donna being involved. I didn't know how strongly you'd react, but I knew you wouldn't like it. Which meant to keep the peace I had to be willing to talk about it. I knew that when I called you."

We stepped off the curb, both of us smiling and me waving to Donna. I said through the smile like a ventriloquist, "How can we know each other this well, and would miss each other if we died, yet still be willing to pull the trigger? I know it's the truth, but I don't understand it."

"Isn't it enough to know it's true? Do you have to explain it?" he asked as we wove through the cars toward Donna.

"Yes, I need to explain it."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I'm a girl," I said.

That made him laugh, a surprise burst of sound, and it made my heart ache because I could count on one hand the number of times I'd heard Edward surprised into laughter. I valued the sound of that particular laugh because it was like an old sound from a younger, more innocent Edward. I wondered if I was the only one that could force that laugh from him. How could we be talking calmly about killing each other? No, it wasn't enough to know we could do it. There had to be a why to it, and saying we were both monsters or sociopaths wasn't enough explanation. At least not for me.

Donna looked at me rather narrowly as we walked up. She made a big show of kissing him and when he sat the suitcases down and had his hands free, she put on an even better show. They kissed, hugged, and body pressed like a couple of teenagers. If Edward was in any way reluctant, it didn't show. In fact, he slipped off his hat and melded into her like he was happy to be there.

I stood, leaning against the side of the car close enough to touch them. If they wanted privacy, they could get a room. It went on long enough that I wondered if checking my watch would be hint enough, but resisted the urge. I

decided that leaning against the car, arms crossed over my stomach, looking bored might be hint enough.

Edward drew back with a sigh. "After last night, I wouldn't think you'd be missing me this much."

"I always miss you," she said in a voice halfway between sultry and a giggle. Donna gazed at me, hands still encircling him, very possessive. She looked right at me and said, "Sorry, didn't mean to embarrass you."

I pushed away from the car. "I don't embarrass that easy."

The happy light in her eyes turned to something fierce and protective. The look and her next words were not friendly. "And just what would it take to embarrass you?"

I shook my head. "Is this my cue to say, a lot more than you've got?"

She stiffened.

"Don't worry, Donna. I am not now, nor have I ever been interested in ... Ted in a romantic way."

"I never thought..." she started to say.

"Save it," I said. "Let's try something really unique. Let's be honest. You were worried about me with Edward," I changed it very quickly to, "Ted, which was why you did the teeny-bopper makeout session. You don't need to mark your territory for my sake, Donna." The last was said in something of a rush because I hoped she hadn't noticed my slip on the names, but of course she had, and I knew Edward had. "Ted's too much like me to ever consider dating. It'd be like incest."

She blushed even through the tan. "My, you are direct."

"She's direct even for a man," Edward said. "For a woman she's like a battering ram."

"It saves time," I said.

"That it does," Edward said. He drew Donna into a quick but thorough kiss. "I'll see you tomorrow, honeypot."

I raised eyebrows at that.

Edward looked at me with Ted's warm eyes. "Donna drove her own car in so we could spend part of the day together. Now she's going to drive home to the kiddies, so we can do business." Donna turned from him, giving me a long searching look. "I'm taking you at your word, Anita. I believe you, but I'm also picking up some strange vibes from you like you're hiding something."

I was hiding something, I thought. If she only knew.

Donna continued, face very serious. "I'm trusting you with the third most important person in my life. Ted is right behind my kids for me. Don't screw up the best thing I've had since my husband died."

"See," Edward said, "Donna knows how to be blunt, too."

"That she does," I said.

Donna gave me one last searching look, then turned to Edward. She drew him away towards a car three down from us. They talked quietly together while I waited in the still, dry, heat. Since Donna had tried for privacy, I gave it to them, turning away and gazing off at the distant mountains. They looked very close, but it's always been my experience that mountains are seldom as close as

they appear. They're like dreams, distant things to set your sights on, but not truly to be trusted to be there when you need them.

I heard Edward's boots crunch on the pavement before he spoke. I was facing him, arms crossed lightly over my stomach, which put my right hand nicely close to the gun under my arm. I believed Edward when he said we had a truce on, but. . . better cautious than sorry.

He stopped by the car one slot over, leaning his butt against it, arms crossing to mirror me. But he didn't have a gun under his arm. I wasn't sure that a bounty hunter's license was enough to get him through an airport metal detector, so he shouldn't have been able to have a gun or large blade on him. Unless of course he'd picked it up from one of the cars, where he'd hidden it. It would be something that Edward would do. Better to assume the worst and be wrong than assume the best and be wrong. Pessimism will keep you alive, optimism won't, not in our line of business anyway.

Our line of business. Strange phrase. Edward was an assassin. I wasn't. But somehow we were in the same business. I couldn't quite explain it, but it was true.

Edward gave me a pure Edward smile, a smile meant to make me uneasy and suspicious. It also usually meant that he meant me no harm and was just yanking my chain. Of course, he knew I knew what the smile usually meant, so he might use it to lull me into a false sense of security. Or it could mean just what it seemed to. I was overthinking things and that was bad all on its own. Edward was right, I was at my best when I let my gut work and kept my higher functions in the background. Not a recipe for going through life, but a good one for a gunfight.

"We have a truce," I said.

He nodded. "I said we did."

"You make me nervous," I said.

The smile widened. "Glad to hear you're still scared of me. I was beginning to wonder."

"The day you stop being afraid of the monsters is the day they kill you."

"And I'm a monster?" He made it a question.

"You know exactly what you are, Edward."

His eyes narrowed. "You called me Edward in front of Donna. She didn't say anything, but you are going to have to be more careful."

I nodded. "I'm sorry, I caught it, too. I will try but I'm not half as good a liar as you are. Besides, Ted is a nickname for Edward."

"Not if the full name on my driver's license is Theodore."

"Now, if I can call you Teddy, maybe I'd remember."

"Teddy is fine," he said, voice totally unchanged.

"You are a very hard man to tease, Ed ... Ted."

"Names don't mean anything, Anita. They're too easy to change."

"Is Edward really your first name?"

"It is now."

I shook my head. "I'd really like to know."

"Why?" He gazed at me from the black sunglasses, and the weight of his interest burned through the glass. The question wasn't idle. Of course, Edward seldom asked any question he didn't want an answer to.

"Because I've known you for five years, and I don't even know if your first name is real."

"It's real enough," he said.

"It bugs me not to know," I said.

"Why?" he asked again.

I shrugged and eased my hand away from my gun because it wasn't necessary, not right this minute, not today. But even as I did it, I knew there would be other days, and for the first time I really wasn't sure that both of us would see the end of my little visit. It made me sad and grumpy.

"Maybe I just want to know what name to put on the tombstone," I said.

He laughed. "Confidence is a fine trait. Over-confidence isn't." The laughter faded and left his face around the glasses cool and unreadable. I didn't have to see his eyes to know they were cold and distant as winter skies.

I pushed away from the car, hands empty at my sides. "Look, Edward, Ted, whatever the hell you call yourself, I don't like being invited here to play monster bait, and find you dating the new age mom of the year. It's thrown me, and I don't like that either. We have a truce until the case is solved, then what?"

"Then we'll see," he said.

"You couldn't just agree to stop being engaged to Donna?"

"No." His voice was small, careful.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I'd need to give her a good enough reason to break her heart and the kids'. Remember, I've been spending a lot of time with the kids. How would it look to just vanish on them?"

"I think her son wouldn't mind. Peter, wasn't it? I think he'd love it if Ted would vanish."

Edward turned his head to one side. "Yeah, Peter would love it, but what about Becca? I've been in her life for over two years and she's only six. Donna trusts me to pick her up after school. I drive her once a week to dance lessons so Donna doesn't have to close the shop early." His voice and face never changed as he spoke, as if it was just facts and meant nothing.

Anger tightened my shoulders and traveled down my arms. I put my hands in fists just to have something to do with my body. "You bastard."

"Maybe," he said, "but be careful what you ask me to do, Anita. Just walking out could do more damage than the truth."

I stared at him, trying to see behind that blank face. "Have you thought about telling Donna the truth?"

"No."

"Damn you."

"Do you really think she could handle the truth, the entire truth about me?" he asked.

I thought about that for nearly a full minute while we stood in the heat-soaked parking lot. Finally, I said, "No." I didn't like saying it, but truth was truth.

"You're sure she couldn't play wife to an assassin? I mean you've only met her for half an hour. How can you be so sure?"

"Now you're teasing me," I said.

His lips twitched almost a smile. "I think you are exactly right. I don't think Donna could handle the truth."

Chapter 4

THE CAR BELONGED to Ted, even though Edward was driving it. It was a square and big something between a Jeep, a truck, and an ugly car. It was covered in red clay mud as if he'd been driving through ditches. The windshield was so dirty only two fans of clear space remained where the windshield wipers had washed away the mud, everything else had dried to a reddish-brown patina of dirt.

"Gee, Edward," I said, as he opened the back hatch, "what have you been doing to this poor whatever it is. I've never seen a car so dirty."

"This is a Hummer, and cost more than most people's houses." He raised the hatch and started putting my bags inside. I offered him my carry-on, and when I was close could smell that new car smell, which explained why the carpeting in back was still nearly pristine.

"If it costs that much, then why doesn't it rate better care?" I asked.

He took the carry-on and put it on the new carpet. "I bought it because it could go over almost any terrain in almost any weather. If I didn't want it to get dirty, I'd have bought something else." He slammed the hatch shut.

"How can Ted afford something like this?"

"Actually, Ted makes a fine living off varmint hunting."

"Not this good," I said, "not off of bounty hunting."

"How do you know what a bounty hunter makes?" he asked, peering around the filthy car at me.

He had a point. "I guess I don't."

"Most people don't know what a bounty hunter makes so I can get away with some purchases that might be out of Ted's price range." He walked around the car toward the driver's side, only the top of his white hat showing above the mud-caked roof.

I tried the passenger side door, and it opened. It took a little bit of work to climb into the seat, and I was glad I wasn't wearing a skirt. One nice thing about working with Edward was that he wouldn't expect me to wear business attire. It was jeans and Nikes for this trip.

The only business thing I was wearing was the black jacket slung over my cotton shirt and jeans. The jacket was to hide the gun, nothing more. "What are the gun laws like in New Mexico?"

Edward started the car and glanced at me. "Why?"

I put on my seatbelt. Evidently, we were in a hurry. "I want to know if I can ditch the jacket and wear my gun naked, or whether I'm going to have to hide the gun for the entire trip."

His lips twitched. "New Mexico lets you carry as long as it's not concealed. Concealed carry without a permit is illegal."

"Let me test my understanding, I can wear the gun in full view of everyone with or without a carry permit, but if I put a jacket over it, concealing it, and don't have a carry permit, it's illegal?"

The twitch turned into a smile. "That's right."

"Western state gun laws are always so interesting," I said, but I started sliding out of the jacket. You can wiggle out of almost anything while remaining seat-belted in a car. Since I always wear a seatbelt, I'd had a lot of practice.

"But the police may still stop you if they see you walking around armed. Just make sure you're not here to kill anybody." He half smiled when he said the last.

"So I can carry as long as it's not concealed, but not really, not without getting questioned by the police."

"And you can't carry a gun of any kind, even unloaded, into a bar."

"I don't drink. I think I can avoid the bars."

A wire fence edged the road he pulled onto, but did nothing to take away the flat, flat distances and the strange black mountains. "What are the mountains called?"

"Sangre del Cristo—the blood of Christ," he said.

I looked at him to see if he was kidding. Of course, he wasn't. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why call them the blood of Christ?"

"I don't know."

"How long has Ted lived out here?"

"Almost four years," he said.

"And you don't know why the mountains are named Sangre del Cristo? Do you have no curiosity?"

"Not about things that don't affect the job."

He didn't say, a job, but the job. I thought it was odd phrasing. "What if this monster that we're hunting is some kind of local bugaboo? Knowing why the mountains are named what they're named may mean nothing, or it may have to do with a legend, a story, a hint about some great blood bath in the past. There are very localised monsters, Edward, things that only come above ground every century or so like really long-lived cicadas."

"Cicadas?" he asked.

"Yeah, cicadas. The immature form stays in the ground until every thirteen or seven or whatever their cycle is years, they climb out, molt, and become IK. They're the insects that make all that noise in the summer time."

"Whatever did those people wasn't a giant cicada, Anita."

"That's not the point, Edward. My point is that there are types of living creatures that stay hidden, almost totally hidden, for years, then resurface, are still a part of the natural world. Preternatural biology is still young. So maybe old myths and legends would give us a clue."

"I didn't bring you down here to play Nancy Drew," he said.

"Yes, you did," I said.

He looked at me long enough to make me want to tell him to watch the road. "What are you talking about?"

"If you just wanted someone to point and shoot, you'd have brought in someone else. You want my expertise, not just my gun. Right?" He'd turned back to the road, much to my relief. There were small houses on either side, most of them made of adobe, or faux-adobe. I didn't know enough about it to judge. The yards were small but well-tended, running high to cacti and huge lilac bushes with surprisingly small bundles of pale lavender flowers on them. It looked like a different variety from the lilacs in the Midwest. Maybe it took less water.

Silence had filled the car and I let it, watching the scenery. I'd never been to Albuquerque, and I'd play tourist while I could. Edward finally answered when he turned onto Lomos Street. "You're right. I didn't ask you down here just to shoot things. I already have backup for that."

"Who?" I asked.

"You don't know them, but you'll meet them in Santa Fe."

"We're driving straight to Santa Fe now? I haven't eaten yet today. I was sort of hoping to catch some lunch."

"The latest crime scene is in Albuquerque. We'll catch it, then lunch."

"Will I feel like eating afterwards?"

"Maybe."

"I don't suppose I could talk you into lunch first then."

"We've got a stop before we hit the house," he said.

"What other stop?" I asked.

He just gave that small smile, which meant it was going to be a surprise. Edward loved to try my patience.

Maybe he'd answer a different question. "Who's your other backup?"

"I told you, you don't know them."

"You keep saying them. Are you saying that you already have two people for backup, and you still needed to call me in, too?" He didn't say anything to that.

"Three people backing you on this. Geez, Edward, you must be desperate." I'd meant for it to be a joke, sort of. He didn't take it that way.

"I want this case solved, Anita, whatever it takes." He looked grim when he said it. So much for my sense of humor.

"Do these two backups owe you a favor?"

"One does."

"Are they assassins?"

"Sometimes."

"Bounty hunters like Ted?"

"Bernardo is."

At least I had a name. "Bernardo is a sometimes assassin and a bounty hunter like Ted. You mean he uses his bounty hunting identity like you use yours as a legal identity?"

"Sometimes he's a bodyguard, too."

"A man of many talents," I said.

"Not really," he said. Which was a strange thing to say.

"What about the other guy?"

"Olaf."

"Olaf, okay. He's sometimes an assassin, not a bounty hunter, not a bodyguard, and what else?"

Edward shook his head.

His noncommittal answers were beginning to get on my nerves. "Do either of them have any other special abilities besides being willing to kill?"

"Yes."

He'd reached my limit on "yes, no" answers. "I didn't come down here to play twenty questions, Edward. Just tell me about the other backups."

"You'll meet them soon enough."

"Fine, then tell me where the other stop is."

He gave a small shake of his head.

"Look, Edward, you're getting on my nerves, and you've already pissed me off, so cut the mysterious crap, and talk to me."

He glanced sideways at me, a glimpse of eyes from the edges of the dark glasses. "My, my, aren't we touchy today."

"This isn't even close to touchy for me, Edward, and you know it. But keep up the noncommittal crap and you are going to truly piss me off."

"I thought you were already pissed off about Donna."

"I am," I said. "But I'm willing to get interested in the case and forget to be continuously pissed. But I can't get interested in the case if you don't answer questions about it. As far as I'm concerned your backup is part of the case, so either start sharing info or drive me back to the damn airport."

"I didn't tell Olaf and Bernardo you're shacking up with a vampire and a werewolf."

"Actually, I'm not dating either of them anymore, but that's not the point. I don't want to know about their sex life, Edward. I just want to know why you called them in. What are their areas of expertise?"

"You broke up with Jean-Claude and Richard both?" For one of the few times since I'd met him I heard real curiosity in his voice. I wasn't sure if it was nice to know or disturbing that my personal life interested Edward.

"I don't know if we broke up, it's more like we aren't seeing each other. I need some time away from them before I decide what to do."

"What are you thinking about doing to them?" And there was a note of eagerness now.

Edward was only eager about one thing. "I am not planning to kill either of them, if that's what you're hinting at."

"I can't say I'm not disappointed," Edward said. "I think you should have killed Jean-Claude yourself before it all got too deep."

"You're talking about killing someone who has been my lover off and on for over a year, Edward. Maybe you could strangle Donna in her bed, but I'd lose sleep over something like that."

"Do you love him?"

The question stopped me, not because of the question but because of who was asking it. It seemed a truly odd question coming from Edward. "Yeah, I think I do."

"Do you love Richard?"

Again, it seemed odd talking about my emotional life with Edward. I have a few male friends, and most of them would rather have a root canal than to talk about "feelings." Of all my male friends I was talking to the one I thought would never discuss love with me. It just wasn't my year for understanding men.

"Yes, I love Richard."

"You say, you think you love the vampire, but you simply answer yes about Richard. Kill the vampire, Anita. I'll help you do it."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, Edward, but I'm Jean-Claude's human servant. Richard is his animal to call. The three of us are bound by vampire marks into a nice little menage a trois. If one of us dies, we may all die."

"Maybe, or maybe that's what the vampire tells you. It wouldn't be the first time he's lied to you."

It was impossible to argue without looking like a fool, so I didn't try. "When I want your advice on my personal life, I'll ask for it. Until people start ice skating in hell, save your breath. Now, tell me about the case."

"You get to tell me who to date and who not to, but I can't return the favor?" he asked.

I looked at him. "Are you angry with me about my stand on Donna?"

"Not exactly, but if you get to give me advice on dating, why can't I return the favor?"

"It's not the same thing, Edward. Richard doesn't have kids."

"Children make that big a difference to you?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, they do."

"I never figured you as the maternal type."

"I'm not, but kids are people, Edward, little people trapped by the choices the adults around them make. Donna's old enough to make her own mistakes, but when you screw her, you're screwing her kids, too. I know that doesn't bother you, but it bothers me."

"I knew it would. I even knew how you'd react, but I don't know why."

"Well, you're one ahead of me. I never dreamed you were boffing new age widows with munchkins. I figured you more for the pay as you go plan."

"Ted doesn't pay for it," he said.

"How about Edward?"

He shrugged. "It's like eating, just another need."

The cold bluntness of it was actually reassuring. "See, that's the Edward I've grown to know and be afraid of."

"You're afraid of me, but yet you'd come against me for a woman you just met and two kids you don't even know. I'm not even planning to kill any of them and yet you'd push the ultimate question between us." He shook his head. "I don't understand that."

"Don't understand it, Edward. Just know it's true."

"I believe you, Anita. You're the only person I know, except for me, that never bluffs."

"Bernardo and Olaf bluff?" I gave it that extra little lilt, making it a question.

He shook his head and laughed. The tension that had been building eased with that laugh. "No, I'm not giving you anything on them."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," he said, and he almost smiled.

I looked at his careful profile. "You're enjoying this. You're enjoying Olaf and Bernardo meeting me." I didn't try and keep the surprise out of my voice.

"Just like I enjoyed you meeting Donna."

"Even though you knew I'd be pissed," I said.

He nodded. "The look on your face was almost worth a death threat."

I shook my head. "You're beginning to worry me, Edward."

"Just beginning to worry you? I must be losing my touch."

"Fine, don't tell me about them. Tell me about the case."

He pulled into a parking lot. I looked up to find a hospital looming over us. "Is this the crime scene?"

"No." He pulled into a parking spot, and shut the engine off.

"What gives, Edward? Why are we at a hospital?"

"The survivors are here."

My eyes widened. "What survivors?"

He looked at me. "The survivors from the attacks." He opened his door, and I grabbed his arm, holding him in the car.

Edward turned slowly and looked at my hand on the bare skin of his arm. He looked at my hand a long time with his disapproval at the touch radiating from him, but it was a trick I'd pulled myself more than once. If the person makes it known that they don't want to be touched, most people that don't mean you violence will back off. I didn't back off. I dug my fingers into his skin, not to hurt, just to let him know he wasn't getting rid of me that easily.

"Talk to me, Edward. What survivors?"

He shifted his gaze from my hand to my face. I had an urge to snatch the sunglasses from his face but fought it. His eyes wouldn't show me anything anyway.

"I told you there were injured people." His voice was mild.

"No, you didn't. You made it sound like there were no survivors."

"My oversight," he said.

"My ass," I said. "I know you enjoy being mysterious, Edward, but it's getting tedious."

"Let go of my arm." He said it the way you'd say, hello, or nice day, no inflection at all.

"Will you answer my questions if I do?"

"No," he said, still with that same pleasant empty voice. "But if you make this a pissing contest, Anita, I'll feel compelled to make you let go. You wouldn't like that."

The voice never changed. There was even a slight smile to his mouth. But I let go, slowly, drawing back into my seat. If Edward said I wouldn't like it, I believed him.

"Talk to me, Edward."

He gave me a big ol' smile. "Call me Ted." Then the son of a bitch got out of the car. I sat in the car, watching him walk across the parking lot. He stopped at the edge with the hospital just across a small road from him. He took off the sunglasses, slipped one of the ear pieces into his shirt front, and stared back at the car, waiting.

It would serve him right if I didn't get out. It would serve him right if I went back to St. Louis and let him clean up his own mess. But I opened the door and got out. Why, you might ask. One, he'd asked me for a favor, and being Edward he'd reveal all in his own sadistic time. Two, I wanted to know. I wanted to know what had finally cut through all that coldness and scared him. I wanted to know. Curiosity is both a strength and a weakness. Which one this particular curiosity was wouldn't be answered for a while. I was betting on weakness.

Chapter 5

SAINT LUCIA HOSPITAL was big and one of the few buildings of any size in Albuquerque that I'd seen that didn't have a southwest theme to it. It was just big and blocky, generic hospital. Maybe they didn't expect the tourists to see the hospital. Lucky tourists.

As hospitals go, it was nice, but it was still a hospital. A place I only go when things have gone wrong. The only up side this time was that it wasn't me or anyone I knew in the rooms.

We were in a long pale corridor with lots of closed doors, but there was a uniformed police officer in front of one of them. Call it a hunch, but I figured that was our room.

Edward walked up to the policeman and introduced himself. He was at his good ol' boy best, harmless and jovial, in a subdued hospital sort of way. They knew each other on sight which should have sped things up considerably.

The uniform looked past Edward to me. He looked young, but his eyes were cool and gray, cop eyes. You have to be on the job a while before your eyes go empty. But he looked at me too long and too intently. You could almost feel the testosterone rising to the surface. The challenging look said that either he was insecure in his own masculinity, his own copness, or that he hadn't been on the job all that long. Not a rookie, but not much beyond it either.

If he expected me to squirm under the scrutiny, he was going to be disappointed. I faced him, smiling, calm, eyes blank and close to bored. Passing inspection had never been my favorite thing.

He blinked first. "The lieutenant is inside. He wants to see her before she goes inside."

"Why?" Edward asked, voice still likable.

The officer shrugged. "I'm just following orders, Mr. Forrester. I don't question my lieutenant. Wait here."

He opened the door and slipped inside without giving much of a glimpse inside. He shut the door behind him, not waiting for the weight and hinges to do it for him.

Edward was frowning. "I don't know what's going on."

"I do," I said.

He looked at me, raising an eyebrow, as if to say, go ahead.

"I'm a girl and technically a civilian. A lot of cops don't trust me to do the job."

"I vouched for you."

"Gee, Ed ... Ted, I guess your opinion doesn't carry as much weight as you thought it did."

He was still frowning at me with Edward's eyes when the door swung open. I was watching his face as he transformed into Ted. The eyes sparkled, the lips curved, the entire set of his face remade itself, as if it were a mask. His own personality vanished like magic. Watching the show this up close and personal made me shiver just a bit. The ease with which he switched back and forth was just plain creepy.

The man in the doorway was short, not many inches above me, maybe five foot six at best. I wondered if their police force didn't have a height requirement. His hair was a golden sun-streaked blond cut very short and close to his square-jawed face. He was tanned a nice soft gold, as if it were as dark a tan as his pale skin were capable of. First Donna, now the lieutenant. Didn't anyone sweat skin cancer here? He looked at me with green-gold eyes, the color of new spring leaves. They were beautiful eyes with long golden lashes and softened his face to an almost feminine appearance. Only the masculine jut of the jaw saved him from being one of those men who is beautiful instead of handsome. The jaw both ruined his face and saved it from perfection.

The eyes may have been lovely, but they weren't friendly. It wasn't even the coolness of cop eyes. It was hostile. Since I'd never met him before, it had

to be the fact that I was a woman, a civilian, and/or an animator. He was either a chauvinist or superstitious. I wasn't sure which I preferred.

He let me have a nice long dose of glaring. I just gave blank face, waiting for him to get tired of it. I could stand there all day and be peacefully blank. Standing in a nice safe hospital corridor wasn't even close to the worst thing I'd had to do lately. It was always sort of peaceful when no one was trying to kill me.

Edward tried to break the stalemate. "Lieutenant Marks, this is Anita Blake. Chief Appleton called you about her." He was still using Ted's happy voice, but there was a set to his shoulders that was stiff and not so happy.

"You're Anita Blake." Lieutenant Marks managed to sound doubtful.

I nodded. "Yep."

His eyes narrowed. "I don't like civilians messing in my case." He jerked a thumb at Edward. "Forrester here has proven himself valuable." He pointed a finger at me. "You haven't."

Edward started to say something, but Marks but him off with a sharp movement of his hand. "No, let her answer for herself."

"I'll answer a question if you'll ask one," I said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you haven't asked a question yet, Lieutenant. You've just made statements."

"I don't need shit from some fucking zombie queen."

Ah, he was prejudiced. One mystery solved. "I was invited down here, Lieutenant Marks. I was invited to help you solve this case. Now if you don't want my help, fine, but I'll need someone from the city government to explain to my boss why the hell I got on a plane to New Mexico when I wasn't sure of my welcome."

"I don't treat you right and you run to powers that be, is that it?"

I shook my head. "Who got your panties in a twist, Marks?"

He frowned. "What?"

"Do I remind you of your ex-wife?"

"I'm married to my only wife." He sounded indignant.

"Congratulations. Is it the voodoo that I use to raise the dead? Are you nervous around the mystical arts?"

"I don't like black magic." He fingered the cross-shaped tie tack that was standard police issue almost everywhere, but somehow I thought Marks was serious about it.

"I don't do black magic, Marks." I drew on the silver chain around my neck until the crucifix spilled into the light. "I'm Christian, Episcopalian actually. I don't know what you've heard about what I do, but it's not evil."

"You would say that," he said.

"The state of my immortal soul is between God and myself, Lieutenant Marks. Judge not lest ye be judged yourself. Or do you skip that part and just keep the parts you like?"

His face darkened, and a vein in his forehead started to pulse. This level of anger, even if he was a right-winger Christian extremist, was over the top. "What in hell is behind that door to have you both so spooked?" I asked.

Marks blinked at me. "I am not spooked."

I shrugged. "Yeah, you are. You're all bent out of shape about the survivors and you're taking it out on me."

"You don't know me," he said.

"No, but I know a lot of policemen, and I know when someone's scared."

He stepped close enough to me that if it had been a fight, I'd have stepped back, put space between us. Instead, I stood my ground. I wasn't really expecting the lieutenant to take a swing at me.

"You think you're so fucking tough?"

I blinked at him, close enough that if I'd risen on tiptoe, I could have kissed him. "I don't think, Lieutenant. I know."

He smiled at that, but not like he was happy. "You think you can take it, be my guest." He stepped to one side, making a sweeping motion towards the door.

I wanted to ask what was behind the door. What could possibly be so horrible that it had Edward and a police lieutenant this shaken? I stared at the closed door, smooth, hiding all its secrets.

"What are you waiting for, Ms. Blake? Go ahead. Open the door."

I glanced back at Edward. "I don't suppose you'd give me a hint."

"Open the door, Anita."

I muttered, "Bastard," under my breath and opened the door.

Chapter 6

THE DOOR DIDN'T LEAD directly into the room. It led into a small antechamber with another sealed, mostly glass door beyond. There was a hush of air circulating through the room as if the room had its own separate air supply. A man stood to one side wearing green surgical scrubs complete with little plastic booties over his feet, a mask hanging loose from his neck. He was tall and slender without looking weak. He was also one of the first New Mexicans that I'd met without a tan. He handed me a pile of scrubs. "Put this on."

I took the clothes. "Are you the doctor on this case?"

"No, I'm a nurse."

"You got a name?"

He gave a small smile. "Ben, I'm Ben."

"Thanks, Ben. I'm Anita. Why do I need the scrubs?"

"To guard against infection."

I didn't argue with him. My expertise was more in the line of taking lives, not preserving them. I'd bow to the experts. I put the scrubs over my jeans, tying the string tie as tight as it would go. The legs of the pants still bagged around my feet.

Ben the nurse was smiling. "We weren't expecting them to send us a policeman so ... petite."

I frowned at him. "Smile when you say that."

His smile brightened a flash of white teeth. The smile softened the face and made him seem less like Nurse Cratchet and more like a human being.

"And I'm not a cop."

His eyes flicked to the gun in it's shoulder holster. The gun was very black and very noticeable against the red shirt. "You're carrying a gun."

I slipped a short-sleeved shirt over my head, and the offending gun. "New Mexico law says I can carry as long as it's not concealed."

"If you're not a policeman, then why do you need the gun?"

"I'm a vampire executioner."

He held a long-sleeved gown out towards me. I slipped my arms through the sleeves. It tied in the back like most hospital gowns. Ben tied it for me. "I thought you couldn't kill a vampire with bullets."

"Silver bullets can slow them down, and if they're not too old or too powerful, blowing a hole in their brain or heart works. Sometimes," I added. Wouldn't want Ben to get the wrong idea and try to take out an intruding vamp with silver ammo and get munched because he trusted my opinion.

We had some trouble getting my hair up under the little plastic hair thing but finally managed it, though the thin ridge of elastic that held it in place scraped the back of my neck every time I moved my head. Ben tried to help me with the surgical gloves, but I put them on myself, no problem.

He raised eyebrows at me. "You've put on gloves before." It wasn't a question.

"I wear them at crime scenes and when I don't want blood under my fingernails."

He helped me tie the mask around my neck. "You must see a lot of blood in your line of work."

"Not as much blood as you see, I bet." I turned with the mask over my mouth and nose. Only my eyes were left uncovered and real. Ben looked down at me, and his face looked thoughtful. "I'm not a surgical nurse."

"What is your specialty?" I asked.

"Burn unit."

My eyes widened. "Are the survivors burned?"

He shook his head. "No, but their bodies are still like open wounds, just like a burn. The protocol is similar."

"What do you mean their bodies are an open wound?"

Someone tapped on the glass behind me, and I jumped, turning to see another man in an outfit just like mine glaring at me with pale eyes. He hit an intercom button, and his voice came clear enough to hear the irritation in it. "If you're coming inside, then do it. I want to sedate them again, and I can't do that

until you've had a chance to question them, or so I'm told." He let go of the button and walked further away behind a white curtain that hid the rest of the room from view.

"Gee, I'm just on everybody's happy list today."

Ben put on his mask and said, "Don't take it personally. Doctor Evans is good at what he does, one of the best."

If you want to find a good doctor in a hospital, don't ask other doctors or referral services. Ask a nurse. Nurses always know who's good and who's not. They may not say the bad stuff aloud, but if they say something good about a doctor, you can take it to the bank.

Ben touched something on the wall that was a little too big to be called a button, and the doors whooshed open with a sound like an air lock opening. I stepped inside, and the doors hushed closed behind me. Nothing but the white curtain now.

I didn't want to pull that curtain aside. Everyone was too damned upset. It was going to be bad. Their bodies were like open wounds, Ben had said, but not a burn. What had happened to them? As the old saying goes, only one way to find out. I took a deep breath and pushed the curtain aside.

The room beyond was white and antiseptic looking, a very hospital of a hospital room. Outside this room there had been some attempt at pastels and a pretense that it was just a building, just hallways, just ordinary rooms. All pretense ended at the curtain, and reality was harsh.

There were six beds, each with a whitish plastic hood/tent over the head of the beds and the upper bodies of the patients. Doctor Evans was standing beside the nearest bed. A woman in matching scrubs was further into the room, checking one of the many blinking, beeping pieces of equipment that huddled around each bed. She glanced up, and the small area of her face that showed was a startling darkness. African American, female, and not fat, but beyond that and height I couldn't tell anything underneath the protective clothing. I wouldn't recognize her again without the scrubs. It was strangely anonymous and disturbing. Or maybe that was just me. She dropped her gaze and moved to another bed, doing the same checks, writing something down on a clipboard.

I walked towards the closest bed. Doctor Evans never turned around or acknowledged me in any way. White sheets formed tents over each patient, held up by some sort of frame work to keep the sheet from touching them.

Doctor Evans finally turned to one side so I could see the face of the patient. I blinked and my eyes refused to see it, or maybe my brain just rejected what I was seeing. The face was red and raw as if it should be bleeding, but it didn't bleed. It was like looking at raw meat in the shape of a human face, no meaty skull. The nose had been cut off, leaving bloody holes for the plastic tubes to be shoved inside. The man rolled brown eyes in his sockets, staring up at me. There was something wrong with his eyes beyond the lack of skin around them. It took me a few seconds to realize his eyelids had been cut off.

The room was suddenly warm, so warm, and the mask was suffocating me. I wanted to pull it off so I could breathe. I must have made some movement because the doctor grabbed my wrist.

"Don't take anything off. I'm risking their lives with every new person that comes in here." He let go of my wrist. "Make the risk worth it. Tell me what did this."

I shook my head, concentrating on breathing slowly in and out. When I could talk, I asked, "What's the rest of the body look like?"

He stared at me, his eyes demanding. I met his gaze. Anything was better than looking at what lay in the bed. "You're pale already. Are you sure you want to see the rest?"

"No," I said, truthfully.

Even with just his eyes visible I could see the surprise on his face.

"I would like nothing better than to turn and walk out of this room and keep walking," I said. "I don't need any new nightmares, Doctor Evans, but I was called in here to give my expert opinion. I can't form an opinion without seeing the whole show. If I thought I didn't need to see it all, trust me, I wouldn't ask."

"What do you hope to gain by it?" he asked.

"I'm not here to gape at them, Doctor. But I'm looking for clues to what did this. Most of the time the clues are on the bodies of the victims."

The man in the bed made small jerks, head tossing from side to side as if he were in a great deal of pain. Small helpless noises came from his lipless mouth. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe normally. "Please, Doctor, I need to see." I opened my eyes in time to see him rolling back the sheet. I watched him roll it back, folding it carefully, revealing the man's body an inch at a time. By the time I saw him to the waist, I knew that he'd been skinned alive. I'd hoped it was just the face. That was awful enough on its own, but it takes a hell of a long time to skin a grown man's entire body, a long screaming eternity to do it this well and this thoroughly.

When the sheet rolled back over the groin, I swayed, just a little. It wasn't a man. The groin area was smooth and raw. I glanced back up at the chest. The bone structure looked male. I shook my head. "Is this a man or a woman?"

"Man," he said.

I stared down and couldn't keep from staring at the groin and what was missing. "Shit," I said softly. I closed my eyes again. It was so hot, so very hot. With my eyes closed, I could hear the hiss of the oxygen, the whisper of the nurse's booties as she came towards us, and small sounds from the bed as he twitched and strained against padded restraints at his wrist and ankles.

Restraints? I'd seen them but hadn't really registered them. All I could see was the body. Yes, body. I couldn't keep thinking of the man as a "he." I had to distance myself or I was going to lose it.

Concentrate on business. I opened my eyes. "Why the restraints?" My voice was breathy but clear. I glanced down at the body, then back up, giving Doctor Evans the most complete eye contact I'd ever given. I'd stare at him until I memorized the light crows-feet around his eyes, if I just didn't have to keep looking at what lay on the bed.

"They keep trying to get up and leave," he said.

I frowned, not that he could see it under the mask. "Surely, they're too hurt to get far."

"We've got them on some very strong painkillers. When the pain dies down, they try to leave."

"All of them?" I asked.

He nodded.

I made myself look back to the bed. "Why isn't this just a case of a serial . . . not killer. What would you call it? A serial..." I shook my head. I couldn't think of a word for it. "Why was I called in? I'm a preternatural expert, and this could have been done by a person."

"There are no blade marks on the tissue," Doctor Evans said.

I stared up at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that no blade did this because no matter how good they are at torture, there are always telltale signs of the instrument used. You're right when you say the bodies of the victims have the best clues, but not these bodies. It's almost as if their skin just dissolved away."

"Any corrosive agent that could take someone's skin and soft tissue like nose and groin wouldn't just stop at the skin. It would keep eating through the body."

He nodded. "Unless it was washed off immediately, but there's no residue of any known corrosive agent. More than that, the body isn't patterned on an acid burn. The nose and groin were torn away. There are signs of tearing and damage that aren't present elsewhere. It's almost as if whoever did the skinning, skinned them then tore off the extra pieces." He shook his head. "I've traveled all over the world to help catch torturers. I thought I'd seen it all, but I was wrong."

"Are you a forensic pathologist?" I asked.

"Yes."

"But they're not dead," I said.

He looked at me. "No, they're not dead, but the same skills that let me judge a dead body work here, too."

"Ted Forrester said there were deaths. Did they die from the skinning?" Now that I was "working," the room didn't seem so hot. If I concentrated very carefully on the business stuff, maybe I wouldn't throw up on the patients.

"No, they were cut into pieces and left where they fell."

"Blade marks on the cut up bodies, I assume, or you wouldn't have used the word cut."

"There were marks of a cutting tool, but it was like no knife or sword, or hell, bayonet that I'd ever seen. The cuts were deep but not clean, something less refined than a steel blade was used."

"What?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know. The blade didn't cut through the bones, though. Whoever cut the bodies up pulled the bodies apart at the joints. No human would have the strength to do that, not multiple times."

"Probably not," I said.

"You really think a human being could have done this?" he asked, motioning at the bed.

"Are you asking me if a person could do this to another person? If you travel the world testifying in cases of death by torture, then you know exactly what people are capable of doing to each other."

"I'm not saying a person wouldn't do this," he said. "I'm saying I don't think it would be physically possible to do it."

I nodded. "The cutting and tearing, I think might have been human, but I agree with the skinning. If it were done by a human, then there would be tool marks of some kind."

"You say tool marks, not blade marks. Most people assume it takes a blade to skin someone."

"Anything that holds an edge can do it," I said, "though it's slower and usually messier. This is strangely clean."

"Yes," he said, nodding. "Yes, that's a good phrase for it. As horrible as it is, it's still very neatly done, except for the extra tissue that was removed. That was not neatly done, but brutally done."

"Almost like we have two different..." I kept wanting to say killers, but these people were still alive. "Perpetrators," I said finally.

"What do you mean?"

"Cutting up a body with a dull tool that isn't strong enough to tear through bone, then pulling a person apart with, bare hands is something more in the line of a disorganized serial killer. The careful skinning is something an organized serial killer might do. Why go to the trouble of carefully skinning the face and groin, then pulling off the pieces? It's either two different mutilators, or it's two different personalities."

"A multiple personality?" He made it a question.

"Not exactly, but not all serial killers are so easy to put in one category or another. Some organized criminals have moments of savagery that resemble the disorganized killer, and some organized minds become more disorganized as they escalate their killing. The same isn't true of a disorganized killer. There aren't enough brownies in the pan for them to ape organized methods."

"So either an organized killer with savage moments of disorganization, or ... or what?" The good doctor was talking very reasonably to me, not angry anymore. I'd either impressed him or at least hadn't disappointed him. Not yet, anyway.

"It could be a pair of killers, an organized killer being the brains of the operation and the disorganized being the follower. It's not that unusual to find killers working in tandem."

"Like the Hillside Strangler or rather Stranglers," he said.

I smiled behind the mask. "There have been a lot more cases than just that one where we had two killers. Sometimes it's two men. Sometimes it's a man and a woman. In that case the man is the dominant personality. Or at least in every case I've ever heard of, except one. Either way one is dominant and the other is to a lesser or greater degree in the control of the other. It can be a near complete domination so that the other person is unable to say no, or it can be

more of a partnership. But even in more equal relationships one person is primarily dominant while the other is the follower."

"And you're sure it's a serial mutilator?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"The serial mutilator idea is the most normal solution I can come up with, but it I'm a preternatural expert, Doctor Evans. I'm rarely called in when the answer wears a human face, no matter how monstrous. Someone thinks this wasn't done by human hands, or I wouldn't be here."

"The FBI agent seemed very sure," Doctor Evans said.

I looked at him. "Have I just wasted both our times here? Did the Feds come in and say pretty much what I just said?"

"Pretty much," he said.

"Then you don't need me."

"The FBI is convinced that it's a serial mutilator, a person."

"Sometimes the Feds can be very sure of themselves, and once they've committed themselves, they don't like to be wrong. Policemen in general can be like that. It is usually the easy answer when it comes to crime. If a husband dies, the wife probably did do it. Cops aren't encouraged to complicate a case. They're encouraged to simplify it."

"Why aren't you taking the simple solution?" he asked.

"Several reasons. One, if it was a serial anything, a human, I'd think the police, Feds, whatever would have some clues by now. The level of fear and uncertainty among the men is too high. If they had a clue to what was happening, they'd be less panicked. I don't have a superior to report to. No one's going to slap my hand or demote me in rank if I guess and I'm wrong. My job and income don't depend on pleasing anyone but myself."

"You do have a boss to answer to?" he said.

"Yeah, but I don't have to give regular written reports. He's more a business manager than anything. He doesn't give a rat's ass how I do the job, as long as I do it and don't insult too many people along the way. I raise the dead for a living, Doctor Evans. It's a specialized skill. If my boss gives me too much grief, there are two other animating firms in this country that would take me in a hot minute. I could even go freelance."

"You're that good?" he said.

I nodded. "I seem to be, and that frees me from a lot of the red tape and politics that the police have to mess with. My goal is to keep this from happening to anyone else. If I look a little foolish or indecisive along the way, that's just fine. Though I'll probably get some pressure to make up my mind and pick a bogeyman. Not from my boss, but from the police and the Feds. Solving something like this could make a cop's career. Being wrong and failing to solve it could be the end of a career."

"But if you're wrong, you aren't hurt," Evans said.

I looked at him. "If I'm wrong, then no harm, no foul. If everybody's looking in the wrong direction, me, the cops, the Feds, everybody, then this is

going to keep on happening." I looked down at the man on the bed. "That will hurt."

"Why? Why will it hurt you?"

"Because we're the good guys, and whoever or whatever is doing this, is the bad guy. Good is supposed to triumph over evil, Doctor Evans, or what's a Heaven for?"

"You're Christian?"

I nodded.

"I didn't think you could be Christian and raise zombies."

"Surprise," I said.

He nodded, though I wasn't sure what he was agreeing with. "Do you need to see the others, or is this enough?"

"You can cover him back up, but yeah, I should at least look at the others. If I don't, then I'll wonder if I missed something by not looking."

"No one else has made it all the way around the room without having to leave, and that includes me the first time I walked in here." He was walking to the next bed as he spoke. I followed behind, not happy to be there, but feeling better. I could do this if I just concentrated on solving the crime and shoved my empathy in a tight dark box. At that moment sympathy was a luxury I couldn't afford.

The second man was almost identical to the first except for height and eye color. Blue eyes this time, and I had to look away. If I locked gazes with any of them, they'd become people, and I'd run screaming.

The third bed was different. The wounds on the chest seemed different somehow, and when Doctor Evans rolled the sheet over the groin, I realized it was a woman. My gaze went back to her chest where something had ripped away her breasts. Her eyes rolled wildly, mouth opening and closing, making small sounds, and I saw for the first time why no one was talking. The tongue was just a ruined stump, rolling like a butchered worm in that lipless, skinless opening.

Heat washed over me in a rush. The room swam. I couldn't breathe. The mask molded itself to my open, gaping mouth. I turned and went for the doors. I walked slowly. I didn't run, but if I didn't get out of there I was going to lose what little I had on my stomach or maybe faint. Of the two I think I preferred throwing up. Doctor Evans pressed the pad that opened the door without a word. The doors opened, and I went through.

Ben the nurse turned to me, mask hastily held in place with a gloved hand. When the doors shut behind me, he let the mask drop. "You all right?"

I shook my head, not trusting my voice. I jerked the mask off my face and still couldn't seem to get enough air. It was too quiet in the little room. The only sound the soft hush of the air whooshing in, recycling. The small movement of cloth as Ben moved towards me. I needed noise, human voices. I needed out of there.

I jerked the plastic thingie off my head. My hair fell around my shoulders, brushed my face. I still couldn't get enough air. "I'm sorry," I said, and my voice sounded distant. "I'll be back." I opened the outer door and escaped.

Chapter 7

THE HALL FELT COOLER, though I knew it wasn't. I leaned beside the closed door, eyes closed, breathing in great draughts of air. The corridor was full of noise after that silent hissing room. People walking, moving, and Lieutenant Marks' voice, "Not so fucking tough after all, eh, Ms. Blake."

I opened my eyes and looked at him. He was sitting in the chair that had probably been brought up for the uniform guarding the door. The uniformed officer was nowhere to be seen. Only Edward leaned against the far wall, hands behind his back. He was watching my face, watching me, as if he'd memorize my fear. "I made it through three patients before I had to leave the room."

"How many did you see before you had to go outside, Marks?"

"I didn't have to leave the fucking room."

"Doctor Evans said that no one has made it through the room, all the way through the room without having to run out. That means you didn't make it either, Marks. So piss off."

He was on his feet now. "You . . . you witch." He spat the last word at me as if it were the worst insult he could come up with.

"Don't you mean bitch?" I said. I was feeling better out here in the hallway.

Trading insults with Marks was a cakewalk compared to my other choices.

"I said what I meant."

"If you don't know the difference between a real witch and an animator, no wonder you haven't caught the thing that's doing this."

"What do you mean 'thing'?" he asked.

"Thing, thing, monster."

"The Feds think it's a serial mutilator," he said.

I glanced at Edward. "Nice of someone to tell me what the Feds said."

Edward didn't look guilty in the least. He gave me pleasant, unreadable, and I turned my attention back to Marks. "Then why aren't there any tool marks from the skinning?"

Marks glanced down the corridor where a nurse was pushing a small cart. "We don't discuss an ongoing investigation in the open, where anyone can hear us."

"Fine, then after I've gone back in there and looked at the last three ... bodies, we'll go some place more private and talk about the case."

I think he paled just a bit. "You're going back in there?"

"The victims are the clues, Lieutenant. You know that."

"We can take you to the crime scenes," he said. It was the nicest thing he'd ever said to me.

"Great, and I need to see them, but right this moment we're here and the only possible clues are inside that room." My breathing had returned to normal and the sick sweat had dried on my forehead. Maybe I was a touch pale myself, but I was mobile and felt almost normal.

I walked into the middle of the hall and motioned Edward over to me, as if I had something for his ears alone. He pushed away from the wall and came toward me. When he was close enough, I faked a low kick he looked down for just an instant, reacting to it, and the second, higher kick caught him in the jaw. He went backwards hard. He had his arms up to defend his face. He knew enough to defend the vital areas, and worry about standing later.

My heart was thudding in my chest, not from exertion, but from adrenaline. I'd never used my new-found Kenpo skills in a fight. Trying it out for real for the very first time on Edward was probably not my best idea, but hey, it had worked. Though truthfully, I was a little surprised it had worked that easily. In the back of my head a voice wondered if Edward had let me take him down. The front of my head said that he had too much ego for that. I believed the second voice. I stayed where I was in a modified horse stance. It was pretty much the only stance I knew well enough to go back to once a kick was launched. I had my fists up, waiting, but didn't move in.

When Edward figured out I wasn't going to do anything else, he lowered his arm and stared at me. "What the hell was that?" There was blood on his lower lip.

"I've been taking Kenpo," I said.

"Kenpo?"

"It's sort of like Tae-kwon-do with fewer kicks and more fluid movements, a lot of hand work."

"A black belt in Judo wasn't enough?" he asked, and it was Ted's voice asking.

"Judo's great exercise, but it's not great for self-defense. You have to close with the bad guy and grapple. This way I can stay out of reach and still do damage."

He touched his lip and came away with blood. "I see that. Why?"

"Why did I kick you in the face?" I asked.

He nodded, and I think he winced ever so slightly. Great.

"Why didn't you warn me about the victims? Tell me what I was up against?"

"I walked in on them cold," he said. "I wanted to see how you handled it cold"

"This is not a pissing contest, Edward. Ted. I am not competing with you. I know you're better than me, tougher than me, colder than me. You win, okay? Stop with the macho bullshit."

"I'm not so sure," he said, softly.

"Not sure about what?" I asked.

"Who's tougher. Remember, I didn't make it through the whole room either."

I stared at him. "Fine, you want to go one on one, great, but not now. We are supposed to be solving a case. We are supposed to be making sure that what happened to those people doesn't happen to anyone else. When we're back on our own time, then you can get competitive. Until we solve this, cut it the fuck out, or you are going to seriously piss me off."

Edward got slowly to his feet. I backed away out of reach. I'd never seen him use martial arts before, but I put nothing past him.

A sound made me back up further until I could see Edward and Marks without looking away from Edward. Marks was making a small sniggering sound. It took me a moment to realize he was laughing, laughing so hard his face was purplish and he seemed to be having trouble breathing.

Edward and I both stared at him.

When Marks could finally talk, he said, "You kick a man in the face, and that's not seriously pissed off." He straightened, hand to his side like he had a stitch in it. "What the fuck do you call seriously pissed?"

I felt my face going blank, my eyes going empty. For just an instant I let Marks see the gaping hole where my conscience was supposed to be. I didn't really mean to, but I couldn't seem to help it. Maybe I was more shaken up from the room and its survivors than I thought. It's the only excuse I can give.

Marks' face went from fading laughter to something like concern. He gave me cop eyes, but underneath that was an uncertainty that was almost fear.

"Smile, Lieutenant. It's a good day. No one died."

I watched the thought spill through his face. He understood exactly what I meant. You should never even hint to the police that you're willing to kill, but I was tired, and I still had to go back into the room. Fuck it.

Edward spoke in his own voice, low and empty, "And you wonder why I compete with you?"

I turned eyes that I knew were just as dead as his to meet his gaze. I shook my head. "I don't wonder why you compete with me . . . Ted. I just told you to stop doing it until the case is solved."

"And then?" he asked.

"Then we'll see, won't we?"

I didn't see fear on Edward's face. I saw anticipation. And that was the difference between us. He enjoyed killing. I didn't. What really scared me was the thought that that might be the only difference between us now. It wasn't enough of a difference for me to throw stones in Edward's direction. I still had more rules than Edward did. There were still things that he would do that I wouldn't, but even that list had been growing shorter of late. There was something close to panic fluttering in my stomach. Not fear of Edward or anything he could do, but wondering when I'd turned the corner and become just another monster. I'd told Doctor Evans we were the good guys, but if Edward and I were on the side of the angels, then what was left to be on the other side?

Something that could skin a person alive without using a tool of any kind. Something that would jerk the penis off a man and the breasts off a woman

with its bare hands. As bad as Edward was, as bad as I'd become, there were worse things. And we were about to go hunting one of them.

Chapter 8

I DID GO BACK into the room, and no, I didn't learn a damn thing from the last three victims. All that wasted bravery for nothing. Well, not exactly for nothing. I proved to myself that I could go back into the room without throwing up or fainting. I didn't care if it impressed Edward or Marks. It impressed me. If you can't impress yourself, then no one else really matters.

I either impressed Doctor Evans, or he needed a restorative cup of tea because he invited me back to the doctors and nurses lounge. There's no such thing as truly undrinkable coffee, but I hoped the tea was better for Evans' sake. Though I doubted it. The coffee came out of a can, and the tea was from little bags with strings on them. There's only so much you can hope for from prepackaged tea and coffee. At home I grind my own beans, but I wasn't home and I was grateful for the bitter warmth.

I added cream and sugar and noticed that the coffee was trembling in the cup, as if maybe my hands weren't quite steady. I was also cold. Nerves, just nerves.

If Edward had nerves, you couldn't tell it as he leaned against the wall, drinking his coffee black. He'd scorned sugar and cream, tough he-man that he was. He winced as he sipped, and I don't think it was the scalding liquid. His lip was swelling slightly from where I'd kicked him. It made me feel better. Childish but true.

Marks had taken a place on the room's only couch, blowing on his coffee. He'd taken cream and sugar in his. Evans settled down into the only chair that looked halfway comfortable, sighing as he stirred his tea.

Edward watched me, and I finally realized that he wouldn't sit down until I did. Screw it. I sat down in a chair that was far too straight-backed to be comfortable, but was placed so I could watch everyone in the room, including the door. There was a small, but full-size, refrigerator against the far wall. It was an older model, done in an odd shade of brown. A small L-shaped cabinet area housed a coffee maker, a second coffee maker with nothing but hot water in it, a sink, and a microwave oven.

Doctor Evans had used the hot water for his tea. There were white plastic spoons in an open packet, and a mug of those useless little coffee stirrers. There'd been a choice of sugar, Nutrasweet, and some other artificial sweetener that I'd never heard of. There was a circle of artificial creamer that had dried into a round crusty ridge where someone had sat a mug down in it. I concentrated on the minutia of the cabinet, trying not to think. For just a few

moments I wanted to sip my coffee and not think. I still hadn't eaten today, and now I didn't want to.

"You said you had some questions for me, Ms. Blake." Doctor Evans spoke into the silence.

I jumped, and so did Marks. Only Edward stayed half-leaning against the wall, unmoved, blue eyes watching us all as if he were apart from the tension and the horror. Maybe he was, or maybe it was just an act. I just didn't know anymore.

I nodded, trying to focus. "How did they all survive?"

He tilted his head to one side. "Do you mean technically how did they survive? Medical detail?"

I shook my head. "No, I mean, one person surviving this much trauma, or even two, I'll buy. But most people wouldn't survive it, or am I wrong?"

Evans pushed his glasses more securely on his nose, but nodded. "No, you aren't wrong."

"Then how did all six of them survive?" I asked.

He frowned at me. "I'm not sure I understand exactly what you're trying to say here, Ms. Blake."

"I'm asking what are the chances that six people of varying sex, background, physical fitness, age, etc. . . . would all be able to survive the same amount of trauma. My understanding is that all the victims that were just skinned have survived, right?"

"Yes." Doctor Evans was watching me closely, pale eyes searching my face, waiting for me to go on.

"Why did they survive?"

"They're tough sons of bitches," Marks said.

I glanced at the lieutenant, then back to Evans. "Are they?"

"Are they what?" the doctor asked.

"Are they tough sons of bitches?"

He lowered his eyes as if thinking. "Two of the men worked out regularly, one of the women was a marathon runner. The other three were just ordinary. One of the men is close to sixty, and didn't have a regular exercise routine of any kind. The other woman is in her thirties but didn't. . ." He looked at me. "No, they aren't particularly tough individuals, not physically anyway. But I've found that it's often the people who aren't physically strong or outwardly tough that survive the longest under torture. The he-men are usually the first to cave."

I forced myself not to glance at Edward, but it was an effort. "Let me test my understanding, Doctor. Have any people that have been skinned like the six in that room died?"

He blinked and again looked into the distance as if remembering, then he looked at me. "No, the only deaths have been those people torn apart."

"Then I ask again, why are they all alive? Why didn't at least one of them die from shock, blood loss, or a bad heart, or hell, the pure terror of it?"

"People don't die from terror," Marks said.

I glanced at him. "Are you absolutely sure of that, Lieutenant?"

His handsome face looked petulant, stubborn. "Yeah, I'm sure."

I waved the comment away. I'd argue with Marks later. Right now I was chasing a point. "How did all six of them survive, Doctor? Not why this six, but why all of them?"

Evans nodded. "I see what you mean. How could all of them have survived it?"

I nodded. "Exactly. Some of them should have died, but they didn't."

"Whoever skinned them is an expert," Marks said. "He knew how to keep them alive."

"No," Edward said. "No matter how good you are at torture, you can't keep everybody alive. Even if you do exactly the same thing to each of them, some people die and some people live. You're not always sure why some make it, and some don't." His voice was very quiet, but it filled the hush of the room.

Doctor Evans looked at him, nodding. "Yes, yes, even an expert can't make people survive what was done to these six. You should lose some of them. For that matter I don't know why they're all still alive. Why hasn't one of them contracted some secondary infection? They are all remarkably healthy."

Marks stood so abruptly, he spilled coffee over his hand. He cursed, striding to the sink and throwing the cup and all in the sink. "How can you say they're healthy?" He looked over his shoulder at the doctor while he ran his hands under the water.

"They are still alive, Lieutenant, and for their condition that is very healthy indeed."

"Magic would do it," I said.

Everyone looked at me.

"There are spells that can keep a person alive during torture so that the torture can be prolonged."

Marks tore too much paper towel off the roll and turned on me, wiping his hands with small abrupt movements. "How can you say you don't do black magic?"

"I said there are spells that will do it, not that I did the spells," I said.

It took him three tries to get the paper towel in the waste basket. "Just knowing about such things is evil."

"Think what you like, Marks, but maybe one of the reasons you had to call me in is that you've kept yourself so lily white that you don't know enough to help these people. Maybe if you were more interested in solving crime than in saving your own soul you'd have wrapped this up by now."

"Saving a soul is more important than solving crime," he said. He was striding towards me now.

I stood up, coffee cup in my hand. "If you're more interested in souls than crime then become a minister, Marks. What we need right now is a cop."

He stalked towards me, and I think would have come close enough to exchange blows, but I watched him remember what I'd done out in the hall. I watched him remember caution, and he walked far around me to get to the door.

Doctor Evans glanced from one to the other of us, as if wondering what he'd missed.

Marks turned at the door, pointing a finger at me. "If I have my way, you are going to be back on a plane tonight. You can't ask the devil to help you catch the devil." With that he closed the door behind him.

Evans spoke into the silence. "There must be more in you, Ms. Blake, than mere toughness, something I haven't seen yet."

I looked at him and took a drink of the cooling coffee. "What would make you say that, doctor?"

"If I didn't know better, I'd say Lieutenant Marks is afraid of you," he said.

"He's afraid of what he thinks I am, Doctor Evans. He's jumping at shadows."

Evans looked up at me, his tea forgotten in his big hands. The look was a long considering one. I had an urge to squirm under such scrutiny, but fought it down. "Perhaps you are right, Ms. Blake, or perhaps he has seen something in you that I have not."

"When you spend all your time worrying that the devil is right behind you, eventually you start seeing him whether he's there or not," I said.

Evans stood, nodding. He rinsed his coffee mug in the sink, washing it out with a fresh paper towel and soap. He spoke without turning around. "I do not know if I will ever see the devil, but I have seen true evil, and if there is no devil behind it, still it is evil." He turned and looked at me. "And we must put a stop to it."

I nodded. "Yes," I said, "we must."

He smiled then, but his eyes stayed tired. "I will work with my colleagues here that are more accustomed to working with the living instead of the dead. We will try and discover why these six survive."

"And if it's magic?" I asked.

He nodded. "Do not tell Lieutenant Marks, but my wife is a witch. She has traveled the world with me seeing such things. Sometimes what we find is more up her alley than mine, not often, mind you. People are quite able to torment one another without aid of magic. But occasionally it has been more."

"Don't take this wrong," I said, "but why haven't you called her in before this?"

He took in a long breath and let it out. "She was out of the country on another matter. Why, you may ask, didn't I call her home sooner?"

I shook my head. "I wasn't going to ask."

He smiled. "Thank you for that. I reasoned that my wife was needed elsewhere, and the FBI seemed so sure it was a person." He glanced at Edward then back to me. "The truth is, Ms. Blake, something about all this frightens me. I am not a man who is easily frightened."

"You're afraid for your wife," I said.

He stared at me as if he could look into my mind with those pale eyes. "Wouldn't you be?"

I touched his arm, gently. "Trust your instincts, doctor. If it feels wrong, send her away."

He drew away from my touch, smiling, tossing the paper towel into the trash can. "That would be terribly superstitious of me."

"You've got a bad feeling about your wife's involvement with this thing. Trust your gut. Don't try to be reasonable. If you love your wife, listen to your heart, not your head."

He nodded twice then said, "I will think about what you said. Now I really must be going."

I held out my hand. He took it. "Thanks for your time, doctor."

"My ... pleasure, Ms. Blake." He nodded to Edward. "Mr. Forrester."

Edward nodded in return, and we were left in the silence of the lounge. "Listen to your heart and not your head. Damn romantic advice, coming from you," Edward said.

"Drop it," I said. I had my hand on the door handle.

"How would your love life be if you took your own advice?" he asked.

I opened the door and walked out into the cool white hallway without answering him.

Chapter 9

MARKS' OFFER OF ESCORTING me to the crime scene seemed to have evaporated with his temper. Edward drove me. We drove in almost complete silence. Edward never sweated small talk, and I just didn't have the energy for it. If I could have thought of something useful to say, I'd have said it. Until then, silence was fine. Edward had volunteered that we were on our way to the latest crime scene, and we'd meet his other two backups in Santa Fe. He told me nothing else about them, and I didn't press it. His lip was still swelling because he'd been too macho to put ice on it. I figured the busted lip was all the slack Edward was going to give me for one day. I'd told him in the strongest terms I could manage, short of pulling a weapon, to stop the competitive crap, and nothing would change that, least of all me.

Besides, I was still riding in a ringing bell of silence as if everything echoed and nothing was quite solid. It was shock. The survivors, if that was the word for them, had shaken me down to my toes. I'd seen awful things, but nothing quite like that. I was going to have to snap out of it before we had our first fire fight, but frankly if someone had pulled a weapon on me right that second, I'd have hesitated. Nothing seemed truly important or even real.

"I know why you're afraid of this thing," I said.

He glanced toward me with the black lenses of his eyes, then back to the road, as if he hadn't heard. Anyone else would have asked me to explain, or made some comment. Edward just drove.

"You don't fear anything that just offers death. You've accepted that you're not going to live to a ripe old age."

"We," he said. "We've accepted that we aren't going to live to a ripe old age."

I opened my mouth to protest, then stopped. I thought about it for a second or two. I was twenty-six, and if the next four years were anything like the last four, I'd never see thirty. I'd never really thought about it in so many words, but old age wasn't one of my biggest worries. I didn't really expect to get there. My life style was a sort of passive suicide. I didn't like that much. It made me want to squirm and deny it, but I couldn't. Wanted to, but couldn't. It made my chest squeeze tight to realize that I expected to die by violence. Didn't want it, but expected it. My voice sounded uncertain, but I said it out loud. "Fine, we've accepted that we're not going to make it to a ripe old age. Happy?"

He gave a slight nod.

"You're afraid that you'll live like those things in the hospital. You're afraid of ending up like them."

"Aren't you?" His voice was almost too soft to hear, but somehow it carried over the rush of wheels and the expensive purr of the engine.

"I'm trying not to think about it," I said.

"How can you not think about it?" he asked.

"Because if you start thinking about the bad things, worrying about them, then it makes you slow, makes you afraid. Neither of us can afford that."

"Two years ago, I'd have been giving you the pep talk," he said, and there was something in his voice, not anger, but close.

"You were a good teacher," I said.

His hands gripped the wheel. "I haven't taught you all I know, Anita. You are not a better monster than I am."

I watched the side of his face, trying to read that expressionless face. There was a tightness at the jaw, a thread of anger down the neck and into his shoulders. "Are you trying to convince me or yourself... Ted?" I made the name light and mocking. I didn't usually play with Edward just to get a rise out of him, but today, he was unsure, and I wasn't. Part of me was enjoying the hell out of that.

He slammed on the brakes and screeched to a stop on the side of the road. I had the Browning pointed at the side of his head, close enough that pulling the trigger would paint his brains all over the windows.

He had a gun in his hand. I don't know where in the car it had come from, but the gun wasn't pointed at me. "Ease down, Edward."

He stayed motionless but didn't drop the gun. I had one of those moments when you see into another person's soul like looking into an open window. "Your fear makes you slow, Edward, because you'd rather die here, like this, than survive like those poor bastards. You're looking for a better way to die." My gun was very steady, finger on the trigger. But this wasn't for real, not yet. "If you were really serious, you'd have had the gun in your hand before you pulled over. You didn't invite me here to hunt monsters. You invited me here to kill you if it works out wrong."

He gave the smallest nod. "Neither Bernardo or Olaf are good enough." He laid the gun very, very slowly on the floorboard hump between the seats. He

looked at me, hands spread on the steering wheel. "Even for you, I have to be a little slow."

I took the offered gun without taking either my eyes or my gun off of him. "Like I believe that's the only gun you've got hidden in this car. But I do appreciate the gesture."

He laughed then, and it was the most bitter sound I'd ever heard from Edward. "I don't like being afraid, Anita. I'm not good at it."

"You mean you're not used to it," I said.

"No, I'm not."

I eased my own gun down until it wasn't pointing at him, but I didn't put it up. "I promise that if you end up like the people in the hospital I'll take your head."

He looked at me then, and even with the sunglasses on I knew he was surprised. "Not just shoot me or kill me, but take my head."

"If it happens, Edward, I won't leave you alive, and taking your head we'll both be sure that the job's done."

Something flowed across his face, down his shoulders, his arms, and I realized it was relief. "I knew I could count on you for this, Anita, you and no one else."

"Should I be flattered or insulted that you've never met anyone else coldblooded enough for this?"

"Olaf's blood is plenty cold enough, but he'd just shoot me and bury me in a hole somewhere. He'd have never thought about taking my head. And what if shooting didn't kill me?" He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I'd be in some stinking hole somewhere alive because Olaf would never think to take my head." He shook his head as if chasing the image away. He slid the glasses back on, and when he turned to look at me, his face was blank, unreadable, his usual. But I'd seen beneath the mask, further than I'd ever been allowed before. The one thing I'd never expected to find was fear, and beneath that, trust. Edward trusted me with more than his life. He trusted me to make sure he died well. For a man like Edward there was no greater trust.

We would never go shopping together or eat an entire cake while we complained about men. He'd never invite me over to his home for dinner or a barbecue. We'd never be lovers. But there was a very good chance that one of us would be the last person the other saw before we died. It wasn't friendship the way most people understood it, but it was friendship. There were several people I'd trust with my life, but there is no one else I'd trust with my death. Jean-Claude and even Richard would try to hold me alive out of love or something that passed for it. Even my family and other friends would fight to keep me alive. If I wanted death, Edward would give it to me. Because we both understand that it isn't death that we fear. It's living.

Chapter 10

THE HOUSE WAS a two-story split-level ranch that could have been anywhere in the Midwest, in any upper-middle-class neighborhood. But the large yard was done in rock paths running high to cacti and a circle of those small flowered lilacs that were so plentiful. Other people had tried to keep their lawns green as if they didn't live on the edge of a desert, but not this house. This house, these people had landscaped for their environment and tried not to waste water. And now they were dead and didn't give a damn about environmental awareness or rainfall.

Of course, one of them could be a survivor. I didn't want to see pictures of the survivors before they'd been . . . injured. I was having enough trouble keeping my professional distance without color photos of smiling faces that had been turned into so much naked meat. I got out of the car, praying that everyone had died in this house, not my usual prayer at a crime scene. But nothing about this case so far was usual.

There was a marked police car sitting out in front of the house. A uniformed officer got out of the marked car as Edward and I walked towards the yard. He was medium build but carrying enough weight for someone taller, a lot taller. His weight was mostly in the stomach and made his utility belt ride low. His pale face was sweating by the time he'd walked the five feet to us. He put his hat on as he walked towards us, unsmiling, thumb hooked in his utility belt.

"Can I help you?"

Edward went into his Ted Forrester act, putting his hand out, smiling. "I'm Ted Forrester, Officer... " he took the time to read the man's name tag, "Norton. This is Anita Blake. Chief Appleton has cleared us both to see the crime scene."

Norton looked us both up and down, pale eyes not the least bit friendly. He didn't shake hands. "Can I see some ID?"

Edward opened his wallet to his driver's license and held it out. I opened my executioner's license for him. He handed Edward's back, but squinted at mine. "This license isn't good in New Mexico."

"I'm aware of that, Officer," I said, voice bland.

He squinted at me, much as he had the license. "Then why are you here?"

I smiled and couldn't quite make it reach my eyes. "I'm here as a preternatural advisor, not an executioner."

He handed the license back to me. "Then why the hardware?"

I glanced down at the gun very visible against my red shirt. The smile was genuine this time. "It's not concealed, Officer Norton, and it's federally licensed so I don't have to sweat a new gun permit every time I cross a state line."

He didn't seem to like the answer. "I was told to let the two of you in." It was a statement, but it sounded like a question, as if he wasn't quite sure he was going to let us in, after all.

Edward and I stood there trying to appear harmless, but useful. I was a lot better at looking harmless than Edward was. I didn't even have to work at it most of the time. He was better at looking useful, though. Without seeming dangerous in the least he could give off an aura of purposefulness that police and other people responded to. The best I could do was look harmless and wait for Officer Norton to decide what our fate would be.

He finally nodded, as if he'd made up his mind. "I'm supposed to escort you around the scene, Miss Blake." He didn't look happy about it.

I didn't correct him that Miss Blake should have been Ms. Blake. I think he was looking for an excuse to get rid of us. I wasn't going to give him one. Very few policemen like civilians messing around in their cases. I wasn't just a civilian, I was female, and I hunted vampires; a triple threat if ever there was one. I was a civvie, a woman, and a freak.

"This way." He started up the narrow walkway. I glanced at Edward. He just started following Norton. I followed Edward. I had a feeling I'd be doing a lot of that in the next few days.

Quiet. The house was so quiet. The air conditioner purred into that silence reminding me of the recycled air in the hospital room. Norton came up behind me, and I jumped. He didn't say anything, but he gave me a look.

I moved out of the entry hall and into the large high ceilinged living room. Norton followed me. In fact he stayed at my heels as I moved around the room like some obedient dog, but the message I was getting from him wasn't trust and adoration. It was suspicion and disapproval. Edward had settled into one of the room's three comfortable-looking powder blue chairs. He'd stretched himself full length, legs crossed at the ankles. He'd left his sunglasses on so he looked the picture of ease in the midst of that careful living room in that too silent house.

"Are you bored?" I asked.

"I've seen the show," he said. He'd toned down his Ted act and was more his usual self. Maybe he didn't sweat Norton's reaction, or maybe he was tired of playacting. I knew I was tired of watching the show.

The room was one of those great rooms which meant the living, dining, and kitchen were all one shared space. It was a large space, but I'm not really comfortable with the open floor plan. I like more walls, doors, barriers. Probably a sign of my own less than welcoming personality. If the house was any clue to the family that had lived in it, they'd been welcoming and somewhat conventional. The furniture was all purchased as sets: a powder blue living room set, a dark wood dining room set to one side with a bay window and white lacy drapes. There was a new hard back southwestern cook book on the kitchen cabinet. The receipt was still being used as a bookmark. The kitchen was the smallest area, long and thin with white cabinets and a black and white cow motif down to a cookie jar that mooed when you took its head off. Store-bought cookies, chocolate chip. No, I didn't eat one.

"Any clues in the cookie jar?" Edward asked from his chair.

"No," I said, "I just had to know if it really mooed." Norton made a small sound that might have been a laugh. I ignored him. Though since he was

standing about two feet from me the entire time ignoring wasn't easy. I changed direction in the kitchen abruptly, and he nearly ran into me.

"Could you give me a little more breathing space?" I asked.

"Just following my orders," he said, face bland.

"Did your orders tell you to stand close enough to tango or just to follow me? "

His mouth twitched, but he managed not to smile. "Just to follow you ma'am."

"Great, then take about two big steps back so we do this without bumping into each other."

"I'm supposed to make sure you don't disturb the scene, ma'am."

"The name's Anita, not ma'am."

That earned me a smile, but he shook his head and fought it off. "Just following orders. That's what I do."

There was something just a touch bitter about that last. Officer Norton was on the down side of fifty or looked it. He was close to putting in his thirty years, and he was still a uniform sitting in a car outside a crime scene following orders. If he'd ever had dreams of more, they were gone. He was a man who had accepted reality, but he didn't like it.

The door opened and a man came through with his tie at half-mast, the white sleeves of his dress shirt rolled up over dark forearms. His skin was a dark solid brown and it didn't look like a tan. Hispanic or Indian or maybe a little of both. The hair was cut very short, not for style, but as if it were easier that way. There was a gun on his hip and a gold shield clipped to the waist band of his pants.

"I'm Detective Ramirez. Sorry I'm late." He smiled when he said it, and there seemed to be genuine cheerfulness, but I didn't trust it. I'd seen too many cops go from cheerful to hardcore up in your face too many times. Ramirez would try to catch his flies with honey instead of vinegar, but I knew the vinegar was there. You didn't get to be a plainclothes detective without that streak of sourness. Or maybe a loss of innocence was a better phrase for it. Whatever you called it, it would be there. It was only a matter of how far under the surface it was.

But I smiled and held my hand out, and he took it. The handshake was firm, the smile still in place, but his eyes were cool and noticed everything. I knew that if I left the room now he'd be able to describe me in detail down to my gun, or maybe up from my gun.

Officer Norton was still behind me like a pudgy bridesmaid. Detective Ramirez eyes flicked to him and the smile wilted just a touch. "Thank you, Officer Norton. I'll take it from here."

The look Norton gave him was not friendly. Maybe Officer Norton didn't like anybody. Or maybe he was white and Ramirez wasn't. He was old and Ramirez was young. He was going to end his career in uniform and Ramirez was already in plainclothes. Prejudice and jealousy are often close kin. Or maybe Norton was just in a bad mood.

Whatever, Norton went out like he'd been told, shutting the door behind him. Ramirez' smile went up a notch as he turned to me. I realized that he was cute in a young guy sort of way, and he knew it. Not in an egomaniac way, but I was a female, and he was cute, and he was hoping that that would cut him some slack with me. Boy, was he shopping in the wrong aisle.

I shook my head, but smiled back.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. Even the slight frown was sort of boyish and endearing. He must practice it in the mirror.

"No, Detective, nothing's wrong."

"Please call me Hernando."

That made me smile more. "I'm Anita."

The smile flashed bright and wide. "Anita, pretty name."

"No," I said, "it's not, and we're investigating a crime, not out on a blind date. You can tone the charm down just a touch, and I'll still like you, Detective Ramirez. I'll even share clues with you, honest."

"Hernando," he said.

It made me laugh. "Hernando. Fine, but really, you don't have to work this hard to win me over. I don't know you well enough to dislike you yet."

That made him laugh. "Was it that transparent?"

"You make a good good-cop, and the little boy charm is great, but like I said, it's not necessary."

"Okay, Anita." The smile went down a watt or two, but he was still open and cheerful somehow. It made me nervous. "Have you seen the entire house yet?"

"Not yet. Officer Norton was trailing a little too close for comfort. Made it hard to walk."

The smile closed down, but the look in the eyes was real. "You're a woman and with that black hair probably part something darker than the rest of you looks."

"My mother was Mexican, but most people don't spot it."

"You're in a section of the country where there's a lot of mixing going on." He didn't smile when he said it. He looked serious and a little less young. "The people that want to notice will."

"I could be part dark Italian," I said.

A small smile that time. "We don't have a lot of dark Italians in New Mexico."

"I haven't been here long enough to notice one way or another."

"Your first time to this part of the country?"

I nodded.

"What do you think so far?"

"I've seen a hospital and part of this house. I think it's too early to form an opinion."

"If we get a breather while you're here, I'd love to show you some of the sights."

I blinked at him. Maybe the boyish charm wasn't just a cop technique. Maybe he was, gasp, flirting.

Before I could think of an answer, Edward came up behind us in his best good ol' boy charm. "Detective Ramirez, good to see you again."

They shook hands, and Ramirez wasted a smile on Edward that looked just as genuine as Edward's. Since I knew Edward was play-acting, it was sort of unnerving how similar the two expressions were.

"Good to see you, too, Ted." He turned back to me. "Please, continue looking around. Ted's told me a lot about you, and I hope for all our sakes that you're as good as he says you are."

I glanced at Edward. He just smiled at me. I frowned. "Well, I'll try not to disappoint anybody." I walked back out into the living room trailed by Detective Ramirez. He gave me more room to maneuver than Norton had, but he watched me. Maybe he did want a date, but he wasn't watching me like a potential date. He was watching me like a cop to see what I did, how I reacted. It made me think better of him that he was professional.

Edward had lowered his sunglasses enough to give me a look as I passed by him. He was smiling, almost grinning at me. The look said it all. He was amused at Ramirez' flirting. I flipped him off, covering the gesture with my other hand so only he would see it.

It made him laugh, and the sound seemed at home here in this bright place. It was a place meant for laughter. The silence filled in behind his laughter like water closing over a stone, until the sound vanished into a profound quiet that was more than quiet.

I stood in the middle of the bright living room, and it was as if it were a display home waiting for the real estate agent to come through with a tour of potential home owners. The house was so new, it felt like a freshly unwrapped present. But there were things that no real estate agent would have allowed. A newspaper was spilled over the pale wood coffee table with the business section folded into fourths. The business section had New York Times written across the top of it, but some of the other pieces said Los Angeles Tribune. A business person recently moved from Los Angeles, maybe.

There was a large colored photo pushed to one corner of the coffee table. It showed an older couple, fiftyish, with a teenage boy. They were all smiling and touching each other in that posed casual way photos often use. They looked happy and relaxed together, though you can never really tell with posed photos. So easy to fool the camera.

I looked around the room and found smaller photos scattered throughout on numerous white shelves that took up almost all available wall space. The photos sat among souvenirs, mostly with an American Indian theme. The smaller more candid shots were just as relaxed, just as smiling. A happy, prosperous family. The boy and man, tanned and grinning on a boat with the sea in the background and a huge fish between them. The woman and three small girls covered in cookie dough and matching Christmas aprons. There were at least three photos of smiling adult couples with one or two children apiece. The little girls from the Christmas photo; grandchildren, maybe.

I stared at the couple and that tall, tanned teenager, and hoped they were dead because the thought of any of them up in that hospital room turned into so

much pain and meat was . . . not a comfy thought. I didn't speculate. They were dead, and that was comforting.

I turned my attention from the photos to the Indian artifacts lining the shelves. Some of it was touristy stuff: reproductions of painted pots in muted shades, too new to be real; Kachina dolls that would have looked just as at home in a child's room; rattlesnake heads stretched in impotent strikes, dead before their murderer opened their mouths to appear fearsome.

But in among the tourist chic were other things. A pot that was displayed behind glass with pieces missing and the paint faded to a dull gray and eggshell color. A spear or javelin on the wall above the fireplace. The spear was behind glass and had remnants of feathers and thongs, beads trailing from it. The head of the spear looked like stone. There was a tiny necklace of beads and shells under glass with the worn edges of the hide thong that bound them together showing. Someone had known what they were collecting because every piece that looked real was behind glass, cared for. The tourist stuff had been left out to fend for itself.

I spoke without turning around, staring at the necklace. "I'm no expert on Indian artifacts but some of this looks like museum quality."

"According to the experts it is," Ramirez said.

I looked at him. His face had gone back to neutral, and he looked older. "Is it all legal?"

That earned me another small smile. "You mean is it stolen?"

I nodded.

"The stuff we've been able to trace was all purchased from private individuals."

"There's more?"

"Yes," he said.

"Show me," I said.

He turned and started walking down a long central hallway. It was my turn to play follow the leader though I gave him more room than either he or Norton had given me. I couldn't help noticing how nicely his dress slacks fit. I shook my head. Was it the flirting, or was I just tired of the two men in my life? Something less complicated would have been nice, but part of me knew that the time for other choices was long past. So I admired his backside as we walked up the hall and knew it meant nothing. I had enough problems without dating the local cops. I was a civilian surrounded by police, and a woman, too. The only thing that would earn me less respect in their eyes was to date one of them. I would lose what little clout I had and become a girlfriend. Anita Blake, vampire executioner and preternatural expert, had some ground to stand on. Detective Ramirez' girlfriend would not.

Edward trailed behind us, but far enough back that we were at the far end of the hallway when he was barely in the corridor. Was he giving us privacy? Did he think it was a good idea to flirt with the detective, or was any human better than a monster, no matter how nice the monster was? If Edward had any prejudice, it was against the monsters.

Ramirez stood at the end of the hallway. He was still smiling as if he were giving me a tour of some other house for some other purpose. His face didn't match what we were about to do. He motioned to the doors to either side of him. "Artifacts to your left, gory stuff to the right."

"Gory stuff?" I made it a question.

He nodded, still pleasant, and I moved closer to him. I stared into those dark brown eyes and realized that the smile was his blank-cop face. It will cheerful, but his eyes were just as unreadable as any cop's I'd ever seen. Smiling blankness, but still blankness. It was unique and somehow disquieting, "Gory stuff," I said.

The smile stayed, but the eyes were a little less sure. "You don't have to play the tough girl with me, Anita."

"She's not playing," Edward said. He'd finally joined us.

Ramirez' eyes flicked to him then back to study my face. "High compliment coming from you, Forrester."

If he only knew, I thought. "Look, Detective, I just came from the hospital. Whatever is behind the door can't be worse than that."

"How can you be so sure?" he asked.

I smiled. "Because even with the air conditioner on, the smell would be worse."

The smile flashed bright and I think real for a moment. "Very practical," he said, voice almost laughing. "I should have known you'd be practical."

I frowned at him. "Why?"

He motioned at his own face. "No make-up," he said.

"Maybe I just don't give a damn."

He nodded. "That too." He started to reach for the door, and I beat him to it. He raised eyebrows at me, but just stepped back and let me open the door. Which also meant I got to walk in first, but hey, only fair. Edward and Ramirez had both already seen the show. My ticket was fresh and hadn't been punched yet.

Chapter 11

I EXPECTED TO FIND a lot of things in the bedroom: blood stains, signs of a struggle, maybe even a clue. What I did not expect to find was a soul. But the moment I entered that pale white and green bedroom I knew it was there, hovering near the ceiling, waiting. It wasn't the first soul I'd sensed. Funerals were always fun. Souls often hung around the bodies as if unsure what to do, but by three days' time the souls were usually gone to wherever souls were supposed to go.

I stared up at this soul and saw nothing. If a soul has a physical shape, you couldn't prove it by me, but I knew it was there. I could have sketched the outline of it in the air with my hand, knew about how much space it was taking up as it floated near the ceiling. But it was energy, spirit, and though it took up space, I wasn't entirely sure it took up the same kind of space as I did, as the bed did, as anything else did.

My voice came out hushed, as if I spoke too loudly, I'd scare it away. "How long have they been dead?"

"They aren't dead," Ramirez said.

I blinked and turned to him. "What do you mean they're not dead?"

"You saw the Bromwells in the hospital. They're both still alive."

I looked into his serious face. The smile had vanished. I turned back to gaze at that slow hovering presence. "Someone died here," I said.

"No one was cut up here," Ramirez said. "According to the Santa Fe PD that's the method of killing that this guy is using. Look at the carpet. There's not enough blood for anyone to have been cut up."

I looked down at the pale green carpet, and he was right. There was blood like black juice soaked into the carpet, but it wasn't much blood, just spots, dabs. The blood was from the skinning of two adults, but if someone had been torn apart limb from limb there would have been more blood, a lot more. There was still the faint rank smell where someone's bowels had let go either under torture or death. It was pretty common. Death is the last intimate thing we ever do.

I shook my head and debated on what to say. If I'd been at home with Dolph and Zerbrowski and the rest of the St. Louis police that I knew well, I'd have just said I saw a soul. But I didn't know Ramirez, and most cops spook around anyone that can do mystical stuff. To tell or not to tell, that was the question, when noises from the front room brought us all around to stare behind us at the still open door.

Men's voices, hurried footsteps, coming closer. My hand was on my gun when I heard a voice yell, "Ramirez, where the hell are you?"

It was Lieutenant Marks. I eased away from my gun and knew I wasn't telling the police that there was a soul hanging in the air behind me. Marks was scared enough of me without that.

He stepped into the doorway with a small battalion of uniforms at his back, almost as if he expected trouble. His eyes were both harsh and pleased when he looked at me. "Get the fuck off my evidence, Blake. You are outta here."

Edward stepped forward, smiling, trying to play peace maker. "Now, Lieutenant, who would give such an order?"

"My chief." He turned to the cops behind him. "Escort her off the property."

I held up my hands and started moving towards the door before the uniforms could move in. "I'll go, no problem. No need to get rough." I was at the door almost abreast with Marks.

He hissed close to my face, "This isn't rough, Blake. You come near me again and I'll show you rough."

I stopped in the doorway, meeting his gaze. His eyes had turned a swimming aqua blue, dark with his anger. The doorway wasn't that big, and standing in it we were almost touching. "I haven't done anything wrong, Marks."

He spoke low, but it carried, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

I thought of a lot of things to say, and do, most of which would have gotten me dragged out by a bunch of uniforms. I didn't want to be dragged out, but I wanted to make Marks suffer. Choices, choices.

I rose on tiptoe and planted a big kiss on his mouth. He stumbled back, pushing away from me so hard that he fell into the bedroom and left me pushed into the hallway beyond. Masculine laughter filled the hallway. Two bright spots of color flamed on Marks' cheeks as he lay panting on the carpet.

"You're lying in your evidence, Marks," I said.

"Get her out of here, now."

I blew Marks a kiss, and left through a grinning parade of policeman. One of the uniforms offered to let me kiss him any time. I told him he couldn't handle it and left through the front door to laughter, catcalls, and masculine humor mostly at Marks' expense. He didn't seem to be a popular guy. Go figure.

Edward stayed inside for a few moments, probably trying to soothe things over like a good Ted would do. But in the end he came out of the house, shaking hands with the cops, smiling, and nodding. The smile vanished as soon as he turned so that I was his only audience.

He unlocked the car and we got in. When we were safe inside of its mud-stained windows, he said, "Marks has gotten you kicked off the investigation. I don't know how he did it, but he did it."

"Maybe he and the chief go to the same church," I said. I had snuggled down into the seat, as far as the seatbelt would allow. Edward looked at me as he started the engine. "You don't seem upset."

I shrugged. "Marks isn't the first right-wing asshole to get up in my face, and he won't be the last."

"Where's that famous temper of yours?"

"Maybe I'm growing up," I said.

He shook his head. "What did you see in the corner of the room that I didn't? You were looking at something."

"A soul," I said.

He actually lowered his sunglasses so I could see his baby blues. "A soul?"

I nodded. "Which means that someone in that house did die, and within three days."

"Why three days?" he asked.

"Because three days is the limit for most souls to hang around. After that they go to heaven or hell or wherever. After three days you may get ghosts, but you won't get souls."

"But the Bromwells are alive. You saw them yourself."

"What about their son?" I asked.

"He's missing," Edward said.

"Nice of you to mention that." I wanted to be angry at him for the game playing, but I just couldn't find the energy. No matter how blasé I was about Marks, it did bother me. I was Christian, but I'd lost count of the number of fellow Christians who'd called me witch or worse. It didn't make me angry anymore, just tired.

"If the parents are alive, then the boy probably isn't," I said.

Edward pulled out onto the road, easing his way among the plethora of marked and unmarked police cars brought with him. "But all the other murder victims were cut up. We didn't find any body parts in the house. If the boy is dead, then it's a change in the pattern. We haven't figured out the old pattern yet."

"A change in pattern may give the police the break they need," I said.

"You believe that?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"What do you believe?"

"I believe that the Bromwells' son is dead, and whatever skinned and mutilated his parents took his body, but didn't cut it up. However the son was killed, it wasn't being torn apart or there would have been more blood. He was killed in a way that didn't add blood to the room."

"But you're sure he's dead?"

"There's a soul floating around the house, Edward. Someone's dead, and if there are only three people living in a house, and two of them are accounted for... You do the math." I was staring out the car window but wasn't seeing anything. I was seeing that young tanned face smiling in the pictures.

"Deductive reasoning," Edward said. "I'm impressed."

"Yeah, me and Sherlock Holmes. By the way, now that I'm persona non grata, where are you taking me?"

"To a restaurant. You said you hadn't had lunch."

I nodded. "Fine." Then after a moment, I asked, "What was his name?"

"Who?"

"The Bromwells' son, what was his first name?"

"Thad, Thaddeus Reginald Bromwell."

"Thad," I said softly to myself. Had he been forced to watch while his parents were skinned alive, mutilated? Or had they watched him die before they bled? "Where's your body, Thad? And why did they want it?" There was no answer. I hadn't expected one. Souls weren't like ghosts. To my knowledge there was no way to communicate with them directly. But I would have answers and soon. It had to be soon. "Edward, I need to see the pictures from the other crime scenes. I need to see everything the Santa Fe PD have. You said only this last case was in Albuquerque, so screw them. I'll start from the other end."

Edward smiled. "I've got copies at my house."

"Your house?" I sat up straighter and stared at him. "Since when do the police share files with bounty hunters?"

"I told you the Santa Fe police like Ted."

"You said the Albuquerque police liked you, too," I said.

"They do like me. It's you they don't like." He had a point. I could still see the hatred in Marks' eyes when he hissed at me, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Sweet Jesus. That was actually the first time I'd ever had that particular verse quoted at me. Though I suppose someone would have gotten around to it sooner or later, being who I am and what I do. I just didn't expect it from a police lieutenant during a murder investigation. It lacked a certain professionalism.

"Marks won't be able to solve this case," I said.

"Without you, you mean?"

"It doesn't have to be me, but someone with some expertise is going to be needed. We are not dealing with a human killer here. Normal police work is not going to do the job."

"I agree," Edward said.

"Marks needs to be replaced," I said.

"I'll work on it," he said. Then he smiled. "Maybe with that nice Detective Ramirez that found you sooo fascinating."

"Don't go there, Edward."

"He does have one thing over your other two boyfriends."

"What?" I asked.

"He is human."

I'd have liked to argue but couldn't. "When you're right, you're right."

"You're agreeing with me?" He sounded surprised.

"Neither Jean-Claude nor Richard are human. As far as I can tell, Ramirez is human. What's to argue about?"

"I was teasing you, and you go all serious on me."

"You have no idea how refreshing it would be to be with a man that just wanted me for me, without any Machiavellian plots."

"Are you saying that Richard has been plotting behind your back, just like the vampire?"

"Let's just say I'm no longer sure who the good guys are, Edward. Richard has become something harder and more complex because his role as Ulfric, Wolf King, has demanded it of him. And God help me, partly I think because I demanded it of him. He was too soft for me, so he's become harder."

"And you don't like it," Edward said.

"No, I don't like it, but since it's partially my fault, it's hard to bitch."

"Then dump them both, and date some humans."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It's only hard if you make it hard, Anita."

"Just dump the boys and start dating other men, just like that."

"Why not?" he asked.

I opened my mouth sure I had an answer, but for the life of me couldn't come up with one. Why not date other people? Because I loved two men

already and that seemed one too many without adding anyone else. But what would it be like to be with someone who was human? Someone who wasn't trying to use me to consolidate his power like Jean-Claude. Both Richard and Jean-Claude huddled around my humanity like it was the last fire at the end of the world and all the rest was icy darkness. Richard especially clung to me because I was human, and having a human girlfriend had seemed to help him retain human status. Though lately how human I was, was up for debate. At least Richard had been human until he became a werewolf. Jean-Claude had been human until he became a vampire. I'd seen my first soul when I was ten at my great-aunt's funeral. I'd raised my first dead by accident when I was thirteen. Of the three of us I was the only one who had never been truly human.

What would it be like to date someone "normal"? I didn't know. Did I want to find out? I realized with a shock that I did. I wanted to go out on a normal date with a normal guy and do normal things, just once, just for a while. I'd been vampire's lover, werewolf's mate, zombie queen, and for the last year I'd been learning ritual magic so I could control all the rest, so I guess you could add apprentice witch to the list. It had been a weird year even for me. I'd called a break to the romance with both Richard and Jean-Claude because I needed a breather. They were overwhelming me, and I didn't know how to stop it. Would one date with someone else really hurt? Would going out with someone who was just a guy really bring the world crashing down around my ears? Would it? The answer was probably no, but the very fact that I wasn't sure meant I should have run from Ramirez and any other nice guy who asked me out. I should have said no, and kept saying no, so why did part of me want to say yes?

Chapter 12

IT WAS ONLY AS Edward was searching for a parking spot on the rock-covered parking lot behind Los Cuates that I realized it was a Mexican restaurant. The name should have been a clue, but I just hadn't been paying attention. If my mother had liked Mexican food, she hadn't lived long enough to pass it on to me. Blake was an English name, but before my great-grandfather came through Ellis Island it was Bleckenstien. My idea of ethnic cuisine was wiener schnitzel and sauerbraten. So I was less than enthused as we crossed the gravel to the rear entrance of the restaurant. For someone who didn't like Mexican or southwestern cuisine, I was in the wrong part of the country.

The back entrance led through a long shadowed hall, but the main restaurant was bright with white stucco walls: bright wall hangings, fake parrots dangling from the ceiling, and strings of dried chilies everywhere. Very

touristy, which usually means the food won't be authentic or very good. But a lot of the diners were Hispanic and that boded well. Whatever the food, if the actual ethnic group liked the restaurant, then the food was authentic and likely good.

A woman that actually looked Hispanic asked if we'd like a table. Edward smiled and said, "Thanks, but I see our party."

I looked where he was looking and saw Donna at a booth. There were two kids with her, one girl about five or six and a boy in his early teens. Call it a hunch, but I was betting I was about to be introduced to her kiddies. Introduced to Edward's potential step-children. Can you stand it? I was almost sure I couldn't.

Donna stood and gave Edward a smile that would have melted a lesser man into his socks. It wasn't the sex, though that was in there. It was the warmth, the perfect trust that only true love can give you. That first romantic love that may not last, but while it does, wow. I knew that he was probably giving as good a look as he was getting, but his wasn't real. He didn't mean it. He was lying with his eyes, something I'd only managed to learn recently, and part of me is sad about that. It's one thing to know how to lie, but to be able to lie with your eyes says you are someone not to be trusted. Poor Donna. She was with two of us.

The little girl scooted out of the booth and came running towards us, arms outstretched, chestnut braids flying. She gave a glad shriek of, "Ted!" and flung herself into his arms. Edward scooped her up and tossed her towards the ceiling. She laughed that joyous full-blown sound that children eventually grow out of, as if the world bleeds the joy from them. Unless we're very lucky, the world teaches us to laugh more quietly, more coyly.

The boy just sat staring at us. His hair was the same rich chestnut brown as the girl's, cut short with a wave of bangs that hung into his eyes. The eyes were brown and dark and not friendly. Edward had said the boy was fourteen, but he was one of those boys that look younger. He could have passed for twelve easily. He looked sullen and angry as he watched Edward and Donna hug, the little girl still in Edward's arms so it was a family hug, Edward whispered something in Donna's ear that made her laugh and pull away blushing.

He swung the girl to his other arm and asked, "How's my best girl?"

She giggled and started talking in a high excited voice. She was telling some long complicated story about her day that involved butterflies and a cat and Uncle Raymond and Aunt Esther. I assumed they were the neighbors that had played babysitter for the day.

The boy turned his hostile eyes from Edward to me. The frown did not lessen, but the eyes went from angry to curious, as if I wasn't what he'd expected. I actually get that a lot from men of all ages. I ignored the happy family stuff and held out my hand to him. "I'm Anita Blake."

He gave me his hand half hesitating as if most people didn't offer. His grip was unsure as if he needed practice, but he said, "Peter, Peter Parnell."

I nodded. "Good to meet you." I would have said his mother said good things about him, but that wasn't strictly true, and Peter struck me as someone who respected truth.

He nodded vaguely, eyes flicking to his mother and Edward. He didn't like it, not one little bit, and I didn't blame him. I remembered how I'd felt when my father brought Judith home. I'd never really forgiven my father for marrying her only two years after my mother's death. I hadn't finished my grieving and he was moving on with his life, being happy again. I'd hated him for it and hated Judith more.

Even if Edward had truly been Ted Forrester, and his intentions honorable, it would have been a difficult situation. As it was, it sucked.

Becca was wearing a bright yellow sundress with daisies on it. She had yellow ribbons at the end of each neat braid. The hand she put over her mouth to smother a giggle still had that soft, round baby look to it. She was looking at Edward as if he was the eighth wonder of the world. In that moment I hated Edward, hated that he could lie to the child so completely and not understand that it was wrong.

Something must have shown on my face because Peter was giving me a strange considering look. Not angry, but thoughtful. I forced my face blank and met his eyes. He held my gaze for a few seconds, but finally had to look away. Probably not fair to bring out my full stare on one angry fourteen-year-old boy, but to do less would imply that he was less, and he wasn't, just young. And time would cure that. Donna took Becca back from Edward's arms and turned towards me smiling. "This is Becca."

"Hi, Becca," I said and smiled because she was one of those children that made it easy to smile.

"And this is Peter," she said.

"We've met," I said.

Donna gave a funny look from Peter to me and back to me. I realized she thought we'd literally met before. "We introduced ourselves already," I said.

She relaxed and gave a nervous laugh. "Of course. Silly of me."

"You were just too busy to notice," Peter said, and his voice held what the actual words did not: scorn.

Donna looked at him as if she didn't know what to say, and finally, said, "I'm sorry, Peter."

She shouldn't have apologized. It implied she'd done something wrong, and she hadn't. She didn't know that Ted Forrester was an illusion. She was holding up her end of the bargain for happily ever after. Apologizing makes you sound weak, and from the look on Peter's face Donna needed all the strength she could get.

Donna slid into the booth first, then Becca, and Edward on the outside, with one leg hanging out from the booth. Peter had already sat down in the middle of his side of the booth. I sat down beside him and he didn't move over, so I found enough seat to be comfortable and ended with the line of our bodies touching from shoulder to hip. If he wanted to play sullen teenager with Edward and his mom, great, but I was not playing.

When Peter realized I wasn't moving over, he finally scooted over with a loud sigh that let me know it had been an effort. I did feel sorry for Peter and his plight, but my sympathy is never endless, and the sullen teenager routine might use it up pretty quick.

Becca was sitting happily between her mother and Edward. She was swinging her legs, and her hands were out of sight, maybe holding a hand of each of them. Her contentment was large and complete as if sitting between them not only was she happy, but she felt safe the way you're supposed to feel with your parents. It made my chest tight to see her so pleased with the situation. Edward was right. He couldn't just leave without some explanation. Becca Parnell more than her mother deserved better than that. I watched the little girl sit there and shine between them and wondered what excuse would be good enough. Nothing came to mind.

A waitress came to the booth, handed plastic menus all around even to Becca which pleased her, and then went away while we looked at them. Peter's first comment was, "I hate Mexican food."

Donna said, "Peter," in a warning voice.

But I added my two cents worth, "Me, too."

Peter looked at me sideways, as if he didn't trust my show of solidarity with him. "Really?"

I nodded. "Really."

"Ted picked the restaurant," he said.

"Think he did it just to be irritating?" I asked.

Peter was looking directly at me, eyes a little wide. "Yeah, I do."

I nodded. "Me, too."

Donna had an open-mouthed astonished look on her face. "Peter, Anita." She turned to Edward. "What are we going to do with the two of them?" Her appealing to Edward for help over such a small thing made me think less of her.

"You can't do anything with Anita," he said, and he turned cool blue eyes to Peter. "I'm not sure about Peter yet."

Peter wouldn't meet Edward's gaze, and the boy squirmed just a bit. Edward made him uncomfortable on more than one level. It wasn't just that Edward was doing his mom. It was more than that. Peter was just a little afraid of Edward, and I was betting that he hadn't done anything to earn it. I was betting that Edward had tried very hard to win Peter over as he'd won Becca over, but Peter wasn't having any of it. It had probably started out as just the normal resentment of anyone his mom dated, but the way he sat there now with his gaze carefully avoiding Edward's let me know it was more now, Peter was more nervous than he should have been around Ted, as if he somehow had picked up the real Edward under all the fun and games. It was both good for Peter and bad for him. If he ever guessed the truth and Edward didn't want it known ... Well, Edward was very practical.

One problem at a time. Peter and I bent over our menus and made disparaging comments about nearly every menu item. By the time the waitress had come back with a basket of bread, I'd actually seen him smile twice. My own younger brother Josh had never been sullen, but I'd always gotten along

with him. If I ever had children, not that I was planning on it, I wanted boys. I was just more comfortable with them.

The bread wasn't bread, but some fluffed pastry thing called a sopapilla. There was a plastic container of honey on the table especially for them. Donna spread honey on a small corner and ate that. Edward spread honey across one entire end of his bread. Becca put so much honey on her bread that Donna had to take it away from her.

Peter took a sopapilla. "It's the only good part of the meal," he said.

"I don't like honey," I said.

"Me, either, but this isn't bad." He spread a minute amount of honey and ate the small bite he'd spread it on, then repeated the process.

I got one and followed his example. The bread was good, but the honey was very different, stronger, and with an undercurrent that reminded me of sage. "This honey tastes nothing like honey back home."

"It's sage honey," Edward said. "Stronger flavor."

"I'll say." I'd never had anything but clover honey. I wondered if all honey took on the flavor of the plant the bees used. It seemed likely. Learn something new every day. But Peter was right. The sopapillas were good, and the honey wasn't bad in small, nay, microscopic amounts.

I finally ordered chicken enchilada. I mean, what could they possibly do to chicken to make it uneatable. Don't answer that.

Peter had plain cheese enchiladas. Both of us seemed to be going on the less is better plan.

I was on my second sopapilla when everyone else, including Peter, had finished their two a piece, when I saw bad guys come into the restaurant. How did I know they were bad guys? Instinct? Nope, practice.

The first one was six foot and almost obscenely broad through the shoulders. His arms swelled against the sleeves of his T-shirt as if the cloth couldn't contain him. His hair was straight and thick, tied back in a loose braid. I think the braid was for effect because the rest of him was so ethnic, he could have been the poster boy for the American Indian GQ. The cheekbones were high and tight under the dark skin, a slight uptilt to his black eyes, a strong jaw, slender lips. He wore blue jeans that were tight enough that you could tell his lower body had not had the workout that his upper body had. There is only one place where a man will put that much effort into his upper body and ignore his lower: prison. You don't lift weights in prison to get a balanced effect. You lift weights so you look like a complete badass and can hit with everything you got when the time comes. I looked for the next clue, and the tattoos were there. Black barbwire chased the swell of his arms just below the sleeves of the T-shirt.

There were two other men with him, one taller, one shorter. The taller one was in better shape, but the shorter had a wicked-looking scar that nearly bisected his face giving him the more sinister look. All the three of them needed was a sign above their heads that flashed "bad news." Why was I not surprised when they started walking toward us. I looked at Edward and mouthed, "What's up?"

The strangest part was that Donna knew them. I could tell by her face that she knew them and was scared of them. Could this day get any stranger?

Chapter 13

PETER LET OUT A soft, "oh, my God."

His face showed fear. He put his angry sullen look up like a mask, but I was close enough to see how wide his eyes were, how his breathing had quickened.

I glanced at Becca, and she had curled back into the seat between Edward and Donna. She peered out around Edward's arm with wide eyes. Everyone knew what was happening except me.

But I didn't have long to wait. The threatening threesome came right up to the booth. I tensed, ready to stand if Edward did, but he stayed seated though his hands were out of sight under the table. He probably had a gun out. I dropped my napkin accidentally on purpose and when I came out from under the table, the napkin was in one hand, and the Browning Hi-Power was in the other. The gun was under the table out of sight, but it was pointed at the bad guys. From under the table the shot probably wouldn't kill anyone, but it would make a big hole in someone's leg, or groin, depending on how tall the person was who happened to be standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Harold," Edward said, "you brought backup." His voice was still Ted's voice, more lively than his usual, but it was no longer a pleasant voice. I couldn't have told you what had changed in the voice, but it raised the tension level another notch. Becca scooted back until she couldn't see the men, hiding her face against Edward's sleeve. Donna reached for her, drawing her away from Edward and into her arms. Donna's face was openly fearful like the girl's. Edward's was open, almost smiling, but his eyes had gone empty. His real eyes peeking out. I'd seen monsters, real monsters, pale under that gaze.

The short one with the scar shifted from foot to foot. "Yeah, this is Russell," he motioned at the Indian, "and this is Newt."

I almost said, "Newt," aloud, but figured we had enough problems without me being a smart-ass. And people say I don't know when to keep my mouth shut.

"Tom and Benny still in the hospital?" Edward asked, voice still conversational. So far we hadn't attracted too much attention. We were getting some glances but not much else, yet.

"We're not Tom and Benny," Russell said. His voice matched the smile on his face, but I was reminded that smiling is just another way of baring teeth, another way to snarl.

"Bully for you," I said.

His gaze swiveled to me. His eyes were so black that the iris and pupil had melted into one black hole. "You another psychic bleeding heart trying to keep the Indian lands safe for us poor savages?"

I shook my head. "I've been accused of a lot but never of being a bleeding heart." I smiled up at him and thought that if I pulled the trigger, I would take out most of his thigh, and maybe cripple him for life. He was standing that close to the table. Close enough that I wanted him to back up, but I was waiting on Edward, and he seemed just fine with them towering over us.

"You should leave now," Edward said, and his voice was beginning to sound like Edward. Ted was leaking away, leaving his face a blank, cold mask, his eyes empty as a winter sky. His voice was without inflection as if he were saying something totally different. Edward was emerging from his Ted mask like a butterfly pulling free of a chrysalis, though I wanted something less pretty, less harmless for the analogy, because what was pulling free into the light wasn't harmless, and if things went wrong it wasn't going to be pretty at all.

Russell leaned over the table, large hands spread across the top. He leaned way over so he would be close to Donna's face, ignoring both Edward and me. Either he was stupid, or he figured we wouldn't draw first blood in a public place. He was right about me, but I wasn't so sure about Edward.

"You and your friends stay out of our way, or you are going to get hurt." He wasn't smiling when he said it. His voice was flat and ugly. "You've got a cute little girl there. Be a shame if something happened to her."

Donna paled and clutched Becca tighter. I don't know what Edward had planned because it was Peter who spoke. "Don't you threaten my sister." His voice was low and angry, no fear showed through.

Russell's gaze flicked to Peter, and he leaned over into his face. Peter sat unmoving, until their faces were inches apart but his eyes flickered back and forth like they were trying to escape. His hands gripped the seat edge as if he were literally holding on to keep from backing down.

"And what are you going to do about it, little man?"

"Ted?" I made it a question.

Russell's eyes flicked to me, then back to Peter. He was enjoying the boy's fear and the show of bravado. Hard to be tough muscle if you can't make a fourteen-year-old boy back down. He'd finish scaring Peter then turn to me. I don't think he considered me a threat. His mistake.

I couldn't see Edward through Russell's bulk, but I heard his voice, cold and empty, "Do it."

No, I didn't shoot him. That wasn't what I'd asked permission to do or what Edward had given the go ahead on. How did I know this? I just did. I switched the gun to my left hand, and let out a breath, long and soft, until my shoulders were relaxed. I centered myself like I learned for years in Judo, and now Kenpo. I visualized my fingers going into his throat, through the flesh. When fighting for real, you don't visualize hitting someone. You visualize throwing the punch through them and out the other side. Though I would hold back a little. You can collapse a man's windpipe with this move, and I didn't

want to go to jail over this. I dropped my right hand down to the seat beside me and brought my hand up with two fingers like a spear pointed.

Russell saw the movement, but didn't react in time. I drove my fingers into his throat coming to my feet with the strength of the blow.

He gagged, hands going to his throat, half collapsing on the table. I used my right hand to drive his face into the table, once, twice, three times. Blood spurted from his nose, and he slid bonelessly across the tabletop to end up on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, gagging, trying to breathe through his injured throat and the smashed nose. I think if he could have breathed better, he'd have passed out, but it's hard to pass out when you're gagging. He rocked on the floor, gagging, eyes rolled back into his head, not focused.

I was standing beside the booth, staring down at him. My gun was still in my left hand, at my side, unobtrusive against my black jeans. Most people wouldn't even see the gun. They'd see the blood and the man on the floor.

Harold and the tall Newt were standing there, frozen, staring down at Russell. Harold shook his head sadly. "You shouldn't have ought to have done that."

Edward was standing beside the booth, blocking their view of Donna and Becca. He spoke softly, so his voice wouldn't carry much beyond our little circle. "Don't ever threaten these people again, Harold. Don't come near them for any reason. Tell Riker that they are off limits, or the next time it won't just be a broken nose."

"I see the guns," Harold said, voice low. He bent down beside Russell. The big man's eyes still weren't focused. His blue T-shirt had turned purple with blood. Harold was shaking his head. He looked up at me. "Who the hell are you?"

"Anita Blake," I said.

He shook his head again. "Don't know the name."

"I guess my reputation does not proceed me," I said.

"It will," Harold said.

I said, "Peter, get some napkins."

Peter didn't ask questions. He just got a double handful of napkins from the dispenser on the table and handed them my way. I took them with my right hand and held them out to Harold. He took them, watching my face, eyes flicking to the gun still bare against my leg.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

He shoved the napkins against Russell's nose and took one arm. "Get his other arm, Newt."

There was a distant wail of sirens coming closer. Someone had called the cops.

Russell was still unsteady on his feet. They'd shoved napkins into his flattened nose, and he looked both silly and grotesque with the bloody napkins sticking out of his nose. He had to clear his voice twice before he could speak, his voice sounded rough, clogged, painful, "You fucking bitch! I am going to hurt you so bad for this."

"When you can stand without help and you've got your nose packed at the nearest emergency room, give me a call. I'd love a rematch."

He spat in my general direction but didn't have the aim, so it splattered harmlessly into the floor. Gross, but not very effective.

"Come on," Harold said. He was trying to move the show towards the door. The sirens were very close now.

But Russell wasn't finished. He turned, forcing the other two to turn with him. "I am going to fuck your bitch, and leave the girl and boy for the coyotes."

"Russell is not a fast learner," I said.

Becca was crying now, and Donna was so pale, I was worried she was going to faint. I couldn't turn around enough to see Peter's face without turning away from the bad guys, so I don't know what he looked like. But it wasn't a pretty scene.

The cops spilled in with Harold still trying to get Russell out the door. Edward and I used the confusion to put up our guns. The two uniforms were a little unsure whom to arrest, but the people actually testified to having heard Russell's threats, and seeing him "menace" us before I hurt him. I'd never seen so much witness cooperation. Most of the time people are deaf and dumb, but having a small, pretty little girl in tears helped people's memories. Technically, Russell could press assault charges on me, but everyone was jumping over themselves to say that he'd been threatening us. One man claimed he'd seen Russell pull a knife. Amazing how quickly details are added to a story. I could not corroborate the knife, but I had enough witnesses to the threats that I didn't think I'd be going to jail. Edward pulled out his Ted ID, and the officers knew him by reputation if not by sight. I pulled out my executioner's license and my gun carry permit. Technically, I was carrying concealed when my permit wasn't for this state. I explained I'd worn the jacket to keep from distressing the children. The cops nodded, wrote it down, and seemed to accept it all.

It helped that Russell was being verbally abusive to the officers and was so obviously a badass, and I was so harmless looking, so small, so feminine, and so much less scary than he was. Edward gave them his address, said I'd be staying with him, and we were free to go.

The restaurant offered us a different table, but strangely Donna and the kids had lost their appetites. I was still hungry, but no one asked me. Edward paid for the food, and declined a takeout order. I put the tip on the bloodstained table, way overtipping to try and make up for the mess. Then we left, and I still hadn't eaten today. Maybe if I asked nicely, Edward would run through a drive-up window at McDonalds. Any port in a storm.

Chapter 14

DONNA STARTED CRYING OUT in the parking lot. Becca joined her. Only Peter stayed silent and apart from the general hysteria. The more Donna cried, the more panicky the girl got, like they were feeding off each other. The girl was crying in those great hiccuppy sobs bordering on hyperventilation. I looked at Edward and raised my eyebrows, He looked blank. I finally gave him a push. He mouthed, "Which one?"

"Girl," I mouthed back.

He knelt by them. Donna had settled down on the bumper of his Hummer cradling Becca in her lap.

Edward knelt in front of them. "Let me take Becca for a little walk."

Donna blinked up at him, as if she saw him, heard him, but wasn't really understanding. He reached for Becca and started prying her from her mother's arms. Donna's arms were limp, but the girl clung to her mother, screaming.

Edward literally pried her small fingers away, and when she was free of her mother, Becca turned and clung to him, burying her face in his shoulder. He looked at me over the girl's head, and I shooed him away. He never questioned, just walked towards the sidewalk that edged the parking lot. He was rocking the girl slowly as he moved, soothing her.

Donna had covered her face with her hands, collapsing forward until her face and hands met her knees. Her sobs were full-blown almost wails. Shit. I looked at Peter. He was watching her, and the look on his was disgusted, embarrassed. I knew in that instant that he'd been the adult in more ways than just shooting his father's killer. His mother was allowed hysterics, but he wasn't. He was the one who held together in a crisis. Damned unfair, if you ask me.

"Peter, can you excuse us for a few minutes?"

He shook his head. "No."

I sighed, then shrugged. "Fine, just don't interfere." I knelt in front of Donna, touching her shaking shoulders. "Donna, Donna!" There was no response, no change. It had been a long day. I got a handful of that short thick hair and pulled her head up. It hurt, and it was meant to. "Look at me, you selfish bitch."

Peter moved forward, and I pointed a finger at him. "Don't." He settled back a step, but he didn't leave. His face was angry, watchful, and I knew that he might interfere regardless of what I said if I went much further. But I didn't have to go further. I'd shocked her. Her eyes were wide, inches from mine, her face drenched with tears. Her breathing was still coming in small chest-heaving gulps, but she was looking at me, she was listening.

I released her hair slowly, and she stayed staring at me with a horrible fascination on her face as if I were about to do something cruel, and I was. "Your little girl has just seen the worst thing she's ever seen in her life. She was calming down, taking it in stride, until you started on the hysterics. You're her mother. You're her strength, her protector. When she saw you fall apart like that, it terrified her."

"I didn't mean ... I couldn't help ..."

"I don't give a shit what you feel or how upset you are. You're the mommy. She's the child. You are going to hold yourself together until she is not around to see you fall apart, is that clear?"

She blinked at me. "I don't know if I can do that."

"You can do it. You're going to do it." I glanced up but didn't see Edward yet. Good. "You are the grownup, Donna, and you are by God going to act like it."

I could feel Peter watching us, could almost feel him storing it away for later playback. He would remember this little scene and he would think on it, you could feel it.

"Do you have children?" she asked, and I knew what was coming.

"No," I said.

"Then what right do you have to tell me how to raise mine?" She was angry now, sitting up straighter, wiping at her face with short harsh movements.

Sitting up on the bumper, she was taller than I was kneeling. I looked up into her angry eyes and told the truth. "I was eight years old when my mother died, and my father couldn't handle it. We got a phone call from a state trooper that told us she was dead. My father dropped the phone and started to wail, not cry, wail. He took me by the hand and walked the few blocks to my grandmother's house, wailing, leading me by the hand. By the time we got to my grandmother's we had a crowd of neighbors, all asking what was wrong, what was wrong. I was the one who turned to my neighbors and said, "My mommy's dead." My father was collapsed in the bosom of his family, and I was left standing alone, uncomforted, unheld, tears on my face, telling the neighbors what had happened."

Donna stared at me and there was something very close to horror on her face. "I'm sorry," she said in a voice that had grown soft and lost its anger.

"Don't be sorry for me, Donna, but be a mother to your own daughter. Hold it together. She needs you to comfort her right now. Later when you're alone, or with Ted, you can fall apart, but please, not in front of the kids. That goes for Peter, too."

She glanced at him, standing there, watching us, and she flushed, embarrassed at last. She nodded her head too rapidly, then visibly straightened. You could actually see her gathering herself. She took my hands, squeezing them. "I am sorry for your loss, and I apologize for today. I'm not very good around violence. If it's an accident, a cut, no matter the blood, I'm fine, honestly, but I just can't abide violence."

I drew my hands gently from hers. I wasn't sure I believed her, but I said, "I'm glad to know that, Donna. I'll go get... Ted and Becca."

She nodded. "Thank you."

I stood, nodding. I walked across the gravel in the direction Edward had gone. I liked Donna less now, but I knew now that Edward had to get away from this family. Donna wasn't good around violence. Jesus, if she only knew who, what, she'd taken to her bed. She'd have had hysterics for the rest of her life.

Edward had walked down the sidewalk to stand in front of one of the many small houses. They all had gardens in front, well tended, well planned. It reminded me of California where every inch of yard is used for something because land is such a premium. Albuquerque didn't look nearly as crowded and yet the yards were crowded.

Edward was still holding Becca, but she was looking at something that he was pointing at, and there was a smile on her face that showed from two houses away. A tension I hadn't realized I was carrying eased from my back and shoulders. When she turned so that her face was full to me, I saw a sprig of lilac tucked into one of her braids. The pale lavender flower didn't match the yellow ribbons and dress, but hey, it was cute as hell.

Her smile faltered around the edges when she saw me. There was a very good chance that I wouldn't be one of Becca's favorite people. I'd probably scared her. Oh, well.

Edward put her down, and they walked towards me. She was smiling up at him, swinging his arm a little. He smiled down at her, and it looked real. Even to me it looked real. You might have really believed he was Becca's adored and adoring father. How the hell were we going to get him out of their lives without screwing Becca over? Peter would be pleased if Ted went poof, and Donna . . . she was a grown-up. Becca wasn't. Shit.

Edward smiled at me and said in his cheerful Ted voice, "How are things?"

"Just dandy," I said.

He raised eyebrows, and for a split second his eyes flinched going from cynical to cheerful so fast it made me dizzy.

"Donna and Peter are waiting for us."

Edward turned so that the girl was between us. She glanced up at me, and her gaze was questioning, thoughtful. "You beat up that bad man," she said.

"Yes, I did," I said.

"I didn't know girls could do that."

That made my teeth hurt. "Girls can do anything they want to do, including protect themselves and beat up bad guys."

"Ted said that you hurt that man because he said bad things to me."

I glanced at Edward, but his face was all open and cheerful for the child and gave me nothing.

"That's right," I said.

"Ted says that you'd hurt someone to protect me just like he would."

I met her big brown eyes, and nodded. "Yes, I would."

She smiled then and it was beautiful, like sunshine breaking through clouds. She reached out her free hand to me, and I took it. Edward and I walked back to the parking lot, holding the child's hands while she half-walked, half-danced between us. She believed in Ted, and Ted had told her that she could believe in me, so she did. The odd thing was that I would hurt someone to protect her. I would kill to keep her safe. I looked across at Edward and for just a moment he looked back at me from the mask. We stared at each other over

the child, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to get us all out of the mess that he had made.

Becca said, "Swing me."

Edward counted out, "One, two, three," and swung her up and out, forcing me to swing her other arm. We moved across the parking lot, swinging Becca between us while she gave that joyous, full-throated laugh.

We sat her down laughing in front of her mother. Donna was composed and smiling. I was proud of her. Becca looked up at me, shining. "Mommy says I'm too big to swing now, but you're strong, aren't you?"

I smiled at her, but I looked at Edward when I said, "Yes, I am."

Chapter 15

DONNA AND EDWARD DID a tender but decorous good-bye. Peter rolled his eyes and scowled as if they'd done a lot more than a semi-chaste kiss. He'd have had a cow if he could have seen them smooching earlier at the airport. Becca kissed Edward on the cheek, giggling. Peter ignored it all and got in the car as soon as he could as if afraid "Ted" might try to hug him, too.

Edward waved until the car turned onto Lomos and out of sight, then he turned to me. All he did was look at me, but it was enough.

"Let's get in the car and get some air conditioning going before I grill you about what the hell is going on," I said.

He unlocked the car. We got inside. He started the engine and the air conditioner, though the air hadn't had time to cool yet. We sat in the expensive hum of his engine with the hot air blowing on us, and silence filled the car.

"Are you counting to ten?" he asked.

"Try a thousand and you'll be closer."

"Ask. I know you want to."

"Okay, we'll skip the tirade about you dragging Donna and her kids into your mess and go straight to who the hell is Riker and why did he send goons to warn you off?"

"First, it was Donna's mess, and she dragged me into it."

My disbelief must have shown on my face because he continued, "She and her friends are a part of an amateur archeology society that tries to preserve Native American sites in the area. Are you familiar with how an archaeological dig is done?"

"A little. I know they use string and tags to mark where an object is found, take pictures, drawings, sort of like you do for a dead body before you move it."

"Trust you to come up with the perfect analogy," he said, but he was smiling. "I've gone with Donna on weekends with the kids. They use freaking

toothbrushes and tiny paint brushes to gently clean the dirt away, or dental picks."

"I know you have a point," I said.

"Pot hunters find a sight that is already being explored, or sometimes one that hasn't been found, and they bring in bulldozers and backhoes to take out as much as possible in the least amount of time."

I gaped at him. "But that destroys more than they can possibly take out, and if you move an object before its site is recorded, it loses a lot of its historical value. I mean the dirt it's found in can help date it. What is found near an object can tell all sorts of things to a trained eye."

"Pot hunters don't care about history. They take what they find and sell it to private collectors or dealers who aren't too particular about how an object was found. A site that Donna was volunteering on was raided."

"She asked you to look into it," I said.

"You underestimate her. She and her psychic friends thought they could reason with Riker, since they were pretty sure it was his people behind it."

I sighed. "I don't underestimate her, Edward."

"She and her friends didn't understand what a bad man Riker is. Some of the really big pot hunters hire bodyguards, goon squads, to help take care of the bleeding hearts, and even the local law. Riker is suspected of having been behind the deaths of two local cops. It's one of the reasons that things went smoothly in the restaurant. All the local cops know that Riker's a suspected cop killer, not personally, but of hiring it done."

I smiled, not a pleasant smile. "I wonder how many traffic tickets he and his men have acquired since it happened."

"Enough that his lawyer filed a harassment suit. There is no proof that Riker's people were involved, just the fact that the cops were killed at a dig that had been partially bulldozed, and an eye witness that saw a car with a initial plate that might have been one of his trucks."

"Is the witness still among the living?" I asked.

"My, you do catch on quick."

"I take it that's a no."

"He's missing," Edward said.

"So why come after Donna and her kids?"

"Because the kids were with her when she and her group formed a protest line protecting a site that was on private land that Riker had gotten permission to bulldoze. She was their spokesperson."

"Stupid, she should not have taken the kids."

"Like I said, Donna didn't understand how bad a man Riker was."

"And what happened?"

"Her group was manhandled, abused, beaten. They fled. Donna had a black eye."

"And what did Ted do about this?" I was watching his face, arms crossed over my stomach. All I could see was his profile, but it was enough. He hadn't liked it, that Donna had gotten hurt. Maybe it was just that she belonged to him, a male pride thing, or maybe . . . maybe it was more.

"Donna asked me to have a talk with the men."

"I take it that would be the two men that you put in the hospital. I seem to remember you asking Harold if two guys were still in the hospital."

Edward nodded. "Yeah."

"Only two in the hospital, and none in a grave. You must be slipping."

"I couldn't kill anyone without Donna knowing, so I made an example of two of his men."

"Let me guess. One of them would be the man who gave Donna the black eye."

Edward smiled happily. "Tom."

"And the other one?"

"He pushed Peter and threatened to break his arm."

I shook my head. The air had begun to cool, and it raised goose bumps even through my jacket, or maybe it wasn't the cold. "The second guy has a broken arm now?"

"Among other things," Edward said.

"Edward, look at me."

He turned and gave me his cool blue gaze.

"Truth, do you care for this family? Would you kill to protect them?"

"I'd kill to amuse myself, Anita."

I shook my head, and leaned close to him, close enough to study his face, to try and make him give up his secrets. "No jokes, Edward, tell me the truth, Are you serious about Donna?"

"You asked me if I loved her and I said, no."

I shook my head again. "Dammit, don't keep evading the answer. I don't think you do love her. I don't think you're capable of it, but you feel something. I don't know exactly what, but something. Do you feel something for this family, for all of them?"

His face was blank, and I couldn't read it. He just stared at me. I wanted to slap him, to scream and rant until I broke through his mask into whatever lay underneath. I'd always been on sure ground with Edward, always known where he stood, even when he was planning to hurt me. But now suddenly, I wasn't sure about anything.

"My God, you do care for them." I slumped back in my seat, weak. I couldn't have been more astonished if he'd sprouted a second head. That would have been weird, but not this weird.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Edward, you care for them, all of them."

He looked away. Edward, the stone cold killer, looked away. He couldn't or wouldn't meet my gaze. He put the car in gear and forced me to buckle my seat belt.

I let him pull out of the parking lot in silence, but when we were sitting at the stop sign waiting for the traffic to clear on Lomos, I had to say something.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't love Donna."

"But," I said.

He turned slowly onto the main street. "She's a mess. She believes in every new age bandwagon that comes along. She's got a good head for business, but she trusts everyone. She's useless around violence. You saw her today." He was concentrating very hard on the driving, hands gripping the wheel tight enough for his knuckles to be white. "Becca is just like her, trusting, sweet, but... tougher, I think. Both the kids are tougher than Donna."

"They've had to be," I said, and couldn't keep the disapproval out of my voice.

"I know, I know," he said. "I know Donna, everything about her. I've heard every detail from cradle to the present."

"Did it bore you?" I asked.

"Some of it," he said carefully.

"But not all of it," I said.

"No, not all of it."

"Are you saying that you do love Donna?" I had to ask.

"No, no, I'm not saying that."

I was staring so hard at his face that we could have been driving on the far side of the moon for all the attention I gave the scenery. Nothing mattered more right that second than Edward's face, his voice. "Then what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that sometimes when you play a part too long, you can get sucked into that part and it becomes more real than it was meant to be." I saw something on his face that I had never seen before, anguish, uncertainty.

"Are you saying that you are going to marry Donna? You're going to be a husband and a father? PTA meetings, and the whole nine yards?"

"No, I'm not saying that. You know I can't marry her. I can't live with her and two kids and hide what I am twenty-four hours a day. That good an actor I'm not."

"Then what are you saying?" I asked.

"I'm saying... I'm saying that part of me, a small part of me, wishes I could."

I stared at him opened-mouthed. Edward, assassin extraordinaire, the undead's perfect predator, wished he could have not a family, but this family. A trusting new age widow, her sullen teenage son, and a little girl that made Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm look jaded, and Edward wanted them.

When I trusted myself to be coherent, I said, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

I couldn't think of anything helpful to say, so I resorted to humor, my shield of last resort. "Just please tell me they don't have a dog and a picket fence."

He smiled. "No fence, but a dog, two dogs."

"What kind of dogs?" I asked.

He smiled and glanced at me, wanting to see my reaction. "Maltese. Their names are Peek-a and Boo."

"Oh, shit, Edward, you're joking me."

"Donna wants the dogs included in the engagement pictures."

I stared at him, and the look on my face seemed to amuse him. He laughed. "I'm glad you're here, Anita, because I don't know a single other person who I'd have admitted this to."

"Do you realize that your personal life is now more complicated than mine is?" I said.

"Now I know I'm in trouble," he said. And we left it on a lighter note, on a joke, because we were more comfortable that way. But Edward had confided in me about a personal problem. In his way he'd come to me for help about it. And being who I was, I'd try to help him. I thought we would solve the mutilations and murders, eventually. I mean violence and death were our specialties. I was not nearly so optimistic about the personal stuff.

Edward did not belong in a world with a woman who had a pair of toy dogs named Peek-a and Boo. Edward was not now, nor ever would be, that cutesy. Donna was. It wouldn't work. It just wouldn't work. But for the very first time I realized that if Edward didn't have a heart to lose, that he wished he had one to give. But I was reminded of the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy and the Scarecrow bang on the Tin Man's chest and hear the rolling echo. The tinsmith had forgotten to put in a heart. Edward had carved his own heart out of his body and left it on a floor somewhere years ago. I'd known that. I just never knew that Edward regretted the loss. And I think until Donna Parnell came along, he hadn't known it either.

Chapter 16

EDWARD DID TAKE ME through a drive-up window, but he didn't want to stop. He seemed anxious to get to Santa Fe. Since he was, rarely anxious about anything, I didn't argue. I requested we go through a carwash while I ate my French fries and cheeseburger. He didn't say a word, just drove into one beside the highway that let us ride through in the car. When I was little, I'd loved watching the suds slide down the windows and the huge brushes roll by. It was still nifty, though not the thrill a minute it had been when I was five. But the carwash did mean that I had a clear view out all the windows. The dirty windows had made me feel ever so slightly claustrophobic. I'd finished my food before we left Albuquerque. I sipped on my soda as we drove out of town and towards the mountains. These were not the black mountains, but a different range that looked more "normal." They were jagged and rocky looking, with a string of glittering light near their base.

"What's with the light show," I asked.

"What?" Edward asked.

"The glitter, what is it?"

I felt his attention shift from the road, but he was wearing his sunglasses, and I couldn't really see his gaze shift. "Houses, the sun is hitting the windows on the houses."

"I've never seen sunlight on windows glitter like that."

"Albuquerque is at 7,000 feet. The air is thinner than you're used to. It makes light do strange things."

I stared at the sparkling windows like a line of jewels imbedded in the mountains. "It's beautiful."

He moved his whole head this time so I knew he was really looking at it. "If you say so."

After that we stopped talking. Edward never did idle chatter, and apparently he had nothing to say. My mind was still reeling from Edward being in love, or as close as he would probably ever get. It was just too weird. I couldn't think of a single useful thing to say so I stared out the window until I thought of something worth saying. I had a feeling it was going to be a long quiet drive to Santa Fe.

The hills were very round, covered in dry brownish grass. I had the same feeling I'd had when I stepped off the plane in Albuquerque—desolate. I'd thought the hills were close until I spotted a cow standing on one. The cow looked tiny, small enough for me to cover with two fingers held up, which meant the "hills" were really small mountains and not nearly as close as they appeared to the road. It was late afternoon or early evening depending on how you looked at it. It was still daylight, but you could feel night looming even in the brightness. The day had worn away like a piece of candy sucked too long. No matter how bright the sunshine, I could feel the darkness pressing close. Partly it was my mood—confusion always makes me pessimistic—but it was also an innate sense of the coming night. I was a vampire executioner, and I knew the taste of night on the breeze just as I knew the feel of dawn pressing against the darkness. There had been times when my life had depended on dawn coming. Nothing like near death experiences to hone a skill.

The sunlight had begun to fade to a soft evening gloom when I'd finally had enough of the silence. I still had nothing helpful to say about his personal life, but there was the case. I'd been asked here to help solve a crime, not to play Dear Abby, so maybe if I just concentrated on the crime, we'd be okay.

"Is there anything about the cases that you've withheld from me? Anything I'm going to be pissed that I didn't know beforehand?"

"Changing the subject?" he asked.

"I wasn't aware we were on a subject," I said.

"You know what I meant."

I sighed. "Yeah, I know what you meant." I slumped in my seat as far as the seatbelt would allow, arms crossed over my stomach. My body language was not happy, nor was I. "I don't have anything to add to the Donna situation, or nothing helpful."

"So concentrate on business," he said.

"You taught me that," I said, "you and Dolph. Keep your eye and mind on the important stuff. The important stuff is what can get you killed. Donna and her kiddies aren't a threat to life and limb so put them on the back burner."

He smiled, his normal close-lipped, I-know-something-you-don't-know smile. It didn't always mean he knew something I didn't. Sometimes he did it just to irritate. Like now. "I thought you said you'd kill me if I didn't stop dating Donna."

I rubbed my neck against the expensive seats and tried to ease a tension that was beginning at the base of my skull. Maybe I had been invited here to play Dear Abby, at least in part. Shit.

"You were right, Edward. You can't just leave. It would screw up Becca for one thing. But you cannot keep dating Donna indefinitely. She's going to start asking for a date for the wedding, and what are you going to say?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Well, neither do I, so let's talk about the case. At least with that we've got a solid direction."

"We do?" he glanced at me as he asked.

"We know we want the mutilations and murders to stop, right?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Well, that's more than we know about Donna."

"Are you saying you don't want me to stop seeing her?" he asked, and that damn smile was back. Smug, he looked smug.

"I'm saying I don't know what the hell I want you to do, let alone what you should do. So let's leave it alone until I get some brilliant idea."

"Okay," he said.

"Great," I said. "Now back to the question I asked. What haven't you told me about the crimes that you think I should know, or rather that I think I should know?"

"I don't read minds, Anita. I don't know what you'll want to know."

"Don't be coy, Edward. Just spill the beans. I don't want any more surprises on this trip, not from you."

He was quiet for so long, I thought he wasn't going to answer. So I prompted him, "Edward, I mean it."

"I'm thinking," he said. He moved in his seat, shoulders tightening and loosening as if he were trying to get rid of tension, too. I guess, even for him, this had been a stressful day. Odd to think of Edward letting anything truly stress him. I'd always thought he walked through life with the perfect Zen of the sociopath, so that nothing truly bothered him. I'd been wrong. Wrong about a lot of things.

I went back to watching the scenery. There were cows scattered close enough to the road that you could make out color and size. If it wasn't a Jersey, a Guernsey, or a Black Angus, I didn't know it. I watched the strange cows standing at impossible angles on the steep hillsides and waited for Edward to finish thinking. Twilight seemed to last a long time here, as if the light of day gave up the fight slowly, struggling to remain and keep the darkness at bay. Maybe it was just my mood, but I wasn't looking forward to darkness. It was as

if I could sense something out there in those desolate hills, something waiting for the night, something that could not move during the day. It could be just my own over-active imagination, or I could be right. That was the hard part about psychic abilities: sometimes you were right, and sometimes you weren't. Sometimes your own anxiety or fear could poison your thinking and make you, almost, literally see ghosts where there were none.

There were, of course, ways to find out. "Is there a place where you can pull over out of sight of the main road?"

He looked at me. "Why?" I

"I'm . . . sensing something, and I just want to make sure I'm not imagining it."

He didn't argue. When the next exit came up, he took it. We took a side road from the exit. It was dirt and gravel and full of huge dry potholes. The shocks on his Hummer took the road like silk flowing down hill, comfy. A soft roll of hills hid us from the main highway, but the road was very flat in front of us, giving a clear view of the road as it went almost straight towards a distant rise of hills. There were a handful of tiny houses on either side of the road, the major cluster some ways ahead with a small church sitting to one side by itself, as if it were part of the houses and not. The church had a steeple with a cross on top of it, and I assumed a bell inside of it. Though we were too far away to be sure. The town, if it were a town, looked down on its luck but not empty. There were people there and eyes to see us. Just our luck, the land had been so empty and the road we go down has a town.

"Stop the car," I said. We were as far from the first house as we could get without backtracking.

Edward pulled over to the side of the road. The dust rose in a cloud to either side of the car, settling over the clean paint job in a dry powder.

"You guys don't get much rain up here, do you?"

"No," he said. Anyone else would have elaborated, but not Edward. Even the weather wasn't a topic of conversation unless it affected the job.

I got out of the car and walked a little way into the dry grass. I walked until I could no longer sense Edward or the car. When I looked back, I was yards away, Edward was standing on the driver's side door, arms crossed on the roof, hat tilted back so he could watch the show. I don't think there was another person I knew who wouldn't have asked at least one question about what I was about to do. It would be interesting to see if he asked any questions afterwards.

Darkness hung like a soft silken cloth, hanging against the sky, and the living light. It was a soft comfortable twilight, an embracing dark. A breeze blew across the open land and played with my hair. Everything felt fine, good. Had I imagined? Was I letting Edward's problems get to me? Was the memory of the survivors in their air-compressed hospital room making me see shadows?

I almost just turned around and walked back to the car, but I didn't. If it were my imagination, then it wouldn't hurt to check, and if it wasn't... I turned and faced away from the car, away from the distant houses, and looked out into the emptiness. Of course, it wasn't really empty. There was grass rustling in the wind, it sounded so dry, like corn in autumn just before it's harvested. The

ground was covered in a thin layer of pale reddish-brown gravel with paler dirt showing through. The ground ran until it met the hills that continued on and on towards the darkening sky. Not empty, just lonely.

I took a deep cleansing breath, let it out and did two things at once: I dropped my shields and spread my arms wide, hands reaching. I was reaching with my hands, but it wasn't just my hands. I reached outward with that sense I have—magic, if you like the word. I don't. I reached outward with that power that let me raise the dead and mix with werewolves. I reached outward towards that waiting presence that I'd felt, or thought I'd felt.

There, there like a fish tugging on my line. I turned to face the direction of the road. It was in that direction, going towards Santa Fe. It—I had no better word. I felt its eagerness for the coming night and knew that it could not move in daylight. And I knew that it was large, not physically, but psychically, because we were not close to it, and yet I'd picked it up miles away. How many miles I couldn't say, but far, very far to have sensed it. It didn't feel evil. That didn't mean it wasn't evil, just that it didn't think of itself as evil. Unlike people, preternatural entities are rather proud of being evil. They embraced their malignancy because whatever this was, it wasn't human. It wasn't physical. Spirit, energy, pick a word, but it was up ahead, and it was not contained in any physical shell. It was free floating. No, not free . . . Something slammed into me, not physically, but as if a psychic truck had run me down. I was on my butt in the dirt, trying to breathe, as if someone had hit me in the chest and knocked the wind out of me.

I heard Edward's running footsteps, but I couldn't seem to turn around. I was too busy relearning how to breathe.

He knelt by me, gun in hand. "What happened?" He was looking out into the thick twilight, not at me, searching, searching for the danger. His sunglasses were gone, and his face was very serious as he searched for something to shoot.

I gripped his arm, shaking my head, trying to talk. But when I finally had air enough, all I said was, "Shit, shit, shit!" It wasn't helpful, but I was scared. Most of the time when I get this scared, I get cold, shocky, but not when it's psychic shit. When something goes wrong with "magic," I never go shocky or get cold, I stay warm. If anything it's like tingling warm, as if I'd stuck my finger in a light socket. Whatever "it" was, had sensed me and shut me down.

I pulled my shields around me like clutching a coat against a blizzard, but strangely it had backed off. Though if that one swat of power was any indication, it could slice me, dice me, and serve me on toast if it wanted to. It hadn't wanted to. I was glad, thrilled, but why hadn't it hurt me worse? How had I sensed it from so far away, and how had it sensed me? Usually, my greatest talent is with the dead. Did that mean whatever "it" was, was dead, or had something to do with the dead? Or was this one of the new psychic abilities that my teacher, Marianne, had warned me might crop up. God, I hoped not. I didn't need more strange shit in my life. I had plenty.

I forced myself to stop the useless cursing, and said, "Put up the gun, Edward. I'm all right. Besides, there's nothing to shoot and nothing to see."

He put a hand under my arm and pulled me to my feet before I was ready. I'd have been very happy to stay sitting for a while. I leaned on him, and he started moving us back towards the car. I stumbled and finally had to tell him, "Stop, please."

He held me up, still searching the new dark, gun still in hand. I should have known he'd keep the gun out. It was his security blanket—sometimes.

I could breathe again, and if Edward stopped dragging me on, I might be able to walk. The fear had faded because it was useless. I'd tried a bit of "magic," and I hadn't been good enough. I was learning ritual magic, but I was a beginner. Power isn't enough. You've got to know what to do with it, like a gun with the safety on. It makes a fine paperweight, but that's about it unless you know what to do with it.

I slid into the car, had my door closed and locked before Edward opened his door. "Tell me what happened, Anita."

I looked at him. "It would serve you right if I just looked at you and smiled."

Something crossed his face, a frown, a snarl, quickly lost to that perfect blankness he could manage. "You're right. I've been a secret-loving bastard, and it would serve me right. But you're the one who said we needed to stop the pissing contest and solve the crime. I'll stop if you will."

I nodded. "Agreed."

"So," he said.

"Start the car and get us out of here." Somehow I didn't like sitting on the nearly deserted road in the freshly spilled darkness. I wanted to be moving. Sometimes movement gives you the illusion that you're doing something.

Edward started the car, turned around in the weeds and drove back towards the highway. "Talk."

"I've never been to this area before. For all I know what I sensed is always here, just some local bugaboo."

"What did you sense?"

"Something powerful. Something that's miles away towards Santa Fe. Something that may be connected to the dead in some way, which would explain why it called to me so strongly. I'm going to need to find a good local psychic to see if this thing is always around or not."

"Donna will know some psychics. Whether they're good, I can't say, and I'm not sure she can either."

"It's a place to start," I said. I snuggled into my seatbelt, hugging myself.

"You got any local animators, necromancers, anyone who works with the dead? If it is something connected to my type of power, then an ordinary psychic might not sense it."

"I don't know of any, but I'll ask around."

"Good."

We were back out on the highway. The night was very dark, as if thick clouds hid the sky. The headlights seemed very yellow against the blackness.

"Do you think this whatever-it-is has anything to do with the mutilations?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"You don't know a hell of a lot," he said. He sounded grumpy.

"That's the problem with psychic shit and magic. Sometimes it's not very helpful."

"I've never seen you do anything like what you just did. You hate the mystical crap."

"Yes, I do, but I've had to accept what I am, Edward. This mystical crap is a part of who and what I am. I can't run from it because it is me. You can't hide from yourself, not forever, and you can't ever outrun yourself. I raise the dead for a living, Edward. Why should it be a shock that I may have other abilities?"

"It's not," he said.

I glanced at him, but he was watching the road, and I couldn't read his face. "It's not," I said.

"I called you in to be backup not just because you're a shooter, but because you know more about preternatural stuff than anyone else I know, that I trust. You hate the psychics and the mediums, because you are one, but you still deal in reality, and that makes you different from the rest of them."

"You're wrong, Edward. I saw a soul today hovering in that room. It was real, just as real as the gun in your holster. Psychics, witches, mediums, they all deal in reality. It's just not the same reality that you deal with, but it is real, Edward, it is very, very real."

He didn't say anything to that, just let the silence fill the car, and I was content with silence because I was tired, terribly, terribly tired. I'd found that doing psychic shit sometimes exhausted me a hell of a lot faster than physical labor. I ran four miles every other day, lifted weights, took Kenpo class, and Judo, and none of it made me as tired as having stood in that field and opened myself to that thing. I never sleep in a car because I don't trust the driver not to have a wreck and kill me. That is the truth about why I don't sleep in cars, no matter what I say out loud. My mother was killed in a car accident, and I've never really trusted cars since.

I settled down in my seat, trying to find a comfortable place for my head.

I was suddenly so tired, so tired my eyes burned. I closed my eyes just to rest them, and sleep dragged at me like a hand pulling me under. I could have fought it, but I didn't. I needed the rest, and I needed it now, or I wouldn't be worth shit soon. And the thought crossed my mind as I let myself relax that I did trust Edward. I really did. I slept huddled in the seat and didn't wake until the car stopped.

"We're here," Edward said.

I struggled to sit up, feeling stiff, but rested. "Where?"

"Ted's house."

I sat up straighter. Ted's house? Edward's house. I was finally going to get to see where Edward lived. I was going to snoop and strip some of his mystery away. If I didn't get killed, finding out Edward's secrets would make the entire trip worthwhile. If I did get killed, I'd come back and haunt Edward, see if I could make him see ghosts after all.

Chapter 17

THE HOUSE WAS ADOBE and looked old or genuine, not that I was an expert, but there was a feel to the house of age. We unloaded my luggage from the back of the Hummer but I had eyes mostly for the house. Edward's house. I'd never really hoped to see where he lived. He was like Batman. He rode into town, saved your ass, then vanished, and you never really expected an invitation to see the Bat Cave. Now here I was standing in front of it. Cool.

It wasn't what I'd pictured. I'd thought maybe a high-tech condo in the city. LA maybe. This modest appearing adobe house hugging the land was just not what I'd had in mind. It was part of his secret identity, his Tedness, but still, Edward lived here, and there had to be more reason than just Ted would have liked it. I was beginning to think I really didn't know Edward at all.

The light over the front door switched on, and I had to turn away, shielding my night vision. I'd been staring right at it when it glared to life. I had two thoughts: one, who had turned on the light; two, the door was blue. The door was painted a blue-violet, a rich, rich color. I could also see the window nearest the door. Its trim was painted the same vibrant blue.

I'd seen it at the airport, though with more flowers and an addition of fuchsia. I asked, "What's with the blue door and trim?"

"Maybe I like it," he said.

"I've seen a lot of doors painted blue or turquoise on a lot of houses since I've been here. What gives?"

"Very observant."

"A failing of mine. Now explain."

"They think witches can't cross a door painted blue or green."

I widened my eyes. "You believe that?"

"I doubt most of the people who paint their doors believe it anymore, but it's become part of the local style. My guess is that most people who do it, don't even remember the folklore behind it."

"Like putting out a jack o' lantern at Halloween to frighten the goblins away," I said.

"Exactly."

"And because I am so observant, who turned on the porch light?"

"Either Bernardo or Olaf."

"Your other backups," I said.

"Yes."

"Can't wait to meet them."

"In the spirit of cooperation, and no more surprises, Olaf doesn't like women much."

"You mean he's gay?"

"No, and implying that to him will probably mean a fight, so please don't, if I'd known I'd be calling you in, I wouldn't have called him in at all. The two of you in the same house on the same case is going to be ... a fucking disaster."

"That's harsh. You think we can't play nice together."

"I'd almost guarantee it," he said.

The door opened, and our conversation cut off abruptly. I was wondering if it was the dreaded Olaf. The man in the doorway didn't look much like an Olaf, but then what does an Olaf look like?

The man was six foot, give or take an inch. It was hard to tell his exact height because his lower body was completely covered by a white sheet that he had clutched in one hand at his waist. The sheet spilled around his feet like a formal dress, but from the waist up he was anything but formal. He was lean and muscular with a very nice set of abs. He was tanned a lovely even brown, though some of that was natural color because he was American Indian, oh, yes, he was. His hair was waist length falling over one shoulder and across the side of his face, heavy and solid black, tusseled from sleep, though it was early to be in bed. His face was a soft, full triangle, with a dimple in his chin, and a full mouth. Was it racist to say that his features were more white than Indian, or was it just true?

"You can close your mouth now," Edward said near my ear.

I closed my mouth. "Sorry," I mumbled. How embarrassing. I didn't usually notice men this much, at least men I didn't know. What was wrong with me today?

The man folded the sheet over his free arm until his legs showed and he could come down the two steps without tripping. "Sorry, I was asleep, or I'd have come out to help sooner." He seemed perfectly at ease in his sheet, though he was going to a lot of effort to spill it over the same arm that was holding it in place, so he could grab a suitcase.

"Bernardo Spotted-Horse, Anita Blake."

He was holding the sheet with his right hand, and he looked mildly perplexed as he dropped the suitcase and started the process of switching everything to the other hand. The sheet slipped down in front, and I had to turn my head away, fast.

I kept my head turned because I was blushing and wanted the darkness to hide it. I waved my hand vaguely behind me. "We'll shake hands later when you're wearing clothes."

Edward's voice. "You flashed her."

Great, everybody noticed.

"I'm sorry," Bernardo said, "truly."

"We can get the luggage," I said. "Go get a robe."

I felt someone move up behind me, and I wasn't sure how I knew, but I knew it wasn't Edward. "You're modest. I expected a lot of things from Edward's descriptions but not modesty."

I turned around slowly, and he was standing too close, invading the hell out of my personal space. I glared at him. "What were you expecting? The

Whore of Babylon?" I was embarrassed and uncomfortable and that always made me angry. The anger showed in my voice.

The half-smile on his face faded round the edges. "I didn't mean any offence." His hand came up as he said it, as if he'd touch my hair.

I stepped back out of reach. "What's with the touchie-feelie routine?"

"I saw the way you looked at me in the doorway," he said.

I felt the heat ride up my face, but I didn't turn away this time. "If you want to come to the door looking like a Playgirl centerfold, don't blame me for staring. But don't make more of it than it is. You're nice eye candy, but the fact that you're coming on this strong isn't flattering to either of us. Either you're a whore, or you think I am. The first I'm willing to believe. The second I know isn't true." I walked up to him now, invading his space, the blush gone, leaving me pale and angry. "So back off."

It was his turn to look uncertain. He stepped back, put the sheet into as much of a cover as it could be, and bowed. It was an old-fashioned, courtly movement, as if he'd done it before and meant it. It was a nice gesture with his hair spilling all around, but I'd seen better. Not for six months, but I had seen better.

He raised up, and his face was solemn. He looked sincere. "There are two kinds of women that hang around with men like Edward, like me, that know what we are. The first are whores, no matter how many guns they own; the second is strictly business. I call them Madonnas because they never sleep with anyone. They try to be one of the guys." The smile played along his lips again. "Forgive me if I'm disappointed that you're one of the guys. I've been here for two weeks, and I'm getting lonely."

I shook my head. "Two weeks, poor baby." I pushed past him and grabbed my overnight case. I looked at Edward. "Next time remind me about everybody's little foibles."

He raised his hand in a Boy Scout oath. "I have never seen Bernardo do that with any woman at first meeting her, I swear it."

My eyes narrowed, but I looked into his eyes, and believed him. "How did I get the honor?"

He picked up my suitcase, and did smile. "You should have seen the look on your face when he came down the steps in the sheet." He laughed and it was very masculine. "I've never seen you that embarrassed."

Bernardo came up next to us. "I really, honestly, didn't mean to flash you. I just don't wear anything to bed so I threw this on."

"Where's Olaf?" Edward asked.

"Pouting that you're bringing her in."

"Great," I said. "One of you thinks he's a Lothario, and the other one won't talk to me. That's just perfect." I turned and followed Edward toward the house.

Bernardo called from behind us. "Don't mistake Olaf, Anita. He likes women in his bed, and he's not nearly as particular as I am about how he gets them there. I'd be more careful of him than of me."

"Edward," I said.

He was just inside the door. He turned back and looked at me.

"Is Bernardo right? Is Olaf dangerous to me?"

"I can tell him about you what I told him about Donna."

"What's that?" I asked.

We were all still in the doorway, not quite in the house. "I told him if he touched her, I'd kill him."

"If you come to my rescue, then he'll never work with me, never respect me," I said.

Edward nodded. "That's true."

I sighed. "I'll handle it on my own."

Bernardo had moved up behind me, closer than I wanted him. I used the carry-on bag to accidentally move him back a step or two. "Olaf has been in prison for rape."

I looked at Edward and let my disbelief show on my face. "Is he serious?"

Edward just nodded. His face had gone to its usual blankness. "I told you in the car that I wouldn't have invited him if I'd known you were coming in on this."

"But you didn't mention the rape conviction," I said.

He shrugged. "I should have."

"What else should I know about good ol' Olaf?"

"That's it." He looked behind me to Bernardo. "Can you think of anything else she needs to know?"

"Only that he brags about the rape and what he did to her."

"All right," I said, "you've both made your point. I only have one question."

Edward just looked at me expectantly, Bernardo said, "Shoot."

"If I kill another one of your backups, do I owe you another favor?"

"Not if he deserves it."

I dumped the bag on the doorsill. "Shit, Edward, if you keep putting me together with fucking crazies and I keep having to defend myself, I'll be owing you favors until we're in our graves."

Bernardo said, "You're serious. You really killed his last backup."

I glanced at him. "Yeah, I'm serious. And I want permission to off Olaf if he gets out of hand, without having to owe Edward another pound of flesh."

"Who'd you kill?" Bernardo asked.

"Harley," Edward said.

"Shit, really?"

I walked up to Edward, invading his space, trying to read past the blank blue of his eyes. "I want permission to kill Olaf if he gets out of hand, without owing you another favor."

"And if I don't give it?" he asked, voice low.

"Drive me to a hotel because I'm not staying in a house with a bragging rapist if I can't kill him."

Edward looked at me for a long slow moment, then gave a small nod.

"Done, as long as he's in this house. Outside the house, play nice."

I would have argued, but it was probably the best I was going to get. Edward was very protective of his backups, and since I was one of them, I

could appreciate the attitude. I picked up my bag from the floor, and said, "Thank you. Now where's my room?"

"Oh, she's going to fit in just fine," Bernardo said, and there was something in his voice that made me look at his face. His handsome face had thinned to a blankness, an emptiness that left his dark brown eyes like two burned holes in his face. It was as if he'd dropped his mask and let me see inside because I'd proven myself monster enough to handle it. Maybe I had. But I knew one thing: Olaf or Bernardo, either one, better not walk in their sleep.

Chapter 18

THERE WAS A FIREPLACE against the far wall, but it was narrow and white, formed of the same smooth whiteness as the walls. There was an animal skull mounted over the fireplace. I would have said deer, but the skull was heavier than that and the horns long and curving. Not a deer, but something close kin, and not from this country. The narrow mantelpiece held two tusks, as in elephant tusks, and smaller animal skulls. A low white couch faced the fireplace. A large block of unpolished marble sat to one side of it with a small white china lamp on it. A small alcove above the lamp held a huge chunk of white crystal. There was a black lacquered table against the far wall between two doorways. A second larger lamp sat on the table. Two chairs sat facing each other in front of the fireplace. They had carved arms with winged lions on the arms and legs. They were black leather and looked vaguely Egyptian.

"Your room is this way," Edward said.

"No," I said, "I've waited a long time to see your home. Don't rush me."

"Mind if I take your luggage through to your room while you explore?"

"Help yourself," I said.

"Gracious of you," he said, and put an extra touch of sarcasm into his voice.

"Don't mention it," I said.

Edward picked up both my bags, and said, "Come on, Bernardo. You can get dressed."

"You didn't let us look around on our own," Bernardo said.

"You didn't ask."

"It's one of the joys of being a girl and not a guy," I said. "If I'm curious, I just ask."

They went through a far door, though the room was small enough that "far" was relative. There was wood to one side of the fireplace in a woven basket of pale, almost white reeds. I ran my hand down the smooth coolness of the black marble coffee table that sat nearest the fireplace. There was a black vase on the table full of what looked like either small wild flowers or large

black-eyed-Susans. The deep yellow gold and the brown center didn't really match anything in the room. Even the Navajo rug that took up most of the floor was in shades of black, white, and gray. There were more flowers in an alcove between the far doorways. The alcove was large enough to be a window except it didn't look out on anything. The flowers spilled from the opening like a mass of gold and brown water, a huge riotous bouquet.

When Edward came back into the room, without Bernardo, I was sitting on the white couch with my feet stretched out underneath the coffee table. I had my hands clasped over my stomach and was trying to picture a roaring fire and a cold winter evening. But somehow the fireplace looked too clean, too sterile.

He sat down beside me, shaking his head. "Happy?"

I nodded.

"What do you think?"

"It's not a restful room," I said, "and for Heaven's sake look at all the wall space. Get some paintings."

"I like it this way." He had settled down on the couch beside me, feet stretched out, hands on his stomach. He was mimicking me, but even that couldn't ruin my mood. I was going to see every room in detail before I left. I could have tried to be cool about it, but I didn't sweat being cool with Edward. We'd moved beyond that in our strange friendship. I really wasn't trying to play king of the hill with Edward. The fact that he was still playing the game with me just made him look silly. Though I hoped the game-playing was over for this trip.

"Maybe I'll get you a painting for Christmas," I said.

"We don't buy Christmas presents for each other," Edward said.

We were both staring at the fireplace as if visualizing that make-believe fire. "Maybe I'll start. One of those big-eyed children or a clown on velvet."

"I won't hang it if I don't like it."

I glanced at him. "Unless it's from Donna."

He was very still suddenly. "Yes."

"Donna added the flowers, didn't she," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"White lilies, or an orchid maybe, but not wild flowers, not in this room."

"She thinks they brighten up the place."

"Oh, they do," I said.

He sighed.

"Maybe I'll tell her how much you love those pictures of dogs playing poker and she can buy you some prints."

"She wouldn't believe it," he said.

"No, but I bet I could come up with something that she would believe that you'd hate just as much."

He stared at me. "You wouldn't."

"I might."

"This sounds like the opening to blackmail. What do you want?"

I stared at him, studying that blank face. "So you're admitting that Donna and her crew are important enough for you so that blackmail would work."

He just looked at me with those pitiless eyes, but the blank face wasn't enough now. There was a chink in his armor big enough to drive a truck through. "They're hostages, Edward, if anyone ever thinks of it."

He looked away from me, closing his eyes. "Do you really think you're telling me something I haven't thought about?"

"My apologies, you're right. Like teaching your grandmother to suck eggs."

"What?" He turned and was half-laughing.

I shrugged. "Just an old saying. It means that I'm lecturing someone who taught me what I'm lecturing about."

"And what have I taught you?" he asked, humor dying, face turning serious.

"You can't take all the credit. My mother's death started the lesson early, but I learned that if you care for people, they can die. If other people know you care for someone, they can use that person against you. You ask why I don't date humans. Hostages, Edward. My life is just too damn violent for cannon fodder to be near and dear to my heart. You taught me that."

"And now I've broken the rule," he said, voice soft.

"Yep," I said.

"And where does that leave Richard and Jean-Claude?" he asked.

"Oh, I make you uncomfortable and now it's my turn."

"Just answer the question."

I thought about it for a second, or two, then answered truthfully, because I'd spent a lot of the last six months thinking about it, about them. "Jean-Claude is so not cannon fodder. If anyone I've ever met knows how to take care of himself, it's Jean-Claude. I guess you can't be a four-hundred-year-old anything without being a survivor."

"And Richard?" Edward was watching my face as he asked, studying me as I so often studied him, and I wondered for the first time if my face was empty more often than it was full, if I hid my emotions, my thoughts, even when I wasn't meaning to. How can you really tell what your own face shows?

"Richard can survive a shotgun blast to the chest with non-silver shot. Can you say the same about Donna?" It was blunt, maybe too blunt, but it was truthful.

His eyes shut down like curtains had pulled, hiding, hiding. There was no one home. It was the face he wore when he killed sometimes, though sometimes when he killed he wore the most joyous expression I ever saw on his face.

"You told me that they huddle around your humanity. Are you saying you huddle around their monstrosity?" he asked.

I looked into that so carefully unreadable face, and nodded. "Yeah, it took me a while to realize it and longer to accept it. I've lost enough people in my life, Edward. I'm tired of it. The chances are very good that both the boys will outlive me." I held up my hand before he could say it. "I know that Jean-Claude isn't alive. Trust me. I probably know that better than you do."

"You guys look serious. Talking about the case?" Bernardo walked into the room wearing blue jeans and nothing else. He'd tied all that hair back in a loose braid. He padded barefoot towards us, and it made my chest tight. It was one of Richard's favorite ways to walk around the house. He only put shoes and a shirt on to go out or if company was coming over.

I watched a very handsome man walk towards me, but I wasn't really seeing him. I was seeing Richard, missing him. I sighed and struggled to sit up straighter on the couch. Call it a hunch but I was betting that Edward didn't have heart to heart talks with Bernardo, at least not about Donna.

Edward had also straightened. "No, we weren't talking about the case," he said.

Bernardo looked from one to the other of us with a smile playing on his lips. But his eyes didn't match. He didn't like the serious air and it not being about the case, and him not knowing what it was about. I'd have asked. Edward wouldn't have told me, but I'd have still asked. Sometimes it was good to be a girl.

"You said you had the files on the Santa Fe cases," I said.

Edward nodded, standing. "I'll bring them to the dining room. Bernardo, show her the way."

"My pleasure," he said.

Edward said, "Treating Anita like a girl would be a mistake, Bernardo. It would piss me off to have to replace you this late in the game." With that, Edward left through the far right door. There was a wash of night air and a buzz of insects before he closed the door behind him.

Bernardo looked at me, shaking his head. "I've never heard Edward talk about any woman the way he talks about you."

I raised eyebrows at him. "Meaning?"

"Dangerous. He talks about you like you're dangerous." Intelligence showed in his solid brown eyes, an intelligence that had been hiding behind his good looks and charming smile. An intelligence that didn't show when he had his monster face on. For the first time I thought that it might be a mistake to underestimate him. He was more than just a gun for hire. How much more remained to be seen.

"What, I'm supposed to say I am dangerous?"

"Are you?" he asked, still studying me with that intense expression.

I smiled at him. "Well, you get to go down the hall first."

He tilted his head to one side. "Why don't we go together, side by side?"

"Because the hall's too narrow, or am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong, but do you really think I'll shoot you in the back?" He spread his arms wide and turned a slow circle. "Do I look armed?" He was smiling when he faced me again, charming.

I didn't buy it. "Unless I run my hands through all that thick hair and down your pants, I don't know you're unarmed."

The smile faded a touch. "Most people don't think about the hair." Which meant that he did have something hidden away. If he was truly unarmed, he'd have teased and offered me a chance to search.

"It's got to be a blade. The hair isn't thick enough to hide a gun, not even a derringer," I said.

He reached behind his head and drew out a slender blade that he'd woven through his hair. He held it up, then flipped it hilt to blade, back and forth, dancing it through his long slender fingers.

"Isn't it an ethnic stereotype that you're good with a knife?" I asked.

He laughed, but not like it was funny. He bounced the blade once more in his hand, and it made me tense. I was still standing behind the couch, but knew that if he were really good, I'd never get behind cover or draw my gun in time. He was just too damn close.

"I can cut my hair and put on a suit, but I'm still going to be an Indian to most people. If you can't change it, might as well embrace it." He slipped the knife back into his hair, making it look smooth and easy. I'd have had to use a mirror and even then I'd have probably cut off half my hair.

"You try to play in corporate America?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said.

"So now you don't do corporate stuff."

"I still play in corporate America. I protect the suits that want flashy muscle. Something exotic to impress their friends about what a big shot they are."

"You do the knife act on command?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Sometimes."

"I hope it pays well," I said.

He smiled. "It either pays well or I don't do it. I may be their token Indian but I'm a rich token Indian. If you're as good as Edward thinks you are, you'd do better at bodyguard work than I do."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the majority of protective work wants their bodyguard to blend in. They want you not to be flashy or exotic. You're pretty, but it's more a girl next door pretty, nothing too beautiful."

I agreed with him, but said, "Oh, that won you a lot of brownie points."

"You've pretty much told me I don't have a chance so why should I bother lying?"

I had to smile. "Point taken."

"You may be a little dark around the edges, but you can pass for white," Bernardo said.

"I'm not passing, Bernardo. I am white. My mother just happened to be Mexican."

"You got your father's skin?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, what of it?"

"No one's ever got up in your face about it, have they?"

I thought about it. My stepmother's hurried comments to strangers that I was not hers. No, I wasn't adopted. I was her stepdaughter. Me and Cinderella. The really rude ones would ask, "What was her mother?"

Judith would always answer quickly, "Her mother was Mexican." Though lately it was Hispanic-American. No one could accuse Judith of not being

politically correct on the issue of race. My mother had died long before people had worried about political correctness being in vogue. If someone asked, she always said proudly, "Mexican." If it was good enough for my mother, it was good enough for me.

That memory I didn't share. I'd never really shared it with my father. I wasn't about to start with a stranger. I chose another memory that didn't hurt quite so much. "I was engaged once until his mother found out my mother had been Mexican. He was blond and blue-eyed, the epitome of WASP breeding. My future-in-law didn't like the idea of me darkening her family tree." That was a brief, unemotional way to say some very painfully things. He had been my first love, my first lover. I thought he was everything to me, but I wasn't everything to him. I'd never let myself fall so completely into anyone's arm before or since. Jean-Claude and Richard were both still paying the bill for that first love.

"Do you think of yourself as white?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Now ask me if I think I'm white enough?"

Bernardo looked at me. "Are you white enough?"

"Not according to some people."

"Like who?"

"Like none of your damn business."

He spread his hands. "Sorry, didn't mean to step on your toes."

"Yes, you did," I said.

"You think so?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think you're jealous."

"Of what?"

"That I can pass and you can't."

He opened his mouth and emotions flowed over his face like water; anger, humor, denial. He finally settled on a smile, but it wasn't a happy one. "You really are a bitch, aren't you?"

I nodded. "You don't pull on my chain and I won't pull on yours."

"Deal," he said. The smile flashed wider. "Now, allow me to escort your lily white ass to the dining room."

I shook my head. "Lead on, tall, dark, and studly, as long as I get to watch your ass while we walk down the hall."

"Only if you promise to tell me how you like the view."

I widened my eyes. "You mean give you a critique on your butt?"

He nodded and the smile looked happy now.

"Are you this big an egotist or just trying to embarrass me?"

"Guess."

"Both," I said.

The smile spread to a grin. "You are as smart as you look."

"Just get moving, Romeo. Edward doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Damn straight."

We went down the short hallway; him leading, me following. He put an extra glide into his walk, and yes, I watched the show. Call it a hunch, but I was betting Bernardo would actually ask me for the critique, probably out loud in

front of other people. Why is it when you have a sure thing to bet on, there's never anyone around to take your money?

Chapter 19

THERE WERE MORE heavy dark beams in the dining room, more off-white walls. If the chairs were a clue, the dining table was black and silver. But the table was hidden under a tablecloth that looked like another Navajo rug, though this one had some color, dull red stripes running with black and white. There was even a black metal candelabra with red candles in the middle of the table. It was nice to see some color that hadn't been added by Donna. It had taken me years to break Jean-Claude of his fixation on black and white decor. Since I was just Edward's friend and nothing more, it wasn't my business how he decorated.

There was a fireplace in the corner nearly identical to the one in the living room except for a black piece of wood set into the white stucco. I would have called it a mantel, but it didn't stick out that far. The true mantel was decorated in more red candles of every shape and size, some sitting with their waxy bottoms directly on the mantel, some in black metal holders. There were two round ones that stuck up above the rest on the kind of holders where you spear the candle to hold it into place. A silver-edged mirror that looked antique was hung behind the candles so that when they were burned, you'd get their reflection. Strange, I hadn't thought Edward was the candlelight type.

There were no windows in the room, just a molded doorway leading out the other side. The walls were utterly white and utterly blank. Somehow the lack of decoration made the room seem more claustrophobic rather than less.

A man appeared in the far doorway. He had to bend over to keep his bald head from smacking the top of the door. He was taller than Dolph, who was six foot eight, which meant he was the tallest person I'd ever met. The only hair on his head was heavy black eyebrows and a shadow of beard along his chin and cheeks. He was wearing the draw string bottoms of men's pajamas. They were black and looked satin. He had on slippers, the kind that have no heels and always seem in danger of falling off. Olaf, because who else could it be, moved in the slippers like they were part of his flesh. Once he got over stooping through the door, he moved like a well-oiled machine, muscles rippling under his pale skin. He was tall, but there wasn't an ounce of fat on him. It was all hard, lean, muscle. He walked around the table towards us, and I moved without thinking to keep the table between us.

He stopped moving. I stopped moving. We stared at each other across the table. Bernardo was at the end of the table, nearest the door, watching us. He looked worried. Probably wondering if he was supposed to come to my rescue

if I needed one. Or maybe he just didn't like the tension level in the room. I know I didn't.

If I hadn't moved away as he walked in, would the tension level have been lower? Maybe. But I'd learned long ago to trust my gut, and my gut said, to stay out of reach. But I could try and be nice. "You must be Olaf. I didn't catch your last name. I'm Anita Blake."

His eyes were dark brown set deep in the bones of his face like twin caves, as if even in daylight his eyes would be shadowed. He just looked at me. It was as if I had not spoken.

I tried again. I'm nothing if not persistent. "Hello, Earth to Olaf." I stared into his face, and he never blinked, never acknowledged my words in any way. If he hadn't been glaring at me, I'd have said he was ignoring me.

I glanced at Bernardo, but kept my gaze on the big man across the table. "What gives, Bernardo? He does talk, right?"

Bernardo nodded. "He talks."

I turned my full attention back to Olaf. "You're just not going to talk to me, is that it?"

He just glared at me.

"You think not hearing the dulcet sounds of your voice is some kind of punishment? Most men are such jabber mouths. Silence is nice for a change. Thanks for being so considerate, Olaf, baby." I made the last word into two very separate syllables.

"I am not your baby." The voice was deep and matched that vast chest. There was also a guttural accent underneath all that clear English, German maybe.

"It speaks. Be still my heart."

Olaf frowned. "I did not agree with your being included on this hunt. We do not need help from a woman, any woman."

"Well, Olaf, honey, you need help from someone because the three of you haven't come up with shit on the mutilations."

A flush of color crept up his neck into his face. "Do not call me that."

"What? Honey?"

He nodded.

"You prefer sweetheart, honeybun, pumpkin?"

The color spread from pink to red, and was getting darker. "Do not use terms of endearment to me. I am no one's sweetheart."

I'd been all set to make another scathing remark, but that stopped me, and I thought of something better. "How sad for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"How sad that you are no one's sweetheart."

The color that had been fading from his face flushed dark now, almost as if he were blushing. "Are you feeling sorry for me?" His voice rose a notch, not yelling but like the low growl of a dog just before it bites. As he got more emotional, the accent got thicker. Very German, very lowland. Grandmother Blake was from Baden-Baden, on the border between Germany and France, but

great-uncle Otto had been from Hapsburg. I couldn't be a hundred percent sure, but it sounded like the same accent.

"Everyone should be someone's sweetheart," I said, but my voice was mild. I wasn't angry. I was baiting him, and I shouldn't have. My only excuse was that all the talk of rape had made me scared of him, and I didn't like that. So I was doing something that was actually very masculine. I was pulling the tail of the beast to make myself feel braver. Stupid. The moment I realized why I was doing it, I tried to stop.

"I am no one's fool, and that means I am no one's sweetheart." He spoke carefully, enunciating each word but his accent was thick enough to walk on. He had started to move slowly around the table, muscles tense like some big predatory cat.

I flashed my jacket on the left side, showing the gun. He stopped moving forward, but his face was furious. "Let's start over, Olaf," I said. "Edward and Bernardo here told me what a big bad guy you were and that made me nervous, which made me defensive. When I'm defensive, I'm usually a pain in the ass. Sorry about that. Let's pretend that I wasn't being a smart ass, and you weren't being all big and bad, and start over."

He stilled. That was the only word I had for it. The quivering tension in his muscles eased like water running down hill. But it wasn't gone, just shoved away somewhere. I had a glimpse into Olaf. He operated from a great dark pit of rage. That it was directed mostly at women was accidental. The rage needed some target or he'd turn into one of those people that drive their cars through restaurant windows and start shooting strangers.

"Edward has been most insistent that you are to be here, but nothing you will say can make me like it." His words were pulling free of the accent as he regained control of his temper.

I nodded. "Are you from Hapsburg?"

He blinked, and for an instant puzzlement replaced the sullenness. "What?"

"Are you from Hapsburg?"

He seemed to think about it for a second or two, then gave a small nod.

"I thought I recognized the accent."

The scowl was back full force. "You are an expert on accents?" He managed to sound sarcastic.

"No. My Uncle Otto was from Hapsburg."

He blinked again, and the scowl wilted around the edges. "You are not German." He sounded very sure.

"My father's family is; from Baden-Baden on the edge of the Black Forest but Uncle Otto was from Hamburg.

"You said only your uncle had the accent."

"By the time I came along, most of the family, except for my grandmother, had been in this country so long there was no accent, but Uncle Otto never lost his."

"He's dead now." Olaf made it half question, half statement.

I nodded.

"How did he die?"

"Grandma Blake says Aunt Gertrude nagged him to death."

His lips twitched. "Women are tyrants if a man allows it." His voice was a touch softer now.

"That's true of men or women. If one partner is weak, the other partner moves in and takes charge."

"Nature abhors a vacuum," Bernardo said.

We glanced at him. I don't know what the expressions were on our faces, but Bernardo held his hands up and said, "Sorry to interrupt."

Olaf and I went back to looking at each other. He was close enough now that I might not be able to draw the Browning in time. But if I moved away now, all my peace-making efforts would be for nothing. He'd either be insulted or see it as weakness on my part. Neither reaction would be helpful. So I stood my ground and tried not to look as tense as I felt, because no matter how calm I sounded, my stomach was in one hard knot. I had one chance to make this work. If I blew it, then the rest of this visit was going to be an armed camp, and we needed to be solving the crime, not fighting each other.

"You are either a leader or being led," Olaf said. "Which are you?"

"I'll follow if someone's worth following."

"And who decides, Anita Blake, who is worth following?"

I had to smile. "I do."

His lips twitched again. "And if Edward put me in charge, would you follow me?"

"I trust Edward's judgment, so yeah. But let me ask you the same question. Would you follow me if Edward put me in charge?"

He flinched. "No."

I nodded. "Great, we know where we stand."

"And where is that?" he asked.

"I'm sort of goal-oriented, Olaf. I came down here to solve a crime and I'm going to do that. If that means at some point taking orders from you, so be it. If Edward puts me in charge of you, and you don't like it, take it up with him."

"Just like a woman to put the responsibility off on a man's shoulders."

I counted to ten, and shrugged. "You talk like your opinion matters to me, Olaf. I don't give a damn what you think of me."

"Women always care what men think of them."

I laughed then. "You know I was starting to feel insulted, but you are just too funny." I meant it.

He leaned towards me trying to use his height to intimidate. It was impressive, but I've been the smallest kid around for as long as I can remember. "I will not take it up with Edward. I will take it up with you. Or don't you have the balls to stand up to me?" He gave a harsh laugh. "Oh, I forgot, you don't have balls." He reached for me in a quick motion. I think he meant to grope me, but I didn't wait to see. I threw myself backward into the floor and was drawing the Browning before my butt hit the floor. Drawing the gun meant I didn't have time to slap my hands down and take the impact the way you were supposed to. I hit hard and felt the shock all the way up my spine.

He'd drawn a blade as long as his forearm from somewhere. The blade was coming down, and the Browning wasn't quite pointed at his chest. It would be a race to see who drew first blood, but it was almost a guarantee that we'd both bleed. Everything slowed down to that crystalline vision, as if I had all the time in the world to point the gun, to avoid the blade, and at the same time everything was happening too fast. Too fast to stop it or change it.

Edward's voice cut through the room. "Stop it! The first one to draw blood, I will personally shoot."

We froze in mid-action. Olaf blinked, and it was as if time had resumed normal flow. Maybe, just maybe, we weren't going to kill each other tonight. But I had the gun pointed at his chest, and his hand was still upraised with the knife. Though knife seemed too small a word, sword was more like it. Where had he pulled it from?

"Drop the knife, Olaf," Edward said.

"Have her put up the gun, first." I met those hard brown eyes and saw a hatred there like what I'd seen earlier in Lieutenant Marks' face. They both hated me for being things that I could not change: one for an innate God-given talent, and the other because I was a woman. Funny, how one unreasoning hatred looks so much like another.

I kept the gun very steadily pointed at his chest I'd let all the air go out of my body, and was waiting, waiting for Olaf to decide what we'd be doing tonight. Either we'd be fighting crime, or we'd be digging a grave, maybe two if he was good enough. I knew what my vote was, but I also knew that the final vote wasn't mine. It wasn't even Olaf's. It was his hatred's.

"You drop the knife, and Anita will put up the gun," Edward said.

"Or she will shoot me while I'm unarmed."

"She won't do that."

"She is afraid of me now," Olaf said.

"Maybe," Edward said, "but she's more afraid of me."

Olaf looked down at me, a glimmer of puzzlement rising up through the hatred and anger. "I am going to shove this blade inside her. She fears me."

"Tell him, Anita."

I hoped I knew what Edward wanted me to say. "I will shoot you twice in the chest. You may get a slice of me before you fall to the ground. If you're really good, you might even slit my throat, but you'll still be dead." I hoped he made up his mind soon because it was awkward holding a shooting stance while sitting on your butt. I was going to get a crick in my back if I didn't get to move soon. The fear was fading, leaving only a dull emptiness behind. I was tired, and the night was still young. Hours to go before I'd sleep. I was tired of Olaf. I had a feeling if I didn't shoot him tonight, I'd get another chance.

"Who are you more afraid of, Anita— Olaf or me?" Edward asked.

I kept my gaze on Olaf and said, "You, Edward."

"Tell him why."

It sounded like a teacher telling his student what to say, but from Edward I'd take it. "Because you would have never let me get the drop on you like this. You would have never let your emotions compromise your safety."

Olaf blinked at me. "You do not fear me?" He made it a question and seemed disappointed. There was something almost little-boyish about his disappointment.

"I'm not afraid of anything I can kill," I said.

"Edward can be killed," Olaf said.

"Yes, but can he be killed by anyone in this room? That's the question."

Olaf looked at me, puzzled now more than angry. He began to lower the blade, slowly.

Edward said, "Drop it," in a quiet voice.

Olaf dropped the blade to the floor. It hit with a ringing clang.

I got to my knees and then scuttled backwards along the edge of the table, lowering the gun as I moved. I got to my feet at the head of the table near Bernardo. I looked at him. "Move over around by Edward."

"I didn't do anything," he said.

"Just do it, Bernardo. I need a little space right now."

He opened his mouth as if to argue, but Edward cut him off. "Do it."

Bernardo did it.

When they were all at the other end of the room, I put the gun up.

Edward had an armful of cardboard box. It was overbrimming with files. He set it down on the tabletop.

"You didn't even have a gun," Olaf said.

"I didn't need one," Edward said.

Olaf pushed past Edward to the hallway beyond. I hoped he was going pack and leave, but doubted we'd get that lucky. I hadn't known Olaf for an hour, and I already knew why he was no one's sweetie.

Chapter 20

A MURDER ALWAYS BREEDS a lot of paper, but a serial murder, you can drown in the paperwork. Edward, Bernardo, and I were swimming upstream. We'd been at it for about an hour, and Olaf hadn't come back. Maybe he had decided to pack up and go home. Though I hadn't heard any doors or cars, but I wasn't sure how soundproof the house was. Edward didn't seem bothered by Olaf's absence, so I didn't give it much attention either. I had read one report through back to front. One to get an overview and see if anything jumped out at me. One thing did. There were slivers of obsidian in the cut up bodies. An obsidian blade, maybe. Though we were in the wrong part of the world for it, or were we?

"Did the Aztecs ever get up this far?" I asked.

Edward didn't treat it like a weird question. "Yes."

"So I'm not the first one to point out the obsidian clue might mean Aztec magic?"

"No," he said.

"Thanks for telling me that we're looking for some sort of Aztec monster."

"The locals cops talked to the leading expert in the area. Professor Dallas couldn't come up with any deity or folklore that would account for these murders or the mutilations."

"You sound like you're quoting. Is there a report around here somewhere?"

He looked out over the mound of papers. "Somewhere."

"Isn't there an Aztec deity that the priests skinned someone as an offering, or is that Mayan?"

He shrugged. "The good professor couldn't make a connection. That's why I didn't tell you. The police have been looking into the Aztec angle for weeks. Nothing. I brought you down here to think different thoughts, not follow old ones."

"I'd like to talk to the professor all the same. If that's okay with you." I made sure he got the sarcasm.

"Look at the reports first, try to find what we've missed, then I'll introduce you to Professor Dallas."

I looked at him, trying to read behind those baby blues and failing as usual. "When do I get to see the professor?"

"Tonight."

That raised my eyebrows. "Gee, that is quick, especially since you think I'm wasting our time."

"She spends most nights in a club near Albuquerque."

"She, being Professor Dallas," I said.

He nodded.

"What's so special about this club?"

"If your career was Aztec history and mythology, wouldn't you just love to interview a real live Aztec?"

"A live ancient Aztec in Albuquerque?" I didn't try and keep the surprise out of my voice. "How?"

"Well, maybe not live," he said.

"A vampire," I said.

He nodded again.

"Has this Aztec vamp got a name?"

"The Master of the City calls herself Itzpapalotl."

"Isn't that like an Aztec goddess?" I asked.

"Yes, it is."

"Talk about delusions of grandeur." I was watching his face, trying to catch a hint. "Did the cops talk to the vamp?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"She wasn't helpful."

"You didn't believe her, did you?"

"Neither did the cops. But she was on stage at her club during at least three of the murders."

"So she's cleared," I said.

"Which is why I want you to read the reports first, Anita. We've missed something. Maybe you'll find out what, but not if you keep looking for Aztec bogeymen. We raised that rock, and as much as the police would like it to be the Master of the City, it isn't."

"So why the offer to take me down to see her tonight?"

"Just because she's not doing the murders, doesn't mean she can't have information that could help us."

"The police questioned her." I made it a statement.

"Yeah, but funny how vampires don't like talking to the police, and how much they like talking to you."

"You know you could have just told me that we were seeing the Master Vamp of Albuquerque tonight."

"I wasn't going to take you down there tonight unless you got bitchy about it. I was actually hoping you wouldn't make the Aztec angle until you'd read everything first."

"Why?"

"I told you, it was a blind alley. We need new ideas. Things we haven't thought of, not things the police have already crossed off the list."

"But you haven't crossed this Itza-whatever off your list, have you?"

"The goddess will let you call her by her English translation, Obsidian Butterfly. It's also the name of her club."

"You think she's involved, don't you?"

"I think she knows something that she might share with a necromancer, but not a vampire executioner."

"So I go down off duty, so to speak."

"So to speak."

"I'm Jean-Claude's human servant, one third of his little triumvirate of power. If I go visiting the Master of this City without police credentials, then I'll have to play vamp politics. I hate vamp politics."

Edward looked out over the table. "When you've read your hundredth witness report tonight, you may change your mind. Even vampire politics look good after reading enough of this shit."

"Gee, Edward, you sound almost bitter."

"I'm the monster expert, Anita, and I don't have a fucking clue."

We looked at each other, and again I had the sense of his fear, his helplessness, things that Edward just didn't feel. Or so I'd thought.

Bernardo came in with a tray of coffees. He must have caught something in the air because he said, "Did I miss something?"

"No," Edward said, and he went back to the papers in his lap.

I stood and started sorting papers. "You haven't missed anything yet."

"I just love being lied to."

"We're not lying," I said.

"Then why is the tension level so high in here?"

"Shut up, Bernardo," Edward said.

Bernardo didn't take it as an insult. He just shut up and handed out the coffee.

I sorted out all the witness reports I could find, then spent the next three hours reading them. I'd read one report back to front and found out nothing the police and Edward hadn't known weeks ago. Now I was looking for something new, something that the police, Edward, the experts they'd called in, nobody had found. It sounded egotistical, but Edward seemed sure I'd find it, whatever it was. Though I was beginning to wonder if it was confidence in me or sheer desperation on Edward's part that made him so sure I'd find something. I'd give it my best shot, and that was all I could do.

I looked down at several stacks of witness reports and settled in to read. I know most people read each report in full, or almost in full, then move to the next, but in a serial crime you were looking for a pattern. On serial murders I'd learned to divide the files up into parts: all the witness statements, then all the forensic reports, then the pictures of the crime scene, etc. . . . Sometimes I did the pictures first, but I was putting it off. I'd seen enough in the hospital to make me squeamish. So the pictures could wait, and I could still do legitimate work on the case without having to see all the horrors. Procrastination with a purpose, what could be better?

Bernardo kept making us all coffee and continued to play host, going back and forth when the coffee ran low, offering food, though we both declined. When he brought me my umpteenth cup of coffee, I finally asked, "Not that I'm not grateful, but you didn't strike me as the domestic type, Bernardo. Why the perfect host routine? It's not even your house." He took the question as an invitation to move closer to my chair until his jean-clad thigh was touching the arm, but it wasn't touching me so that was fine. "You want to ask Edward to go for coffee?"

I looked across the table at Edward. He didn't bother to look up from the papers in his hands. I smiled. "No, I was more thinking I'd get my own."

Bernardo turned and leaned his butt against the table, arms crossed over his chest. Muscles played in his arms as if he were flexing just a bit for my benefit. I didn't think he was even aware he was doing it, as if it were habit. "Truthfully?" he asked.

I looked up at him and sipped the coffee he'd brought me. "That would be nice."

"I've read the reports more than once. I don't want to read them again. I'm tired of playing detectives and wish we could just go kill something, or at least fight something."

"Me, too," Edward said. He was watching us now with cool blue eyes. "But we have to know what we're fighting, and the answer to that is in here somewhere." He motioned at the mounds of papers.

Bernardo shook his head. "Then why haven't we, or the police found the answer in all this paper?" He ran his finger down the nearest stack. "I don't think paperwork is going to catch this bastard."

I smiled up at him. "You're just bored."

He looked down at me, a little startled expression on his face, then he laughed, head back, mouth wide as if he were howling at the moon. "You haven't known me long enough to know me that well." Laughter was still sparkling in his brown eyes, and I wished it were a different pair of brown eyes. My chest was suddenly tight with missing Richard. I looked down at the papers in my lap, not sure if it would show in my eyes. If my eyes showed sorrow, I didn't want Bernardo to see it. If my eyes showed longing, I didn't want him to misinterpret it.

"Are you bored, Bernardo?" Edward asked.

Bernardo turned at the waist so he could see Edward with a minimum of movement. It put his bare chest facing me. "No women, no television, nothing to kill, bored, bored, bored."

I found myself staring at his chest. I had an urge to rise up out of my chair spill the papers to the floor and run my tongue over his chest. The image was so strong, I had to close my eyes. I had feelings like this around Richard and Jean-Claude, but not around strangers. Why was Bernardo affecting me like this?

"Are you all right?" He was bending over me, face so close that his face filled my entire vision.

I jerked back, pushing the chair and rising to my feet. The chair crashed to the floor, papers spilled everywhere. "Shit," I said with feeling. I picked up the chair.

He bent down to help pick up the papers. His bare back made a firm curved line as he started shoveling the papers back into a pile. I watched the way the small muscles in his lower back worked, fascinated by it.

I stepped away from him. Edward was watching me from across the table. His gaze was heavy, as if he knew what I was thinking, feeling. I knew it wasn't true, but he knew me better than most. I didn't want anyone to know that I seemed to be unwarrantedly attracted to Bernardo. It was too embarrassing.

Edward said, "Leave us alone for a while, Bernardo."

Bernardo stood with a bundle of papers, looking from one to the other of us. "Did I just miss something?"

"Yes," Edward said, "Now get out."

Bernardo looked at me. He looked a question at me, but I gave nothing back. I could feel my face unreadable and empty. Bernardo sighed and handed me the papers. "How long?"

"I'll let you know," Edward said.

"Wonderful, I'll be in my room when Daddy decides to let me come out." He stalked through the nearest door where Olaf had vanished through.

"No one likes being treated like a child," I said.

"It's the only way to deal with Bernardo," Edward said. His gaze was very steady on my face, and he looked way too serious for comfort.

I started sorting the papers in my hands. I used the cleared space on the table that I'd made hours ago when I was still leaning over the table instead of slumping in the chair to read. I concentrated on sorting and didn't look up until I felt him beside me.

I looked then and found his eyes weren't blank. They were intense, but I still couldn't read them. "You said you hadn't been dating either of them for six months."

I nodded.

"Have you been dating anyone else?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"No sex, then," he said.

I shook my head again. My heart was beating faster. I so did not want him to figure this out.

"Why not?" he asked.

I looked away then, unable to meet his eyes. "I don't have any moral high ground to preach from anymore, Edward, but I don't do casual sex, you know that."

"You're jumping out of your skin every time Bernardo comes near you." Heat climbed up my face. "Is it that noticeable?"

"Only to me," he said.

I was grateful for that. I spoke without looking at him. "I don't understand it. He's a bastard. Even my hormones usually have better taste than that." Edward was leaning against the table, arms crossed over his white shirt. It was exactly how Bernardo had been sitting, but it didn't move me, and I didn't think it was just the shirt. Edward just did not affect me in that way and never would.

"He's handsome, and you're horny."

The heat that had been fading, flared until it felt like my skin would burn.

"Don't say it that way."

"It's the truth."

I looked at him then, and let the anger show in my eyes. "Damn you."

"Maybe your body knows what you need."

I widened eyes at him. "Meaning what?"

"A good uncomplicated fuck. That's what I mean." He still looked calm, unmoved as if he'd said something entirely different.

"What are you saying?"

"Fuck Bernardo. Give your body what it needs. You don't have to go back to the monsters to get laid."

"I cannot believe you said that to me."

"Why not? If you were having sex with someone else, wouldn't it be easier to forget Richard and Jean-Claude? Isn't that part of their hold on you, especially the vampire. Admit it, Anita. If you weren't celibate, you wouldn't be missing them as much."

I opened my mouth to protest, closed it, and thought about what he'd said. Was he right? Was part of the reason I was still mooning over them the lack of sex? Yeah, I guess it was, but it wasn't just that. "I miss the sex, yeah, but I miss the intimacy, Edward. I miss looking at them both and knowing they're mine. Knowing I can have every inch of them. I miss Sunday after church and having Richard stay over to watch old movies. I miss watching Jean-Claude watch me eat a meal." I shook my head. "I miss them, Edward."

"Your problem, Anita, is that you wouldn't know an uncomplicated fuck if it bit you on the ass."

I wasn't sure whether to smile or be mad, so my voice was a little amused and a little angry. "And your relationship with Donna is so uncomplicated?"

"It was at the beginning," he said. "Can you say that about either of yours?"

I shook my head. "I'm not a casual person, Edward, not in anything."

He sighed. "I know that. When you give your friendship, it's for life. When you hate someone, it's forever. When you say you're going to kill someone, you do it. One of the things making you squirm about your boys is the fact that for you, love should be forever."

"And what's wrong with that?"

He shook his head. "Sometimes I forget how young you are."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means you complicate your life, Anita." He raised a hand before I could say it, and said it for me. "I know I've screwed up with Donna, but I went into it meaning to be casual, meaning it to just be part of the act. You always go into everything like it's life or death. Only life and death are life and death."

"And you think that sleeping with Bernardo would fix all that."

"It'd be a start," he said.

I shook my head. "No."

"Your final word?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Fine, I won't bring it up again."

"Great," I said and looked into that blank, Edward face. "Being with Donna has made you more personal, more warm and fuzzy. I'm not comfortable with the new Edward."

"Neither am I," he said.

Edward went back to his side of the table, and we both started reading again. Usually, silence between us was companionable and not strained. But this quiet was full of unsaid advice: me to him about Donna, and him to me about the boys. Edward and I playing Dear Abby to each other. It would have been funny if it hadn't been so sad.

Chapter 21

AN HOUR LATER, I'd finished the witness reports. I stretched my lower back while still sitting in the chair, just bending slowly at the waist until my hands touched the floor or almost touched the floor. Three stretches, and I could press my palms flat to the floor. Better. I got up and checked my watch. Midnight. I felt stiff and strange, estranged from this quiet room and the peaceful

surroundings. My head was filled with what I'd read, and what I'd read hadn't been peaceful.

Standing, I could see Edward. He'd moved to the floor, lying flat on the floor, holding the reports up in front of his face. If I had lain down, I'd have been asleep. Edward always did have a will of iron.

He glanced at me. I got a glimpse of what he was looking at. He'd moved on to the pictures. Something must have shone on my face because he placed the pictures face down on his chest. "You finished?"

"With the witness reports, yeah."

He just looked at me.

I went around the table and sat in the chair he'd started the night in. He stayed lying on the floor. I would have said like a contented cat, but there was something more reptilian about him than feline; a coldness. How could Donna miss it? I shook my head. Business, concentrate on business.

"The majority of the houses are isolated ones, mostly because of the wealth of the owners. They've got enough money to give them land and privacy. But three of the houses were located in developments like the Bromwells' with neighbors all around. Those three attacks occurred on one of the few nights that all the neighbors were gone."

"And?" he said.

"And I thought this was going to be a brainstorming session. I want your ideas."

He shook his head. "I brought you down here for a set of fresh eyes, Anita. If I tell you all our old ideas, it may lead you down the same wrong paths we've already taken. Tell me what you see."

I frowned at him. What he said made sense, but it still felt like he was keeping secrets. I sighed. "If this was a person, I'd say he or they stake out the houses night after night, waiting for that one night when all the neighbors were out of the way. But do you know the odds of an entire street clearing out on any given night in the suburbs?"

"Long odds," Edward said.

I nodded. "Damn straight. A few people had plans for that night. One couple went to a niece's birthday party. Another family had their once a month dinner with the in-laws. Two couples from different crime scenes were both working late, but the rest of the people didn't have plans, Edward. They just all left home about the same time on the same night for different reasons."

He was watching me, eyes blank, but steady, intense, and neutral at the same time. From his face I didn't know whether I was saying something he'd heard a dozen times before, or something brand new. Detective Sergeant Dolph Storr likes to stay neutral and not influence his people so I was kind of used to it, but Edward made Dolph seem positively loaded with influence.

I continued, but it was like slogging through mud without any feedback at all. "The detective in charge of the second case, he noticed it, too. He went out of his way to ask why they left their houses. The answers are almost identical where the police take the time to ask details."

"Go on," Edward said, face still blank.

"Dammit, Edward. You've read all the reports. I'm just repeating what you already know."

"But maybe you'll end up someplace new," he said. "Please, Anita, just finish your thought."

"They all got restless. A spur of the moment trip to get ice cream with the kids. One woman decided to go grocery shopping at eleven o'clock at night. Some of them just got in their cars and went for a drive, no place in particular. Just had to get out for a while. One man described it as cabin fever.

"A woman, Mrs. Emma ... shit. I've read too many names in too short a space of time."

"Was it an unusual name?" Edward asked without a single change of expression.

I frowned at him and leaned across the table, lying on it to reach the reports. I shuffled through them until I found the one I wanted. "Mrs. Emma Taylor said, 'The night just felt awful. I just couldn't stand being inside.' She goes on to say, 'Outside the air was suffocating, hard to breathe.' "

"So?" he asked.

"So I want to talk to her."

"Why?"

"I think she's a sensitive, if not a psychic."

"There's nothing in the reports that say she's either."

"If you have the gift and you ignore it or pretend it's not real, it doesn't go away. Power will out, Edward. If she's a strong sensitive or a psychic that has neglected her powers for years, then she'll be either depressed or manic. She'll have a history of treatment for mental illness. How serious will depend on how gifted she is."

He finally looked interested. "You're saying that having psychic ability can drive you crazy?"

"I'm saying that psychic ability can masquerade as mental illness. I know ghost hunters that hear the voices of the dead like whispers in their ears, one of the classic symptoms of psychopernia. Empaths, people who draw impressions from other people, can be depressed because they're surrounded by depressed people, and they don't know how to shield themselves. Really strong clairvoyants can spend their lives getting visions from everything they touch, unable to turn it off, again seeing things that aren't there. Psychopernia. Demonic possession can mask itself as multiple personality. I could give you examples for the next hour matching mental illness with different types of power."

"You've made your point," he said. He sat up and didn't seem the least bit stiff. Maybe the floor was good for his back. "I still don't understand why you want to talk to this woman. The report was taken by Detective Loggia. He was very thorough. He asked good questions."

"You noticed that he took more time with why people left than the rest of the cops, just like I noticed it."

Edward shrugged. "Loggia didn't like the way everyone cleared out. Too damn convenient, but he couldn't come up with anything that tied the people together into a conspiracy."

"A conspiracy?" I almost laughed then stopped at the seriousness in his face. "Did someone actually suggest that an entire upper-middle-class to more-than-middle-class neighborhood conspired together to kill these people?"

"It was the only logical explanation for why they all left within thirty minutes of each other on the night of the murders."

"So they investigated all these people?" I asked.

"That's where some of the extra paperwork comes from."

"And?" I said.

"Nothing," Edward said.

"Nothing?" I made it a question.

"A few neighborhood squabbles over kids destroying the flowers, one affair where the husband that turned up dead was banging the next door neighbor's wife." Edward grinned. "The neighbor was lucky that the other man got cut up in the middle of a string of serial killings. Otherwise, he'd have been the top of the hit parade."

"Could it have been a copycat?" I asked.

"The police don't think so, and believe me they tried to make the pieces fit."

"I believe you. The police hate to let a good motive slide since most of the time motive isn't even one of their top priorities. Most people kill over stupid things, impulse, screw motive."

"Do you have a logical reason why all these people would vacate their houses just at the right time for the killer, or killers, to make their move?"

I nodded. "Yep."

He looked up at me, a slight smile on his face. "I'm listening."

"It's very common in hauntings for people to be uncomfortable in the area where the ghost is strongest."

"You're saying ghosts did this?"

I waved a hand. "Wait, wait until I'm done."

He gave a small nod. "Dazzle me."

"I don't know if it's dazzling, but I think it's how it was done. There are spells that supposedly can make a person uneasy in a house or a place. But the spells I read in college were for one person or one house, not a dozen homes and twice that many people. I'm not even sure a coven working together could affect that big an area. I don't know that much about actual witchcraft of any flavor. We'll need to find a witch to ask. But I think it's moot. I just mentioned it as a possibility."

"It's a possibility the cops haven't come up with yet."

"Nice to know I haven't entirely wasted the last five hours of my life."

"But you don't think it was witches," Edward said.

I shook my head. "Witches of almost any flavor believe in the threefold rule. What you give out comes back to you threefold."

"What goes around comes around," Edward said.

"Exactly, and no one is going to want this shit coming back on them three-fold. I would have said they also believe in 'do what you will, only harm none,' but you can have bad pagans just like you can have bad Christians. Just because your belief says something is wrong doesn't mean someone's not going to break the rules."

"So what do you think caused them all to leave their homes just when our killer needed it?"

"I think whatever is doing this, is big enough and powerful enough to simply arrive on the spot and want the people to go, and they went."

Edward frowned at me. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"Our monster arrives, knows which house it wants, and he fills the rest of the houses with dread, driving the other families out. That takes a hell of a lot of power, but to then turn around and shield the murder house so that that one family doesn't flee, that's truly impressive. I know some preternatural critters that can throw a sense of unease around them. Mostly I think to keep hunters at bay. But I don't know anything that can cause this kind of controlled panic."

"So you're saying you don't know what it is," he said, and there was just a tinge of disappointment in his voice.

"Not yet, but if this is true, then it rules out a hell of a lot of things. I mean some vampires can throw out fear like this, but not on this large a scale, and if they could do the other houses, they couldn't shield the murder house."

"I know a vampire kill when I see it, Anita, and this isn't one."

I waved my hands in the air as if clearing it. "I'm just throwing out examples, Edward. Even a demon couldn't do this."

"How about a devil?" he asked.

I looked at him, saw he was serious, so I gave him a serious answer. "I won't go into how long it's been since anyone saw a devil, a greater demon, above ground, but if it were anything demonic, I'd have felt it today in the house. The demonic leave a stain behind, Edward."

"Couldn't one that was powerful enough hide its presence from you?"

"Probably," I said. "I'm not a priest, so probably, but whatever is mutilating these people doesn't want to hide." I shook my head. "It's not demonic, I'd almost bet the farm on it, but again I'm not a demonologist."

"I know that Donna can help us locate a witch tomorrow. I don't think she knows any demonologists."

"There are only two in the country. Father Simon McCoupen, who has the record in this century in this country for number of exorcisms performed, and Doctor Philo Merrick, who teaches at the University of San Francisco."

"You sound like you know them," Edward said.

"I attended a class taught by Merrick, and a talk given by Father Simon.

"I didn't know you were that interested in demons."

"Let's just say that I'm tired of running into them without knowing much about them."

He looked at me, sort of expectantly. "When did you run into a demon?"

I shook my head. "I won't talk about it after dark. If you really want to know, ask me again tomorrow when the sun is shining."

He looked at me for a second or two, as if he wanted to argue, but he let it go. Which was just as well. There are some stories, some memories, that if you tell them after dark, they seem to gain weight, substance, as if there are things listening, waiting to hear themselves spoken of again. Words have power. But even thinking about them is sometimes enough to make the air in a room heavy. I'd gotten better over the years at turning off my memories. It was a way to stay sane.

"The list of what our murderer isn't is getting longer," Edward said. "Now tell me what it is."

"I don't know yet, but it is preternatural." I leafed through the pages until I found the part I'd marked. "Four of the people now in the Santa Fe hospital were only found because they wandered outside their homes at night, skinned and bleeding. Neighbors found them both times."

"There's a transcript of the 911 call somewhere in this mess. The woman who found the Carmichaels had hysterics over the phone."

I thought about what I'd seen in the hospital and tried to imagine finding one of my neighbors, perhaps a friend, in that condition in the middle of the street. I shook my head and chased the image back. I did not want to imagine it. I had enough nightmares of my own, thank you very much.

"I don't blame her," I said. "But my point is this: how could they walk around in that condition? One of the survivors attacked his neighbor when the man came to help. He bit his shoulder so badly that the man was taken to the hospital with the mutilation victims. Doctor Evans said that they have to restrain all the patients in Albuquerque or they try to get up and leave. Don't you find that strange?"

"Yes, it's all strange. Is there a point in here somewhere?" And I heard that thread of tiredness in his voice.

"I think that whatever skinned them was, is, calling them."

"Calling them how?" he asked.

"The same way a vampire calls a person he's bitten and mind-raped. The skinning or something about it gives the monster a hold over them."

"Why doesn't the monster just take them with him the night he skins them?" Edward asked.

"I don't know."

"Can you prove that the skinned victims are being called by some bogeyman?"

"No, but if the doctors would okay it, I wonder where one of the survivors would go, if no one stopped him. Maybe the mutilation victims could lead us right to the thing."

"You saw the hospital today, Anita. They are not going to let us take one of their patients and set him free. Between you and me, I'm not sure I could stand to watch it myself."

"Well, the great Edward, afraid at last," another voice said.

We both turned to see Olaf standing in the far doorway. He was wearing black dress slacks, and a black polo-style shirt, the shirtsleeves a little short for

his long arms. I guess there just aren't a lot of choices when you wear Jolly Green Giant sizes.

He glided into the room, and if I hadn't spent so much time around vampires and shapeshifters, I'd have said he was good at gliding. For a human, he was very good.

Edward stood as he spoke. "What do you want, Olaf?"

"Has the girl solved your mystery?"

"Not yet," Edward said.

Olaf stopped at the edge of the table closest to us. "Not yet. Such confidence you have in her. Why?"

"Four hours and that is the best question you can come up with," I said.

Olaf turned to me with a snarl. "Shut up!"

I took a step forward, and Edward touched my elbow. He shook his head. I stepped back, gave them some room. Truthfully, I wasn't up to arm wrestling Olaf, and I couldn't really shoot him just for yelling at me. It kind of limited my options.

Edward answered Olaf's question. "When you look at her, Olaf, you see just the surface, just the small, attractive packaging. Underneath all that prettiness is someone who thinks like a killer, and a cop, and a monster. I don't know anyone else who bridges all three worlds as well as she does. And all the preternatural experts you find are specialists; they're witches, or clairvoyants, or demonologists." He glanced at me as he said the last, then back to Olaf. "But Anita is a generalist. She knows a little about most of it and can tell us whether we need to find a specialist, and what kind of specialist we need."

"And what kind of magical specialist do we need?" He put a lot of sarcasm into that question.

"A witch, someone who works with the dead." He'd remembered my earlier request about finding out what I'd sensed on the road. "We're making a list."

"And checking it twice," I said.

Edward shook his head.

Olaf turned to me. "Was that a joke?"

"A little one, yes."

"Perhaps you should not try to make jokes."

I shrugged.

He turned back to Edward. "You told me all this before she came. You waxed eloquent about her abilities. But I have worked with your magical people in the past, and you never talked about them as you speak of her. What is it about her that is so God damned special?"

Edward glanced at me, then back to Olaf. "The Greeks believed that once there were no male and female, that all souls were one. Then the souls were torn apart, male and female. The Greeks thought that when you found the other half of your soul, your soul mate, that it would be your perfect lover. But I think if you find your other half, you would be too much alike to be lovers, but you would still be soul mates."

I was fighting hard to keep my face from showing the growing surprise at this little speech. I hoped I was succeeding.

"What are you trying to say?" Olaf demanded.

"She is like a piece of my soul, Olaf. "

"You are mad," Olaf said, "a lunatic. Soul mates, bah!"

I kind of agreed with Olaf on this one.

"Then why is the thought of giving her a gun while I hunt her one of my greatest fantasies?" Edward asked.

"Because you are mad," Olaf said.

Hear, hear, but I didn't say it out loud.

"You know that I have no greater compliment to give than that," Edward said. "If I wanted to kill you, Olaf, I would just do it. The same with Bernardo because I know that I'm better than both of you. But with Anita I'll never be sure unless we do go up against each other for real. If I die without knowing which of us is better, I'll regret the not knowing."

Olaf stared down at him. "You cannot mean to say that this girl, this die Zimtzecke of a girl is better than Bernardo or me."

"That's exactly what I mean."

Die Zimtzecke meant a quarrelsome or bitchy woman. Couldn't really argue with that one. I sighed. Olaf had hated me before. Now he was going to feel forced to be competitive. This I did not need. And compliment though it was, it was not reassuring to know that Edward fantasized about killing me. Oh, excuse me, hunting me while I was armed to see which of us was better. Oh, yeah, that was much more sane.

I checked my watch. It was 1:30 A.M. "Frankly, boys, I don't know whether to be flattered or frightened, but I do know one thing. It's late, and I'm tired. If we are really going to see the big bad vampire tonight, then it has to be now."

"You just don't want to look at the pictures tonight," Edward said.

I shook my head. "No, not just before trying to sleep. I don't even want to read the forensic reports tonight. I'll look at the gory remains first thing tomorrow."

"Afraid," Olaf said.

I met his angry eyes. "I need some sleep if I'm to function well while I'm here. If I see the pictures right before bedtime, I can't guarantee sleep."

He turned back to Edward. "Your soul mate is a coward."

"No, she's just honest."

"Thank you, Edward." I went to stand closer to Olaf, so that I had to crane my neck back to see his face, and he loomed over me. There was really no way to get decent eye contact, so I stepped back to a more comfortable angle for my neck, and settled for meeting his deep-set eyes. "If I'd been a man I'd have probably felt compelled to look at the pictures, to prove myself worthy of all Edward's praise. But one of the good things about being a woman is that my level of testosterone poisoning is lower than most men's."

"Testosterone poisoning?" Olaf looked confused. Probably not a new sensation for him.

"Show me to my room, then explain it to him, Edward. I want to get some extras if I'm going to be interviewing vamps tonight."

Edward led me past the brooding Olaf and out the door that everyone seemed to disappear through. The hallway was white and so unadorned it looked unfinished. He pointed out Bernardo's room as the first door and Olaf's was right beside mine.

"Do you really think Olaf and I bunking next door to each other is a good idea?"

"By putting you right beside him, it shows him I'm not afraid for you."

"But I am," I said.

He smiled. "Just take some basic precautions. You'll be fine."

"Nice to know one of us confident. If you hadn't noticed, he outweighs me by like a ton."

"You're talking like it would be a standup fight. I know you, Anita. If Olaf comes through your door tonight, you'll just shoot him."

I studied his face. "Are you setting him up so I will kill him?"

He blinked, and I saw for a moment that I'd surprised him. "No, no. I meant what I said to Olaf. If I wanted him dead, I'd just kill him. I put you next door to him because I know how he thinks. He'll think it's a trap, too easy, and he'll behave himself tonight."

"What about tomorrow night?"

Edward shrugged. "One night at a time."

I shook my head and opened the door. Edward called to me before I could go inside or even turn on the light. I turned back to face him.

"You know most women get all mushy when a man tells them they're his soul mate."

"I'm not most women."

His smile widened. "Amen to that."

I looked at him. "You know what you said in there scares me. The thought that you fantasize about hunting me and killing me. That's creepy, Edward."

"Sorry," he said, but he was still smiling, still amused.

"But honestly if you'd said the soul mate stuff and meant it like lovey-dovey, that could have scared me more. I've known since we met that you might kill me some day, but fall in love with me ... that would be just too weird."

The smile faded a notch or two. "You know if we could love each other, our lives would be less complicated."

"Truth, Edward. Have you ever had a romantic thought about me?"

He didn't even have to think about it. He just shook his head.

"Me, either. I'll meet you out front by the car."

"I'll wait for you here," he said.

I looked at him. "Why?"

"I don't want you smarting off to Olaf on your way out if I'm not there to stop the fight."

"Would I do that?"

He shook his head. "Get the extra firepower and let's start the drive I'd like to get to bed before dawn."

"Good point." I went into the room, closing the door behind me. There was a knock on the door almost immediately. I opened it back up, slowly, but was pretty sure it was Edward. It was.

"We'll take you into the club as my guest, just a friend. If the vamps don't know who you are, they might be more careless around you, let something slip that would make sense to you, that wouldn't make sense to me."

"What happens if I get outted during the evening? Think Her Worship will resent you sneaking the Executioner into her club?"

"I'll tell her that you wanted to see the best show in town and thought that they might not want the Executioner around, but that you're strictly there in an unexecution work mode."

"Will you say it just like that, unexecution work mode?"

He smiled. "Probably. She likes her men to be either very serious or very cute."

"She. You talk like you know her."

"Ted only kills rogues. He is very welcome in a lot of the local monster hangouts."

"Edward the actor," I said.

"I do good undercover work."

"I know you do, Edward."

"But it always makes you uncomfortable to see me do it."

I shrugged. "You're such a good actor, Edward, sometimes it makes me wonder which act is real."

The smile faded, leaving his face blank, and empty like some of him had slithered away with his smile. "Go get your gear, Anita."

I closed the door with him still standing there. In some ways I understood Edward better than either of the men I had been dating. In other ways he was the biggest mystery of all. I shook my head, literally shaking it off, and looked around the small bedroom. If we came back here at dawn, I'd be tired, and tired could mean careless. I decided to make some changes now while I was fresh.

The room's only chair would go under the doorknob, but not until I was in for the night. I moved a line of miniature Kachina dolls from the dresser to the windowsill. If anyone opened the window, one or more of the dolls would fall. There was a small mirror on the wall that was framed by deer antlers. I placed it under the window, just in case the dolls didn't fall. I'd leave my suitcase to one side of the door entrance so if the door did somehow manage to open without knocking the chair over, Olaf might trip over the suitcase. Of course, I was almost as likely to trip over it trying to get to the bathroom on the way out. The moment I thought of it, I had to go. I'd hit the bathroom on the way out. Edward could stand outside and make sure Olaf didn't interrupt.

I searched through my suitcase. It was illegal for me to carry my vampire gear without a court order of execution. Carrying it without one was like premeditated murder. But no law against carrying a few extras. I had two thin vials of holy water with little rubber caps. You hit the cap with your thumb and

it popped open, sort of like a grenade, but only dangerous to the vamp. Which made it a lot more user friendly than a grenade.

I slipped the holy water into each of my back pockets. They barely showed through the dark cloth. I already had my cross, but I'd had crosses ripped off of my throat before, so I had backups. I put a plain silver cross with chain in one front pocket of my jeans, and another one in the pocket of the black dress jacket. I opened the box of new ammunition that I'd packed.

I'd had to leave my apartment almost two years ago now. When I'd lived in my apartment, I'd put Glazer Safety Rounds in my guns because I didn't want my neighbors to take a stray bullet. Glazers will not go through walls, but as Edward and some of my police friends had pointed out, I'd been lucky. Glazers will shatter bone, but don't really go through bone, the difference between a shotgun and a rifle round, sort of. Edward had actually come into town just to take me out to the shooting range and test fire stuff. He'd asked me questions about specific gun fights, and what I'd learned was that the reason the Glazers had done what I wanted them to do was mostly being almost point blank every time I used them for a kill. What I needed was something that was a reliable kill from a safer distance than arm's length. It also might explain why I'd hit some older vamps from a distance, but they hadn't stopped. Maybe not. Maybe they were just that old, but... Edward had been very convincing. Something with more penetrating power, more stopping power, ammo meant not to wound but to kill. Because let's face it: when was the last time I'd wounded anyone that I hadn't meant to kill? Wounding was an accident for me. Killing was the goal.

I'd settled on the Hornady Custom XTP handgun ammo. To be exact the 9 mm Luger, 147 JHP/XTP, silver-coated of course. There were other hollow point bullets that will expand to a bigger mass, but some of them don't penetrate nearly as far into a body mass. With a vamp you need to make sure you hit something vital, not just that you make a big hole. There were even bullets that penetrated further into a mass, which meant they'd reliably go through a body and out the other side. But all the Hornady XTPs were designed to penetrate the target, but not so far as to pass through the target object and "create a hazard." That last was a quote from some of the Hornady Manufacturing literature. The ammo followed the FBI penetration requirements. The Feds, even more than little ol' me, have to worry about what happens when bullet hits the bad guy and keeps traveling. Is it going to hit a kid, a pregnant woman, a nun out for her morning stroll? Once a bullet hits the mark and keeps traveling, you really never know where it will end up. So the plan is to make sure it doesn't leave the target, but that the target doesn't get up either.

Of course, Edward had made his own recipe for killing. He'd taken silver hollow points and filled the end with holy water and mercury, then sealed the top with wax. I'd been afraid that the wax would make the bullets jam in a gun, but they ran through like silk—smooth, dependable, like Edward himself. The ammo was a hell of a show. So Edward had told me. I hadn't used Edward's homemade surprise yet. I was still vaguely wary of them. He shouldn't have told me that they might jam the gun. Or maybe, I would have been nervous of

them anyway. With these even if you hit in a non-lethal area, missed the heart, the head, everything vital, you still did damage. The holy water and silver mercury would explode through the vamp's body, burning where they touched. The holy water would cut through the body like acid, Hit a vamp even in a leg or arm with this shit, and they might lose all interest in killing you and just want to stop the pain.

I stared at the two boxes of ammo, and finally loaded up with the Hornady XTP, Edward's specials in their box. If I did have to shoot any vamps tonight I had no court order of execution, and carrying the homemade seemed too much like premeditation. Premeditation is the difference between first degree murder, and second degree murder or even manslaughter if you had a good lawyer and a sympathetic jury. There were people in jail at this very moment for killing vamps. I did not want to be one of them. Besides, we were just going down there to ask questions, nothing major. So I told myself as I closed the suitcase and left the other bullets behind.

But I knew better than most that what should be simple always grows complex when you add a vampire. Add a Master of the City, any city, and you never really know what you're walking into. I'd killed three Masters of the City: one with a sword, one with fire, one by killing their human servant. Never just a straight on shoot out. I probably wouldn't be shooting anyone tonight, but... I loaded up my extra clip with the bullets. I'd only use them if I'd used up the first clip. If I emptied thirteen of the XTPs into something and it didn't go down, all bets were off. I'd worry about murder charges later, after I survived. Survival first. Try to stay out of jail second. My priorities in order, I slipped the extra clip into the right pocket of my jacket and went off to find Edward. He was, after all, the one who had taught me my priorities.

Chapter 22

I WAS COOLING my heels in the living room when Bernardo and Olaf came out of the far rooms. They had both changed clothes.

Bernardo was in white dress slacks with a sharp crease and a roll of cuff. A white vest showed off his darkly muscled arms. He'd added heavy silver arm bracelets at mid-bicep, and matching ones at each wrist. A silver saint's medallion glittered against the smooth darkness of his chest. Most of his hair fell like a black dream around all that white, except for a braid on one side. It was a thick braid because he just had that much hair, and he'd woven silver chains with tiny bells here and there in his hair, so he stalked into the room to the sound of gentle chimes. He looked at me through a curtain of blackness caressing one side of his face, the other graced by the silver on black glint of the braid. It was, to say the least, eye-catching.

It was a little bit of a struggle to tear my gaze from Bernardo and look at Olaf. He had gone for a black shirt that seemed utterly sheer. To hide his shoulder holster, he'd put on a leather jacket. It was way too hot for leather. Though admittedly, with his totally shaved head, black jeans, and black boots with silver toes and heels, the leather jacket looked about the right speed.

"You guys look spiffy. What's the occasion?"

"We're going to a club," Bernardo said, as if that explained it.

"I know that," I said.

He was frowning now. "You should change."

I pushed to my feet from the couch. "Why?"

He walked toward me. I caught glimpses of dark flesh above his white leather loafers and the hem of his pants, no socks. He stopped at the edge of the couch, as if I'd pulled back, or made some other sign that I wasn't happy.

"I know you can look as good as we do." He gave a little self-deprecating smile, "Or as good as Olaf here. Maybe not as good as me." He smiled, and I was a good smile, meant to melt something a little lower than my heart. But I'd been working on my reaction to him. I was not a slave to my libido. Richard and Jean-Claude could attest to that.

I looked at him in all his light and dark glory. "If I can't look as good as you, why try at all?"

The smile widened to a grin that made his face look somehow more real and less handsome. Less handsome, less practiced, but I liked it more. He took a step closer, and that teasing, practiced look was back. This was a man who knew how to flirt. But if anything will turn me off, it's a very practiced approach, as if the man has done it a thousand times before, to a lot of different women. Which always seems to imply that I am no different from all the rest. Not flattering.

"I think you might, might, be able to approach my glory, if you tried."

Even knowing it was an act, I had to smile. "I just don't want to work that hard, Bernardo."

"If I am forced to change, then everyone changes," Olaf said.

I looked at him. Was he handsome? Not really, but he was striking. If he could tone down the bad boy routine, he could probably pick up plenty of girls at the club, or maybe even if he didn't tone it down. It always amazes me how many women like dangerous men. Men who almost from the moment you meet them, you know are bad news. Me, I prefer my men kinder, gentler, nice. Niceness is highly underrated by most people.

"I don't remember anyone putting you in charge, Olaf. When Edward asks me to change clothes, I'll change."

He took a step towards me, but whatever he was going to say or do, stopped when Edward came into the room. He was wearing a red tank top with a short-sleeved silk shirt that matched the tank. The shirt would hide his shoulder holster if he were careful. His jeans were new and black, and with his yellow hair grown out enough to have a little curl to it, he actually looked sort of cute. Edward never looked cute.

I knew when I was beaten. I raised hands in surrender and started walking towards the bedrooms. Then stopped. I turned back to him. "I thought the point to taking me down there without cops was that the monsters might talk to Anita Blake, vamp executioner. So that means no undercover crap."

"Why would changing clothes be undercover for you?" Bernardo asked.

I looked at him, then looked at Edward. "If you want my services, you take whatever the hell I'm wearing. I don't dress up outside the office."

Edward said, "Let's go down there with you a little under wraps. Look around the club, meet the monsters, before they find out who you are."

"Why?"

"You know the answer."

"You want me to look around, use my expertise, before they know I have any expertise."

He nodded.

"But you also want me to be Anita Blake and impress the monsters."

"Yes," he said.

"Hard to do both."

"Be a tourist until they make you, then be yourself."

"The best of both worlds," I said.

"Exactly."

I looked at him. "Is this all your plan? No hidden agenda?"

He smiled, and it was Ted's smile, slow, lazy, innocent. "Would I do that to you?"

I just shook my head and started for the bedrooms. "Forget I asked. I'll change into something more . . . festive," I said without turning around.

Edward didn't call me back and say no need to change so I kept walking. We were undercover tonight apparently. I hate undercover work. I am just so damn bad at it.

I had also not packed with an eye for club hopping. I changed into the newest, blackest jeans I had. The Nikes would have to do because I hadn't brought anything else. Except more Nikes. All my shirts were just different colors of one or two styles. If I find something comfy, I've learned to buy doubles if I really like something, and multiple colors if I really, really like a style. This means I am usually wearing last year's style long after the fashion trend has moved on, but it's not like I care.

I had a royal blue cotton tee with a scoop neck. Almost all the shirts I'd packed had a scoop neck. The blue was a little softer than the rest of the colors. I added a touch of eye shadow, enough eyeliner to be dramatic, enough mascara so that the eyeliner didn't overwhelm my eyelashes, a hint of blush, and some kiss-ass red lipstick.

I couldn't really get a good look in the room's small mirror, but at least the makeup looked good. The shoulder holster was very black against the blue shirt, but the black suit jacket took care of that. Since I couldn't take the jacket off without flashing the guys, I added my wrist sheaths with matching silver knives. If I was going to be stuck with the jacket all night, I might as well carry

them. Besides, you never know when you'll need a good blade. I ran a brush through my hair and called it done.

Apparently, I looked okay because Bernardo said, "I take it back. If you'd packed a dress, you'd be prettier than I am."

I shook my head. "No, I wouldn't, but thanks for saying it."

"Let's go," Edward said.

"She is showing too much breast," Olaf said.

I looked at his completely sheer black shirt. "I can see your nipples."

His face darkened. I think he was actually blushing. "Bitch."

"Yeah, sure, you and the horse you rode in on," I said.

Edward moved between us, soothing the big man. To me, he said, "Don't tease him unless you want the trouble."

"He started it," I said.

He looked at both of us, his face that icy gaze that I'd seen him wear when he killed. "I don't care who starts it, but I will finish it. Is that clear?"

Olaf and I looked at Edward, then at each other. Slowly, we both nodded.

"It is clear," Olaf said.

"Crystal," I said.

"Good " His face transformed into a smiling face, somehow appearing years younger, How did he do it? "Then let's go." We went.

Chapter 23

OBSIDIAN BUTTERFLY, THE CLUB, was located between Santa Fe and Albuquerque. The club was set back from the road like one of the Indian casinos.

It had high-class tourist trap written all over it. The parking lot was so full we had to circle to find a spot.

The building was done in faux-Aztec temple. Or for all I knew real Aztec temple. But the outside of the building looked like a movie set. Red neon traced square carved faces, and the name was traced in more red neon. There was a line stretching around the corner of the building and out into the hot summer dark. This was not my town. I didn't know the manager, so I couldn't jump the line. I also did not want to stand in the line.

Edward walked up the line, confident, as if he knew something I didn't. We followed him like obedient puppies. We weren't the only foursome trying to get into the club. We were the only foursome that wasn't made up of couples. To blend in we needed at least one more woman. But Edward didn't seem to be trying to blend in. He walked up to the head of the line where a large, broad-shouldered man of very Indian descent stood bare-chested, wearing what looked like a skirt but probably wasn't, and a heavy faux-gold collar that

covered most of his shoulders like a mantle. He was wearing a crown covered in macaw feathers and other smaller feathers that I couldn't identify.

If this was just the bouncer at the door, I was actually interested in seeing the show. Though I hoped they had access to lots and lots of pet parrots and hadn't actually slaughtered birds just for the outfits.

"We're Professor Dallas's party. She's expecting us," Edward said in his best hail-fellow-well-met voice.

The feather and gold bedecked man said, "Names." He uncrossed his arms and looked at a clipboard that had been in his hand the entire time.

"Ted Forrester, Bernardo Spotted-Horse, Olaf Gundersson and Anita Lee." The new last name stopped me. Apparently, he was serious about me going in incognito.

"IDs."

I tried very hard to keep my face blank, but it was an effort. I didn't have any fake ID. I looked at Edward.

He handed his driver's license to the man, then still smiling, said, "And now aren't you glad that I didn't let you leave your license in the car." He handed a second license to the man.

He looked at both for longer than I thought he should have, as if he suspected something. My shoulders were actually tight, waiting for him to turn to me and say, ah-hah, fake ID, but he didn't. He handed both licenses back to Edward, and turned to Bernardo and Olaf. They waited with their licenses out, as if they'd done this before.

Edward moved back to stand by me and handed me the license. I took it and looked at it. It was a New Mexico license with an address on it that I didn't know. But it was my picture, and it said Anita Lee. The height, weight, and the rest were accurate, just the name and address was wrong.

"Better put it in your pocket. I may not be around to find it next time," he said.

I slipped it in my pocket along with my other license, a lipstick, and some money, and an extra cross. I wasn't sure whether to be flattered or insulted that Edward had set up a secret identity for me. Of course, maybe it was just the license, but knowing Edward there'd be more to it. There usually was.

The big double doors were opened by another large muscled guy in a skirt, though he didn't have a feather crown or a nifty collar. A lesser bouncer, apparently. The doors led into a darkened room thick with an incense I didn't recognize. The walls were completely covered with heavy drapes, only another set of double doors showing the way.

Another bouncer, this one blond and tanned the color of thick honey, opened the door. He had feathers woven into his short hair. He winked at me as we went through the door, but it was Bernardo he watched the closest. Maybe he was looking for weapons, but I think he was watching Bernardo's butt. He wouldn't see a weapon from the back. Bernardo had transferred his gun to a front cross draw because the gun had showed a lump at the back. Which told you how snug the pants fit in back.

The room we entered was large, stretching out and out into the near darkness. People sat at square stone tables that looked suspiciously like altars to me. Or at least what Hollywood is always using for altars. The "stage" took up most of the far left wall, but it wasn't a stage, not really. It was being used as a stage, but it was a temple. It was as if someone had sliced off the top of a pyramid temple and transported it here to this night club, in a city so far removed from the lush jungles where the building began that the stones themselves must be lonely.

A woman appeared in front of Edward. She looked as ethnic as the first doorman with high sculpted cheekbones, and a fall of shiny black hair that fell to her knees as she moved through the tables. She had menus in her dark hands, so I assumed she was the hostess. But her dress was red with a black design, and I knew silk when I saw it. The dress was vaguely oriental and didn't match the decor of the room, or the waitresses hurrying to and fro in odd loose dresses made of some rough material. The waitresses struggled along in loose-fitting sandals, while the hostess glided before us in high heels the same scarlet as her dress and perfectly manicured nails.

She was beautiful in a tall, slender, graceful fashion, like a model, but she was a discordant note, as if she belonged to a different theme. She showed us to a table that was in the very front with a view dead center of the temple. There was a woman at the table, who stood and offered us her hand as we sat down. Her handshake was firm, and her hand was about my size. It takes practice to have a firm handshake with hands this small.

Professor Dallas, call me Dallas, was shorter than I was, and so petite that in the tight clothes she'd have looked prepubescent. She wore tan Dockers pants, a white polo shirt, with a tweed jacket complete with leather elbow patches, as if she'd read the dress code for college professors and was trying to conform. Her hair was shoulder length, a baby fine, medium brown. Her face was small and triangular and as pale and perfect as God had intended it to be. Her glasses were gold wire frames and too large for the small face. If this was her idea of party clothes, someone needed to take her shopping. But somehow I didn't think the good doctor gave a shit. I like that in a woman. A man stepped out of the odd-shaped door at the top of the temple. The moment he stepped out, silence fell in rings around him, spreading out and out into the murmuring audience until it was so quiet I could hear the pulse of my own blood. I'd never heard a crowd this large go so quiet so quickly.

I'd have said it was magic, but it wasn't, not exactly. But this man's presence was a sort of magic. He could have worn jeans and a T-shirt and he'd still have commanded your attention. Of course, what he was wearing was pretty eye catching all on its own.

His crown was a mass of thin, long feathers, a strange greenish, bluish, goldish color, so that as he moved they shifted color like a trapped greenish rainbow hovering in a fan of colors above his forehead. His cape hung nearly to his knees and seemed to be formed of the same feathers as his headdress, so that he moved in a wave of iridescence. The body that showed was strong, square, and dark. I was sitting close enough to tell if he was handsome or not,

but staring at him, I wasn't sure. It was impossible to separate his face from that presence, and so the face didn't matter much. He was attractive, not because of the length of a nose or the turn of a chin, but just because.

I found myself sitting up a little straighter in my seat, as if coming to attention. The moment I did it, I knew that even if it wasn't magic, it was something. I had to fight to tear my gaze from him and look at the others at the table.

Bernardo was gazing at him, as was Doctor Dallas. Edward was gazing out over the hushed crowd. Olaf was studying the doctor. He watched her, not as a man watches a woman, but as a cat watches a bird through cage bars. If Dallas noticed, she ignored it, but somehow I think she didn't notice. I think even with the man's presence filling the room, his rich voice riding the air, I'd have felt Olaf's gaze like a cold wind down my spine. That Dallas was oblivious to it made me worry about her, just a little, and made me very sure that I never wanted Olaf alone with her. Her survival instincts just weren't up to it.

The man, king or high priest, talked in rich tones. I caught part of it. Something about the month of Toxcatal, and a chosen one. I could not concentrate on his voice, any more than I could gaze upon him because to give him too much of my attention meant I was caught up in the spell he was weaving over the crowd. It wasn't a spell in the true sense of the word, but there was power in it, if not magic. The difference between magic and power can be very small. I'd been forced to accept that fact in the last two years.

The high priest was human, but there was a taste of ages to him. There are just not that many ways for a human to last centuries. One way is to be the human servant of a powerful master vamp. Unless Obsidian Butterfly was more generous about sharing her power than most of the Masters of the City that I'd met, the high priest belonged to her. He was too powerful an echo of his master to be endured unless she was that master. Master vamps have a tendency to either destroy or own that which is powerful.

The high priest had been powerful in life, a charismatic leader. Now centuries of practice had turned that charisma into a kind of magic. I'd had full fledged vamps not affect me this much. If this was the servant, how scary was the master going to be? I sat there at the stone table, flexing my shoulders to feel the tightness of the shoulder holster. I was glad I'd packed an extra clip of bullets. I moved my wrists just enough to feel the knives resting against my arms. I was very glad I'd brought the knives. You can stab vamps and keep them alive, but still make your . . . point.

I was finally able to separate the power of his voice from the word. Most vamps, when they can, do tricks with their voices. The words themselves hold the key. They say beautiful, and you see beauty. They say terror, and you feel afraid. But this voice had little to do with the words. It was just an overwhelming aura of power like a great white noise hum. The audience may have thought that they were hanging on every word, but the man could have recited a grocery list with similar effect.

The words were, "You saw him as the god Tezcathpoca in our opening dance. Now see him as a man." The lights had been dimming as the priest spoke, until he was left in near darkness, only the iridescent gleam of feathers showed as he moved. The light came up on the other side of the stage, revealing a man, pale skin that glowed in the lights from his bare feet to equally bare shoulder. His back was to the audience and for a moment I thought he was nude. There was nothing to break up the curve of his body from the swell of his calves, to his thighs, the tight roundness of his buttocks, the lean waist, the spread of shoulders. His hair looked black under the lights, cut so close to his head that it looked shaved. He turned slowly, revealing the barest of G-strings, a color so close to his skin that you knew the illusion of nudity was a planned effect.

His face shone unadorned like a star, starkly beautiful. He looked somehow pure and perfect, which wasn't possible. No one human was perfect. But he was pretty. A line of black hair ran down the center of his chest and stomach to vanish into the thong. Our table was close enough, and his body white enough, that I could see the thin line of hair encircling his nipples to meet that thin line down his chest like the soft arms of a T.

I actually had to shake my head to clear it. Maybe it was being celibate, or maybe there was more magic in the air than just the voice of the human servant. I looked back at the stage and knew that it was only a trick of the light that made his skin seem to glow. I looked over at Professor Dallas. She had her head bent very close to Edward, talking to him in whispers. If she saw the show almost every night, it was nothing new to her, but the lack of attention that she paid the man made me turn and search the dim tables around us. Most eyes, especially the women, were turned rapt to the stage. But not all eyes. Some were drinking, holding hands with their dates, doing other things. I turned back to the stage and just looked at him, drinking in the lines of his body. Damn, it was just me. Or rather, it was just a normal human reaction to a nearly naked and attractive man. I'd have preferred a spell. At least then I could blame someone else. My hormones, my fault. I needed more hobbies, that was it, more hobbies. That would fix everything. The lights came up slowly until the Priest was visible once more.

"It was traditional that twenty days before the great ceremony, brides would be chosen for him."

I caught a glimpse of fur, and for just an instant I thought it was a line of shapeshifters in their half-human, half-beast guise. But it was men dressed in leopard skins. Not hanging loose like cloaks but as if the skins were sewn around their bodies. Some of them were too tall for the skins so that a foot or more of bare leg showed below the animal feet, or out of the clawed arms. They moved among the tables in a strangely graceful line, encased in fur with their faces framed through the open jaws of the dead animals.

A man passed within touching distance of our table, and I saw the black rosettes that decorated the golden skin more closely, and it wasn't leopard. I was spending a lot of time with St. Louis' wereleopards. I'd killed the wereleopard leader because he was trying to kill me, among other things. But

I'd left the leopards without a leader, and shapeshifters without a leader are anyone's meat. So I was de facto leader until we could work something else out. I'd been learning how to forge them into a stronger unit, or pard. One of the ways you did that was sheer physical closeness, not sex, but closeness. I stared at the skin, and my hand went out without thinking. The man's movement stroked my hand over the once living fur. The spots were larger. The markings weren't as neat somehow. I watched the cat heads on the men, and the heads were more square, not the rounded almost feminine line of leopard. Jaguars, they were jaguars, which made perfect sense with the Aztec motif, but, like the bird feathers, I wondered how they'd obtained the skins, and was it legal. I knew it wasn't right. I don't believe in killing for decoration. I wear leather because I eat meat, just using the whole animal. Nothing wasted.

The man turned and looked at me. His eyes were blue, his face tanned a pale gold that matched the line of belly fur just before it turned white. The moment he looked at me energy danced down my skin like a hot breath. A shapeshifter, great. There was a time, not long ago, that that much power this close would have drawn an answering energy from me, but not this time. I sat there staring at him, and I was safe behind my shield that squeezed down a layer of energy that stood between me and all the psychic shit. I gave him innocent brown eyes, and he moved off through the tables as if I was no longer interesting. Which was fine with me.

I didn't reach out for it, but the energy came here and there from them. It would have been so much worse without the shielding. They had to be werejaguars or the costumes were like the ultimate false advertising. Somehow, this didn't strike me as a show that promised anything it couldn't deliver.

The werejaguars picked women from the audience, took them by the hand and led them towards the stage. A petite blonde was pulled from her seat giggling. A short, square woman with skin the color of tanned leather was pulled solemn-faced and didn't seem to be nearly as pleased, but she let herself be led to the stage. A taller more slender Hispanic woman was next, with long black hair that shimmered as she moved like an ebony curtain. She stumbled on the steps, and only the werejaguar's arm saved her from falling. She laughed as he steadied her, and I realized she was drunk.

A figure appeared in front of me, blocking my view of the stage. I looked up into a dark face framed by snarling jaws. The jaguar's golden glass eyes rode above the man's face, as if the dead animal were staring at me, too. The man reached a square, dark hand out to me.

I shook my head.

The hand stayed, pale palm up, waiting.

I shook my head again. "No, thanks anyway."

Dallas leaned around Edward, across the table, having to nearly crawl on it to get close to me. It stretched her body in a long line, her long ponytail pooling on the stone. Olaf's hand hovered over that spill of hair, and the look on his face was strange enough to distract me from everything else. Her voice made me look at her face instead of Olaf's. "They need someone your size and body type to round out the brides. Someone with long hair." She was smiling. "Nothing

bad is going to happen." She gave me a cheerful smile that made her look even younger.

The man leaned over me and I could smell the fur and ... him. Not sweat just his scent, and that made my stomach contract, made me have to concentrate on holding my shields, because the part of me that was tied to Richard and his beast wanted to respond, wanted to spill outward and wallow in that scent. The animal impulses, true animal impulses, always threw me.

The man's voice was thickly accented, and sounded unsuited to whispering. It was a voice for shouting orders. "Do nothing that you do not wish to do but please come to our temple."

Maybe it was the please or the accent or the absolute seriousness in his face but I believed. I still might not have gone with him, but Edward leaned into me, and said, "Tourist, think tourist." He didn't say, "Play along, Anita. Remember, we're undercover," because with a shapeshifter this close he'd hear anything that was said at the table. But Edward had said enough. I was a tourist. A tourist would go.

I gave the man my left hand and let him pull me to my feet. His hand was very warm. Some lycanthropes seem to adopt their alter ego's body temperature. Even Richard's skin grew warmer near the full moon, but that couldn't be it tonight. We were only days away from the dark of the moon, as far from the shining fullness that called the beasts as we could get. The man was just warm. Too hot for fur.

The priest in his feathers encouraged the audience to applaud as the last reluctant bride, me, joined the grouping around the nearly naked man. The werejaguar stood me on the side with the giggling blond. The smell of beer was strong enough that I knew the giggling wasn't just nervousness. Perfect.

I looked past the man, doing my best to ignore him, to the two women on the other side. The tall one with all the hair was swaying slightly on her spike heels. Her skirt was leather, and the blouse looked like a red camisole. The other woman was that solid that some people call fat, but it isn't. She was square and wore a loose black shirt over black pants. She caught my eye, and we shared a moment of discomfort. Audience participation was great as long as the audience wants to participate.

"These are your brides," the priest said, "your reward. Enjoy them."

The solid woman and I both took a step back as if it were choreographed. The blonde and the tall one with all the hair melted into his arms, cuddling and laughing. The man played to them, but it was their hands that wandered over his body. He was very careful where he touched them. I thought at first it was just fear of being sued, but there was a stiffness, a tightening of his body when their hands wandered over his bare buttocks that said he wasn't having as good a time as it looked. From the audience you'd have never noticed. He came away from them with orange-red lipstick like a wound on his pale skin and pale pink like a patch of glitter down his face.

He reached out to us, and both of us shook our heads. We took another step back, and a step closer together. Solidarity. She offered me her hand, not to shake, but to hold, and I realized she was scared, not just nervous. I was

neither, just not happy. She whispered, "I'm Ramona." I gave her my name, and what seemed to matter more, held her hand. I felt like Mommy on the first day of school when the bullies are waiting.

The priest's voice came. "You are his last meal, his last caress. Do not deny him."

Ramona's face changed, grew soft. Her hand fell away from mine. The fear was gone. I called, softly, "Ramona." But she moved forward as if she never heard me. She moved into the man's arms. He kissed her with more tenderness than he'd shown the other two. She kissed him back, with a passion and a strength that made anything the other two had done seem pale and watered down. The other two women had gone to their knees on either side, either because they couldn't stand upright anymore, or the better to run their hands over both the man and the new woman. It looked like a mild version of a pornographic four-way.

He drew back from Ramona, laying a second kiss on her forehead as if she were a child. She stayed unmoving, eyes closed, face slack. It was illegal to force anyone to do anything against their will by use of magic. I looked at Ramona's empty face, waiting, waiting for what came next, all decision, all choice, washed away. If I'd been myself tonight instead of whoever the hell I was supposed to be, I'd have called them on it. I should still turn them in to the cops. But truthfully, unless they did worse, I wasn't going to turn them in if the Master of the City could help us solve the mutilation murders. If the murders stopped, a few mind-games could be overlooked.

There was a time when I wouldn't have tolerated it, when I wouldn't have looked the other way for any reason. They say everyone has their price. Once I thought I was the exception to the rule, but if it was a choice of letting this nice woman be made to do some things she didn't want to do, or seeing another crime scene, another survivor, they could have the woman. Not have in the true sense of the word, but to my knowledge mind-magic by a human servant wasn't permanent. Of course, until tonight I hadn't known a human servant could do mind-rape. I really didn't know how much danger this woman was in, and yet. . . and yet I would risk her, as long as nothing worse happened. If they told her to strip, all bets were off. I had rules, limits. They just weren't the same ones they'd been four years ago, or two years, or a year ago. The fact that I let them mind-rape her and didn't complain, bothered me, but not enough.

The blonde woman leaned into the man and bit his butt, not hard but enough to make him jump. His back was to the audience, so I was probably the only one who saw the anger that showed for just a moment in that handsome face.

The priest stayed on his side of the stage, as if he didn't want to distract from the show, but I knew he'd turned his attention to me. The full force him was like pressure against my skin.

His voice. "A most reluctant bride to leave him lonely in his hour of need I felt his power and now that power was wedded to the words. When he said "need," I felt need. My body tightened with it, but I could ignore it. I knew I could stand there and be unmoved, that he could do his worst and I could stand

against it. But no human could have done it. Anita Blake, vamp executioner, could stand firm, but Anita Lee, undercover party-goer, well... If I just stood there, the game was up. At the very least they'd know I wasn't an ordinary tourist. Times like these are one of the reasons I hate undercover work.

I ignored the priest's rich voice and just walked toward the man. He was having trouble keeping the blonde's hand out of the front of his G-string. The other woman knelt in a pool of her own dark hair, hanging on his leg, one hand playing with the side strap of the G-string. Only Ramona stood there, face blank, hands at her sides, waiting for orders. But the priest was concentrating all his energies on me. She was safe until he finished with me.

The dark-haired woman got the strap to slide over the smooth bone of his hip, and the blonde used it as a chance to plunge her hand under the cloth. His eyes closed, head going back, body reacting automatically, even as his hand grabbed her hand and tried to pull her hand out of his pants. Apparently, she was hanging on, not hurting him exactly, but not letting go.

I doubted the club would have tolerated this level of abuse if the performer had been a woman and the audience member a man. Some forms of sexist double standards do not work in a man's favor. A woman they would have rushed on stage and saved her, but he was a man, and he was on his own.

I touched Ramona's shoulders and moved her to one side like she was furniture. She moved where I put her, eyes still closed. Made me feel worse that she was that pliant. But one problem at a time. I put my hand on top of his and moved his hand away from the blonde's wrist. His hand didn't move at first, then he looked at me, really looked at me. His eyes were large, a soft pure gray with a circle of black around the iris like someone had used the same eye pencil to trace his eyes that they'd used on the sweep of eyebrow and dark lashes. Strange eyes. But whatever he saw in my eyes seemed to reassure him because he let go of the blonde. There's a nerve in the arm about three fingers down from the bend of the elbow. If you hit it right, it's pretty painful. I dug my fingers into her flesh, as if I'd find that nerve and drag it to the surface. I was pissed, and I wanted to hurt her. I succeeded.

She gave a small scream, her hand opened, and I was able to move her arm back, fingers digging into the nerve. She didn't struggle, just whimpered and stared up at me with large unfocused eyes, but the pain was chasing the liquor away. If I kept it up long enough, I could have sobered her up in, oh, fifteen minutes or so, if she didn't pass out first.

I spoke low, but my voice carried. The stage had great acoustics. "My turn."

The tall Hispanic woman crawled away from the man, scuttling in her tight skirt until she fell flat on her face. You have to be pretty drunk to fall from a crawling position. She got to one elbow, and her voice came thick, but panicked. "He's yours."

I drew the blonde a few steps farther away from the man, and slowly let go of her arm. I told her, "Stay." She cradled her arm against her body, huddling over it. The look she gave me was not friendly, but she didn't mouth off. I think she was afraid of me. I wasn't having a great night. First, I let the nice lady be

mind-raped, then I terrorize drunken tourists. I would have said, how could the night get worse, but worse was waiting. I looked back at the nearly naked man and didn't know what to do with him.

I walked back over to him because I couldn't figure a graceful way off stage. I'd probably blown my cover as a tourist, but Edward had let me bring a gun and knives into the club. In fact, we were all loaded for bear or vampire or whatever. The bouncers, unless they were idiots, had to have seen some of the weapons. I was just not supposed to be a vamp executioner, but I've never played victim well. I should never have come on stage, but too late now.

The man and I stood facing each other, his back still to the audience. He leaned into me, breath warm against my hair. He whispered, "My hero, thank you."

I nodded, and that small movement brushed my thick hair against his face. My mouth was dry, and it was hard to swallow. My heart was suddenly beating too hard, too fast, as if I'd been running. It was a ridiculous reaction to a strange man. I was horribly aware of how close he was, how little he was wearing, and how my hands just hung at my sides because to move at all would brush against him. What was the matter with me? I had not been noticing men this badly in St. Louis. Was there something in the air in New Mexico, or was it just lack of oxygen from the elevation?

He rubbed his face against my hair, whispered, "I am Cesar." That small movement put the curve of his jaw, the skin of his neck next to my face. There was a trace of the women's perfume mixing along his face, overlaying the clean scent of his skin, but underneath it all was a sharper scent. It was the smell of warmer flesh than human, slightly musky, so rich it was almost a damp smell, as if you could bathe in the scent like water, but the water would be hot, hot as blood, hotter.

The scent was so strong that I swayed, and for a second I could feel the brush of fur against my face like rough piled velvet. The sensory memory poured through me, and overwhelmed all my careful control. The power poured upward in a spill of heat along my skin. I'd managed to cut the direct links to the boys so that I was alone in my own skin, but the marks were still there, coming to the surface at odd moments, like this one. Shapeshifters always recognize each other. Their beasts always know, and though I had no beast of my own, I had a piece of Richard's. That piece reacted to Cesar. If I'd been expecting it, I might have been able to prevent it, but it was too late now. It wasn't dangerous, just a spill of heat, pulsing along my skin, a dance of energy that didn't belong to me.

Cesar had jerked back from me as if I'd burned him, then he smiled. It was a knowing smile like we shared a secret. He wasn't the first shapeshifter to mistake me for one of them. To my knowledge I was one of only two humans in the world that had this close a tie to a shapeshifter. The other man's tie was to a weretiger, not a werewolf, but the problems were similar. We were both part of a vampire's triumvirate, and neither of us seemed happy.

Cesar's hands went to either side of my face, hesitating just above my skin. I knew he was feeling the push of that otherworldly energy like a veil that had

to be pushed aside to touch. Except he didn't. He spilled his own power into his hands, so that he held me in a pulsing shell of warmth. It made me close my eyes, and he hadn't even touched me yet, not with his hands.

I opened my mouth to tell him not to touch me, but as I drew breath to speak his hands touched my face. I wasn't ready. He pushed his power into, mine. It hit like a jolt of electricity, raising the small hairs on my body, tightening places low on my body, raising gooseflesh in a wash down my skin. The power flowed towards Cesar like a flower turning towards the sun. I couldn't stop it. The best I could do was ride the power instead of letting it ride me.

He bent his face towards me, still cradling my face between his hands. I put my own hands on top of his as if I was going to hold on. Power poured from his mouth as he hovered over my lips. The power ran through my body and spilled out of half-parted lips like a hot wind. Our mouths met and the power flowed into each of us, mingling as it brushed like two great cats rubbing furred sides along each other's bodies. The warmth grew to heat, until it almost hurt to stay tied to his lips, as if any second now our flesh would burn into each other, melting through skin, muscle, bone, until we fell into the center of each other like molten metal cutting through layers of silk.

The energy had turned sexual, as it usually did ... for me. Embarrassing but true. We drew back from the kiss at the same time, blinking at each other like sleepwalkers awakened too early. He gave a nervous laugh and leaned into me as if to kiss me again, but I put a hand on his chest, and held him away, I could feel his heart thudding against my palm. I could suddenly feel the blood racing in his body. My eyes were drawn to the big pulse in his throat, I watched that rapid rise and fall in the side of his neck as if it were some sort of jewel, something to watch sparkle and glitter in the lights. My mouth was suddenly dry, and it wasn't sex. I actually stepped into him, pressed my body down the front of his, brought my face close to his neck and that jumping beat of life. I wanted to go down on that soft skin, sink teeth into his flesh, taste what lay beneath. I knew with a knowledge that was not mine that his blood would be hotter than a human's. Not warm but hot, a scalding rush of life to warm cold flesh.

I had to close my eyes, turn my head, step away with my hands over my eyes. I had no direct link to either of the men, but I held their power in me. Richard's burning warmth, and Jean-Claude's cold hunger. For a space of heartbeats I had wanted to feed on Cesar. This when I had walled up the marks, boarded them up, chained them, locked them with everything I had. When the marks were open between the three of us, the desires that ran through me, the things that I thought, were too horrible or maybe just too alien. Not for the first time I wondered what piece of me each of them held in their bodies. What dark desire or strange urge did I leave behind? If I ever talked to either of them again, maybe I'd ask, or then again, maybe I wouldn't.

I felt someone hovering close. I shook my head. "Don't touch me."

"Let us get back stage, then I can apologize." It was the priest's voice.

I lowered my hands and found him standing beside me. He held out his hand to me. I didn't touch him. "We meant no harm." I laid my left hand in his and found his skin quiet. There was nothing but human warmth and the solid feel of him. He led me towards an area to the far left of the stage. Cesar was already there with the three other women.

The werejaguars were there like guards, and it seemed to have made the blonde and the one with all the hair brave again. They were pawing Cesar, and he was kissing Ramona, who was kissing him back with enthusiasm.

The priest led me towards them, and I hung back. I whispered, "I can't." I meant that I couldn't touch Cesar again so soon. I didn't trust myself, and I didn't want to have to say it out loud. I didn't have to. The priest seemed to understand.

He leaned close. "Please, just stand near them. No one will touch you." I don't know why I believed him, but I did. I stood near the near-orgy, trying not to look as uncomfortable as I felt. Then a large white screen came down out of the ceiling, and before it was solidly in place, the priest drew me to one side. A woman my size with hair my length appeared and moved towards the mini-orgy. I watched her join the group, and a jaguar dragged the blonde out. A woman that matched the blond came to take her place. They replaced everyone, even Cesar, with actors, who did a shadow orgy against the white screen, thrown large for the audience. The actresses matched all the women chosen, at least for a shadow play. Which is what Dallas had meant when she said they needed someone my size with long hair to complete the brides.

The actors weren't really doing anything, but it must have looked awful from the audience's point of view. Clothes flew and the women were topless. I wondered if the shadows looked as topless as the real thing.

The priest drew me away until we stood in a small curtain area. He spoke low but clearly, so I guess we could talk without being heard on stage. "You would never have been chosen if we didn't think you human. Our deepest apologies."

I shrugged. "No harm done."

He looked at me and there was a weight of knowledge in his eyes that I couldn't lie to. "You are frightened of what lies inside you, and you have not made peace with it."

That much was true. "No, I haven't made peace with it."

"You must accept what you are, or you will never know what your true place in the world is, your true purpose."

"Don't take this wrong, but I don't need a lecture tonight."

He frowned at that, and there was a flash of anger. He wasn't used to being talked to like that. I was betting that everyone was afraid of him. Maybe I should have been, but what fear I had of him or them had vanished when I realized I wanted to take a bite out of Cesar's neck. That scared me more than anything they could do to me tonight. All right, almost anything they could do tonight. Never underestimate the creativity of a being that is hundreds of years old. Most of them know more about pain than we poor humans will ever know. Unless we are very, very unlucky. I was either feeling lucky or stupid.

He made a small motion and the werejaguar that had chosen me came to us. He dropped to one knee, head bowed. The priest said, "You chose this woman."

"Yes, Pinotl."

"Did you not feel her beast?"

His head lowered even more. "No, my lord, I did not."

"Choose," the priest said.

The kneeling man drew a knife from his belt. The handle was turquoise in the shape of a jaguar. The blade was about six inches of black obsidian. The man held the blade up to the priest who took it as reverently as it had been offered. The man undid some hidden catch on the jaguar skin, and pushed the hood back so that his head was bare. His hair was thick and long, tied in a long club at the back of his head. He raised a dark face that was so square and chiseled, it looked like he could have poised for Aztec temple carvings. If you were into Meso-Americans, his profile was perfect.

He raised his face up to the priest. His face was empty of all expression, just a calm waiting.

There was a roar from the audience that made me glance at the actors, but I turned back to the priest and the man before I'd really seen anything. I had a glimpse of seminude bodies, and an impression of something large and phallic strapped around the man. Normally, that would have made me take a second glance, just to make sure I was seeing what I thought I'd seen, but no matter what was happening out there, the real show was here. It was in the serene, upturned face of the man, and the serious eyes of the priest, the dull gleam of the black blade. They could use all the props they wanted, no matter how big, but it wouldn't come close to the two men and the quiet intensity stretching between them.

I didn't know exactly what was about to happen, but I had an idea. He was being punished because he'd chosen a lycanthrope from the audience, instead of a human. But I was human, or at least not a lycanthrope. I couldn't let him get sliced up, not even if it meant admitting who I was. Could I?

I touched the priest's arm, lightly. "What are you going to do to him?"

The priest looked at me, and his eyes seemed like deep caves, a trick of shadows. "Punish him."

My fingers tightened on his arm, trying to feel it through the slick softness of feathers. "I just want to make sure you're not going to slit his throat or something really dramatic."

"What I do with our men is my business, not yours." The force of his disapproval was strong enough that I took my hand off his arm. But I was worried now what he was going to do. Damn Edward and his undercover idea. It never worked for me, pretending. Reality always screwed it up.

The priest laid the blade point against the man's cheek. There was no fear in his face, nothing but an eerie serenity that made my throat tight, and a thrill of fear slide down my spine. God, I hated zealots, and that's what I was seeing.

"Wait," I said.

"Do not interfere," the priest said.

"I'm not a lycanthrope," I said.

"Lies, to save a stranger," nothing but contempt in his voice.

"I'm not lying."

The priest called, "Cesar."

He appeared like a well-trained dog coming to his master's call. Maybe the analogy was unfair, but I wasn't feeling particularly charitable right now. If I blew our cover, had to say who I was, I didn't know if I was going to be blowing something that Edward had planned. By saying who and what I was, I didn't know if I was endangering us. Edward hadn't shared enough of his plans, which I would take up with him when the evening was over, but my first concern was safety. Was saving a stranger from being sliced up worth our lives? No. Was keeping a stranger from being killed worth maybe risking our lives? Probably. I had so many unanswered questions and so little real information that I felt like I must be killing brain cells thinking around all the things I didn't know.

Cesar appeared beside me, on the far side of me away from the priest. I think he'd spotted the blade. "What has he done?"

"He picked her out of the audience and did not sense her beast," the priest said.

"I don't have a beast," I said.

Cesar laughed, and it was too loud. He covered his mouth with his hand for a moment, as if to remind himself we had to be quiet. "I saw the hunger in your face." He said hunger like it should have been in capital letters. Great, more shapeshifter slang that I didn't know.

I tried to think of a short version that would make sense. I made two starts, before I finally said, "There is too much. I will sum up." I even threw in the bad Spanish accent.

The priest's face stayed blank and unhappy. He did not get the movie reference. Cesar choked back another laugh. He'd probably seen *The Princess Bride*. "The hunger you saw was not from some beast," I said.

The priest gave his full attention to the man kneeling in front of him. It was as if I'd been dismissed. He sliced the man's cheek open. The thin cut spread and blood welled in liquid lines down the dark skin.

"Shit," I said.

He placed the knife against the man's other cheek. I grabbed his wrist. "Please, listen to me."

The priest turned his dark eyes to me. "Cesar."

"I am not your cat to call," Cesar said.

The priest's dark gaze slid from me, to the man beside me. "Be careful that what is pretense does not become real, Cesar."

It was a threat, though I didn't understand exactly what the threat had been, but I knew a threat when I heard one. Cesar moved up beside me. "She merely wishes to speak, my lord Pinotl. Is that so much to ask?"

"She also touches me." They both stared at my hand on his wrist.

"I'll let go if I have your word that you won't cut him until you've heard me out."

Those eyes came back to rest fully on my face, and I felt the force of him thundering down on me. I could almost feel his skin vibrate under my hand. "I can't let you bleed him for something that wasn't his fault."

He never said a word, but I felt movement behind me, and I knew it wasn't Cesar, because he turned toward the movement. I looked back and found two of the jaguar men coming towards us. They were probably not going to hurt me, just stop me from interfering. I turned back to the priest, met his eyes. I let go of his wrist. I had a few seconds to decide whether to draw a gun or a knife. They weren't trying to kill me, so the least I could do was return the favor. I slipped a knife out, holding it against my leg, trying to be unobtrusive. I'd made the decision to go for the knife and not the gun. I hoped it was the right decision.

One of jaguars was the tanned, blue-eyed one. The other was the first African American I'd seen in the club, his face very contrasting with all the pale spotted fur. They advanced on me in a roil of energy, a low growl escaped from one of their throats, the faintest of threats. That one faint sound raised the hair at the back of my neck. I backed up, putting the kneeling man between me and the two jaguars.

The priest had laid the obsidian blade against the man's right cheek. He hadn't started cutting yet. "Are you just going to cut each cheek, is that it? Will it stop there?"

The blade tip bit into his cheek. Even in the dark I could see the first liquid drop, a faint gleam, like a dark jewel. "If you just want to slice him up a little, fine. It's your business. I just don't want to see him mutilated or killed for something he couldn't have sensed."

The priest sliced the other cheek, slower this time. I think I was making things worse. I asked it out loud, of everyone and no one. "Am I making things worse?"

The cheek closest to me began to heal, the skin reknitting as I watched, had an idea. I stepped closer to the priest and the kneeling man. I kept an eye on the two jaguars across from them, but they just stood watching. They'd backed me off, maybe that's all they were supposed to do.

I touched the kneeling man's chin, turned his face towards me. The other cheek was completely healed. I'd never seen an obsidian blade used and hadn't been a hundred percent that it didn't act like silver. But it didn't. Shapeshifters healed the damage. The priest was still holding the obsidian knife upright in his hand.

The audience broke into thunderous applause, the sound rising like thunder through the small backstage area. The actors were pouring away from the white screen. The act was almost over. Everyone had turned at the noise and the movement, even the priest. I put my finger against the tip of the obsidian knife and pressed. The tip was like glass, the pain sharp and immediate. I drew back with a hiss.

"What have you done?" the priest demanded, and his voice was too loud, it must have carried out into the crowd.

I spoke lower. "I won't heal, not as fast as he did. It'll prove that I'm not a lycanthrope."

The priest's anger filled the air like something hot and touchable. "You do not understand."

"If someone would talk to me, instead of hugging their secrets so damn close, I wouldn't be blundering into things."

The priest handed the blade back to the kneeling man. He took the knife and bowed his forehead to it. Then he licked the blade, carefully around the sharp edges, until he came to the point and my blood. Then he slid the tip between his lips, into his mouth, sucking it down like a woman taking a man into her mouth. His mouth worked around the blade and I knew it was cutting him, as he swallowed it. I knew it was cutting him up, but he made it look as if it were something wonderful, orgasmic, as if he were having a very good time.

He watched me as he did it, and his eyes weren't serene anymore. They had filled with heat. It was the same heat you could see in any man's eyes when was thinking about sex. But not when the man was sucking on a glass sharp blade, cutting his mouth, tongue, throat, drinking his own blood, with a taste of my blood as a chaser.

Someone grabbed my hand, and I jumped. It was Cesar. "We must be on stage. You must take your seat." He was watching the kneeling man, all the men, carefully. He eased me around the group of them, and all eyes followed like I was some wounded gazelle.

The other three women were already in place, standing behind the now dim white screen. They'd taken off some clothing. The giggling blonde was down to pale blue bra and panties, still laughing her head off. The Hispanic had taken off her skirt and was down to a pair of crimson panties that matched the red camisole she was still wearing. She'd kept the matching red high heels. She and the blonde were leaning against each other, swaying and laughing. Ramona wasn't laughing. She still stood quietly, unmoved and unmoving.

The priest's voice came from backstage. "Disrobe for our audience." His voice was soft, but Ramona grabbed the bottom of her shirt and lifted. Her bra was an ordinary bra, white and simple. It wasn't meant to be lingerie, and I doubted she'd planned on anyone seeing it tonight. She let her shirt fall to the floor. Her hands went to the top button of her pants. I pulled away from Cesar and grabbed Ramona's hands. "No, don't."

Her hands went slack in mine, as if even that small interference had broken the spell, but she didn't look at me. She didn't see what was in front of her, just the internal landscape that I couldn't see.

I picked her shirt back up and placed her hands over it. She clutched it automatically, covering most of the front of her.

Cesar took my arm. "The screen is going up. There is no time."

The screen began to slowly lift.

"You can't be the only one dressed," he said. He tried to slide the jacket from my shoulders, and bared the shoulder holster.

"We'll scare the audience," I said.

The screen was to our knees. He grabbed the front of my shirt, jerking it out of my pants, baring my stomach. He dropped to his knees and was licking my stomach as the screen came up completely. I tried to grab a handful of hair to pull him off me, but there wasn't enough hair to grab. The hair was much softer than it looked, much softer than my hair would have been if you shaved it to stubble. His teeth bit gently into my skin, and I put my hand under his chin, raising his face, so that he either had to take his teeth out of my skin, or bite deeper. He let go, let me raise his face to stare upward at me. There was a look in his eyes that I couldn't read, but it was something large and more complex than you see in a stranger's eyes. Complex I didn't need tonight.

He was on his feet in a movement so liquid and graceful that I knew that Edward would spot him for what he was, not human. He went to the one with all the hair first, giving her a tonsil-cleaning kiss, as if he'd crawl into her from the mouth down. Then he spun her like a dance move, and jaguar men were there to escort her and her arm full of clothes back to her table. The blonde was next. She kissed him, running pale nails down his back. She gave a little jump and wrapped her legs around his waist, forcing him to hold her weight or fall. The kiss was long, but she was in control of it. Cesar walked her to the edge of the stage, still clinging to his body like a limpet.

The jaguar men pried her away from his body, one pale limb at a time, until they had to carry her above their heads while she struggled, and then finally went limp, laughing as they carried her back to her table.

Ramona seemed to wake up. She blinked around her as if she'd woken and wasn't sure where she thought she should be. She stared down at her blouse clutched to the front of her and screamed. Cesar tried to help her on with her blouse, and she slapped at him. I went to her, trying to help her, but she seemed afraid of me, too, now, as if her panic had spread to include all of us.

The jaguar men tried to help her off stage, and she fell trying to keep them from touching her. It was finally a man from her table who came and escorted her out of the lights, out of the ring of strangers.

She was crying and speaking softly in Spanish as he led her back to the table. I would have to talk to someone about her. I couldn't leave town without knowing that the mind tricks weren't permanent. If it had been a vampire with a one on one call like that, he could have called her any time, any night, and she would answer his call. She would have no choice.

Cesar stood in front of me. He raised my hand, I think to kiss it, but it was the hand that I'd cut to prove I wouldn't heal. Not that anyone had cared, Cesar raised my hand and stared at the small wound in the tip of my finger. It was a small cut and didn't bleed much, but it wasn't healing either. If I'd been a lycanthrope, the small prick would have closed up and healed by now.

He looked at me over the still bleeding finger. "What are you?" he whispered.

"Long story," I whispered back.

He kissed the wound like a mother with a child's scrape, then his mouth slid over my finger, down to my hand. He drew it slowly back out. Fresh blood welled to the tip of my finger, bright and sparkling under the lights. His tongue

flicked out, rolling the drop of blood into his mouth. He leaned close as if to kiss me, but I shook my head and moved towards the steps that would lead me off the stage and away from him.

The jaguar men were there to help me off the stage, but I looked at them, and they backed off, letting me walk down the steps by myself. Edward held my chair for me, and I let him. Food had been served while I was on stage. Edward handed me a linen napkin. I wrapped it around my finger, holding pressure to it.

Dallas actually got up from her chair and came to talk to me, hanging over the back of my chair. "What happened back there? I've been a volunteer before, and I've never seen anyone hurt."

I looked up at her, her face close in the dimness, all serious and concern. "If you think no one gets hurt, then you haven't been paying attention."

She frowned, looking puzzled.

I shook my head. It was too late, and I was suddenly too tired to try and explain. "I cut myself shaving."

She frowned harder, but also got the point that I didn't want to talk.

I sat back down, leaving me to Edward. He leaned into me, laying his mouth against my ear and whispering so low it was like he was breathing into my ear. He knew how good a shapeshifter's hearing was, not to mention vamps. Do they know who you are?"

I turned, putting my mouth against his ear, having to raise on one knee in my seat, putting my body in a line against his. It looked intimate, but it allowed me to whisper to him in a voice so low I wasn't sure he would hear. "No, but they know I'm not human, not a tourist." I put my arm across his shoulders, one hand on his shoulder, holding him because I didn't want him to move away. I wanted the next question answered. "What are you planning?"

He turned to me, a look on his face that was far too intimate, too teasing for the conversation. He leaned into me, mouth pressed so close to my ear that it must have looked to the others like he had his tongue down it. "No plan, just thought you being you might scare the monsters from talking to us."

It was my turn to whisper, "No plan, you promise?"

"Would I lie to you?"

I jerked back from him and slugged him in the shoulder, not hard, but he got my point. Would Edward lie to me? Would the sun rise tomorrow? Yes to both.

The actors that had taken our places were finally on stage, in robes. The priest in his feathers was introducing them, getting the applause they deserved. I was glad they ruined the effect and didn't leave poor Ramona convinced she'd done terrible things. I was actually surprised that they'd spoiled the trick, like a magician revealing his secrets.

"We'll allow you to eat before the next and last act of our show."

The lights came up, and we all turned to our meals. I'd thought the meat was beef, but when I put the first bite in my mouth the texture told me I was wrong. The waitress had brought me an extra napkin, and I used that to spit the bite into.

"What's wrong?" Bernardo asked. He was eating the meat and enjoying himself

"I don't eat... veal," I said. I took a forkful of an unrecognizable vegetable, then realized it was sweet potatoes. I didn't recognize the spices in them. Of course, cooking wasn't exactly my area of expertise.

Everyone was eating the meat except me, and strangely, Edward. He'd taken a bite, but then he concentrated on the flat bread, and the vegetables, too.

"You don't eat veal either, Ted?" Olaf asked. He put another bite in his mouth and chewed slowly, as if trying to draw every ounce of flavor.

"No," Edward said.

"I know it's not moral indignation about the poor little calves," I said.

"And you worry about the poor little calves?" Edward said. He gave me a long look as he asked. I couldn't read his eyes, but they weren't blank, I just couldn't read them. What else was new?

"I don't approve of the treatment of the animals, no, but truthfully I just don't like the texture."

Dallas was watching us all as if we were doing something a lot more interesting than discussing meat. "You don't like the texture of. . . veal?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't."

Olaf had turned to the other woman. He took his latest bite of meat and offered it to her on the end of his fork. "You like veal?"

She got a strange little smile on her face. "I eat veal here almost every night." She didn't take his bite that he offered but took another bite from his own fork.

I felt like I was missing something, but before I could ask, the lights went down again. The final act was about to begin. If I was still hungry, surely there'd be something open on the way home. There usually was.

Chapter 24

THE LIGHTS WENT DOWN until the room was left in darkness. A dim spot light cut the darkness. The light was only a faint white gleam when it finally stopped at the far, far end of the darkened room.

A figure stepped into that pale gleam. A crown of brilliant red and yellow feathers was bent towards the light. A cloak of smaller feathers covered the figure from neck to the edge of the light. The crown raised, revealing a pale face. It was Cesar. He turned his face to one side, giving profile and showing that he had earrings going from lobe to halfway up the edge of his ear. Gold glittered as he moved his head, and the light grew stronger. He lifted something in his hands and a note of music filled the near dark. A thin trilling note like a flute, but not. The song was beautiful, but eerie, as if something lovely were

crying. A jaguar man lifted off the feathered cloak and vanished into the darkness. A heavy gold collar lay across his shoulders and chest. If it were real it was a fortune in precious metal. Hands came from either side of the darkness, appearing in the light, taking the feathered crown without ever showing themselves.

Cesar walked slowly, and halfway up the room I could see what he was playing. It looked like a panpipe, but not exactly. The song cut through the darkness, crawled through it, one moment uplifting, the next mournful. It looked like he was truly playing it, and if so it was impressive. Jaguar men stripped him of everything he was carrying: a small shield; a strange stick that looked sort of like a bow, but not, a bag of short arrows or something like them. He was close enough now that I could see the jade decoration that he wore in front of his kilt, though I knew it wasn't a kilt, but skirt wasn't right either. The front was covered in feathers; the rest, some rich cloth. More hands came into the light to undo the garment and take it and the jade away. They were close enough now that the darkness and light couldn't hide that the hands belonged to the jaguars. They stripped him down to the flesh-colored G-string he'd worn before, or one like it.

The song rose into the dimness as he neared the last few rows of tables. You could almost see the notes rising upward like birds. I don't usually wax poetic about music, but this was different. Somehow you knew it wasn't just a song, just something to listen to and forget, or hum in odd moments. When you think of ritual music, you think of drums, something with a beat to remind us of our hearts, and the ebb and flow of our bodies. But not all ritual is made to remind us of our bodies. Some of it's made to remind us of why the ritual is happening. All ritual at its heart is for the sake of divinity. All right, not all, but most. Most of it is us yelling, hey God, look at me, look at us, hope you like it. We are all just children at heart, hoping Dad or Mom likes the present we picked out.

Of course, sometimes Mom and Dad can have quite a temper.

Cesar let the flute or pipes hang from a thong around his neck. He knelt and removed his own sandals, then handed them to a woman at the nearest table. There was a shifting in the dimness as if she wasn't sure she wanted them. Maybe after the earlier show she was afraid to take them. Couldn't really blame her on that one.

He stopped at the table just behind that one and spoke quietly to another woman. She stood and removed one of the gold earrings from his ear. Then he went from table to table, and let sometimes men, but mostly women take the last of his decoration from his body. Which probably explained why the earrings were the least expensive, least authentic pieces he'd been wearing. Except for the last earrings. A medium sized jade ball set in each earlobe, but it was the figurines that dangled beneath, moving as his head moved, swaying as he walked, that made the earrings special. Each figure was nearly three inches high, brushing his shoulders like the hair he did not have. As he got closer, you could see the green stone was intricately carved into one of those squat deities the Aztecs were so fond of.

He stopped at our table, and I was surprised because he'd carefully ignored the other "brides" on this walk. He raised me to my feet with one hand in mine, then turned his head so I could reach the earring. I didn't want to stop the show, but they were too expensive a gift to accept unless they were fake. In the moment I touched the cool stone, I knew it was real jade. It was too heavy, too smooth to be anything else.

I don't wear earrings, and I've never had pierced ears, so I was left feeling the back of his ear in the near dark, trying to figure out how to undo the earring. He finally reached up and helped me, hands doing quickly and almost gracefully what I'd been fumbling at. By watching him I realized that they unscrewed, and when he turned his head I was able to get the second one out myself. I knew enough about jewelry to know that the screws were modern. It was real jade, real gold, but it wasn't an antique, or at least the clasps were modern.

The stones rested heavy and very solid in my hands. He leaned over and whispered, breath warm against my cheek. "I will get them back from you after the performance. Don't interfere." He laid a gentle kiss on my cheek and walked to the bottom step. He took the flute from around his neck and broke off one of the many reeds, scattering it on the step.

I sat back down, the jade gripped in my hands. I leaned into Edward. "What's about to happen?"

He shook his head. "I've never seen this particular show."

I looked across the table at Professor Dallas. I wanted to ask her what was going on, but she had all her attention on the stage. Cesar had broken part of the flute on every step as he walked up them. Four jaguar men were waiting at the top, grouped around a small, roundish stone. The priest was there, too, but without the cape, He was even broader through the shoulders than he'd seemed, and though not tall you got the impression of sheer strength, sheer physicality. He seemed more warrior than priest.

Cesar had made it to the top of the temple. The four jaguar men grabbed him, by wrist and ankle, lifting him over their heads, steadying his body with their hands. They paced the stage with him held above their heads, showing him to the four corners of the stage, even the one that faced away from the audience. Then they brought him to the small round stone and laid his body across it, so that his head and shoulders leaned back, and the lowest part of his chest and upper stomach were curved over the stone.

I was on my feet before I saw the obsidian blade in the priest's hand Edward grabbed my arm. "Look to your left," he said.

I glanced and found two of the jaguar men waiting. If I made a run for the stage, I bet they'd try and stop me. Cesar had said that he'd come for the earrings after the performance. Which implied he'd be alive to do it. He'd warned me not to interfere. But dammit, they were going to cut him up. I knew that now. What I didn't know, was how badly they were going to cut him up.

Dallas had gotten up from her seat and was at my other arm, whispering, "It's part of the show. Cesar plays sacrifice twice a month. Not always this exact sacrifice, but it's part of his job." She spoke low and soothingly like you

talked to a crazy person on a ledge. I let her and Edward ease me back into my seat I was gripping the jade earrings so hard the edges dug into my hands.

Dallas knelt beside me, keeping a hand on my arm, but she watched the stage. The jaguar men held him, and you could see their grip tighten, see them take in their collective breaths. Cesar's face showed nothing, not fear, not anticipation, just waiting for it.

The priest drove the blade into the flesh just below the ribs. Cesar's body jerked in reaction, but he didn't cry out. The blade tore across him, digging into the meat, widening the hole. His body danced with the wound, but he never made a sound. Blood poured across Cesar's pale skin, bright and almost unreal under the lights. The priest reached his hand into the wound nearly up to his elbow, and Cesar cried out.

I grabbed Dallas's arm. "He can't survive without his heart, not even a shapeshifter can survive that."

"They won't take his heart, I swear it." She stroked my hand where it gripped her like you'd soothe a nervous dog.

I leaned in close to her, and whispered, "If they take his heart when I could have stopped it, I'll have your heart on a knife before I leave New Mexico. You still willing to swear?"

Her eyes had gone wide. I think she was holding her breath, but she nodded. "I swear it."

The funny thing was that she believed the threat instantly. Most people you tell them you're going to cut their heart out and they won't believe you. People believe you'll kill them, but get too graphic and they take it like a joke or an exaggeration. Professor Dallas believed me. You could see it in her face. Most college professors wouldn't have. Made me wonder about Dallas more than I already did.

The priest's voice came into the utter silence that had filled the room. "I hold his heart in my hand. In the long gone days we would have torn it from his chest, but those days are gone," and you heard, felt the regret in his words. "We worship as we can, not as we would." He slid his hand out slowly, and I was close enough to hear the wet, fleshy sound as his hand pulled out of the wound.

He raised a hand covered in blood above his head, and the audience cheered.

They cheered. They fucking cheered.

The jaguar men lifted Cesar from the altar and tossed him down the steps. He tumbled bonelessly coming to rest on the floor directly in front of the steps. He lay on his back, gasping, fighting to breathe and I wondered if the priest had damaged a lung or two when he went fishing for the heart.

I just sat there, staring at him. He did this twice a month. It was part of his job. Shit. Not only didn't I understand it, I didn't want to. If he was into pain and death, I didn't need to know anything else about him. I was eyeball deep in sadomasochistic wereleopards back home. I didn't need another one.

The priest was talking, but I didn't hear him. I didn't hear anything but a great roaring like white noise in my ears. I watched the wereleopard twitch, Hotly jerking, blood pouring down his sides, across the floor, but even as I

stared, the blood was slowing. It was hard to tell through all the blood and torn flesh, but I knew he was healing.

Two of the human bouncers came and picked him up, one taking his ankles, the other lifting under his arms. They carried him through the tables, past us. I stood, stopping them. Dallas stood with me, as if afraid of what I'd do. I stared into Cesar's eyes. There was real pain there. He wasn't having a good time or didn't seem to be. But you don't do shit like this on a regular basis unless you enjoy it on some level. His hands were lying on his chest, as if he were trying to hold himself together. I pried one hand up. The skin was slick with blood. I pressed the jade earrings into his hand, closed his fingers around them.

He whispered something, but I didn't bend down to hear. "Don't ever come near me again."

I sat back down, and they carried him away. I started to reach for a napkin to wipe my hands, but Dallas grabbed my arm. "She's ready to see you now."

I hadn't seen anyone talk to her, but I wasn't questioning it. If she said it was time, fine. We could meet the Master of the City and get the hell out of here.

I started to reach for the napkin again, but she moved it out of reach. "It is fitting that you meet her with the blood of sacrifice on your hands."

I looked at her and grabbed the napkin out of her hands. She actually struggled to keep it, and we had a little tug of war before I jerked it away from her. But a woman appeared at my elbow. She wore a red-hooded cloak and came up only to my shoulder, but even before she turned her head so I could see the face that lay inside that cloak, I knew what she was. Itzpapalotl, Obsidian Butterfly, Master of the City, and self-proclaimed goddess. I hadn't felt her coming. I hadn't heard her or sensed her. She just appeared beside me like magic. It had been a long time since a vampire had been able to do that. I think I stopped breathing for a second or two as I met her eyes.

Her face was as delicate as the rest of her, her skin a milk-pale brown. Her eyes were black, not just brown, but truly black like the obsidian blade she was named for. Most master vamp's eyes are like drowning pools, things to fall into and be trapped, but her eyes were like solid black mirrors reflecting back, not something to fall into, but something to show you the truth. I saw myself in those eyes, a miniature reflection perfect in every detail like a black cameo. Then the image split, doubling, tripling. My face stayed in the center with a wolf's head on one side, and a skull on the other. As I watched, the three images grew closer until the wolf and skull were superimposed over my face, and for a split second I couldn't tell where one image left off and the others began.

One image floated above the rest. The skull rose above the first two, spilling upward through the blackness, filling her eyes until the skull filled my vision, and I was able to stumble back, nearly falling. Edward was there, catching me. Dallas had moved to stand beside the vampire.

Bernardo and Olaf were at Edward's back, and I knew in that instant that if he'd given the word, they'd have both drawn guns and fired. It was a comforting

thought. Suicidal, but comforting. Because I could feel her people now, which meant she had to have been blocking me, hiding them. I felt the vampires underneath the building, around it, through it. There were hundreds of them, and most of them were old. Hundreds of years old. And Obsidian Butterfly? I glanced at her but was careful not to meet her eyes this time. It had been years since I'd had to avoid a vampire's eyes. I'd forgotten how hard it is to look someone in the face without making eye contact, like some elaborate game. Them trying to catch my glance and bespell me, me trying to keep away.

She had a fall of straight black bangs, but the rest of her hair was pulled back from her face to reveal delicate ears set with jade ear spools. She was a delicate thing, petite even standing next to me and Professor Dallas, but I wasn't fooled by the packaging. What lay inside was a vampire not that old. I doubted she was a thousand years yet. I'd met older, much older, but I'd never met any vampire under a thousand that echoed in my head with the power that this one did. Power breathed off her skin like a nearly visible cloud, and I'd learned enough of vampires to know that the echo of power wasn't on purpose. Some of the masters with special abilities, like causing fear or lust, just gave off that power constantly like steam rising from a pot. It was involuntary, partially at least. But I'd never met one that leaked power, pure power.

Edward was talking to me, probably had been talking to me for a while. I just hadn't heard. "Anita, Anita, are you all right?" I felt the press of a gun not pointed at my back, but drawn, using my body to shield it from the room. Things could get ugly really fast.

"I'm all right," but my voice didn't sound all right. It sounded hollow and distant, like I was in shock. Maybe I was, a little. She hadn't exactly rolled my mind, but she knew things about me in that first contact that most vampires never figured out. I realized suddenly that she knew what kind of power I was. That was her gift, to be able to read power.

Her voice when it came was heavily accented and much deeper than that fragile throat should have held, as if the voice was an echo of that immense power. "Whose servant are you?"

She knew I was a vampire's human servant, but not whose servant I was. I liked that, made me feel better. She read only power, not details, unless of course, she was only pretending not to know. But somehow I didn't think she'd pretend ignorance. No, this was one that liked showing off her knowledge. She breathed arrogance as she breathed power. But why not be arrogant? She was, after all, a goddess, self-proclaimed anyway. You'd have to be either absolutely arrogant or crazy to claim godhood.

"Jean-Claude, Master of the City of St. Louis."

She cocked her head to one side as if listening to something. "Then you are the Executioner. You did not give your true name at the door."

"Not all vampires will talk to me if they know who I am."

"What is it you wish to speak with me about?"

"The mutilation murders."

Again, she turned her head to one side as if listening. "Ah, yes." She blinked and looked up at me. "The price for an audience is what lies on your hands."

I must have looked as puzzled as I felt, because she elaborated. "The blood, Cesar's blood. I wish to take it from you."

"How?" I asked, just call me suspicious.

She simply turned and started walking away. Her voice came like the sound to a badly dubbed film, sound long after it should have been heard.

"Follow me, and do not clean your hands."

I glanced at Edward. "Do you trust her?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Me either," I said.

"Are we going or staying?" Olaf asked.

"I vote for going," Bernardo said. I hadn't really looked at him since the sacrifice began. He was looking a little pale. Olaf wasn't. Olaf looked fresh and bright-eyed, as if he were enjoying the evening.

Dallas said, "It would be a grave insult if you refuse her invitation. She rarely gives personal interviews voluntarily. You must have impressed her."

"I didn't impress her. I attracted her," I said.

Dallas frowned. "Attracted her. She likes men."

I shook my head. "She may have sex with men, but what attracts her is power, Professor."

She looked at me, searching my face. "You have that kind of power?"

I sighed. "We'll find out, won't we?" I started walking in the direction that the cloaked figure had gone. She hadn't waited for us to decide. She'd just walked away. Like I said, arrogant. Of course, we were about to follow her into her private lair. That was arrogance, too, or stupidity. Arrogance or stupidity, sometimes there's not much difference between the two.

Chapter 25

I DIDN'T KNOW where to go, but Dallas did. She led us to a small door set to one side of the temple steps, hidden by curtains. The door was still open, like a black mouth. Steps led down. Where else? Just once I'd like to see a vamp whose major hideout was up instead of down.

Dallas walked down the steps with a spring in her step and a song in her heart. Her ponytail bounced as she skipped down the steps. If she had a single misgiving about going down into that darkness, it didn't show. Dallas confused me. On one hand she didn't see that Olaf was dangerous, and she wasn't afraid of any of the monsters in the club. On the other hand, she'd believed me when I told her I'd cut her heart out. I'd seen it in her eyes. How could she believe that

threat from a total stranger and not see the other dangers? Didn't make sense to me, and I didn't like what I didn't understand. She seemed utterly harmless, but her reactions were weird, so I put a question mark by her. Which meant, I wouldn't be turning my back on her or treating her like a civilian until I was convinced that that was what she was.

I was going too slowly for Olaf. He pushed past me and followed Dallas's bouncing ponytail down the stairs. He had to stoop to keep from bumping his head on the ceiling, but he didn't seem to mind. Fine with me. Let him take the first bullet. But I followed them down into the dark. No one had offered me violence, not really, not yet. So it seemed rude to have a gun naked in my hand, but... I'd apologize later. Unless I knew the vampire personally I liked having a loaded gun in hand the first time I paid a call. Or maybe it was the narrow stairs, the close press of stone as if it would close around us like a fist and crush us. Have I mentioned that I'm claustrophobic?

The stairs didn't go down very far, and there was no door at the end of them. Jean-Claude's retreat in St. Louis was something of an underground fortress. The barely hidden doorway, the short stairs, no second door—arrogance, again.

Olaf blocked my view of Dallas, but I saw him reach the dimly lit doorway at the bottom. He had to stoop even further to get through the door and hesitated before standing up on the other side. There was a sense of movement around him or rather to either side of him. Quick, almost not there, like things you see out of the corner of your eyes. It reminded me of the hands that had stripped Cesar as he walked between light and darkness.

He stayed just in the doorway, his body nearly filling it completely, blocking what little light there had been. I caught the faintest edge of Dallas. She led him away from the door further into the firelit dark.

I called down, "Olaf, are you okay?"

No answer.

Edward tried. "Olaf?"

"I am fine."

I glanced back at Edward. We had a moment of staring into each other's eyes, both of us thinking the same thing. This could be a trap. Maybe she was behind the murders. Maybe she just wanted to kill the Executioner. Or maybe she was a centuries-old vampire, and she just wanted to hurt us for the hell of it

"Could she make Olaf lie?"

"You mean mind tricks?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Not this fast. I may not like him, but he's stronger than that." I looked at him, searching his face in the dim light. "Could they force him to lie?"

"You mean a knife at his throat?" Edward said.

"Yeah."

He gave a faint smile. "No, not this quick, not ever."

"You're sure of that?" I asked.

"My life on it."

"We're betting all our lives on it."

He nodded. "Yes, we are."

But if Edward said that Olaf wouldn't sell us out on fear of death or pain, then I believed him. Edward didn't always understand why people did what they did, but he was usually right about the fact that they were going to do it. Motive evaded him, but he was seldom wrong. So ... I kept walking down the steps.

I strained my peripheral vision, trying to see on either side of the doorway as I walked through it. I didn't have to bend over to go through. The room was square and small, maybe sixteen by sixteen. It was also packed nearly corner to corner with vampires.

I put my back against the wall to the right of the door, gun clutched two-handed, pointed at the ceiling. I wanted badly to point it at someone, anyone. My shoulders ached with the tension of not doing it. No one was threatening me. No one was doing a damn thing except standing, staring, milling around the way people do. So why did I feel like I should have entered the room shooting?

Tall vampires, short vampires, thin vampires, fat vampires, every size, every shape, and almost every race, moved around that small stone room. After what had happened upstairs with their master, I was careful not to make eye contact with any of them. My gaze swept over the room, taking in the pale faces, and getting a quick head count. When I got over sixty, I realized the room was at least twice the size I'd originally thought. It had to be just to hold this many of them. It only looked small because it was packed so tight. The torchlight added to the illusion, flickering, dancing, uncertain light.

Edward stayed in the doorway, his back to the doorframe, shoulder touching mine lightly. His gun was up like mine, his eyes searching the vamps. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? Look at them." My voice was breathy, not because I was trying to whisper—that would have been useless—but because my throat was tight, my mouth dry.

He scanned the crowd again. "So?"

My gaze flashed to him, then back to the waiting vampires. "Shit, Ed ... Ted. Shit." It wasn't just the number of them. It was my own ability to sense them that was the problem. I'd been around a hundred vamps before, but they hadn't affected me like this. I didn't know if having walled off my link to Jean-Claude made me more vulnerable to them, or if my necromancy had grown since then. Or maybe Itzpapalotl was just that much more powerful than the other master had been. Maybe it was her power that had made them so much more than most vamps. There were close to a hundred in this room. I was getting impressions from all of them, or most of them. My shields were great now, I could keep out a lot of the preternatural stuff, but this was too much for me. If I had to guess, there wasn't a vamp in the room under a hundred. I got flashes from individual ones if I looked at them too long, a slap in the face of their age, their power. The four females in the right corner were all over five hundred years old. They watched me with dark eyes, dark-skinned, but not as

dark as they would have been with a little sun. The four of them watched me with patient, empty faces.

Her voice came from the center of the room, but she was hidden behind the vampires, shielded by them. "I have offered you no violence, yet you have drawn weapons. You seek my aid, yet you threaten me."

"It's not personal, Itz . . ." I stumbled over her name.

"You may call me Obsidian Butterfly." It was odd talking to her without being able to glimpse her through the waiting figures.

"It's not personal, Obsidian Butterfly. I just know that once I put up the gun, chances of drawing it again before one of your brood rips my throat out is damn small."

"You mistrust us," she said.

"As you mistrust us," I said.

She laughed then. Her laughter was the sound of a young woman, normal but the strained echoes from the other vampires were anything but normal. The laughter held a wild note to it, a desperation, as if they were afraid not to laugh. I wondered what the penalty was for not following her lead.

The laughter faded away, except for one high pitched masculine sound the other vampires went still, that impossible stillness where they seem like well-made statues, things made of stone and paint, not real, not alive. They waited like a host of empty things. Waited for what? The only sound was that high, unhealthy laughter, rising up and up like the sounds the movies have you hear in insane asylums, or mad scientists' laboratories. The sound raised the hair on my arms, and it wasn't magic. It was just creepy.

"If you put up your guns, I will send most of my people away. That is fair is it not?"

It was fair, but I didn't like it. I liked having the gun naked in my hands. Of course, the gun only worked if shooting a few of them would stop the rest from rushing us, and it wouldn't. If she said, go to hell, they'd start digging a hole. If she told them to rush us, they most certainly would. So the guns were just a security blanket, a delaying tactic before the end. It took only a few seconds to think it through, but that awful laughter kept going like it was one of those creepy dolls with a laugh track inside of it.

I felt Edward's shoulder pressing against mine. He was waiting for me to give the answer, trusting my expertise. I hoped I didn't get us killed. I put the gun back in its holster. I rubbed my hand against my leg. I'd been holding the gun too long, and too damn tight. Me, nervous?

Edward put his gun up. Bernardo was still in the stairway, and I realized that he was making sure nothing came down the stairs and blocked our retreat. It was kind of nice working with more than just two people and knowing everyone on your side was willing to shoot anything that moved. No bleeding hearts, no empathy, just business.

Of course, Olaf was off to one side with Dallas. He had never pulled a gun. He had waded into this many vampires, following her bouncing ponytail to destruction. Or at least to potential destruction.

The vampires drew a breath, each chest rising as one, as if they were many bodies with one mind. Life, for lack of a better term, flowed back into them. Some of them looked almost human, but many of them were pale and starved, and weak. Their faces were too thin, as if the bones of their skull would push out through the sickly skin. They were all pale, but the natural skin color of many was darker than Caucasian, so even pale, they weren't the ghostly paleness I was used to seeing. I realized with something like shock that most of the vampires I knew were Caucasian. Here, white skin was the minority. A nice reversal.

The vampires began to glide towards the door. Or some of them glided. Some of them shuffled as if they didn't have energy to pick their feet up, as if they were truly ill. To my knowledge vampires couldn't catch any disease. but these vampires looked sick.

One of them stumbled and fell at my feet, landing heavily on hands and knees. He stayed where he was, head hanging down. His skin was a dirty white like snow that had lain too long by a busy road, a greyish white. The other vampires moved around him as if he were a bump in the road. They flowed past him, and he didn't seem to notice. His hands looked like the hands of a skeleton, barely covered with skin. His hair was a blond so light, it looked white, hanging down around his face. He raised his face up, slowly, and it was like looking at a skull. His eyes had sunk so far into his head that they seemed to burn at the end of long black tunnels. I wasn't afraid of looking in this one's eyes. He didn't have enough juice to roll me with his eyes, I could tell that just standing here. The bones of his cheeks pushed so hard against the thin skin that it looked like they should tear through.

A pale tongue slid from between thin nearly invisible lips. His eyes were a pale, pale green, like bad emeralds. The thin walls of his nose flared as if he were scenting the air. He probably was. Vamps didn't rely on scent the way shapeshifters did, but they had a much better sense of smell than humans. He closed his eyes in the middle of drawing a deep breath. He shuddered and seemed to swoon, faint. I'd never seen a vamp act like this. It caught me off guard, and that was my fault.

I saw him tense, and my hand was going for the Browning, but there was no time. He was less than a foot away. I never even touched the gun before he slammed into me. He knocked the breath from my body. His hand was on my face, turning my head to one side, baring my neck, before I had time to breathe. I had a sense of movement even though I couldn't see him. I felt his body tense and I knew he was coming in for a strike. He made no effort to control my hands. I kept going for the gun, but I would never get it out and pointed in time. He was going to sink fang into my neck, and I couldn't stop it. It was like a car accident. I just had time to see it coming and to think, "I can't stop it." There wasn't even time to be afraid.

Something jerked the vampire backwards. His hand curled in my jacket, and didn't let go. His desperate grip nearly pulled me off my feet, but I got the gun out before I worried about staying on my feet.

A large, very Aztec-looking vamp had the skeletal vamp, holding him pinned against his body, only that one arm with its clutching hand not pressed to the larger man's body.

Edward had his gun out pointed at the vampires. He'd gotten to his gun first, but then he hadn't been shoved up against a wall and manhandled. Or would that be vampire-handled?

The big vamp jerked the thin one hard enough that he nearly pulled me off my feet, but that one clutching hand stayed curled in my jacket, catching on the shirt underneath. I had the Browning pointed at the vamp's chest, though I wasn't sure if the Hornady ammo was safe to shoot at arm's distance into one target pressed directly in front of another person. I wasn't sure if the ammo would go through the first vamp and into the second. The second vamp had saved me. It really wouldn't be nice to blow a hole in him.

The other vampires were leaving the room in a hurrying line to get past us and up the stairs, out of harm's way. Cowards. But it was thinning out the ranks, which would be great. Eventually, I'd care that there weren't so damn many vamps in the room, but right now the world was narrowed down to the vamp that had hold of me. First things first.

The big vamp kept backing up, trying to get the skeletal one to let go of me. We kept moving further into the room. Edward paced us, gun held two-handed pointed at the vampire's head. I finally put the barrel of my gun underneath the vamp's chin. I could blow his brains up without hitting the second vampire.

Obsidian Butterfly's voice slashed through the room like a whip. The sound made me wince, shoulders tightening as if it had been a blow. "These are my guests. How dare you attack them!"

The skeletal vampire started to cry, and his tears were clear, human. Vampire's tears are tinged red. They cry bloody tears. "Please, please let me feed, please!"

"You feed as we all feed, as befits a god."

"Please, please, mistress, please."

"You disgrace me before our visitors." Then she spoke low and rapidly in a language that was sort of Spanish sounding, but it wasn't Spanish. I don't speak Spanish, but I've heard it spoken often enough to know it when I hear it, and this wasn't it. Whatever she was saying, upset both vampires.

The big one pulled so hard that he finally jerked me off my feet because the other vamp was still holding on. I ended up on my knees, my jacket and shirt dangling from the vamp's hand, one arm pulled up at an awkward angle. My gun was pressed into his stomach now, and again I wondered if at point blank range the new ammo would kill both vamps? It was a miracle that I hadn't accidentally shot his head off. Edward was still there, gun pointed at the vamp's head. The first hint I had that something else had gone wrong was a faint glow. The glow grew into something pure and white. My cross had spilled out of my shirt.

The vampire kept his grip on me, but started to scream in a high pitiful voice. The cross flared bright and brighter until I had to turn my head and

shield my eyes. It was like having magnesium burning around your neck. So bright, it only got this bright when something very bad was near. I didn't think the something bad was the thing still hanging onto me. I was betting the cross was glowing for her benefit, maybe others' but mostly hers. A lot of things in the room could kill me, but nothing else in the room was worth this much of a light show.

"Let him go to his destiny," she said.

I felt the arm that was still pulling so desperately, go limp. I felt him kneeling, felt it through the barrel of the gun still pressed against him.

Edward said, "Anita?" It was a question, but I didn't have an answer yet.

I blinked past the light, trying to see. The vampire put a hand on either side of my shoulders. His eyes were squeezed shut against the light. His face stretched wide with pain. The white white light glistened on fangs as he moved in to feed.

"Stop, or die," I said.

I'm not sure he even heard me. His hand caressed the edge of my cheek, and it was like being touched by fleshy sticks. His hands didn't even feel real. I yelled, "I'll kill him."

"Do so. It's his choice." Her voice was so matter of fact, so uncaring, that it made me not want to do it.

His hand grabbed my hair, tried to twist my face to one side. His head was drawn back for a strike, but he couldn't push past the glare of the cross. But he might work up to it. As weak as he was, he should have run screaming from this much holy light.

"Anita," Edward's voice and it wasn't a question now, more a preview.

The vampire let out a scream that made me gasp. His head threw back, then down, and his face moved in a white blur towards me. The gun went off before I realized I'd squeezed the trigger, just a reflex. A second gun echoed so close on my shot that it sounded like a single gunshot. The vamp jerked, and his head exploded. Blood and thicker things sprayed half my face.

I knelt in a sudden deafening silence. There was no sound, nothing but a line, distant ringing in my ears, like tinny bells. I turned in a sort of slow motion to see the vamp's body sprawled on its side, I got to my feet and still couldn't hear anything. Sometimes that's shock. Sometimes it's just gunshots going off next to your ears.

I scraped at the blood and thicker pieces on the left side of my face. Edward handed me a white handkerchief, probably something Ted would carry, but I took it. I started trying to scrape the stuff off of me.

The cross was still glowing like a captive star. I was already deaf. If I didn't stop having to squint around the light, I was going to be blind as well. I looked around the room. Most of the vamps had fled up the stairs away from the cross's glow, but what was left huddled around their goddess, shielding her, I think, from us. I blinked through the glare, and I think I saw fear on one or two faces. You don't see that often on several hundred years worth of vampire. It might have been the cross, but I didn't think that was it. I slipped the cross back into my shirt. The cross was still cool silver. It never burned unless

vampire flesh touched it. Then it would flare into actual flame and burn the vamp and any human flesh that happened to be touching it at the same time. Usually, the vamp would jerk away before you got past second degree burns so I'd never gotten a scar from one of my own crosses.

The vampires stayed in front of their mistress, and the fear was still there on at least one face. The cross could keep them at bay, but that wasn't what they feared. I looked down at the body. The entrance hole was just a small red thing, with black scorch marks around it, but the exit hole was nearly a foot in diameter. There was no head on the body, only the lower jaw and a thin rim of back brain left. The rest had been blown in a wide spray across the floor and across me.

Edward's mouth was moving, and sound came back in a kind of Doppler shift, so that I heard only the end of it. "... ammo are you using now?"

I told him.

He knelt by the body and inspected the chest wound. "I thought the Hornady XTP wasn't supposed to make this much of a mess going out."

His voice still sounded like it was distant, tinny, but I could hear again. It meant that my hearing would go back to normal eventually. "I don't think they did any firing tests at point blank range."

"It makes a nice hole at point blank range."

"In like a penny, out like a pizza," I said.

"You had questions about the murders?" Obsidian Butterfly said. "Ask them."

She was standing in the middle of her people, but no longer shielded. I don't know if she decided we weren't going to shoot her, or if she thought it was cowardice to hide behind others, or if we'd passed some kind of test. But if she were willing to answer my questions, then I'd take it any way I could get it.

I saw Dallas and Olaf to one side of the vamps. Dallas had her face hidden against his chest, and he was holding her, comforting her, helping her not see the mess on the floor. Olaf was looking down at her as if she were something precious. It wasn't love, more the way a man will look at a really nice car that he wants to own. He looked at her like she was a pretty thing that he'd wanted but hadn't expected to get. He stroked her hair, running his fingers through the long dark ponytail over and over, playing with her hair, watching it fall against her back.

I wasn't the only one watching them. "Cruz, take the professor upstairs. I think she's seen enough for one night."

A short male vamp, very Hispanic, went to them, but Olaf said, "I'll take her upstairs."

"No," Edward said.

"I don't think so," I said.

Itzpapalotl said, "That will not be necessary."

The three of us exchanged a glance, though I didn't meet her eyes dead on. But there was an understanding between us, I think. Olaf needed to stay away from the professor. Maybe a state or two away from her.

Cruz pulled Dallas out of Olaf's reluctant arms and led the crying woman up the stairs, and away from the horror we'd stretched out on the floor. Though we hadn't made the vampire a horror, we just killed him. Itzpapalotl had starved him until he faced a glowing cross for the chance to feed. Starved him until he'd let two humans point guns at him and not even try to get away. He'd wanted to sink fangs into human flesh more than he'd wanted to live. I don't usually feel sorry for vampires that try to feed off of me, especially without permission, but this one time I'd make an exception. He'd been pitiful. Now he was dead. Pity has never stopped me from pulling a trigger, and Edward didn't feel pity. I could stare down at what was left of that skeletal body and think, poor thing, but I felt nothing about the death. It wasn't just that I didn't feel regret. I felt nothing, absolutely nothing.

I looked at Edward, and he looked at me, and I'd have given a great deal for a mirror right that second. Staring into Edward's blank face, those empty eyes that felt nothing, I realized that I didn't need a mirror. I already had one.

Chapter 26

MAYBE I'D HAVE BEEN afraid of that revelation, but the vampires began to flow out towards us. Survival first, moral issues later. Richard might say that was one of my biggest problems. Jean-Claude wouldn't. There's more than one reason why Richard and I haven't settled down to a happy ever afterlife, and there's more than one reason why I haven't cut Jean-Claude loose.

Itzpapalotl glided forward still shrouded in the scarlet cloak. It was so long that you couldn't see her feet and she moved so smoothly that it looked like she was on wheels. There was something artificial about her.

The four silent women moved on her left, and something bothered me about the way they moved. It took me a second or two to realize what it was. They were moving in utter unison, perfect step. One lifted a hand to brush a strand of black hair from her face, and all the others followed the movement like puppets, though there was no stray hair on their faces. From the breaths that raised their chests, to the small jerk of a finger, they imitated each other. No, not imitated, that was too mild a word. They were like one being with four bodies. The effect was eerie because they didn't look alike. One was short and square. One was tall and thin. The other two were delicate and did look something alike. All of them had paler skin than Itzpapalotl, as if in life they hadn't been much darker than they were now.

The tall vamp that had tried to pull the starving vamp off me walked to her right. He was the tallest of the ones that looked pure Aztec, six feet at least, with shoulders and muscles to match. His hair fell in a black wash down his back, held from his face by a crown of feathers and gold. His nose was pierced,

though that was too mild a word for the three inches of thick gold that bisected his face. Gold earplugs stretched his earlobes to a thin line of flesh. His skin was the color that old ivory sometimes gets, not a pale gold, but a pale copper, palest bronze. It was a striking color with the coal black hair and the perfectly black eyes. He moved two steps back, at her right, and like the women he moved as if this had always been his place.

Three male vamps moved a little distance from the man. They were all that shining ivory white that I was used to seeing. They were dressed in the same clothing as the bouncers, those skirt/thong bathing suit thingies. But they had no adornment. Their arms and legs were pale and empty. They were even barefoot. I knew servants when I saw them, or prisoners maybe.

One was medium height with curly brown hair cut short, and a darker brown line of beard and mustache outlining the perfect whiteness of the skin. The eyes were pale blue. The second man was shorter with short hair turned salt and pepper as if he'd died after the hair had gone grey. The face was lined, but strong, and the body still muscular, so that his age at death was hard to tell. Older than the others, fortyish, though I was no judge of age of death in vamps. His eyes were the dark gray of storm clouds, echoing his hair color.

He held a leash in one hand, and on the end of that leash the third man crawled, not on all fours, but on his hands, and his feet, legs hunched monkey-like, or like a whipped dog. His hair was short and a surprising yellow, curling soft. It was the only thing on him that looked alive. His skin was like old paper, clinging and yellowed to his bones. His eyes were sunk so far back into his head that I couldn't tell what color they were.

The end of the entourage was five very Hispanic, Aztecy bodyguards. Bodyguards are bodyguards regardless of the culture, the century, or state of life, or would that be death? I knew muscle when I saw it, and the five vamps were muscle, even carrying obsidian blades, and obsidian-edged clubs, and looking somewhat less than serious in feathers and jewelry. They exuded that aura of badass.

Olaf had moved back to stand with us, and the three of us faced them. Bernardo had stayed near the stairway, making sure our retreat wasn't cut off. So nice to work with other professionals. Olaf had his gun out now, too, and was watching the vamps with a look that wasn't neutral. It was hostile. I didn't know why, but he seemed pissed. Go figure.

The vamps stopped about eight feet from us. The dead vampire lay on the floor between us. The body had already stopped bleeding. When you take a head off of a vamp, they bleed just like a human, quarts and quarts of the red stuff. It is a freaking mess when you decapitate someone. But this vampire had bled only a small odd-shaped space on the stone floor, barely a foot across, and a second even smaller pool under the chest. Not nearly enough blood for what we'd done to him.

The silence seemed thicker than it should have, and Olaf filled it. "You can check his pulse if you want."

"Olaf, don't," Edward said.

Olaf shifted, either uncomfortable, or fighting down the urge to do something worse than mouthing off. "You're the boss," he said, but not like he meant it.

"I doubt this one had a pulse," I said, and I was looking at the vampires while I said it. "It takes energy to make a vamp's heart beat and he didn't have any."

"You feel pity for him," Itzpapalotl said.

"Yeah, I guess I do."

"Your friend does not."

I glanced at Edward. His face showed nothing. It was nice to know there were still some differences between us. I felt pity. He didn't. "Probably he doesn't."

"But there is no regret in either of you, no guilt."

"Why should we feel guilty? We just killed him. We didn't turn him into a crawling, starved thing."

Even under the masking cloak, I could feel her grow still with that awful stillness that only the old ones have. Her voice came warm with the first thread of anger. "You presume to judge me."

"No, just stating facts. If he hadn't been starved worse than any vamp I've ever seen outside of a coffin prison, he would never have attacked me." I also thought that they could have tried harder to get him off of me, but didn't say it out loud. I really didn't want to piss her off with eighty or so vamps waiting upstairs between us and the door. That wasn't even taking into account the werejaguars.

"And if I told my starved ones that they could feed off of you, all of them, what would they do?" she asked.

The starved vamp on the leash, looked up at that. His eyes never stayed on anyone too long, flitting from face to face to face, but he'd heard her.

My stomach jerked tight in a knot hard enough to hurt. I had to blow out a breath to be able to talk around the sudden flutter of my pulse. There'd been at least ten, fifteen of the starved ones. "They'd attack us," I said.

"They would fall upon you like ravening dogs," she said.

I nodded, hand settling more securely on the butt of my gun. "Yeah." If she gave the order, my first bullet was going between her eyes. If I died, I wanted to take her with me. Vindictive, but true.

"The thought frightens you," she said.

I tried to see her face in that hood, but some trick of shadow left only her small bowed mouth visible. "If you can feel all these emotions, then you can tell a lie from a truth."

She lifted her face, a sudden defiant movement. A look passed over her face, the barest flicker across that calmness. She really couldn't tell lie from truth. Yet she sensed regret, pity, fear. Truth and lie should have come in there somewhere.

"My starved ones are useful from time to time."

"So you starve them deliberately."

"No," she said. "The great creator god sees they are weak and does not sustain them as he sustains us."

"I don't understand."

"They are allowed to feed as gods feed, not as animals."

I frowned. "Sorry, I still don't get it."

"We will show you how a god feeds, Anita." She said my name like it was meant to be said, making it a rolling three syllable word, making of the ordinary name something exotic.

"Shapeshifter coming down," Bernardo said. He had his gun up and pointed.

"I have called a priest to feed the gods."

"Let him come down," I said. I looked at that delicate face and tried to read what was there, but there was nothing home that I could talk to, nothing I could understand. "I don't mean to be insulting, my apologies if I am being insulting, but we came here to talk about the murders. I would like to ask you some questions."

"Your vast knowledge of things arcane and things Aztec has brought us to you," Edward said.

I fought not to raise eyebrows at him, just nodding. "Yeah, what he said."

She actually smiled. "You still believe I and my people are merely vampires. You do not truly believe that we are gods."

She had me there, but she couldn't smell a lie. "I'm Christian. You saw that when the cross glowed. That means I'm a monotheist, so if you guys are gods, then it's something of a problem for me." That was so diplomatic, even I was impressed.

"We will prove it to you, then we will offer you hospitality as our guests, then we will talk business."

I've learned over the years that if someone says they're a god, you don't argue with them unless you're better armed, so I didn't try and get the business moved up. She was nuts and had enough muscle backing her in this building to make her brand of craziness contagious, or even fatal. So we'd do arcane vampire shit, then when the self-proclaimed goddess was satisfied I'd get to ask my questions. How bad could it be, watching them prove they were gods? Don't answer that.

The werejaguar that came through the door was the blue-eyed blond with his golden tan that had first passed so near our table that I'd touched his fur. He came through the door with a neutral face, empty-eyed as if he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to be here.

His gaze took in the room, and hesitated over the dead vamp in the middle. But he fell to one knee in front of Itzpapalotl, his back to us and our guns, fur-covered head bowed. "What would you have of me, holy mistress?"

I fought to keep my face blank. Holy mistress? Good grief.

"I want to show our visitors how a god is fed."

He looked up then, looking into her face. "Who am I to worship, holy mistress?"

"Diego," she said.

The brown-haired vampire startled at the name, and though his face was blank, empty, I knew he wasn't happy. "Yes, my dark goddess, what would you have of me?"

"Seth will offer sacrifice to you." She caressed a delicate hand across the fur of the man's hood.

"As you like, my dark goddess," Diego said. His voice was as empty as his face tried to be.

The werejaguar, Seth, crawled on all fours, mimicking the animal whose skin he wore. He pressed his forehead to his hands, lying nearly prostrate at Diego's feet.

"Rise, priest of our dark goddess, and make sacrifice to us."

The werejaguar stood, and he was nearly half a foot taller than the vampire. He did something on the front of the jaguar skin, and it opened, enough for him to lift the headpiece over his head, so that the animal's sightless glass eyes stared back at us over the man's shoulders. The head flopped bonelessly like a broken-necked thing. His hair was a rich honey blond, sun-streaked, held back in a long club, woven back and forth so that it looked like a lot of hair, but held close to his head so the jaguar skin would slip on easily. It was just like the hairdo on the one who had gotten cut up by the priest back stage.

"Turn so our visitors can see all," Itzpapalotl said.

The men turned so we had a side view. The werejaguar's earlobes were covered in thick white scars. He drew a small silver knife from his belt, the hilt was carved jade. He placed the silver blade against his earlobe, steadying it with his other hand and sliced it open. Blood spilled in scarlet lines on his fingers, down the blade, to drip on the shoulders of the jaguar skin.

Diego went to the taller man, putting a hand behind his neck, and another at the small of his back. It looked oddly like a kiss, as he drew the werejaguar's head downward. The vampire's mouth sealed around the earlobe, drawing it and some of the ear into his mouth. His throat worked as he swallowed, sucking on the wound, drawing it down. The pale blue of his eyes had spread to a sparkling fire like palest sapphires sparkling in the sun. His skin began to glow as if there was white fire inside. The brown of his hair darkened, or maybe that was illusion because of how glowing white his skin had become.

The werejaguar had closed his eyes, head thrown back, breath catching in his throat, as if it felt good. One of his hands lay on the vampire's bare shoulder, and you could see the pressure of his fingers in that pale, glowing flesh.

Diego drew back, flashing fangs. "The wound closes."

"Another offering, my cat," she said.

The vampire moved back just enough for the other man to use the silver blade on the other ear. Then he fell on him, like a lover long refused. He drew back, eyes sparkling with blue light. He looked blind and heavy-lidded as he drew back from him. "The wound closes."

It was actually interesting that the wound closed as fast as it did. Vamps had an anticoagulant in their saliva that should have kept it flowing, and silver

should have forced the shapeshifter to heal human normal, but the wound was closing pretty fast, not fast enough to make me comfortable, but a lot faster than it should have. The only thing I could figure was that Itzpapalotl had somehow given her shapeshifters even more healing ability than a normal shapeshifter. Maybe normal silver bullets wouldn't work on them, not to kill them anyway. It was something to think about, just in case.

"I want them to see what it is to be a god, Diego. Show them, my cat."

The werejaguar opened a seam on the fur that looked almost like it was Velcroed shut. He slit open the front of the fur, having to stop and undo the belt that held knives and a small pouch. The belt dropped to the floor, and he slipped the fur down his body. The golden tan was an all over tan, complete with ... um, you know. Nude sun bathing, how unhealthy.

The jaguar slipped out of the skin until he stood completely nude. He still had the silver knife in his hand. I didn't have a clue what he was about to use it on, but having to strip couldn't be a good sign. He cupped his own penis, and it had come out of the fur smooth and hard, excited. He put the point of the blade against that delicate skin and drew it in a thin crimson line. His breath ran out in a ragged gasp.

It was echoed by me and Olaf. Bernardo said, "Shit!" Eeeyah. I don't think I had as much sympathy as the guys, but that had to hurt. Edward was the only one of us who hadn't made a sound. Either he knew what was coming, or nothing surprised him.

"Diego," Itzpapalotl said, "show them what it means to be a god." There was a thread of warning in her voice, as if she were warning him to do his job. I wasn't sure why because Diego had seemed to thoroughly enjoy the ear sucking. Why wouldn't he do this?

Diego dropped to his knees, and his face was very close to the offered blood, all he had to do was reach out and take it. But he stayed kneeling, staring at the cut flesh with eyes that still blazed pale blue fire. He stayed kneeling until the cut began to heal, and finally vanish as if the flesh had absorbed it. I'd never seen a shapeshifter heal silver that well. Never.

Seth looked over his shoulder, one hand still around his naked penis, though it was beginning to wilt a little. "Holy mistress, what do you wish me to do?"

"Sacrifice," she said, and there was enough heat in that one word to make me shiver.

Seth put the blade point to his flesh again. It seemed harder to get a clean cut when he wasn't fully erect, but he managed. Blood spread in fine rivulets over his skin, staining his fingers with tiny hits of red.

Diego stayed kneeling, but made no move to feed. The fire faded from his eyes, the glow leeching out of the skin, leaving him still lovely, a contrast of pale skin, dark hair, and blue eyes, but he looked defeated somehow, hands limp in his lap.

The four women moved around behind Itzpapalotl, gliding as a unit until they stood in a half-circle behind the kneeling vampire. "You have disappointed me again, Diego," the goddess said.

He shook his head and bowed it, eyes closing. "I am sorry for that, my dark goddess. I would not disappoint you for the sun and the moon itself." But his voice was tired when he said it, like it was a memorized line but his heart wasn't in it.

The four vamps surrounding him pulled black leather bound rods from their belts, and lifted leather bags off the ends. Dozens of thin leather cords spread out from each bag like obscene flowers. Silver balls were braided in the cords so that they sparkled in the torchlight. It was a cat o' nine tails, except it had a lot more tails.

"Why do you insist on refusing this honor, Diego? Why do you make us punish you?"

"I am not a lover of men, my dark goddess, and I will not do this. I am sorry that my refusal pains you, but this one thing I will not do." Again, his voice was tired, as if he'd said all of it before, many times before.

He was about five hundred years old, like the four women that surrounded him. Had he been turning the "honor" down for five centuries?

The four women watched their goddess, not glancing even at the vampire at their feet. Itzpapalotl gave a small nod. Four arms went back, flaring the cat o' nine tails in a fan of silver and leather. They whirled it through the air like they knew what they were doing. They hit him in sequence, right to left, each whip landing a blow, then the next, the next, the next. The blows fell so close together it was like the sound of hard rain, except that this rain was smacking into flesh, and you could hear it thudding home. They whipped him until they drew blood, then they stood motionless around him, waiting.

"Do you still refuse?"

"Yes, my dark goddess, I still refuse."

"When you raped these women long ago, did you dream of the price you would pay?"

"No, my dark goddess, I did not."

"You didn't believe in our gods, did you?"

"No, my dark goddess, I did not."

"You thought your white Christ could save you, didn't you?"

"Yes, my dark goddess, I did."

"You were wrong."

His head hunched between his shoulders as if he were trying to draw into himself like a turtle. The metaphor was funny. The gesture was not. "Yes, my dark goddess, I was wrong."

She gave another nod, and the women began to whip him in a blur that made the whips gleam silver like lightning in their hands. Blood ran in streamers down his back, but he never cried out, never asked for mercy.

I must have made some movement, because Edward stepped close to me, not grabbing my arm, but touching it. I met his eyes, and he gave the barest shake of his head. I wouldn't really risk our lives for a vampire I didn't know, really I wouldn't, but I didn't like it.

Olaf made a small sound. He was watching it with glowing eyes like a child at Christmas who comes down to find that he'd gotten exactly what he

wanted. He'd put up the gun, his big hands clasped in front of him, clasped so hard they were mottled, and a fine tremor ran up his arms. I might not like it, but Olaf did.

I glanced at Edward, sort of nodding to the big man. Edward gave the barest of nods. He saw it, too, but he was ignoring it. I tried. I caught Bernardo's eyes. He was staring at the big man, a look very close to fear on his face. He turned and concentrated on the stairs, turning his back on everything in the room. I'd have liked to join him, but I couldn't turn away. It wasn't just macho crap, you know. If Edward could stand to watch it, then so could I. Though there was a little of that. Mostly it was if Diego could endure it, I could watch it. If I wasn't going to stop it then I had to at least watch. To do nothing to help him and to turn away would have been too much cowardice for me to swallow. I'd have choked on it. The best I could do was try to watch other things around him. The way the women's arms went up and down like machines, as if they would never tire.

The five guards stood impassive, but the vamp that walked at Itzpapalotl's right side watched it with half-parted lips, eyes intent as if afraid to miss even the smallest movement. He was almost as old as the goddess herself, seven, eight hundred years, and for five hundred of those years he'd been watching this particular show, and he still enjoyed it. I knew in that moment that I never wanted to make an enemy of the creatures in this room. I never wanted to be at their mercy. Because they had none.

The other two Spanish survivors had moved back to stand against the far wall, as far from the show as they could get. The one with salt and pepper hair stared at the ground as if there was something of great interest there. The starved one on his leash had curled into a fetal position, as if he were trying to disappear altogether.

The women turned Diego's back into bloody ribbons. A red pool formed at his feet. He curled his upper body over his legs until he was like a little hull of pain. Blood began to drip down his shoulders to form a second puddle in front of him. He was weaving, even that low to the ground, as if he might pass out. I hoped he passed out soon.

I finally did take a step forward, and Edward grabbed my arm. "No," he said.

"You feel pity for him," Itzpapalotl said.

"Yes," I said.

"Diego was one of the strangers that came into our lands. He thought we were barbarians. We were things to be conquered, robbed, raped, slaughtered. Diego never saw us as people, did you, Diego?"

There was no answer this time. He wasn't exactly unconscious but close enough that he was beyond words. "You didn't think we were people, did you, Cristobal?"

I didn't know who Cristobal was, but there was a high keening sound. It was the vampire on the leash. He unrolled from his tight fetal ball. The keening ended in that same awful laughter that I'd heard earlier. The laughter rose up

and up until the vampire holding the leash jerked it tight, pulling him like you'd discipline a dog. I realized that the leash was a choke collar. Shit.

"Answer me, Cristobal."

The vampire let up on the leash enough for the starved one to get a ragged breath. His voice, when it came, was strangely cultured, smooth and sum "No, we did not think you were people, my dark goddess." Then the ragged laughter came from those thin lips, and he huddled around himself again.

"They broke into our temple and raped our priestesses, our virgin priestesses, our nuns. Twelve of them raped these four priestesses. They did unspeakable, vile things to them, forced them with pain and threats of death to do whatever the men wanted them to do."

The women's faces never changed during the speech, as if it were about someone else. They had stopped whipping the man. They just stood there watching him bleed.

"I found them dying in the temple from what had been done to them I offered them life. I offered them vengeance. I made them gods, and then we hunted down the strangers that had raped them, the ones that left them for dead. We took each of them, made them one of us, so their punishment would last forever. But my teyolloquanyies were too strong for most of them. There were twelve of them once. Now only two remain."

Itzpapalotl looked at me, and there was a challenge in her face, a look that demanded an answer. "Do you still feel pity for him?"

I nodded. "Yes, but I understand hate, and revenge is one of my best things."

"Then you see the justice here."

I opened my mouth, Edward's hand tightened on my arm, until it was painful. He forced me to think before I answered. I'd have been careful, but he didn't know that.

"He did a terrible, unforgivable thing. They should have their revenge." In my head I added, though five hundred years of torment seemed a bit much. I killed people when they deserved it, anything beyond that was up to God. I just didn't think I was up to making decisions that would last five hundred years.

Edward eased up on my arm and started to let go of me, when she said, "So you agree with our punishment?" His hand locked back onto my arm, if anything tighter than before.

I glared up at him, hissing under my breath, "You're bruising me."

He let me go, slowly, reluctantly, but the look in his eyes was warning enough. Don't get us killed. I'd try not to. "I would never presume to question the decision of a god." Which was true. If I ever met a god, I wouldn't question their decision. The fact that I didn't believe in any god with a little "g" was beside the point. It wasn't a lie, and it sounded perfect for the situation. When you're prefabricating as fast as you can, it doesn't get better than that.

She smiled, and she was suddenly young and beautiful like a sudden glimpse of the young woman she must have been once. It was almost more of a shock than the rest. I'd expected a lot of things, but not Itzpapalotl to have retained even a shred of her humanity.

"I am very pleased," she said, and she looked at it. I'd pleased the goddess, made her smile. Be still my heart.

She must have made some sign because the whipping continued. They beat him until the white of his spine showed through in places where the flesh had worn completely away. A human would have died long before they got that far, or even a shapeshifter, but the vampire was as alive as when they started. He had collapsed into a little ball, his forehead on the floor, arms trapped under his body, his weight resting on his legs. He was unconscious, but the body didn't fall over. It was propped up by its own weight.

Olaf was making a high-pitched hiss under his breath, fast and faster. If the circumstances had been different, I'd have said he was working up to an orgasm. If that was what he was doing, I so didn't want to know. I ignored him, or did my best to.

The werejaguar stood there through it all, nude, body going limp, the cut long healed as he watched the vampire's body torn apart. He watched it with a neutral face, but occasionally when a blow was particularly vicious, or when the first hint of bone showed through, he winced, gaze sliding away, as if he didn't want to watch but was afraid to actually turn his head away.

"Enough." That one word, and the whips stopped, drooping like wilted flowers. The silver balls had all turned crimson, and blood dripped from the ends of the whips in slow spatters. The women's faces had never changed, as if the faces were just masks, and what lay underneath was inhuman and held all the emotions that the masks could not show. As if the monstrosity inside was more human than the human shells they wore.

The four women walked in a line to a small stone basin in the far corner. They dipped each whip into the water in turn, then ran their hands over each lash almost lovingly.

Olaf tried twice to speak, had to clear his throat, and finally said, "Do you use saddle soap and mink oil on the leather?"

The four women turned as one toward him. Then they all looked at Itzpapalotl. She answered for them. "You sound knowledgeable about such things."

"Not as knowledgeable as they are," he said, and he sounded impressed, like a Cellist seeing Yo-Yo Ma perform for the first time.

"They have had centuries to perfect their craft."

"Do they use their craft just on the bodies of the men who hurt them?" he asked.

"Not always," she said,

"Can they speak?" he asked. He was watching them as if they were something precious and lovely.

"They have taken a vow of silence until the last of their tormentors is dead."

I had to ask. "Are they executing them periodically?"

"No," she said.

I frowned, and the question must have shown on my face.

"We do not execute them. We merely harm them, and if they die of their injuries, then so be it. If they survive, then they live to see another night."

"So you're not going to give Diego any medical attention?" I asked.

Edward's hand had never let go of me during the torture as if he truly didn't trust me not to do something heroic and suicidal. His hand dug into me again, and I'd had my fill. "Let me the fuck go, now, or we are going to have a disagreement... Ted." I wasn't feeling good about watching Diego bleed. I was feeling worse because it hadn't bothered me as much as I thought it should have. I'd have helped him if I could have, as long as it wasn't suicide. He was a stranger and a vampire. I wasn't risking our lives for him, and that was that. Had there been a time when I would have risked us all, even for a strange vampire? I just didn't know anymore.

"Diego has survived far worse than this. He is the strongest of all of them. We broke all the others before they died. They did everything we asked them in the end. Except Diego, and still he fights us." She shook her head, as a dismissing it all. "But we must show you how it is to be done properly. Chualtalocal, show them how the sacrifice is to be embraced."

The vamp that stood at her right hand stepped forward. He walked around the fallen Diego as if he were a pile of trash to be avoided, and left for someone else to clean up. He faced the werejaguar as Diego had faced him, but things had changed. Seth had been all pumped up from having his ears sucked when he first stripped, hard and eager to please. Now he was just naked, and his eyes kept going to the bloody mess that Diego had become as if he was wondering when his turn was coming.

"Make your offering, my cat," she said.

Seth was looking from Diego's body to the vampire in front of me. "My holy mistress, I am willing, you know I am, but I... I seem to be," he swallowed hard enough that I heard it even over the still faint ringing in my ears "I seem to be ..."

"Make your sacrifice, Seth, or suffer my wrath."

The four sisters weird had hung their cat o' nine tails on small hooks in the wall, all in a row like a sadomasochistic version of the seven dwarves with their identical possessions. They glided back towards us all, like sharks scenting blood in the water.

Seth seemed to know they were there. He actually grabbed himself and started trying to get some attention going, but his eyes were flicking wildly through the room as if looking for an escape. He was making the effort, but nothing was happening.

Edward wasn't holding onto my arm anymore, maybe that was it, or maybe I'd just had enough for one night. "You've scared him shitless. It's hard to get it up when you're scared."

She and Chualtalocal looked at me, and their black eyes held nearly identical expressions, not that I chanced looking into the eyes long, but it was still there, disdain. How dare I interfere?

Edward made as if to grab me again. I held up a hand to him. "Don't touch me."

He let his hand fall back, but his eyes were not happy with me. Fine, I wasn't happy with anyone right now.

"And are you offering to help him overcome his fear?" Itzpapalotl asked. The look on her face said plainly that she didn't expect me to offer.

"Sure," I said.

I don't know who looked the most surprised, but I think it was Edward, though Bernardo was a close second from the doorway. Olaf just watched me like a fox watching a rabbit through the fence, who's just spotted a hole big enough to crawl through. I ignored him. It was probably best to always ignore Olaf, if possible. Ignore him or kill him. That was my vote.

I held my hand out to the werejaguar. He hesitated, glancing from the vamp in front of him, to me, to the goddess behind him. I wiggled my fingers at him. "Come on, Seth. We don't have all night."

"Go with her, do as she says, as long as you offer fitting sacrifice."

He took my hand, tentatively, and though he was a six foot plus, naked, limn, there was something very little boyish on his face. Maybe it was the near panic in his baby blues. He was scared, scared that he was going to end up on the floor, meat for the four sisters weird. I didn't blame him for worrying. I think if I hadn't stepped in, that was exactly what was about to happen. But I'd had all the torture I could handle for one night. It wasn't moral outrage. It was just plain outrage. I wanted to ask my questions and get the hell out of here. Vampires can live a very long time, theoretically forever, which means their idea of getting down to business can be damn leisurely. The vamps might have had eternity. I didn't.

I led Seth the werejaguar off to the other side of the room. The easiest thing would have been to work him by hand, but I was like so not doing that. The option I was voting for wasn't that simple, but it was something I was willing to do. I was going to call that part of me that was Richard's mark. Not the connection to him—that was safely walled away. I'd packed it so tight, I wasn't even sure I could open to the mark even on purpose. But I held a part of it inside me. The same part that had recognized Cesar, the same part that let me deal with the wereleopards back home. That electric rush of energy was a turn on to wereanimals. I'd discovered it accidentally. Now I was going to try and do it on purpose.

But it wasn't like a switch. Maybe someday it would be, but right now it took some preparation to get it going. It was maddening that something that came out at odd moments when I didn't want it, would refuse to come out when I did, but psychic shit is like that, unpredictable. It's one of the reasons it's so hard to study in laboratory conditions. X does not always equal Y.

I put my hands on my hips and looked at him, from head to foot, and didn't know where to start. My life would be both easier and harder if I was into casual sex, but for better or worse, it wasn't my cup of tea.

"Can you undo your hair?"

"Why?" He sounded suspicious, and I didn't blame him.

"Look, I could have let her turn you over to her pet torturers, but I didn't. So work with me here."

His hands went to the knot at the back of his head. He pulled long pins out of his hair, and finally a comb that was made of bone. The hair uncurled slowly as if it were stretching from some long sleep, sliding down his back in a heavy mass. I walked behind him and he started to turn and watch me. I touched his shoulder, made him face front. "I'm not going to hurt you, Seth. I'm probably the only person in this room that won't."

He kept his face front, but there was a tension to his shoulder, his back that said he didn't like it. I didn't care. We needed to do this fast. Call it hunch but the goddess didn't strike me as patient.

I unrolled his hair, helping it slide down his back. The colors were extraordinary, bright yellow, rich gold, a pale almost white, all of it streaked together, each color blending into the next the way sea water blends one color into the next, distinct but making a whole. I ran my hands through the thick warmth of his hair until it lay spread across his back, an inch past his waist. I grabbed two handfuls of hair and pressed it to my cheek. There was the close smell of sweat and the scent of the fur he'd worn. He had a cologne, faint on his skin, something so sweet, it smelled like candy. I spread the hair apart until I could see the skin of his back, and laid my face against the warmth of him. He smelled warm, as if you could sink your teeth into him like something fresh from the oven. I walked around him, hands trailing lightly over his skin, touching mostly the fall of that sun-streaked hair.

I came to stand in front of him, looked up into those wide, still half-afraid eyes, but a glance down his body showed that I'd made some progress, not enough, but some.

I didn't look at the vampires, or Edward, or anybody. I concentrated just on the man in front of me. To look elsewhere was to lose ground. I took his hand, and that pale golden tan looked darker against the paleness of my skin, I lowered my face over his hand as if I'd kiss it, but I brushed my lips barely against his skin, moving up his arm, breathing in the scent of his skin. I opened my mouth, laying my breath like a warm touch just above the skin of his arm. It raised the pale hairs on his arm in a march of goosebumps.

He flexed the hand I was holding, rolling me into his body with my back resting against the front of him. His other arm wrapped around from the other side, enfolding me in the warmth of his body. He laid his face on the top of my head, and a spill of his hair fell across me like a warm sweet scented curtain. The firelight danced through the gold of his hair, turning it into an amber cage, carved of light. He kissed the top of my head, then laid a gentle kiss against my temple, the top of my cheekbone, my cheek. He was so tall that in bending over he enveloped me in his body, covering me in the feel of him. The candy smell of his cologne breathed along his skin, and my body constricted with it. The smell was the key. The power spilled upward in a warm liquid rush that brought me to tiptoe, made me luxuriate against his body like a cat with catnip, wanting to roll my body in the scent. My body writhed against his as the power rode in almost painful waves, so warm, it was almost hot, rising off my body like invisible steam.

One hand stayed around my waist, the other touched my chin, turning my face back to meet his mouth. He kissed me, and for a second I stiffened, but I'd learned that if you called the power, you didn't fight it. You embraced it. If you fought it, then you had less control. I kissed him back. I expected the power to push out my mouth into his like it had with Cesar, but it didn't. The kiss was nice, but it was just the feel of his lips on mine. His warmth pushed against mine, his power like a trembling shadow spilling along mine. We stood wrapped in a curtain of his hair, a circle of arms, and a vibrating blanket of that skin-dancing power that was all shapeshifter.

He shuddered against me, arms hugging me close. I could tell he was ready for sacrifice without looking, but I had to glance down anyway. He was ready. I pulled free of him, gently. "You're ready to go back to the vamps, Seth. I think you're ready to make a sacrifice." I made myself look him in the eyes.

He bent and kissed my forehead, gently. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

We walked back to the vamps hand in hand. But it wasn't the vampires that made me uncomfortable as we crossed the room. It was the humans, Bernardo looked like he was reconsidering my status as untouchable Madonna. Olaf had an almost hungry look on his face. It was closer to the way werewolves looked at you on the night of full moon than the way a man looks at a woman. Edward had a slight frown between his eyes, which for him meant he was bothered by something. The vampires looked about like I'd expected. Itzpapalotl looked serious, as if she hadn't known I could call the power up on purpose. It's why they'd apologized for dragging me up on stage earlier.

I gave Seth over to Chualtalocal like a father handing the bride to the groom. Then I moved back to stand by Edward. He looked at me, as if he was the one trying to read me for a change, and failing. It was almost worth it, if I could confuse Edward.

"Did you enjoy yourself, my cat?" the goddess asked.

"Yes, holy mistress, I did."

"Are you ready to make sacrifice?"

"Yes, holy mistress."

"Then do so." She looked past him to me, as if she didn't like what she saw. Something about what I'd done with Seth had disturbed her. Had she expected me to take him off in the corner and just do him by hand like a fluffer in a porno movie? Had the fact that I'd used power as well as mild sex disturbed her? Or had she seen something I hadn't, or understood something I did not? No way of knowing short of asking, and admitting that kind of ignorance to master vamps is a good way to get killed. So no questions about magic, just eventually, hopefully about the case.

Seth picked up the small silver blade again. He cradled his flesh in his hand and set the tip of the blade against himself. I caught Bernardo turning back towards the door. The blade tip bit into flesh, and I looked away. I think we all did, except for Olaf. It might have startled him the first time, but he was over the shock. Blood was being spilled, flesh being cut. Olaf couldn't miss that.

He watched the cutting, but then I caught him turning away out of the corner of my eye, and I had to look. I had to see what was bad enough for Olaf not to be able to stomach it.

The vampire had gone to his knees. I guess maybe I'd expected him to just lick the blood off, but he wasn't. He was sucking at it the way that Diego had sucked at Seth's ears, except this wasn't an ear. The vampire had covered almost every inch of Seth with its mouth. Seth's eyes were closed, and there was a look of concentration on his face.

I looked away again and found myself meeting the dead eyes of the four fallen nuns. Those empty, angry faces were almost harder to stare at than a vampire going down on someone. I literally turned my back on all of them and found that Olaf had done the same thing. He was hugging himself and staring at nothing. His discomfort rose off of him in almost visible waves. Even with his back turned, the sounds carried. I wished for the ringing in my ears to get worse.

Soft, sucking sounds, wet sounds, the sound of flesh in flesh, and the sharp intake of breath that was probably Seth. His breath came in three fast pants, and he spoke, "Please, holy mistress, I am not sure of my control tonight."

"You know the punishment," she said. "Surely, that is incentive enough to hold yourself in check."

I glanced back then and found that Seth was staring back over his shoulder at the four women in the corner. When he turned back, he looked scared. The vampire was still feeding, sucking, throat swallowing. Surely, the wound had healed by now, unless they'd made a second wound while I was being embarrassed and not looking.

Seth dug his fingernails into the palms of his hands. His hands paled with the force of squeezing nails into his own flesh. He threw his head back suddenly, breath coming fast, faster, fastest. The vampire pulled off of him, leaving him hard and still intact. "The wound has closed."

Chualtalocal stood and went back to his mistress. The moment there was room, Seth collapsed to his knees, opening his hands slowly as if they hurt. There were bloody half-moons where his nails had bitten into his palms. But it had worked. Any distraction to keep him out of the clutches of the goddess's pet freaks.

"I offer you hospitality, to you and your friends. You may have Seth if you like and finish him as his body seems to so badly need."

I suddenly knew what she meant by hospitality. Somehow I didn't think that was Aztec culture, though if I remembered correctly, hadn't some of the Aztecs sent Cortes and his men women along with food and gold? Maybe this wasn't any different. But I didn't want to mess with it.

"Dawn is coming. I can feel it pressing against the darkness like a weight about to tear the night apart."

She turned her head to one side and seemed to think, or maybe she was sensing the night, the air, something. "Yes," she said, "I feel it, too."

"Then if it isn't too large an insult, can we skip the hospitality for tonight and get to the murders?"

"Only if you give me your word that you will return and taste our hospitality before you go back to Saint Louis."

I glanced at Edward. He shrugged. I guess it was up to me. What else was new when it came to monster? "I don't agree to having sex with your people, but I'll agree to a return visit."

"You seemed to like Seth. I would offer you Cesar, who your power seemed to like even more, but he does not make sacrifice, nor does he act as hospitality. It is his price for letting us come so near killing him twice a month."

"You mean because he lets you nearly tear his heart out twice a month, he doesn't have to make sacrifice or all the other stuff?"

"That is what I mean."

It made me think better of ol' Cesar. I'd seen his show, and now I'd seen some of the behind the scenes stuff, and I had to say that it was a close call which was worse. Letting someone cut your chest open and touch your still beating heart, or letting vamps suck blood off of tender body parts and be offered for sex to strangers. No, come to think of it, I'd have rather had my chest cut open, as long as I knew I'd heal completely every time.

"It's not that Seth isn't lovely to look at. I'm sure it would be a pleasure to be with him, but I don't do casual sex. Thanks for thinking of me though. I know the police spoke with you."

"They did. I do not think they learned anything of value from me."

"Maybe they didn't ask the right questions," I said.

"And what are the right questions?"

I was about to do something that the police wouldn't like at all. I was about to tell the monsters, someone they had suspected at one point of being the murderer, details of the crime. But she needed specific details or how was she to recognize the marks of some Aztec bogeyman? I knew how the cops had done it. They'd been so general, it was almost useless to show up. I understood why they did it that way. Once I opened my mouth and let out details to Itzpapalotl, then she was contaminated. They'd never be able to slip her up in an interrogation, because she got the secret details from me.

What I knew and the police couldn't was that they'd never interrogate the truth out of her. She was the kind of vamp that could sit in a dark room and watch the colors on the inside of her own eyeballs and be content. The only thing they could threaten her with was the death penalty, and if she was behind the murders, it was already a death penalty. One of the downfalls to a swift and certain punishment was that it took a lot of the give and play out of an interrogation. Once someone knows they are going to be executed, you can't bargain with them.

"Can we clear the room out a little?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can we have fewer of your people in here? I'm going to share confidential police information with you, and I don't want it to get out."

"Whatever you say in this room remains in this room. No one here will talk of it to anyone else. I can promise you this." She was utterly sure of

herself, arrogant. But why not? All of her people were terrified of her. If what happened to Diego was commonplace, then think what the exotic stuff must be. If she dictated that the secrets were safe, they were safe.

Edward stepped close to me. He lowered his voice though he didn't try and whisper. "Are you sure about this?"

"I'm sure, Edward. She can't help if she doesn't have enough information." We looked at each other for a few seconds, then he gave a small nod. I turned back to the waiting vampire. "Okay," I said, and I told her about the survivors, and the dead.

I don't know what I expected, maybe for her to be titillated, or to go, aha, and recognize the monster responsible. What I got was serious attention, good questions at the right places, and a glimpse at a very intelligent mind behind all the games. If she wasn't a delusional, sadistic, megalomaniac, would-be goddess, she might have been likable.

"The skins of men are valuable to Xipe Totec and Tlazolteotl. The priests would flay the sacrifice and wear the skin. The heart had many uses for the gods. Even the flesh was used, at least in part. Sometimes, the insides of a sacrifice would have some strange thing inside it, and be an omen. Then the other organs might be kept for a time and studied, but it was rare."

"Can you think why they would cut out the tongues?"

"To keep them from speaking the secrets they have seen." She said it, like of course that was the reason. It made sense ritually, I guess.

"Why cut off the eyelids?"

"So they can never not see the truth, even though they cannot speak it. I do not know if this is why they have done these awful things."

"Why would someone remove the outward secondary sex characteristics?"

"I do not understand," she said, and she was holding the cloak close about her, as if she were cold. We'd been talking long enough, I had to remind myself not to look directly in her eyes.

"The genitalia on the men, the breasts on the women, were removed." She shuddered, and I knew something I hadn't before. Itzpapalotl, the goddess of the obsidian blade, was frightened. "It sounds like some of the things the Spanish did to our people."

"But the flaying and taking the organs, that's more Aztec, than European." She nodded. "Yes, but our sacrifices were messengers to the gods. We caused pain only for sacred purposes, not for cruelty or a whim. All blood was holy. If you died at the hand of a priest, you died knowing it served a greater purpose. Literally, your death helped the rain to fall, the maize to grow, the sun to rise in the sky. I do not know of any god that would flay people and leave them alive. Death is necessary for the messenger to reach the gods, Death is part of the worship of the deity. The Spaniards taught us to kill for the sake of killing, not as a sacred trust, but just for slaughter." She stared past me at the four women that waited patiently for her to notice them, for her to give them a purpose. "We have learned the lesson well, but I would rather have stayed in a world where it was not true." I saw in her face that she had some clue to what she'd lost, to what her vampires had lost when she decided they would become as cruel as

their enemies. "The Spaniards killed so many of our people along the road to Acachinanco that they tied white handkerchiefs over their noses because of the stench of rotting bodies."

She looked at me then, and the hatred in those eyes burned along my skin. After five hundred years, she still carried a grudge. You had to admire someone who could hold on to hate like that. I thought I knew how to hold a grudge, but looking into her face, I realized I was wrong. There was room in me for forgiveness. In Itzpapalotl's face there was room for only one thing, hatred. She'd been angry about the same thing for over five hundred years. She'd been punishing people for the same crimes for five hundred years. It was impressive in a psychotic sort of way.

I hadn't learned much more about the murders than when I'd stepped through the doors. I'd mostly learned negatives. A genuine Aztec didn't recognize the murders as the work of any god or cult associated with the Aztec pantheon. It was good to know, something to cross off the list. Police work is mostly negatives. Finding out what you don't know, so you can decide what you do. I didn't know anything positive about the murders, but I knew one thing for absolute certain as I listened to the outrage in her voice about atrocities older than the entire country we were sitting in. I never wanted this woman mad at me. I'd told people that I'd chase them into hell to have my vengeance, but I probably didn't mean it. Itzpapalotl would mean every word.

Chapter 27

IT WAS STILL DARK as Edward drove us homeward. Still night, true dark, the vampires still roamed, but that soft edge in the air let you know the light is coming. If we hurried, we'd make it into bed before true dawn. If we dawdled, we'd get to see the sun come up. None of us seemed to be dawdling. We sat in the car in a silence that no one seemed willing to break.

We left the club behind and drove out into the hills beyond towards Santa Fe. Stars spread like a blanket of cold fire across the soft black silk of the sky. The sky had that larger than life, empty quality it gets over large bodies of water or in the desert.

Olaf's voice came out of the darkness, low and strangely intimate the way voices can be in a car at night. "If we'd accepted their hospitality, do you think I could have had the vampire they whipped?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Define have?" I said.

"Have, to do with as I liked."

"What would you have done with him if they had?" Bernardo said.

"You don't want to know, and I don't want to hear it," Edward said. He sounded tired.

"I thought you liked women, Olaf," Bernardo said it. I didn't say it, honest.

"For sex I like women, but so much blood. It shouldn't have gone to waste." He sounded wistful.

I turned in my seat and tried to see his face in the dark. "So it's not just women who have to be careful around you, is that it? Does it just have to bleed to be attractive?"

"Leave him alone, Anita. About this, leave him the fuck alone."

I turned to look at Edward. He rarely cussed, and he rarely sounded as tired and almost overwhelmed as he did now. "Okay, I mean, sure."

Edward glanced in the rearview mirror. There wasn't a car in either direction for miles. I think he was looking at Olaf. He stared into the mirror a long time. I think they had some major eye contact going.

He finally blinked and went back to staring at the road, but he didn't seem happy.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Us," Bernardo said. "What isn't he telling us?"

"All right, what aren't you telling us?"

"It's not my secret to tell," Edward said, and that was all he'd say. He and Olaf had a secret, and they weren't willing to share.

We finished the rest of the drive in silence. The sky was still black, but it was a paler black, the stars dim in it. Dawn was tremblingly close when we went into the house. I was so tired, my eyes burned. But Edward took me by the arm and led me down the small hallway away from the bedrooms. He kept his voice low. "Be very careful of Olaf."

"He's big and bad. I get it."

He dropped his hand from my arm, shaking his head. "I don't think you do."

"Look, I know he's a convicted rapist. I saw the way he looked at Professor Dallas tonight, and I saw his reaction to the blood and torture. I don't know what you're not telling me, but I know that Olaf would hurt me if he could I know that."

"You're afraid of him?"

I took a breath. "Yeah, I'm afraid of him."

"Good," Edward said. He hesitated then said, "You fit his vic profile."

"Excuse me?"

"His favorite victims are petite women, usually Caucasian, but always with long dark hair. I told you I would never have brought him in on this case if I'd known you were coming down, too. It isn't just because you're a woman. You're his physical ideal for a victim."

I stared at him for a few seconds, mouth opened, then closed it, and tried to think what to say. "Thanks for telling me, Edward. Shit. You should have told me this up front."

"I was hoping he could hold his act together, but I saw him tonight, too. I'm worried that he'll snap. I just don't want you to be the one in the way when it happens."

"Send him back to wherever he came from, Edward. We don't need him if he adds to the problem."

He shook his head. "No, he's got a specialty that's perfect for this case."

"And that specialty would be?"

He gave that small smile. "Go to bed, Anita. It's already dawn."

"No," I said, "almost, but not quite."

He studied my face. "You can really feel the sunrise without looking?"

I nodded. "Yep."

He looked at me, and it was as if he were trying to read me now. For the first time I felt that maybe, just maybe, Edward was as puzzled by me as I was by him, sometimes. He escorted me to my room and left me at the door like an overprotective date.

I was glad I'd prepared the room for safety before I left. If someone came through the window, they'd knock the dolls over or step on the mirror with its antlers. The door would have a chair and the suitcase in front of it. The room was as safe as it was going to get. I undressed, putting the guns and knives on the bed until I could decide exactly what was staying where for overnight. A man's extra large T-shirt that hung past my knees came out of the overnight bag. I'd started keeping one change of clothes, nightclothes, and toiletries in the overnight bag ever since the airline lost my luggage on a business trip. The last thing I pulled out of the overnight bag was my toy penguin Sigmund. I used to only sleep with Sigmund every so often, but lately, he'd been my constant companion under the sheets. A girl needs something to cuddle with at night.

The Browning Hi-Power was my other constant companion. At home it stayed in a holster I'd rigged to my headboard. Here I put it under my pillow, making very sure the safety was on. It always made me slightly nervous to put a loaded gun under my pillow. Seemed less than safe, but not nearly as unsafe as being unarmed if Olaf came through the door. I had brought four knives with me. One of them went between the mattresses. I put the Firestar back into the suitcase. I wanted something bigger than a handgun. I had a sawed-off shotgun and a mini-Uzi. Normally, I'd have brought more big guns, but I knew Edward would have more and better, and he would share. I finally decided on the mini-Uzi with a modified clip that held thirty rounds with enough humph to cut a vampire in half. It was a gift from Edward so the ammo was probably illegal, but then so was the gun. I'd been almost embarrassed about carrying it at first, but one night last August I used it for real. I'd pointed it at a vampire, pulled the trigger, and cut him in half. It had looked like his body was torn in half by some giant hand. His upper body had fallen slowly to one side. His lower body collapsed to its knees. I still had the vision of it like a slow motion image. There was no horror or regret. It was just a memory. The vampire had come with a hundred of his friends to kill us. I'd tried to kill one of them as messily as possible to get the rest to leave us alone. It hadn't worked, but that was only because the vampires were more afraid of their Master of the City than of me.

Maybe the Uzi was overkill for a human being, but if by some chance I emptied the Browning into Olaf's chest and he didn't go down, I wanted to

make sure he didn't reach me. I'd cut him in half and see if the pieces could crawl.

Chapter 28

IT WAS AFTER FIVE when I finally closed my eyes. Sleep sucked me under like a roll of black water, dragging me deep, and instantly into a dream. I stood in a dark place. There were small stunted trees everywhere, but they were dead. All the trees were dead. I could feel it.

Something crashed over to my right, something large moving through the trees, and a sense of dread rode before it like a wind. I ran, hands up to protect my face from the dry branches. I tripped over a root and went sprawling. There was a sharp pain in my arm. It was bleeding. Blood poured down it, but I couldn't find a wound.

The thing was getting closer. I could hear tree trunks snapping with sharp explosions. It was coming. It was coming for me. I ran, and ran, and ran, and the dead trees stretched out forever and there was no escape.

A typical chase dream, I thought, and the moment I thought it, I realized it was a dream, and the dream changed, faded into another dream. Richard standing in nothing but a sheet, one tanned muscled arm reaching out to me. His brown hair falling in a froth of waves around his face. I reached for him, and as my fingertips brushed his, a smile curving his lips, the dream shattered, and I woke.

I woke, blinking into a patch of sunlight that spilled across the bed. But it hadn't been the light that had woken me. There was a light tapping on my door. A man's voice. "Edward says get up."

It took me a moment to realize it was Bernardo's voice. It didn't take Freud to analyze the dream at the end with Richard in a sheet. I was going to have to be careful around Bernardo. Embarrassing, but true.

I sat up in bed, yelling through the door, "What time is it?"

"Ten."

"Okay, I'm coming."

I listened but didn't hear him walk away. Either the door was more solid than it looked, or Bernardo was quiet. If it had just been Edward, I'd have thrown on a pair of jeans under the over-sized T-shirt, and had some coffee. But there was company in the house and it was all male. I managed to get into the bathroom and dress without meeting anyone in the hallway. I was wearing dark blue jeans, a navy blue polo shirt, white jogging socks, and in black Nikes. Normally, I'd left the guns off until I went out into the big bad world, but at Edward's house the big bad world was staying in the next room so I put the

Firestar 9 mm in an inner pants holster, set for a right-handed cross draw. Brushed, cleaned, and armed, I wandered toward the smell of bacon.

The kitchen was small and narrow and white. But all the appliances were black, and the starkness of the contrast was almost too much first thing in the morning. There was another bouquet of wild flowers in the middle of a small white wooden table. Donna had struck again, but truthfully I agreed with her. The kitchen needed something to soften it.

The two men sitting at the table did nothing to humanize the room. Olaf had shaved so that the only hair left were the black lines of his eyebrows. He wore a black tank top, black dress slacks. Couldn't see the shoes, but I was betting on a monochrome look. He was also wearing a black shoulder rig with a big automatic of some kind. I didn't recognize the brand. A black-hilted knife was in a holster under his left arm.

Shoulder holsters chaff when you wear them with tank tops, but hey, it wasn't my problem.

Bernardo wore a white short-sleeved T-shirt and black jeans. He'd pulled the top layer of his hair back on either side with a large multi-colored barrette. There was still plenty of hair to fall down past his shoulders, stark and black against the pure whiteness of his shirt. He was wearing a ten mil Beretta just in back of his right hip. I couldn't see a knife on him, but I was betting it was there.

Edward was at the stove, emptying a pan of scrambled eggs onto two plates. He was also wearing black jeans with matching cowboy boots, and a white shirt that was a twin of the one he'd worn yesterday.

"Gee, guys, do I have to go back to my room and change?"

They all looked at me, even Olaf. "What you're wearing is fine," Edward said. He carried the plates to the table and put one in front of each of the empty chairs. There was a plate of bacon in the center of the table beside the flowers.

"But I don't match," I said.

Edward and Bernardo smiled. Olaf didn't. Big surprise. "You guys look like you're in uniform," I said.

"I guess we do," Edward said. He sat down in one of the empty chairs.

I sat in the other one. "You should have told me there was a dress code."

"We didn't do it on purpose," Bernardo said.

I nodded. "Which is what makes it funny."

"I am not changing clothes," Olaf said.

"No one's asking you to," I said. "I was making an observation." My eggs had bits of green and red things in them. "What's in the eggs?"

"Green peppers, red chilies, and diced ham," Edward said.

"Gee, Edward, you shouldn't have." I liked my scrambled eggs the way God intended them, plain. I pushed the eggs around with my fork, and reached for the bacon. Half the plate was barely cooked, the other half done to a crisp. I went for the crisp.

The bacon on Olaf's plate was the crispy kind, too. Oh, well.

I said grace over the food. Edward kept eating, but the others hesitated, uncomfortable with their mouths full. It's always fun to say grace at a table with

people who don't. That uncomfortable silence. The panic while they wonder whether to keep chewing or to stop. I finished praying and took a bite of bacon. Yum. "What's the game plan for today?" I asked.

"You haven't finished looking at the files," Edward said.

Bernardo groaned.

"I think it is a waste of time," Olaf said. "We have gone over the files. I do not believe that she will find anything new."

"She's already done that," Edward said.

Olaf looked at him, a piece of bacon half way to his mouth. "What do you mean?"

Edward told them.

"That is nothing," Olaf said.

"It's more than you came up with," Edward said, quietly.

"If I am such a burden on this job, maybe I should leave," Olaf said.

"If you can't work with Anita, maybe you should."

Olaf stared at him. "You would rather have her as backup instead of me?" He sounded astonished.

"Yes," Edward said.

"I could break her in half over my knee," Olaf said. The astonishment was turning to anger. I suspected that most emotions turned into anger for Olaf.

"Maybe," Edward said, "but I doubt she'd give you the chance."

I held up my hand. "Don't make this a competition, Edward."

Olaf turned to me, slowly. He spoke very slowly, very clearly. "I do not compete with women."

"Afraid you can't measure up?" I asked. The moment I said it, I wished I hadn't. The momentary satisfaction wasn't worth the look on his face as he rose from his chair. I leaned into the table and drew the Firestar, pointing it in his general direction under the table.

Olaf stood, looming over me, like a muscular tree. "Edward has spent the morning talking to me about you. Trying to convince me that you are worth listening to." He shook his head. "You are a witch and I am not. The thing we hunt may be magical and we need your expertise. Maybe this is all true, but I will not be insulted by you."

"You're right," I said, "I'm sorry. It was a cheap shot."

He blinked at me. "You are apologizing?"

"Yes, on the rare, rare occasions when I'm wrong, I can apologize."

Edward was staring at me across the table.

"What?" I asked.

He just shook his head. "Nothing."

"Olaf's hatred of women is sort of a handicap, and I try not to make fun of people with handicaps."

Edward closed his eyes and shook his head. "You just couldn't leave it alone, could you?"

"I am not a cripple."

"If you hate anyone or anything with an unreasoning, uncompromising hatred, then you are blind where that hatred is concerned. The police kicked me

out of a crime scene yesterday because the cop in charge is a right-winger squeaky-clean Christian, and he considers me devil spawn. So he'd rather more people get killed and mutilated than have me help him solve the case. He hates me more than he wants to catch this monster."

Olaf was still standing, but some of the tension had drained away. He seemed to actually be listening to me.

"Do you hate women more than you want to catch this monster?"

He looked at me, and for once his eyes weren't angry. They were thoughtful. "Edward called me because I am the best. I have never walked away from a job until the quarry was dead.

"And if it takes my preternatural expertise to help kill the monster, can you deal with that?"

"I don't like it," he said.

"I know that, but that's not what I asked. Can you handle my expertise helping you kill the monster? Can you take my help if it is the best thing for the job?"

"I don't know," he said. At least he was being honest, even reasonable. It was a start.

"The question, Olaf, is which do you love more: the kill or your hatred of women?"

I could feel Edward's and Bernardo's stillness. The room held its collective breath waiting for the answer.

"I would rather kill than do anything else," Olaf said.

I nodded. "Great, and thank you."

He shook his head. "If I take your help, it does not mean that I consider you my equal."

"Me either," I said.

Someone kicked me under the table. I think it was Edward. But Olaf and I nodded at each other, not exactly smiling, but I think we had a truce. If he could control his hatred, and I could control my smart-ass impulses, the truce might last long enough for us to solve the case. I managed to reholster the Firestar without him noticing, which made me think less of him. Edward had noticed, and I think, so had Bernardo. What was Olaf's specialty? What good was he if he didn't know where the guns were?

Chapter 29

AFTER BREAKFAST WE HEADED back into the dining room. Bernardo had volunteered to do the dishes. I think he was looking for any excuse to get out of the paperwork. Though I was beginning to wonder if Bernardo had been as

badly spooked by the mutilations as Edward had been. Even the monsters were afraid of this one.

Last night I'd been ready to look at the forensic reports next, but in the clear light of day I could admit that it was cowardice. Reading about it was not as bad as seeing it. I so did not want to look at the photos. I was afraid to see them, and the moment I admitted that to myself, I moved them to the top of the list.

Edward suggested we stick all the pictures on the walls of the dining room.

"And put pin holes in your nice clean walls," I said.

"Don't be barbaric," Edward said. "We'll use sticky putty." He held up a small packet of the pliable yellow rectangles. He peeled off some and handed it to Olaf and me.

I squeezed the stuff between my fingers, rolling it into a ball. It made me smile. "I haven't seen this stuff since elementary school."

The three of us spent the next hour putting the pictures up on the wall. Just handling the sticky putty made me remember fourth grade and helping Miss Cooper hang Christmas decorations on the walls.

We'd hung cheerful Santas, fat candy canes, and bright balls. Now I was hanging vivisectioned bodies, close-ups of skinless faces, shots of rooms full of body parts. By the time we had one wall covered I was mildly depressed. Finally, the pictures took up almost all the empty white wall space.

I stood in the center of the room and looked at it all. "Sweet Jesus."

"Too harsh for you?" Olaf asked.

"Back off, Olaf," I said.

He started to say something else but Edward said, "Olaf." It was amazing how much menace he could put into one ordinary word.

Olaf thought about it for a second or two, but in the end he let it go. Either Olaf was getting smarter or he was afraid of Edward, too. Guess which way I was voting.

We'd grouped the photos by crime scene in large clusters. This was my first glimpse of the bodies that had been torn apart.

Doctor Evans had described the bodies being cut by a blade of unknown origin, then disjointed by hand. But that had been a very clean description of what had actually been done.

At first, all my eyes could see was blood and pieces. Even knowing what I was looking at, my mind refused to see it at first. It was like looking at one of those 3-D pictures where at first it's just colors and dots, then suddenly you see it. Once you see it, you can't unsee it. My mind was trying to protect me from what I was looking at by just simply not allowing me to make sense of it. My mind was protecting me, and it only does that when it's bad, really really bad.

If I had just walked out now before my eyes made sense of it, I might escape the full horror of it all. I could turn on my heel and march out of here I could just refuse to take one more terror into my brain. Probably a good idea for my own sanity, but it wouldn't help the next family that this thing got hold

of. It wouldn't stop the mutilations, the deaths. So I stood there and made myself stare up at the first picture, waiting to see what was really there.

The blood was brighter than movie blood, a cherry red. They'd gotten to this scene before the blood had started to dry.

I spoke without turning around. "How did the police find the bodies so quickly in this house? The blood is still fresh."

Edward answered, "The husband's parents were supposed to meet them for an early breakfast, before work."

I had to look away from the picture, at the floor. "You mean his parents found him like this?"

"It gets worse," Edward said.

"How could it possibly get worse?" I asked.

"The wife told her best friend she was pregnant. The breakfast meeting was to tell the husband's parents they were about to be grandparents for the first time."

The rug swam in my vision, like looking at it through water. I reached back for a chair and eased my way into it. I put my head between my knees and breathed very carefully.

"You all right?" Edward asked.

I nodded without raising up. I waited for Olaf to make a sarcastic remark, but he didn't. Either Edward had warned him off or he thought it was horrible, too.

When I was sure I wasn't going to throw up or faint, I spoke with my head still between my knees. "When did the parents arrive at the house? What time?"

I heard paper rustle. "Six-thirty."

I rested my cheek against my knee. It felt good. "When did the sun come up?"

"I don't know," Edward said.

"Find out," I said. Gee, the rug on the floor was kind of pretty.

I raised up slowly, still practicing nice even breaths. The room did not swim. Good. "The grandparents-to-be arrived at six-thirty. It takes what, ten minutes, less, for them to recover enough to call the cops. Then uniforms arrive on the scene first. It could take thirty minutes or an hour, more, for a crime scene photographer to arrive, and yet the blood is still fresh. It hasn't dulled yet, let alone started to brown."

"The parents nearly walked in on it," Edward said.

"Yeah," I said.

"What difference does that make?" Olaf asked.

"If dawn was close to six-thirty, then the critter can be out in daylight, or it went to hole close to the murder scene. If it wasn't close to dawn, then it may be limited to darkness."

Edward was smiling down at me like a proud parent. "Even with your head between your knees, you're still thinking about the job."

"But what does it gain us," Olaf said, "if the creature is limited to darkness or daylight?"

I looked up at him. He was looming over me again, but I kept sitting down. Wouldn't look very macho if I stood up and fell down. "If it's limited to darkness, then it may help us figure out what kind of critter it is. There really aren't that many preternatural creatures that are limited exclusively to darkness. It would help narrow the list."

"And if it holed up near the first murder scene," Edward said, "we might find some traces."

I nodded. "Yeah."

"The police tramped over that area within an inch of its life," Olaf said. "Are you saying you can find something that they can't?" His arrogance was showing.

"With the first murder, especially, the police were looking for a human perpetrator. If you're looking for a human being, you look for different things than if it's a monster." I smiled. "Besides, if we didn't all think we could find things that the police couldn't, we wouldn't be here. Edward wouldn't have called us in, and the police wouldn't have shared the files with him."

Olaf frowned. "I have never seen you smile like this, Edward, unless you are pretending to be Ted. You took like a proud teacher whose pupil is doing well."

"More like Frankenstein with his monster," I said.

Edward thought about it for a second, then nodded and grinned, pleased with himself. "I like that."

Olaf frowned at both of us. "You did not create her, Edward."

"No," I said, "but he helped make me the woman I am today."

Edward and I looked at each other, and the smiles faded from both our faces, leaving us solemn. "Am I supposed to apologize for that?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Do you feel like apologizing for it?"

"No," he said.

"Then don't. I'm alive, Edward, and I'm here." I stood and didn't sway at all. Life was good.

"Let's find out if any of the killings took place after daylight. When I've looked at all this shit, let's go see some murder scenes." I looked at Edward. "If that's all right with you. You is the boss."

He gave a small nod. "That's fine, but to keep Ted working with the Santa Fe PD, we'll need to include them at the murder sites."

"Yeah," I said, "police don't like civvies mucking up their murder scenes, makes them testy."

"Besides, you're already persona non grata in Albuquerque," Edward said. "We've got to keep some of the cops willing to talk to you."

"And that's really bugging me," I said. "I'm barred from the freshest crime scenes, the newest evidence. I don't need another handicap on a case like this."

"You don't know what it is either, do you?" Edward said.

I shook my head, and sighed. "Not a damn clue." Bless his chauvinistic heart, but Olaf didn't say, I told you so.

I went back to staring at the pictures, and suddenly I could see it. I let out a breath, and said, softly, "Wow." The room seemed hot. Dammit, I was not

going to have to sit down again. I put my fingertips on either side of the wall steadying myself, but it must have looked like I was trying for a closer look. Trust me, I was as close as I ever wanted to get. I finally had to close my eyes for just a few seconds. When I opened them, I was okay or as okay as I was likely to be.

Body parts scattered like flower petals, stirred into a red mess. My eye flicked from one blood-covered lump to another. I was almost sure that was a forearm, and the ball of a knee joint showed whitely amid all the red. I'd never seen so many pieces before. I'd seen bodies torn apart before, but that had been for food or punishment. But there was a terrible completeness to this ... destruction. I moved on to a shot of the same image but from a slightly different angle. I tried to put the body together in my head, but kept coming up short on parts.

I finally turned around. "There's no head and no hands." I pointed at small lumps in the blood. "Unless those are fingers. Was the body completely disjointed even down to the finger bones?"

Edward nodded. "Every victim has been almost completely dismembered down to the joints."

"Why?" I asked. I looked at Edward. "Where's the head?"

"They found it down the hill behind the house. The brain was missing."

"How about the heart?" I asked. "I mean there's the spine, almost intact, but I don't see any viscera. Where are all the internal organs?"

"They didn't find them," Edward said.

I leaned back, half-sitting on the table. "Why take the internal organs? Did they eat them? Is it part of some magical ritual? Or is it just part of the ritual of the killing itself, a souvenir?"

"There are a lot of organs in the body," Olaf said. "You put them all in one container and they can be heavy, bulky. They also rot very quickly unless you put them in some form of preservative."

I looked at him, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the pictures. He hadn't given a lot of detail, but something in the way he said it made him sound like he knew what he was talking about.

"And how do you know how heavy the internal organs of a human body can be?"

"He could have worked in a morgue," Edward said.

I shook my head. "But he didn't, did you, Olaf."

"No," he said, and now he was looking at me. His eyes had been turned into two dark caves by the deep set of his face and a trick of light, or would that be darkness. He stared down at me, and without seeing his eyes I could feel the intensity of that stare, as if I were being studied, measured, dissected.

I kept my gaze on Olaf, but asked, "What is his specialty, Edward? Why did you call him in on this particular case?"

"The only person I've ever seen do anything close to this, is him," Edward said.

I glanced at him, and his face was calm. I turned back to Olaf. "I was told you went to jail for rape, not murder."

He looked right at me and said, "The police arrived too soon."

A cheerful voice called out from the front of the house. "Ted, it's us." It was Donna, and the "us" could only mean the kids.

Edward left at a goodly walk, trying to head her off. I think Olaf and I might have still been staring at each other when she walked in on us, but Bernardo came in, and said, "We're supposed to hide the pictures." "How?" Olaf asked.

I took the candelabra off the table and said, "Put the table cloth over the door." I stood aside and let Bernardo drag it off the table.

Olaf said, "Aren't you going to help him? You are one of the boys, after all."

"I'm not tall enough to hold it up over the entire door," I said.

He gave a small smile, derisive, but he moved up to help Bernardo block the open doorway with the tablecloth.

I was left standing behind them with the black iron candelabra in my hands. I stared at the tall, bald man and was half-regretful that I wasn't tall enough to smash the heavy iron candelabra into his skull. Just as well. I'd owe Edward another favor if I killed one of his backups just because he'd scared me.

Chapter 30

I COULD HEAR EDWARD in his best consoling Ted voice, trying to convince her that she didn't need to say Hi to everyone. She argued, polite, but firm, that of course she did. The more he tried to keep her away, the more she wanted to see. Call it a hunch, but I was betting it was me she wanted to see. The house was arranged so that you couldn't enter the three guest bedrooms without going through the dining room. Donna wanted to make sure where I was, and that I hadn't been in anyone's bed but my own. Or at least not in Ted's. Did she think that I was racing ahead of them to my room to throw clothes over my nakedness? Whatever the motive, she was coming this way. I heard Becca's voice.

Shit. I ducked under the rug across the door and nearly ran into them. Donna stopped walking with a small oomph of surprise. Her eyes were wide as she looked at me as if I'd scared her. Peter was watching me with cool brown eyes, as if it was all too boring for words, but underneath the perfect teenage boredom was a light, an interest. Everybody wondered why the tablecloth was in front of the doorway.

It was Becca who said it. "Why is the rug in front of the door?" I kept calling it a tablecloth because that's what Edward was using it for, but it still looked like a rug. Kids stick to the basics.

Donna looked at Edward. "Yes, Ted, why is the tablecloth in front of the door."

"Because we're holding it," Bernardo said from behind the improvised curtain.

She stepped close to the cloth. "And why are you holding it?"

"Ask Ted," Bernardo and Olaf said together.

Donna turned back to Edward. I usually know what Edward will say, but with Donna I was out of guesses.

"We've got the pictures from the case spread all over the room. They aren't something I want you or the kids to see." Gee, he went for the truth. It must be true love.

"Oh," she said. She seemed to think about it for a second or two, then nodded. "Becca and I will take the goodies through to the kitchen." She lifted a white, string-wrapped box, took Becca by the hand and went towards the kitchen. Becca was straining backwards, saying, "But, Mommy, I want to see the pictures."

"No, you don't, sweetie," Donna said, and very firmly led the child away.

I thought that Peter would follow but he stood there, looking at the doorway, then glanced at Edward. "What kind of pictures?" he asked.

"Bad ones," Edward said.

"How bad?"

"Anita," Edward said.

"Some of the worst I've seen, and I've seen some awful stuff," I said.

"I want to see," Peter said.

I said, "No."

Edward said nothing, just looked at him.

Peter scowled at us. "You think I'm a baby."

"I wouldn't want your mom to see them either," Edward said.

"She's a wimp," he said.

I agreed with him, but not out loud.

"Your mother is who she is," Edward said. "It doesn't make her weak. It just makes her Donna."

I stared at him, trying very hard not to gape, but I wanted to. I'd never heard him cut anyone any slack for anything. Edward was not just judgmental, he was a harsh judge. What chemical alchemy did the woman have to have won him over? I just did not get it.

"I think what. . . Ted is trying to say is that it isn't your age that makes us not want to show you the pictures."

"You think I can't handle it," Peter said.

"Yeah," I said, "I think you can't handle it."

"I can handle anything that you can handle," he said, arms crossed over his thin chest.

"Why? Because I'm a girl?"

He actually blushed, as if embarrassed. "I didn't mean that." But of course he had. But, hey, he was fourteen. I'd let it slide.

"Anita is one of the toughest people I've ever met," Edward said.

Peter squinted at him, arms still hugging his chest. "Tougher than Bernardo?"

Edward nodded.

"Tougher than Olaf?" And I thought more of the kid that he'd put the two men in that order. He knew instinctively which was the scariest man, or maybe it was just Olaf's size. No, I think Peter had a feel for the bad guys. It's something you either have or you don't. It can't really be taught.

"Even tougher than Olaf," Edward said.

There was a disgruntled sound from behind the rug. The sound of Olaf's ego getting bruised.

Peter looked at me, and the look had changed. You could almost see him thinking, trying to put my petite female self in the same category as Olaf's aggressive male presence. He finally shook his head. "She doesn't look as tough as Olaf."

"If you mean arm wrestling, I'm not."

He frowned and turned back to Edward. "I don't understand."

"I think you do," Edward said, "and if you don't, I can't explain it to you."

Peter's frown deepened.

"Part of the problem with the tough-guy code," I said, "is that a lot of it can't be explained."

"But you understand it," Peter said. He sounded almost accusatory.

"I've spent a lot of my time around very tough guys."

"That's not it," Peter said. "You're different from any girl I've ever met."

"She's different from any girl you will ever meet," Edward said.

Peter looked from one to the other of us. "Mom's jealous of her."

"I know," Edward said.

Bernardo's voice came from inside the room. "Can we lower the rug now?"

"Don't tell me you tough he-men are getting tired," I said.

"Lactic acid builds up in everybody's muscles, chickie," Bernardo said.

I'd started the name calling so I let the "chickie" comment go. "You need to join your mom and Becca in the kitchen," I said.

"Do I?" He was looking at Edward, and I realized he was appealing to Edward, asking permission.

"Yes," I said and looked at Edward, trying to tell him with my eyes, not to do this.

But he had eyes only for the boy. They stared at each other, and something passed between, some knowledge, something. "Drop the cloth," Edward said.

"No," I said and grabbed Peter's arm. I spun him around, so his back was to the door. I'd caught him by surprise, so he didn't struggle. Before he could decide what to do about me, Edward spoke. "Let him go, Anita."

I looked at him around Peter's shoulder and realized he was taller than me by a few inches. "Don't do this."

"He wants to see. Let him see."

"Donna won't like it," I said.

"Who's going to tell her?"

I looked into Peter's dark eyes. "He will when he gets mad enough at you or her or both."

"I wouldn't do that," Peter said.

I shook my head. I didn't believe him, and that more than anything made me let go of his arm and back off. If Edward showed Peter this little corner of hell and word got back to Donna, it might be enough to break them up permanently. I was willing to trade some of Peter's innocence for that. Harsh, but true.

The rug fell away on Olaf's side first, then Bernardo was left holding the rug in his arms like a limp child. He looked at Edward and shook his head, but he stepped back beside Olaf and let Peter walk into the room. I followed behind him and Edward.

Olaf had moved back near the far door. Bernardo laid the cloth on the table and stepped back to the far end of the table. I took up station to the far wall, almost mirroring Olaf, but at the opposite door. We'd all moved to separate corners of the room, and all of us tried to separate ourselves from what was happening. I don't think even Olaf approved.

Peter took in all the pictures, turning around and around. He paled, and his voice was a little breathy. "Are those people?"

"Yes," Edward said. He stayed right beside Peter, not touching, not too close, but very definitely with him.

Peter walked to the nearest wall, to the pictures I'd just been looking at "What happened to them?" he asked.

"We don't know yet," Edward said.

Peter looked at the pictures, eyes flicking from one horrible image to another. He didn't walk the room or study any one picture as closely as I had, but he looked, he saw what was there. He didn't scream or faint or throw up. He'd proven his point. He wasn't a wimp. I wondered if I should warn him about the possibility of nightmares. Nah, he'd either have them or he wouldn't

He was still pale, with a light dew of sweat on his upper lip, but he was mobile, and his voice was breathy, but calm. "I better help Mom in the kitchen." He walked out still hugging his arms around himself as if he were cold.

No one said a word as he walked out. When I was pretty sure he was out of ear shot, I walked up to Edward. "Well, that went better than I thought it would."

"It went about the way I thought it would," Edward said.

"Shit, Edward, the kid is going to have nightmares."

"Maybe, maybe not. Pete's a tough kid." He was looking out through the doorway as if he could still see the boy. His gaze was faraway.

I stared at him. "You're proud of him. Proud of the fact that he looked at this," I motioned at the pictures, "and didn't freak."

"Why shouldn't he be proud?" Olaf asked.

I looked at him. "If Edward were Peter's dad, maybe. But he's not." I turned back to Edward. I stared at him. His face was its usual blankness, but there was a flinching around the eyes.

I touched his arm, and the touch was enough. He looked at me. "You're treating him like a prospective son." I shook my head. "You cannot have this family."

"I know that," he said.

"I don't think you do," I said. "I think you're actually beginning to think about doing it, for real."

He dropped his gaze, not meeting my eyes.

"Shit, Edward, shit."

"I hate to admit it, but I agree with her," Olaf said. "If it was just the boy, then I would see no problem. I think you can make of him what you will, but the woman and the girl..." He shook his head. "It will not work."

"I don't understand why you even want a family," Bernardo said.

"For different reasons. Neither of you believe in marriage," Edward said.

"True," Olaf said, "but if men like us do marry, it should not be a woman like Donna. She is too . . ." he struggled for a word, and finally said, "innocent, and you know that I do not say that about many women."

"Maybe that's one of her attractions," Edward said, and he seemed as truly puzzled as the rest of us.

"You're already screwing her. Why marry her?" This from Bernardo.

"If all I wanted was sex, I'd have gone elsewhere," Edward said.

"She any good?" Bernardo asked.

Edward just looked at him, one long look.

Bernardo raised his hands. "Sorry, sorry, just curious."

"Don't be curious about Donna," Edward said. He turned to me. "You believe in marriage. Underneath all that toughness is a midwestern girl that still believes in the white picket fence."

"I do believe in marriage, but not for people like us, Edward."

I don't know what he would have said to that, because the phone rang and he went to answer it.

"Saved by the bell," I said.

"He intends to marry this woman," Olaf said.

I nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"If he wants to marry her, it's his business," Bernardo said.

Olaf and I stared at him until the smile on his face faded to a look of puzzlement.

"What?"

"Olaf may be a serial rapist, Bernardo, or even a serial killer, but in his own twisted way he has more scruples than you do. Doesn't that worry you?"

Bernardo shook his head. "No."

I sighed.

Edward came back into the room. His face was back to his normal "Edward face," as if all the near revelations of just a minute ago had never happened. "The monster did another couple in Albuquerque last night."

"Shit," I said. "Are you going without me?"

Edward was watching my face just a little too closely, so I knew there was a surprise coming. "Your presence has been requested on site."

I could feel the surprise on my face. "Is Lieutenant Marks not in charge anymore?"

"It was him on the phone."

"You're kidding me," I said.

Edward shook his head and smiled.

"I don't get it."

"I'd guess that someone up the feeding chain chewed his ass for kicking you out. They probably gave him a choice of working with you, or being off the case."

I had to smile. "A case like this can make a career."

"Exactly," Edward said.

"Well, we know Marks' price now."

"Price?" Bernardo asked. "You guys bribed him?"

"No," I said, "but his principles that he so kindly spat in my face yesterday weren't as precious to him as his career. Always nice to know how strong a person's convictions are."

"Not that strong," Edward said.

"Apparently not," I said.

I heard Donna coming down the hallway, talking loudly to Becca, but I think it was to warn us that they were coming. The men grabbed the rug mid went for the doorway. Edward said in his loud, cheerful Ted voice, "Saddle up, boys and girls. We got work to do."

I went for my room. If we were going to go outside the house, I needed more weapons.

Chapter 31

I SAT IN THE front seat beside Edward. It was probably my imagination but I could feel someone staring at the back of my neck. If I wasn't imagining it, I was betting on Olaf.

I'd added the shoulder holster complete with Browning Hi-Power. Usually it was the only gun I wore until someone tried to kill me, or some monster showed in the flesh. But I'd kept the Firestar in its inner pants holster. Too many pictures of dismembered corpses for comfort. I even took all the knives which tells you how insecure I was feeling. Being stared at hard enough to bore a hole through my flesh was beginning to get on what nerves I had left. It wasn't my imagination. I could feel it.

I turned in the seat and met Bernardo's eyes. There was a look on his face when I turned around that was nothing I wanted to see. I had an uncomfortable thought that he was fantasizing and I just might be in the starring role

"What are you staring at?" I asked.

He blinked, but it seemed to take a long time for his eyes to really focus on me rather than whatever was inside his head. He gave a slow, almost lazy smile. "I wasn't doing anything."

"Like hell," I said.

"You can't tell me what to think, Anita," he said.

"You're presentable enough. Go get a date."

"I'd have to wine and dine her, and then I couldn't count on sex at the end of the evening. What good is that?"

"Then get a hooker," I said.

"I would if Edward would let me out on my own."

I turned and looked at Edward.

He answered the question without me having to voice it. "I've forbidden Olaf from ... dating while he's here. Olaf resented it, so I told Bernardo the same thing."

"Very even handed," I said.

"It is totally unfair to punish me because Olaf is a psycho," Bernardo said

"If I cannot meet my needs, then why should you be able to?" Olaf said.

There was something in his voice that made me look at him. He was staring straight ahead, no eye contact to anyone.

I turned around in my seat and looked at Edward. "Where do you come up with these people?"

"The same place I find vampire hunters and necromancers," he said.

He had a point. Enough of a point that we finished the drive to Albuquerque in silence. I felt I had enough moral high ground to throw stones, but evidently Edward disagreed. Since he knew Olaf better than I did, I wasn't going to argue. At least not now.

People talk of ranch-style houses, but this really was a ranch. A ranch as in cowboys and horses. It was a dude ranch for tourists so whether it counted as a really real ranch, I wasn't sure. But it was the closest thing to an actual working ranch that I'd ever set foot on.

The ranch really wasn't in Albuquerque, but in the middle of nowhere. In fact the house and corrals sat in the middle of a whole lot of nothing. Empty space with bunches of dry grass and strange palish soil stretching out and out to the horizon. Hills ringed the ranch like smooth piles of rock and brush. Edward drove us under an entrance that had a cow's skull nailed to it and said, "Dead Horse Ranch." It was so similar to a hundred western movies I'd seen on television that it seemed vaguely familiar.

Even the corral full of horses spilling in an endless nervous circle seemed stage-managed. The house wasn't exactly what I had pictured, being low to the ground and made of white adobe much like Edward's house but newer. If you could have just erased the plethora of police cars, emergency units, and even some fire rescue equipment, it would have been picturesque in a lonesome down-on-the-prairie sort of way.

A lot of the police cars had revolving lights, and the crackle of police radios was thick in the air. I wondered if it was the lights, the noise, or just this many people making the horses nervous. I didn't know much about horses, but

surely rushing back and forth around their pen wasn't normal behavior. I wondered if they had been running in circles before the cops came or after. Were horses like dogs? Could they sense bad things? Didn't know, didn't even know who to ask.

We were stopped just inside the gate by a uniformed cop. He took our names and went off to find someone who would let us pass, or find someone to tell him to kick us out. I wondered if Lieutenant Marks was here. Since he'd issued the invite, it seemed likely. What kind of threat to his career had they used to get him to invite me back?

We waited. None of us spoke. I think we'd all spent a lot of our adult lives waiting for one uniform or another to give us permission to do things. It used to get on my nerves, but lately I just waited. Maturity, or was I just getting too worn down to argue over small stuff? I'd have liked to say maturity, but I was pretty sure that wasn't it.

The uniform came back with Marks trailing behind him. Marks' pale tan suit jacket flapped in the hot wind, giving a glimpse of his gun riding just behind his left hip. He stared at the ground as he walked, briskly, all business, but he was careful not to look at us, at me, maybe.

The uniform got to us first, but he stood a little back from the open driver's side door and let the lieutenant catch up. Marks finally got there, and he looked fixedly at Edward, as if he could exclude me by just not looking at me.

"Who are the men in the back?"

"Otto Jefferies, and Bernardo Spotted-Horse." I noticed that Olaf had to use an alias, but Bernardo got to keep his real name. Guess who was wanted for crimes elsewhere.

"What are they?"

I wouldn't have known how to answer that question but Edward did. "Mr Spotted-Horse is a bounty hunter like myself, and Mr. Jefferies is a retired government worker."

Marks looked at Olaf through the glass. Olaf looked back. "Government worker. What sort of government worker?"

"The kind that if you contacted the state department, they'd confirm his identity."

Marks tapped on Olaf's window.

Olaf rolled the window down with the nearly silent buttons on the door handles. "Yes," he said in a voice that was totally devoid of his usual German burr.

"What did you do for the state department?"

"Call them and ask," Olaf said.

Marks shook his head. "I have to let you and Blake inside my crime scene, but not these two." He jerked a thumb at the back seat. "They stay in the car."

"Why?" Bernardo said.

Marks looked at him through the open window. His blue green eyes were mostly green right now, and I was beginning to realize that meant he was angry. "Because I said so, and I've got a badge and you don't."

Well, at least it was honest.

Edward spoke before Bernardo could do more than make inarticulate noises. "It's your crime scene, Lieutenant. We civilians are just here on your sufferance, we know that." He twisted in his seat to give the two men direct eye contact, but turned so Marks couldn't see his face well. I could, and it was cold and full of warning. "They will be happy to stay in the car. Won't you, boys?"

Bernardo slumped in his seat, arms crossed on his chest, sulking, but he nodded. Olaf just said, "Of course, whatever the good officer says." His voice was mild, empty. The very lack of tone was frightening, as if he were thinking something very different from the words.

Marks frowned but stepped back from the car. His hand hovered around his body as if he had a sudden desire to touch his gun, but didn't want to appear spooked. I wondered what had been in Olaf's eyes when he spoke those mild words. Something not mild, that I was certain of.

The uniformed cop had detected something in Marks. He stepped closer to his lieutenant, one hand on the butt of his gun. I didn't know what had changed in Olaf, but he was suddenly making the cops nervous. He hadn't moved. Only his face was turned towards them. What was he doing with just his facial expression that had them so jumpy?

"Otto," Edward said softly, so that the sound didn't carry outside the car. But as he had in the house when he said, Olaf, that one word carried a menace, a promise of dire consequence.

Olaf blinked and turned his head slowly towards Edward. The look on his face was frightening, feral somehow, as if he'd let down his mask enough to show some of the madness inside. But as I looked at him, I thought this was a face to deliberately frighten people, a sort of tease. Not the real monster, but a monster that people could understand and fear without thinking too hard.

Olaf blinked and looked out the far window, face bland and as inoffensive as it got.

Edward turned the car off and handed his keys to Bernardo. "In case you want to listen to the radio."

Bernardo frowned at him, but took the keys. "Gee, thanks, Dad."

Edward turned back to the police officers. "We're ready to go when you are, Lieutenant." He opened his door as he said it. The door swinging open made Marks and the uniform take a step or so back.

I took it as my cue and got out on my side. It wasn't until I came around the front of the Hummer in full sight that Marks finally paid attention to me.

He stared at me, and his face was harsh. He could manage not to show outright hatred in his face, but he couldn't manage neutral. He didn't like me being here. He didn't like it one little bit. Who had twisted his tail in a knot hard enough to force him to let me back on board?

He opened his mouth as if he'd say something, closed it, and just started walking towards the house. The uniformed officer followed at his heels, and Edward and I trailed behind. Edward had his good ol' boy face on, smiling and nodding to the police officers, the emergency workers, everyone and everything in his path. I just stayed at his side, trying not to frown. I didn't know anybody here, and I'd never been comfortable greeting strangers like long-lost friends.

There were a lot of cops outside in the yard. I spotted at least two different uniforms, enough plainclothes to open up a discount men's store, and some plainclothes detectives that stood out. I don't know what they do during FBI training that is different from anywhere else, but you can usually spot them. The clothes are slightly different, more uniform, less individual than with regular cops, but it's more an aura about them. An air of authority as if they know that their orders come straight from God and yours don't. I used to think it was insecurity on my part, but since I'm rarely insecure, that can't be it. Whatever "it" was, they had it. The Feds had arrived. That could speed things up, be a big help, or slow things to a crawl and fuck up what little progress had already been made. It depended almost entirely on how the police in charge got along with each other, and how protective everyone was of their turf.

These crimes were gruesome enough that we might actually see some cooperation between jurisdictions. Miracles do happen.

Usually, when there's a body on the ground, the police of whatever flavor are inside at the scene walking on the evidence. But there were too many people out here. There couldn't possibly be that many more inside the house. The house was big, but not that big.

Only one thing would keep them out in the New Mexico heat. The scene was a bad one. Gory, piteous, frightening, though no one will admit out loud to that one. Pick an adjective, but the police milled around the yard in the heat with their ties, the women in high heels on the loose gravel. Cigarettes had appeared in a lot of hands. They talked in small hushed voices that didn't carry above the crackle of radios. They huddled in small groups, or sat alone on the edge of cars, but not for long. Everyone kept moving, as if to remain still was to think and that was a bad thing. They reminded me of the horses nervously running in circles.

A uniformed police officer was sitting at the open doors of the ambulance. The emergency medical technician was bandaging his hand. How had he gotten hurt? I hurried to catch up with Marks. If he were the man in charge he'd know what had happened. Edward just fell into step behind me, no questions, just following my lead. He had ego problems with me sometimes, but on the job there was nothing but the job. You left the shit outside the door. You could always pick it up on your way back out.

I caught up with Marks on the long narrow wraparound porch. "What happened to the uniform that's getting his hand bandaged?"

Marks stopped in mid-stride and looked at me. His eyes were still a hard, pitiless green. You always think of green eyes as being pretty or soft, but his were like green glass. He had a big hate on for me, a big one.

I smiled sweetly and thought, fuck you, too. But I'd learned lately to lie even with my eyes. It was almost sad that I could lie with my eyes. They really are the mirror to the soul, and once they go, you are damaged. Not beyond repair, but damaged.

We stared at each other for a second or two, his hatred like a fine burning weight, my pleasant smiling mask. He blinked first, like there'd been any doubt. "One of the survivors bit him."

My eyes widened. "Are the survivors still inside?"

He shook his head. "They're on their way to the hospital."

"Anybody else get hurt?" When you ask that at a scene where vics are down, you almost always mean other cops.

Marks nodded, and some of the hostility drained from his eyes leaving them puzzled. "Two other officers had to be taken to the hospital."

"How bad?" I asked.

"Bad. One nearly got his throat ripped out."

"Have any of the other mutilation vics been that violent?"

"No," he said.

"How many vics were there?"

"Two, and one dead, but we're missing at least three other people, maybe five. We've got a couple unaccounted for, but other guests heard them talking about a picnic earlier. We're hoping they missed the show."

I looked at him. He was being very helpful, very professional. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"I know my job, Ms. Blake."

"I never said otherwise."

He looked at me, then at Edward, then finally settled his gaze on me. "If you say so." He turned abruptly and walked through the open door behind him.

I looked at Edward. He shrugged. We followed Marks in, though I noticed we'd lost the uniformed officer somewhere in the walk across the yard. No one was spending more time inside than they had to.

The living room looked as if someone had taken white liquid and poured it down to form the sloping walls, the curved doorways leading away into the house, the freeform fireplace. There was a bleached cow skull above the fireplace. A brown leather couch wrapped a huge nearly perfect square in front of the cold fire. There were pillows with Native American prints on them. A huge rug that looked almost identical to one of Edward's took up most of the center of the floor. In fact the entire place looked like an updated version of Edward's place. Maybe I still hadn't seen Edward's sense of style. Maybe this was just a type of southwestern style that I'd just never seen. There was a large open section that had been a dining room area. The table was still there. There was even a chandelier formed of what looked to be deer antlers. There was a pile of white, red-soaked cloth to one side of the table. Blood was seeping out of the bottom of the cloth bundle, leaking across the polished hardwood floor in tiny rivulets of crimson and darker fluids.

A photographer was snapping pictures of something on the table. My view was hidden by three suit-covered backs. Panic clawed at my throat, and it was suddenly harder to breathe. I didn't want the men to move. I did not want to see what was on the table. My heart was pounding in my throat, and I had to take a deep, shaking breath, clearing my throat. The deeper breath had been a mistake. The smell of fresh death is like a cross between an outhouse and a slaughterhouse. There was an acrid stink, and I knew the intestines had been perforated. But there was another smell under the almost sweet smell of too much blood. A smell of meat. I'd tried to find other words for it, but it was the

closest I could come to describing it. It was like drowning in the scent of raw hamburger. Meat, a person reduced to so much meat.

That one smell made me want to run. To just turn on my heel and walk away. This was not my job. I was not a cop. I was here as a favor to Edward.

If I left now, he could bill me. But of course, it was too late. Because I wasn't here just because of a favor to anyone now. I was here to help stop this from happening again. And that was more important than any nightmares I was about to accumulate.

A thin heavy line of liquid oozed off the edge of the table and fell slowly to the floor with a sparkle of crimson from the bright chandelier. The short man in the middle turned and caught a glimpse of us. His face was grim, but when he caught sight of us, of me, something close to a smile curled his lips. He left the others grouped around the table and came towards us. He was short for an FBI agent, but Special Agent Bradley Bradford walked with a confident swinging stride that covered ground and made taller men sometimes have to hurry to keep up.

We'd met over a year ago in Branson, Missouri, on a vampire case that had turned out to be vampires plus a little something older and less local. People had died, but mostly the monsters had died. Bradford must have been happy with my performance because he kept in touch. I knew that he was now assigned to the new FBI preternatural division. Last I heard they were calling it the Special Research Section, just like the Serial Killer Profiler unit was now called Investigative Support. The FBI tries to avoid sensational buzzwords like serial killer or preternatural or monster. But call it what you like, a spade's a spade.

He started to put his hand forward to be shaken, then stopped. His hands were encased in plastic gloves splattered with blood, and a spot on one side that was too black, too thick, to be blood. He smiled an apology as he lowered his hands.

I knew who had twisted Marks' tail and gotten me back in the ball game I took shallow, even breaths and tried not to embarrass him. I hadn't thrown up at a murder scene in nearly two years. Be a shame to spoil my record now,

"Anita, it's good to see you again."

I nodded and felt myself smile. I was happy to see Bradley, but... "We really need to start meeting when there aren't bodies on the ground." See light, joking, I could be cool. I was also delaying the final walk to what lay on the table. I could do semi-clever repartee all damn day if I just didn't have to see what was bleeding in the dining room.

Why was this one getting to me so badly? No answer, but it was.

Another agent joined us. He was tall, slender, skin actually dark enough to be called black. His hair was cut close to his head in a low, well-groomed wedge. He straightened his tie, and settled his coat in place with long-fingered hands that seemed to dance even in these small movements. I'm not one of those women who notices hands usually, but there was something about his that made me think poet, musician, as if he did other things with them besides shooting practice.

"Special Agent Franklin, this is Ted Forrester and Anita Blake."

He shook hands with Edward, but didn't answer the Ted smile with one of his own. He turned serious eyes to me. His hand was enough longer than mine that shaking was a little awkward, but we managed. But it was somehow an unsatisfying handshake as if we still didn't have the measure of each other. Some men still use a handshake as a way of sizing you up.

"How long have you been in the house, Ms. Blake?" he asked.

"Just got here," I said.

He nodded as if it were important. "Bradford has painted a glowing picture of you." There was something in his voice that made me say...

"I take it you don't share Bradford's opinion of me." I smiled when I said it.

He blinked and looked startled, then his shoulders relaxed just a touch, and a very small smile played across his lips. "Let's say I'm skeptical of civilians with no special training coming into a crime scene."

I raised eyebrows at the "no special training." Edward and I exchanged glances. The Ted face was slipping, letting some of his own natural cynicism leak into those blue eyes, that nearly boyish face.

"Civilians," he said softly.

"We don't have badges," I said.

"That must be it," he said, voice still soft, and vaguely amused.

Franklin frowned at us. "Are we amusing you?"

Bradford stepped between us almost literally. "Let's let them look at the scene, then we'll decide things."

Franklin's frown deepened. "I don't like it."

"Your objection has been noted, Franklin," Bradford said, and there was a tone in his voice that said he'd had enough of the younger man.

Franklin must have heard it too, because he smoothed his perfect tie once more and led the way towards the dining room. Bradford followed him. Edward looked at me, asking a question with his eyes.

"I'm coming," I said. Once I'd tried being more macho than the police. Nothing phased me. I was heap-big-vampire-slayer. But lately, I just didn't give a crap. I didn't want to do this anymore. It was almost a shock to realize that I really didn't want to be here, I'd seen too many horrors in too short a space of years. I was burning out, or maybe I'd already burned out and hadn't realized it.

Panic tightened my stomach into a hard knot. I had to get it under control.

I had to separate myself from the task ahead, or I was going to lose it. I tried to take a few calming breaths, but the smell came thick on my tongue. I swallowed, wished I hadn't, and stared at the tips of my shoes. I stared at the ends of my Nikes as they touched the fringe of the dining room rug until the knot in my gut eased, and I felt calm. There was still a soft flutter in my chest, but it was the best I could do.

Agent Franklin said, "Ms. Blake, are you all right?"

I raised my eyes and saw what lay on the table.

Chapter 32

I LET OUT a low, "Wow."

"Yes," Bradford said, "wow is good."

The table was pale natural pine, a pale, almost white wood. It matched the walls and the rest of the decor and made a dramatic showpiece for the thing on the table. Thing, it, no other pronouns would do. Distance, distance, mustn't think that this was once a human being.

At first all I could see was the blood and pieces of meat. It was like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing. The first thing I was sure of was the neck. I could see the broken edge of the spine sticking up above the flesh of the neck. I looked around for the head, but none of the blood-covered lumps was the right size. But there was a leg nearly perfectly whole, only ripped away from the hips, but it was intact. It had not been disjointed. Once I saw that, I found a hand lying on its back, fingers cupped as if cradling something.

I bent closer, hands in my pockets because I'd forgotten my own surgical gloves back in St. Louis. How unprofessional of me. I leaned over the hand and I wasn't smelling the stink anymore. I wasn't thinking oh, my, God, how awful. The world narrowed down to a nickel-sized lump cupped in the hand. I saw what was there. The hand had long, carefully groomed fingernails, some broken off, as if she'd struggled. She. I looked to the ring finger and found a wedding band set that looked heavy and expensive, though to be sure I'd have to move the hand and I wasn't ready for that yet. I registered all the information as if from a great distance because I'd found a clue. I concentrated on that like it was a life line, and maybe it was.

"There's something in her hand. It may be only a piece of cloth, but..." I bent so low over it that my breath caressed the skin and brought a scent up from it to me. Musty, an animal smell. My breath did one other thing. It moved the edge of the thing in her hand. The one tiny edge wasn't as blood-logged, and it moved as I blew across the hand.

I straightened. "I think it's a feather." I looked around the room trying to see where it could have come from. Except for the antler chandelier nothing else in the room seemed made of animals.

Bradford and Franklin looked at each other. "What?" I asked.

"What made you say her?" Franklin asked.

"The nails, the wedding ring set." I glanced up at the rest of the body. The only other clue that this had been a woman was maybe the size of the neck dainty. "She was small, about my size, maybe a little smaller." I heard myself say it and felt nothing. I felt empty like a shell thrown up on the sand, empty and echoing. It felt a little bit like being in shock, and I knew that later I'd pay for it. Either I'd have screaming hysterics once I had some privacy, or I'd broken something in myself that might never come back, might never fix.

"Besides the fact that it's female, what else do you see?" Franklin asked.

I didn't like being tested, but somehow I just didn't have the energy to bitch about it. "The other vics were disjointed down to their finger bones. This one isn't. When I first heard that survivors were being carefully skinned then mutilated, and that the dead were all torn apart, I thought we might be dealing with a pair of killers. One very organized and in charge, the other disorganized and following. But the bodies weren't torn up. They were very carefully dissected. It was organized, very thought out. But this ..." I motioned at the thing on the table. "This was not organized. Either our organized killer is beginning to dissolve and become less coherent, or we have two killers like I originally thought. If we have two killers, then the organized one in charge has lost control over his follower. This murder was not well planned. That means mistakes, which will help us. But it may also mean that anyone that crosses paths with this thing is dead. Higher body count from here on out, more frequent kills maybe, maybe not."

"Not bad, Ms. Blake. I even agree with you on most of it."

"Thank you, Agent Franklin." I wanted to ask what parts didn't he agree with, but was pretty sure where we disagreed. "You still think this is a human serial killer?"

He nodded. "I do."

I looked at the remains like lumpy red paint tossed across the table. The bloodstains had spread until I was standing in the edge of it. The cops hated to have you tracking blood everywhere. I stepped back, and the stain spread out towards me. I took another step back. My foot crunched in something. I knelt and found salt on the floor. Someone had gotten messy during lunch. I stood up.

"This is fresh kill, Agent Franklin, real fresh. How long would it take a person, even two people, to reduce another human being to this?"

His long hands played over his tie again. I wondered if he knew he did that when he was nervous. If he didn't, I'd play poker with him any day. "I really couldn't give an estimate, not and be accurate."

"Fine. Do you really think a person is strong enough to tear someone apart like this quickly enough to have the blood this fresh? The damn thing's bleeding like it's still alive, it's so damn fresh. I don't think a human being could do this much damage this quickly."

"You are entitled to your opinion."

I shook my head. "Look, Franklin, it was logical for you to assume the killer, or killers, were human. It usually is human in your line of work. I'm assuming you're with the Investigative Unit."

He nodded.

"Great. See, you hunt people. That's what you do. They are monsters but not real monsters. I don't hunt people. I hunt monsters. That's just about all I do. I don't think I've ever been called into a case where the perp was human, or at least where magic wasn't involved."

"Your point," he said, very stiff, eyes angry.

"My point is that if they had thought this was a monster to begin with, they'd have sent it over to Bradford's new unit. But they didn't, did they?"

His eyes were a little less angry, more uncertain. "No, they didn't."

"Everyone thought it was human, so why shouldn't you assume the same thing? If they'd dreamt that it was non-human, they wouldn't have sent it to you, right?"

"I suppose so."

"Great. Then let's work together, not at cross purposes. If we split our manpower between looking for people and looking for monsters, it will cost time."

"And if you're wrong, Ms. Blake, if it is a human being doing these terrible things and we stop investigating down that avenue it could cost more lives." He shook his head. "It's not my initial report I'm standing by, Ms. Blake. It's the chance that it is a human perpetrator. We will continue to treat this as a normal investigation." He looked at Bradford. "That is my final recommendation."

He turned to Edward. "And you, Mr. Forrester, are you going to dazzle me with your profiling abilities?"

Edward shook his head. "No."

"What do you offer to this investigation then?"

"When we find it, I'll kill it."

Franklin shook his head. "We are not judge, jury, and executioner, Mr. Forrester. We are the FBI."

Edward looked at him, and most of Ted's good ol' boy charm seemed to have seeped out of his eyes, leaving them cold and uncomfortable to meet. "I have two men with me out in the car, one of them is an expert on this type of crime. If this was done by a person, then he'll be able to tell us how it was done." His voice had gone bland, smooth, and empty.

"Who is this expert?" Franklin asked.

"Why is he still out in the car?" Bradford said.

"Otto Jefferies, and because Lieutenant Marks wouldn't let him in," Edward answered.

"By the way," I said, "thanks for getting me back on the case, Bradley."

Bradley smiled. "Don't thank me. Help us solve the damn thing."

"Who is Otto Jefferies?" Franklin asked.

"He's a retired government worker," Edward said.

"How does a retired government worker have expertise on this type of killing?"

Edward looked at him until Franklin began to fidget, smoothing his hands down not just his tie but his suit coat. He even checked his cuffs, though to make the movement really effective you needed cufflinks. Buttons just didn't do it.

"I'm sure you are implying something by your so pointed gaze, but my question stands. What kind of government worker would have this kind of expertise?"

Franklin may have been nervous but he was also stubborn.

"Call the state department," Edward said. "They'll answer your questions."

"I want you to answer my questions."

Edward gave a small shrug. "Sorry, if I told you the truth, I'd have to kill you." He said the last with a good ol' boy smile, and an awe-shucks shine in his eyes. Which probably meant he was serious.

"Bring your men in," Bradley said.

"I must protest involving more civilians in this case," Franklin said.

"Duly noted." Bradley looked at Edward. "Bring them in, Mr. Forrester. I'm agent in charge on site." Edward went for the door.

"For now," Franklin said.

Bradley looked up at the taller man. "I think you need to be elsewhere, Franklin."

"Where would I be of better use than overseeing the crime scene?"

"Anywhere that is away from me," Bradley said.

Franklin started to say something, then looked at both of us in turn, and finally at Bradley. "I won't forget this, Agent Bradford."

"Nor will I, Agent Franklin."

Franklin turned abruptly and walked out, hands sliding over his clothes. When he was out of earshot, I said, "He doesn't seem to like you."

"Making a new division for preternatural crimes wasn't a popular move with everyone. Until now the Investigative Division has been handling them."

"Gee, and I thought the FBI was above such petty disputes."

Bradley laughed. "God, don't I wish."

"This is a really, really fresh scene, Bradley. I don't mean to tell you your job, but shouldn't we be searching the area for the creature?"

"We did a ground search, turned up nothing. We've still got the helicopter up. We also sent off for geology maps of the ranch in case there's a cave we missed."

"Would a geology survey cover man-made ruins?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"This area of the country is supposed to be lousy with ruins. Just because nothing's visible from above ground doesn't mean there won't be something buried. A room, or even a kiva."

"What's a kiva?" Bradley asked.

"A sacred underground room for ceremonial magic. It's one of the few things that most of the southwestern tribes, or pueblos, have in common."

Bradley smiled. "Don't tell me you're also an expert on Native American religious practices, too?"

I shook my head. "Nope. I had a brief overview in my comparative religion class in college, but I didn't take Native American as one of my electives. Knowing that kiva do exist and their general use pretty much exhausts my knowledge of the southwestern tribes. Now if you need to know details about the Sioux sun worshipping rituals, those I remember."

"I'll check with the surveying company and see if they mark man-made structures."

"Good."

"The locals called in some tracking dogs. The dogs wouldn't come in the house. They refused to track."

"Were they bloodhounds?" I asked.

Bradley nodded. "Why?"

"Bloodhounds are a very friendly breed. They are not attack dogs. Sometimes on the preternatural bad stuff they refuse the trail. You need some trollhunds."

"Troll-what?" Bradley asked.

"Trollhunds. They were originally bred to hunt the Greater European Forest Trolls. When the trolls went extinct, the breed almost died out. They're still a rare breed, but they are the best you can find for tracking preternatural bad guys. Unlike the Bloodhound they will attack and kill what they trail."

"How do you know so much about dogs?" Bradley said.

"My dad's a vet."

Edward had reentered with Olaf and Bernardo at his back. He'd heard the last. "Your dad, a doggie doctor. I didn't know that."

He was looking intently at me, and I realized that Edward didn't really know much more about me than I did about him.

"Are there any trollhunds in this area?" Bradley asked it of Edward.

He shook his head. "No. If there were I'd know it. I'd have used them."

"You knew about troll-whatsits, too?" Bernardo asked.

Edward nodded. "If you're a varmint hunter, so should you."

Bernardo frowned at the criticism, then shrugged. "I do more bodyguard work than critter killing these days." He was looking at everyone, everything but the table and contents.

"Maybe you should go back to guarding other people's bodies," Edward said. I don't know what I'd missed, but Edward was angry with him.

Bernardo looked at him. "Maybe I should."

"No one is stopping you."

"Damn you... Ted," and Bernardo walked out.

I looked at Olaf, as if for a clue to what had just happened, but Olaf had eyes only for the remains. His face was transformed. It took me a few seconds to realize what the expression on his face was, because it was wrong. It did not match what was happening. He stared down at the remains of that woman with enough raw lust in his eyes to burn down the house. It was a look that should have been saved for privacy, to be shared between your beloved and yourself. It was not a look for public consumption, when you were looking at the bleeding remains of a woman you did not know.

Staring into Olaf's face, I was cold, cold all the way down to my Nikes. Fear, but not of the monster, or rather not of that monster. If you had given me a choice between whatever was doing these killings or Olaf, right that moment I wouldn't have known who to pick. It was sort of like choosing between the tiger and the tiger.

Maybe I was standing too close, I don't know. He just suddenly turned his head and looked full at me. And just like I'd known in the car what Bernardo was thinking, I knew that Olaf was looking for a star in his own little fantasy.

I held my hands up, shaking my head, and backed away from him. "Don't even go there... Otto." I was beginning to really hate all these aliases.

"She was almost exactly your height." His voice had a soft, almost dreamy quality.

Drawing a gun and shooting him was probably overkill, but I certainly didn't have to stand there and help his imagination. I turned to Bradley, "Someone said there were other bodies. Let's go see." Five minutes ago, you'd have had to drag me into the next chamber of horrors. Now I grabbed Bradley's arm and half pulled him, half let him lead me deeper into the house, I could feel Olaf's gaze against my back like a hand, hot and close. I didn't look back. Nothing ahead of me could be worse than watching Olaf paw through the woman's remains, knowing that he was thinking of me while he did it.

Chapter 33

BRADLEY LED ME to a door that had been half-torn out of its hinges. Something big had pushed through here. Bradley had to use both hands to get the door to one side. It seemed to have settled into the carpet, wedging itself. He jerked back, and I jumped, pulse in my throat.

"Damn splinters." He held up the palm of his gloved hand and there was a small crimson spot on the plastic. He jerked the glove off. The splinter seemed to have come off with the glove, but it was bleeding freely.

"Some splinter," I said.

"Dammit." Bradley looked at me.

"You better let somebody look at it."

He nodded, but didn't turn to go. "Don't be insulted, but not everyone is happy with me forcing you back on this case. I can't leave you alone in here with evidence. If there were ever questions raised, it would be hard to explain."

"I've never pocketed evidence from a crime scene in my life."

"I'm sorry, Anita, but I can't take the chance. Will you follow me out to the ambulance?"

He was having to cup one hand under the other to catch the blood so it didn't reach the carpet. I frowned, but nodded. "Fine."

He started to say something, then turned and walked back to the living room. We were about a fourth of the way through the room when Edward asked, "Otto wants to open the table cloth and see what's inside."

"I'll send the photographer and Agent Franklin in to oversee it." Bradley kept going for the door having to hurry a little to keep his own blood from contaminating the scene.

Neither Edward nor Olaf nor the uniform that had magically appeared to watch them fondle the evidence, asked how he'd hurt his hand. Maybe no one cared.

I followed Bradley across the gravel turn-around to the ambulance. There were still too many people mulling around outside. Shouldn't they be out searching for the creature? It wasn't my job to tell them their job, but this was the freshest crime scene yet, and there just didn't seem to be enough frantic activity to suit me.

Bradley sat down at the end of the ambulance and let the techs treat his wound. Because it was a wound. Splinter, my ass. He'd stabbed himself. I tried to be a good girl and just stand there, but I think my impatience showed, because Bradley started talking.

"We did send people out to search when we arrived, and we arrived damn quick."

"I didn't say anything."

He smiled, then grimaced as the EMT did something to his hand that hurt. "Walk far enough away from the house to give a 360 look. Then come back and tell me what you see."

I looked at him. He motioned me off with his good hand. I shrugged and started walking. The heat was like a weight across my shoulders, but without humidity it just wasn't as bad. The gravel crunched under my feet, louder than it should have been. I walked in the opposite direction from the horse corral. The horses were still running in their endless chase like a maniac merry-go-round. I threaded my way through the cars, marked and unmarked. The fire truck had driven away. I wasn't sure why it had been here in the first place. I thought sometimes when you call 911, you get more emergency vehicles than you need, especially if the caller panics and isn't specific enough.

I stopped beside the silent revolving lights of a car. Who had called the police? Did we actually have a witness? If we did, why hadn't anyone mentioned it? If we didn't, then who had called for help?

I walked until the hot dry wind rustling through the clumps of grass was louder than the electric squawk of radios. I stopped and turned back towards the house. The cars were small enough that I could have covered one of them with my hand. I'd probably walked farther out than I needed to go. Far enough out that if I yelled for help, they might not hear me. Not bright. I should walk further in, but I needed to be clear of it for awhile. I needed to be out in the wind alone. I compromised. I drew the Browning and put off the safety, pointing the barrel at the ground, one-handed. Now I could enjoy the solitude and still be safe. Though, truthfully, I wasn't sure if what we were chasing gave a damn about bullets, silver or otherwise.

Bradley had said to look. I looked. The ranch lay in a large round valley or maybe a plateau, since we'd had to drive up some hills to get here. Whichever, the land stretched flat and smooth for miles to the rim of distant hills. Of course, I'd been surprised by distances here, so maybe the hills were really mountains, and the land stretched for a very long way in every direction. There were no trees. There was almost no vegetation above thigh height to me.

Whatever had taken that door out had been big, bigger than a man, though not by much. I turned in a slow circle, scanning the ground, and there was nowhere for something that large to hide. They'd walked this ground when they first arrived, full of confidence that the creature couldn't have gotten far. They marched out, and out, and out, and found nothing. The helicopter buzzed overhead, high enough that it didn't disturb the wind, but low enough that I was pretty sure it was looking at me. They were looking for anything unusual, and I was standing out here by myself, unusual enough.

The helicopter circled a few times, then buzzed off to search somewhere else. I looked out at the empty land. There was nowhere to hide. Where had it gone? Where could it have gone?

Underground, maybe, or it flew away. If it flew away, I couldn't help them find it, but if it went underground ... Caves, or an old well, maybe. I'd suggest it to Bradley, and probably be told that they'd checked it. But hey, I was here to offer suggestions, wasn't I?

I heard someone behind me and whirled. I had the gun halfway up when I recognized Detective Ramirez. He had his hands up and to each side, away from his gun. I let out the breath I'd been holding and holstered the gun "Sorry."

"That's okay," he said. He was wearing another white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled back over dark, strong forearms. The tie was a different color but it still hung loose like a necklace, and the top two buttons of his shirt were open so that you could see the smooth hollow of his throat.

"No it's not. I'm not usually this jumpy." I hugged myself, not because I was cold. Far from it. But because I badly wanted someone to hold me. I wanted to be comforted. Edward had many uses. Comfort was not one of them.

Ramirez came up beside me. He didn't try and touch me, just stood very close and looked out over the land where I was looking. He spoke still staring out in the distance. "The case getting to you?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I don't know why."

He gave a sharp laugh and turned to me, face halfway between astonishment and humor. "You don't know why?"

I frowned at him. "No, I don't."

He shook his head, smiling, but his eyes were gentle. "Anita, this is an awful case. I've never seen anything this bad."

"I've seen things as bad as the vivisected victims, the ones that died."

His face sobered. "You've seen things that bad before?"

I nodded.

"What about the mutilations?" he asked. His face was very serious now, His smooth nearly black-brown eyes watched my face.

I shook my head. "I've never seen anything like the survivors." I laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "If survivor is the word for them. What kind of life are they going to have, if they live?" I hugged myself tighter, staring at the ground, trying not to think.

"I've been having nightmares," Ramirez said.

I looked up at him. Police don't admit things like that often, especially not to civilian consultants that they've just met. We looked at each other, and his eyes were so gentle, so genuine. Unless he was a much better actor than I thought he was, Ramirez was letting me see the real him. I appreciated it, but didn't know how to say it out loud. You don't verbalize something like that. The best you can do is return the favor. The trouble was, I wasn't sure what the real me was anymore. I didn't know what to put in my eyes. I didn't know what to let him see. I finally stopped trying to pick and choose, and think I settled for confused, bordering on scared.

He touched my shoulder lightly. When I didn't say anything, he moved into me, wrapping his arms across my back, holding me against him. I stayed stiff in his arms for a second or two, but didn't pull away. I relaxed against him in inches, until my head rested in the curve of his neck, my arms tentatively, around his waist. He whispered, "It will be all right, Anita."

I shook my head against his shoulder. "I don't think so."

He tried to see my face but I was standing too close, at too awkward an angle. I pulled back so he could see my face, and suddenly I felt awkward standing there with my arms around a stranger. I pulled away, and he let me go, only keeping the fingers of one hand grasped in his. He gave my hand a little shake. "Talk to me, Anita, please."

"I've been doing cases like this for about five years. When I'm not looking at the messily dead, I'm hunting vampires, rogue shapeshifters, you name it."

His was holding my hand solidly now, wrapped in the warmth of his skin. I didn't pull away. I needed something human to hold onto. I tried to put into words what I'd been thinking for awhile now. "A lot of cops never use their guns, not in thirty years. I've lost count of how many people I've killed." His hand tightened on mine, but he didn't interrupt. "When I started out, I thought vampires were monsters. I really believed it. But lately I'm not so sure. And regardless of what they are, they look very human. I could get a call tomorrow that would send me down to the morgue to put a stake through the heart of a body that looks every bit as human as you and me. Once I've got a court order of execution, I am legally sanctioned to shoot and kill the vampire or vampires in question, and anyone that stands in my way. That includes human servants or people with just a bite on them. One bite, two bites, they can be healed, cured. But I've killed them to save myself, to save others."

"You did what you had to do."

I nodded. "Maybe, maybe, but that doesn't really matter anymore. It doesn't matter whether I'm right to do it, or not. Just because it's a righteous kill doesn't mean it doesn't affect you. I used to think that if I was right, it would be enough, but it's not."

He drew me a little closer with his hand. "What are you saying?"

I smiled. "I need a vacation."

He laughed then, and it was a good laugh, open and joyous, nothing special about it but his own astonishment. I'd heard better laughs but none when I needed it more. "A vacation, just a vacation?"

I shrugged. "I don't see myself taking up flower arranging, Detective Ramirez."

"Hernando," he said.

I nodded. "Hernando. This is part of who I am." I realized we were still holding hands, and I drew away from him. He let me, no protest. "Maybe if I take a break, I'll be able to do it again."

"What if a vacation isn't enough?" he asked.

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it." It wasn't just the brutal day in and day out of the job. My reaction to Bernardo's body and letting a perfect stranger comfort me were so unlike me. I was missing the guys, but it was more than that. When I left Richard, I left the pack, all my werewolf friends.

When I left Jean-Claude, I lost all the vamps, and strangely one or two of them were friends. You can be friends with a vampire as long as you remember that they are monsters and not human beings. How you can do both at the same time, I can't really explain, but I manage.

I hadn't just cut myself off from the men in my life for six months. I'd cut myself off from my friends. Even Ronnie, Veronica Sims, one of my few human friends had a new hot romance. She was dating Richard's best friend which made socializing awkward. Catherine, my lawyer and friend, had only been married two years, and I didn't like to interfere with her and Bob.

"You're thinking something very serious," Ramirez said.

I blinked and looked at him. "Just realizing how isolated I am even back home. Here, I am so ..." I shook my head without finishing it.

He smiled. "You're only isolated if you want to be, Anita. I've offered to show you the local sights."

I shook my head. "Thanks, really. Under other circumstances, I'd say, yes."

"What's stopping you?" he asked.

"The case for one. If I start dating one of the local cops, then my credibility goes down the tubes, and I'm not too high on some lists already."

"What else?" He had a very gentle face, soft, as if he would be very gentle in everything he did.

"I've got two men waiting back home. Waiting to see who I'm going to choose, or if I'm dumping both of them."

His eyes widened. "Two. I'm impressed."

I shook my head. "Don't be. My personal life is a mess."

"Sorry to hear that."

"I can't believe I just told you all that. It isn't like me."

"I'm a good listener."

"Yeah, you are."

"May I escort you back?"

I smiled at the old-fashioned phrasing. "Can you answer some question first?"

"Ask." He sat down on the ground in his dark brown pants, lifting the pant legs so they wouldn't bunch.

I sat down beside him. "Who called the police?"

"A guest."

"Where is he or she?"

"Hospital. Severe shock brought on by trauma."

"No physical injuries?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Who were the mutilation vics this time?"

"The wife's brother and two nephews, all over twenty. They lived and worked on the ranch."

"What about the other guests? Where were they?"

He closed his eyes, as if visualizing the page. "Most of them were off on a planned outing, an overnight camping trip into the mountains. But the rest borrowed the ranch cars that are kept for the guests' use and left."

"Let me guess," I said. "They just felt restless, jittery, had to get out of the house."

Ramirez nodded. "Just like the neighbors around all the other houses."

"It's a spell, Ramirez," I said,

"Don't make me ask you again to use my first name."

I smiled and looked away from the teasing look in his eyes. "Hernando, this is either a spell or some sort of ability the creature possesses to cause fear, dread, in the ones it doesn't want to kill or hurt. But I'm betting on a spell."

"Why?"

"Because it's too selective to be a natural anxiety like a vampire's ability to hypnotize with its eyes. A vamp can bespell one person or a room full of people, but it can't do an entire street except for one house. It's too exact. You need to be able to organize your magic for this, and that means a spell."

He picked one of the rough-looking blades of grass, running it between his fingers. "So we're looking for a witch."

"I know something about wiccan and other flavors of witchcraft, and I don't know any way a lone wiccan, or even a coven could do this. I'm not saying there isn't a human spell worker involved somewhere, but there is definitely something otherworldly, nonhuman, at work here."

"We got some blood traces off the broken door."

I nodded. "Great. I wish someone would tell me when we find a clue. Everyone, including Ted is playing it so close to the chest, I've spent most of my time going over ground that someone else has already figured out."

"Ask me and I'll tell you anything you want to know." He tossed the grass blade to the ground. "But we better be getting back before you get a worse reputation than just dating me."

I didn't argue. Put any woman in an area run mostly by men and rumors will fly. Unless you make it very clear that you are off limits, there is also a certain competitiveness that sets in. Some men are either trying to run you out of town or get into your pants. They don't seem to know any other way to deal with a woman. If you're not a sexual object, you're a threat. Always makes me wonder what kind of childhoods they had.

Hernando stood brushing grass and dirt off the back of his pants. He seemed to have had a dandy childhood, or at least he'd turned out well.

Congrats to his parents. Someday he'd bring home a nice girl and have nice children in a nice house with yard work on the weekends, and every Sunday dinner at one set of grandparents or another. A nice life if you can get it, and he still got to solve murders. Talk about having it all.

What did I have? What did I really have? I was too young for a mid-life crisis, and too old for an attack of conscience. We started walking back towards the cars. I was hugging my arms again, and had to force myself to stop. I lowered my arms to my sides and walked along beside Ramirez ... ah, Hernando, like nothing was wrong.

"Marks said that one of the first cops on the scene had his throat nearly bitten out. How did that happen?"

"I wasn't here for the first rush. The lieutenant waited to call me in." There was a trace of harshness in his voice. He was gentle, but not if you pushed him. "But I heard that the three living victims attacked the cops. They had to subdue them with batons. They just kept trying to take pieces out of them."

"Why would they do that? How would they do it? I mean you skin most people and rip off pieces, they aren't going to feel like fighting."

"I helped pick up some of the earlier survivors, and they didn't fight, they just lay there and moaned. They were hurt and they acted hurt."

"Have they ever traced down Thad Bromwell, the son of the first scene I saw?"

Hernando's eyes widened. "Marks didn't call you?"

I shook my head.

"He is such a shithead."

I agreed. "What? Did they find the body?"

"He's alive. He was away on a camping trip with friends."

"He's alive," I said. Then whose soul had I seen hovering in the bedroom? I didn't say it out loud because I'd forgotten to mention the soul to the police. Marks had been ready to chase me out of town. If I'd started talking about souls floating near the ceiling, he'd have gotten matches and a stake.

But someone had died in that room, and the soul was still confused about where to go. Most of the time if the soul hovers, it hovers over the body, the remains. Only three people lived in the house, two of them mutilated, and the boy somewhere else.

I had an idea. "These new mutilation victims, they kept fighting, kept trying to take bites out of the officers?"

He nodded.

"Are you sure about the bites, not just hitting, but like they were trying to feed?"

"I don't know about feeding, but it was all bite wounds." He was looking at me strangely. "You've thought of something."

I nodded. "I may have. I have to see the other body, the one behind the door first, but then I think it's time to go back to the hospital."

"Why?"

I started walking again, and he grabbed my arm, turned me to face him, There was fierceness in his eyes, an intensity that trembled down his arm.

"You've only been here a couple of days. I've been dealing with this for weeks. What do you know that I don't?"

I looked at his hand until he let me go, but I told him. He was having nightmares about this shit, and I hadn't gotten to that point yet. "I'm an animator. I raise zombies for a living. My specialty is the dead. One thing that the living dead have in common with one other from zombie, to ghoul, to vampire, is that they must feed off the living to sustain themselves."

"Zombies don't eat people," he said.

"If a zombie is raised and the animator that raised it can't control it, then it can go wild. It becomes a flesh-eating zombie."

"I thought that was just stories."

I shook my head. "No, I've seen it."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that maybe there are no survivors. Maybe there are just dead and the living dead."

He actually went pale. I touched his elbow to steady him, but he stood straight. "I'm all right. I'm all right." He looked at me. "What do you do with a flesh-eating zombie?"

"Once it's gone amok, there isn't anything anyone can do except destroy it. The only way to do that is fire. Napalm is good, but any fire will do."

"They'll never let us roast these people."

"Not unless we can prove what I'm saying is true."

"How can you prove it?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet, but I'll talk to Doctor Evans and we'll come up with something."

"Why would the earlier vics be docile and these new ones be vicious?"

"I don't know, unless the spell or the monster is changing, maybe growing stronger. I just don't know, Hernando. If I'm right about there being no survivors, then I've had my brilliant idea for the day."

He nodded, face very serious. He stared at the ground. "Jesus, if they are all dead, then that means that this thing we're after is making more of itself?"

"I'd be surprised if it was ever human, but maybe. I don't know. I do know that if it is growing stronger and the skinned ones are growing more violent, then the creature may be controlling them."

We looked at each other. "I'll call the hospital and get more men down here."

"Call the Santa Fe hospital, too."

He nodded and broke into a half-run across the gravel, moving through the cars like he had a purpose. The other cops were watching him, as if wondering what the rush was. I hadn't asked Hernando if they'd checked for underground hiding places. Shit. I went to find Bradley and ask him. Then I'd go back into the house one last time, see the last body, and then ... off to the hospital to answer the age-old question: what is life and when is death a sure thing?

Chapter 34

THE MAN'S FACE stared up at me, eyes wide, glazed, unseeing. His head was still attached to his spine, but the chest had been split open as though two great hands had dug into his rib cage and pulled. The heart was missing. The lungs had been ripped, probably when the rib cage gave. The stomach had been punctured, giving a sour smell to the smaller room. The liver and intestines lay in a wet heap to one side of the body as if they had all spilled out at the same time. The lower intestine still curled down inside the lower end of the body cavity. By smell alone I was pretty sure that the intestines hadn't been pierced.

I sat back on my heels beside the body. Blood had splattered the lower half of the man's face, drops of it scattering across the rest of his face and into his graying hair. Violent, very violent, and very quick. I stared into his sightless eyes and felt nothing. I was back to being numb and I was not complaining. I think if I'd seen this body first, then I'd have been horrified, but the remains in the dining room had just used me up for the day. This was awful, but there were worse things, and those things were in the next room.

But it wasn't the body that was interesting. It was the room. There was a circle of salt around the body. A book lay within the circle covered so thickly in blood that I couldn't read the pages it was opened to. They'd taken all the pictures and videos they were going to in this room so I used borrowed gloves to raise the book up. It was bound with embossed leather, but there was no title. The middle half of the book had soaked so much blood up that the pages were sticking together. I didn't try and pry them apart. The police and the Feds had technicians for delicate work. I was careful not to close the book and lose the place the man was probably reading from. For all I knew the book had been on the desk that the man shoved against the door, and it had simply fallen to the floor, opening on its own. But to think that meant we had no clue, so we'd all pretend we were sure that the man had deliberately opened the book. In the middle of being chased by a monster that had just butchered his wife, he went for this book, opened it, started to read. Why?

The book was hand-written and I read enough to know that it was a book of shadows. It was the spell book, sort of, of a practicing witch. One that followed an older or more orthodox tradition than the neo-pagan movement, Gardian or Alexandrian, maybe. Though again I couldn't be sure. I'd had one semester in college on comparative witchcraft, though now I'm sure they called it comparative wiccan. Of the wiccan practitioners I knew personally, none of them practiced anything this traditional.

I put the book carefully back where I'd found it and stood. The bookshelves against the near wall were full of books on psychic research, the preternatural, mythology, folklore, and wicca. I had some of the same books at home, so the books alone weren't proof of much. But the clincher was the altar.

It was an antique wooden chest with a silk cloth over the top. There were silver candlesticks with partially burned candles in them. The candles had runes carved into them. Other than the fact that they were runes, I couldn't read them.

There was a round mirror with no frame sitting flat between the candles. There was a small bowl of dried herbs to one side, a larger bowl of water, and a small carved box tight shut.

"Is that what I think it is?" Bradley asked.

"An altar. He was a practitioner. I think that book is his book of shadows, his spell book for lack of a better term."

"What happened here?"

"There's salt in the floor of the dining room."

"That's not unusual," Bradley said.

"No, but a salt circle is. I think he was somewhere further back in the house. He heard his wife screaming or heard the monsters. Something alerted him. He didn't come running with a gun, Bradley. He came running with a handful of salt. Maybe he had something else in his hands or on his person, some charm or amulet. I don't see it, but that doesn't mean it's not here."

"Are you saying he threw salt at this thing?"

"Yes."

"Why, for god's sake?"

"Salt and flame are two of our oldest purifying agents. I use salt to bind a zombie back into its grave. You can throw it on fairies, fetches, a whole host of critters, and it will make them hesitate, maybe not much more."

"So he threw salt and maybe some charm at the creature, then what?"

"I think that's why the monster stopped, and why the tablecloth full of trophies is still sitting by the table."

"Why didn't the monster go back and get the trophies after he killed the man?"

"I don't know. Maybe he finished the spell before he died. Maybe he drove it from the house. I'd like to get a real wiccan in here to look over the scene."

"Wiccan, you mean witch."

"Yes, but most of them prefer the term wiccan."

"Politically correct," Bradley said.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"What could a real wiccan tell us that you can't?"

"She might know what spell he used. If the spell drove the thing from the house, then we might be able to use a version of the same spell to trap or even destroy it. Something this man did drove the creature out of this house before it was ready to go. He forced it to leave behind its goody bag and to leave without gutting his body. It's the first weakness we've seen in this thing."

"Franklin won't like bringing in a witch. Neither will the locals. If I force everyone to bring this wiccan in, and it doesn't work or she talks to the media, then the next time you see me I won't be an FBI Agent."

"Aren't you supposed to try every angle to solve this crime? Isn't that your job?"

"The FBI doesn't use witches, Anita."

I shook my head. "How the hell did you get me in then?"

"Forrester had already brought you in on the case. All I had to do was stand up to Marks."

"And Franklin," I said.

He nodded. "I outrank Franklin."

"Then why is he so snotty?"

"It seems to be a natural talent of his."

"I don't want to get you fired, Bradley." I went to the overturned desk and started opening the drawers. There was a gun cabinet in the living room. Most people who had a cabinet full of them kept one for personal protection.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

I opened the larger bottom drawer, and there it was. "Come here, Bradley."

He came to peer into the drawer. The gun was a 9 mm Smith and Wesson. It lay on the side of the drawer where it had fallen when the desk tipped over. Bradley stared down at the gun. "Maybe it's not loaded. Maybe he had the ammo locked in the living room."

"Can I touch it?"

He nodded.

I lifted it, and just by the weight I was pretty sure it was loaded, but it wasn't a gun I was familiar with, so I popped the clip and showed it to Bradley.

"Full," he said, voice soft.

"Full." I slid the clip back inside the gun, hitting it sharply with the palm of my hand to make it click. "He had a loaded 9 mm in his desk, but he grabbed salt and his book of shadows. He didn't waste time grabbing for the gun. He either knew what the thing was, or he sensed something about it and knew the gun wouldn't work, and that the spell would." I raised the gun up so that Bradley looked at it, the barrel pointed at the ceiling. "The spell worked, Bradley, We need to know what it was, and the only way to know that is to get a witch in here."

"Can't you take the book and just show her pictures?"

"What if the position of the book is important? What if there are clues to the spell in the circle itself? I don't practice this kind of ritual magic, Bradley. For all I know if you get someone in here, they may be able to sense something that I can't. Do you really want to take the chance that pictures and just seeing the book in their own home will be just as good as seeing it here like this?"

"You're asking me to risk my career."

"I am asking you to risk your career," I said, "but I'm also asking you to not risk any more innocent lives. Do you really want to see this done to another couple, another family?"

"How can you be so sure that this is the key?"

"I'm not sure, but it's the closest thing we've seen to a break in this case, I'd hate to lose it because of career jitters."

"It's not just that, Anita. If we use anything more exotic than psychics and we fail, then the entire unit could be disbanded."

I placed the gun in his hand. He stared at it. "I trust you to do the right thing, Bradley. That's why you're one of the good guys."

He shook his head. "And to think I blackmailed Marks to get you back on the case."

"You knew I was a pain in the ass when you fought to get me back on the case. It's one of my many charms."

That earned me a weak smile. He was still holding the gun flat across his hand. His fingers tightened around it. "You know any witches in the area?"

I grinned at him. "No, but I bet Ted does." I shook my head. "I've never hugged an FBI agent, but I'm tempted."

That made him smile, but his eyes stayed cautious, unhappy. I was asking a lot from him. I touched his arm. "I wouldn't ask you to bring in a witch if I didn't think it was our best shot. I wouldn't ask just on a whim."

He gave me a long look. "I know. You are one of the least whimsical people I've ever met."

"I would say you should see me when I'm not neck deep in corpses, but it doesn't really matter. I don't get much lighter than this."

"I've checked the cases you've helped the St. Louis PD solve, Anita. Gruesome stuff. How old are you now?"

I frowned at the question then answered it. "Twenty-six."

"How long have you been helping the police?"

"About four years."

"The Bureau switches its agents off the serial killer shit about every two years. Whether they want to transfer or not. Then after a break, they can come back."

"You think I need a break?"

"Everyone burns out eventually, Anita, even you."

"Actually, I'm thinking about a vacation when I get home."

He nodded. "That's good."

I looked up at him. "Do I look like I need a break?"

"I've seen it before in other agents' eyes."

"Seen what?" I asked.

"Like your eyes are a cup, and every horror you see is another drop added. Your eyes are full of the things you've seen, the things you've done. Get out while there's still some room for things that don't bleed."

"That is damn poetic for an FBI agent."

"One friend stayed with it until he had a heart attack."

"I think I'm a little young for that," I said.

"Another friend ate his gun."

We stared at each other. "I'm not the suicidal type."

"I also don't want to see you in jail."

My eyes widened. "Whoa. I do not know what you're talking about."

"The state department confirmed Otto Jefferies is a retired government worker, but they couldn't access the rest of his file at the present time. I've got a friend at the state department with a level two secret clearance. He couldn't access Otto Jefferies' files either. He's a total black out, which means he's a

spook of some kind. You do not want to get involved with the spooks, Anita. If they try to recruit you, say no. Don't try to find out who Otto really is, or what he did. Don't get nosy or you'll end up in a hole somewhere. Just work with him, leave him alone, and move on."

"You sound like you're talking from personal experience," I said.

He shook his head. "I'm not going to talk about it."

"You brought it up," I said.

"I told you just enough to get your attention, I hope. Just trust me on this. Stay the fuck away from these people."

I nodded. "It's okay, Bradley. I don't like . . . Otto. And he hates women, so don't worry. I don't think it would occur to him to try and recruit me."

"Good." He put the gun back in the desk drawer and closed it.

"Besides," I said, "what would the top secret set want with me?"

He looked at me, and it was a look that I wasn't used to getting. The look said, I was being naive. "Anita, you can raise the dead."

"So?"

"I can think of a half a dozen uses for that one talent alone."

"Like what?"

"Prisoner dies in interrogation. Doesn't matter. Raise him up again. A world leader is assassinated. We need a few days to get our troops ready, raise the leader for a few days. Give us time to control the panic, or stop the revolution."

"Zombies are not alive, Bradley. They couldn't pass for a country's leader."

"From a distance, for two or three days, don't even try and say you couldn't pull that off."

"I wouldn't do it," I said.

"Even if it meant that hundreds of lives could be saved, or hundreds of Americans could be evacuated in safety."

I looked at him. "I... I don't know."

"No matter how good the cause seems at the beginning, Anita, eventually it won't be. Eventually, when you're so far in you can't see daylight, they'll ask things of you that you won't want to do."

I was hugging myself again, which irritated me. No one had approached me to do anything on an international level. Olaf thought I was good for only one thing and that did not include helping the government. But it did make me wonder how Edward had met him. Edward was spooky, but was he a spook?

I looked up at Bradley's so serious face. "I'll be careful." Then I had a thought. "Did someone approach you about me?"

"I was thinking about offering you a job with us." I raised eyebrows at him.

He laughed. "Yeah, after looking through your file, it was decided that you're too independent, too much a wild card. It was decided that you not thrive in a bureaucratic setting."

"You got that right, but I am flattered you thought of me."

His face went back to serious, and there were lines in his face that I hadn't seen before. It made him look forty plus. Most of the time he didn't. "Your file got flagged, Anita. It got moved up the line. I don't know where to or who asked for it, but there is government work out there for the independent wild card if they have specialized enough skills."

I opened my mouth, closed it, and finally said, "I'd say you were joking but you're not, are you?"

He shook his head. "I wish I was."

Edward had said that he wouldn't have brought Olaf in if he'd known I was coming. It made it sound like Olaf had been invited in, not volunteered, but I'd ask Edward. I'd make sure.

"Thank you for telling me, Bradley. I don't know much about this stuff but I know you're taking a chance telling me at all."

"I had to tell you, Anita. You see it was me that pulled your file in the first place. I was the one that pushed to get you invited in. I brought you to someone's attention. For that I am heartily sorry."

"It's okay, Bradley. You didn't know."

He gave a small shake of his head, and the look on his face was bitter. "But I should have."

I didn't know what to say to that. It turned out I didn't have to say anything Bradley walked out of the room. I waited a second or two, then followed him out. But I couldn't shake the unease. He'd meant to scare me, and he'd succeeded. It was all Big Brother watching and paranoia. He already had me wondering if Olaf had invited himself, or even if Edward could have been asked to recruit me. It wouldn't surprise me that Edward worked for the government, at least part time. He took money from anyone.

It would have seemed silly if I hadn't seen the look on Bradley's face. If he hadn't told me about my file. He said file, like everyone had a file. Maybe they did. But someone had requested my file. I had a sudden image of my life, my crimes, all printed in neat type crossing one shadowy desk after another until it reached, where? Or would the question be who?

Blake, Anita Blake. It even sounded funny. Of course, the federal government has never been known for its sense of humor.

Chapter 35

EDWARD LET ME drive his Hummer to the hospital. He stayed behind to wait for the witch. She was Donna's friend so he'd play Ted and hold her hand through the crime scene. It would be her very first crime scene. Talk about being thrown in at the deep end to sink or swim. Even I'd had a gentler introduction to police work than this.

Olaf stayed to commune with the bodies. Fine with me. I did not want to be in a car, or any small confined space with Olaf without Edward along to chaperone. I think the police and the Feds would have gladly given him to me for the ride, though. All he'd really done was confirm my supposition that the killer would not have willingly left his trophies behind, though Olaf knew less about magic than I did. He didn't know why the killer left. I was the only one with a scenario for that, and even I would be relieved if the wicca practitioner seconded my opinion. If she didn't, then we were truly out of guesses.

In fact, almost no one wanted to go with me. Franklin thought I was nuts. What did I mean, the survivors weren't survivors, but the living dead? Bradley wasn't willing to leave Franklin as the ranking agent on site. The geology maps were on the way, and I don't think he wanted Franklin in charge of the search. Marks wouldn't leave the scene to the Feds, and he also thought I was nuts. Ramirez and one uniform followed me in an unmarked car.

I didn't really think they'd find the monster. There had been no track. No tracks meant either it could fly or it dematerialized. Either way they weren't going to find it, not on foot, not with maps. So I felt free to go to the hospital.

Another reason to go into Albuquerque was that Edward had found me a name. A man who was known as a brujo, a witch. Donna had only given "Ted" the name on the condition it would not be used to harm the man. She'd only been given the name on the strict understanding that no harm would come to him. The one who gave up the name didn't want the brujo to come back and hurt her. He would work evil spells for money, as well as personal vengeance. If you could prove in court that he performed real magic for nefarious purpose, it was an automatic death sentence. His name was Nicandro Baco, and he was supposed to be a necromancer. If he were, he'd be the first one, other than me, that I'd ever met. The name came with one other warning. Be careful of him. He was much more dangerous than he looked. Just what I needed—a necromancer with an attitude. Oh, wait, I was a necromancer with an attitude. If he got shitty with me, we'd see who was the bigger fish. Was that a chip on my shoulder or overconfidence? We'd see.

Oh, and Bernardo went with me. He sat in the passenger seat slumped down until the seatbelt I'd insisted he wear cut across his neck. His handsome face was set in a scowl, arms crossed over his chest. I think he'd have crossed his legs if he'd had room. Words like closed-off, brooding, came to mind.

Shadows stretched across the road, though there were no trees or buildings to cast them. It was like the shadows just spilled out of the earth itself to lie across the road like a promise of the night to come. If you went by the watch on my wrist, it was early evening. If you went by the level of daylight, it was late afternoon. We had about three hours of daylight left. I drove through the gathering shadows with a feeling of urgency pressing against me. I wanted to be at the hospital before dark. I didn't know why, and I didn't question it. We were being followed by a police car. Surely, they could fix the ticket.

It was frightening how quickly and smoothly the car went over eighty without me noticing it. There was something about the roads and the way they spilled out and out across the empty landscape that made lower speeds seem

like crawling. I kept it at a solid eighty, and Ramirez kept up with me. He seemed to be the only one who believed me. Maybe he felt the urgency, too. The silence in the car wasn't exactly companionable, but it wasn't uncomfortable either. Besides, I had enough problems without playing crying shoulder for one of Edward's sociopathic friends.

Bernardo broke the silence. "I saw you and that detective getting it on there in the grass."

I frowned at him. He was watching me with hostile eyes. I think he was trying to pick a fight, though I didn't know why. "We were not 'getting it on,' " I said.

"Looked pretty cozy to me."

"Jealous?" I asked.

His face hardened, thinning into angry lines. "So you do sleep around. Just not with us bad guys."

I shook my head. "It was a comforting hug, not that it's any of your business."

"Didn't think you were the comforting hug type."

"I'm not."

"So," he said.

"So this case is getting to me."

"I hear that," he said.

I glanced at him. His face was turned away, only a thin rim of profile showing through his hair like the moon just before it goes dark.

I turned back to the road. If he didn't want eye contact, fine with me. "I thought you were avoiding the pictures and forensic stuff," I said.

"I've been here two weeks longer than you have. I've seen the pictures. I've seen the bodies. I don't need to see it all again."

"What exactly did you and Edward quarrel about today?"

"Quarrel," he said and gave a low chuckle. "Yeah, you could say we quarreled."

"What about?"

"I don't know why the hell I'm here. Tell me what or who to shoot, and I'll do it. I'll even guard bodies if the price is right. But there's nothing to shoot at. Nothing but dead bodies. I don't know shit about magic."

"I thought you were a licensed bounty hunter that specialized in preternatural critters."

"I was with Edward when he cleaned out a nest of lycanthropes in Arizona. Fifteen of them. We mowed them down with machine guns and grenades." He had an almost wistful tone to his voice. Ah, the good ol' days. "Before that I'd killed two rogue lycanthropes, but afterwards I got a lot of calls for this shit. I took the ones that were basically just hits. The only difference was that the vic wasn't human. Those I could handle, but I am not a detective. Call me in when the kill is in sight, and I'll be there, but not this. This fucking waiting around, looking for clues. Who the hell looks for clues? We're assassins, not Sherlock Holmes."

He shifted in his seat, and struggled to sit up straighter, arms still holding himself tight. He did the headshake to get the hair back away from his face, The headshake is a very feminine gesture. A man has to be muy macho for it not to be. Bernardo managed.

"Maybe he assumed that since you helped him out with the shapeshifters that you'd be useful with this."

"He was wrong."

I shrugged. "Then go home."

"I can't"

I glanced at him. I could see most of his profile, and it was a nice one.

"You

owe him a favor, too?"

"Yes."

"Mind me asking what sort of favor?"

"Same as you."

"You killed one of his other backups?"

He nodded, and had to run his hands through his hair to slide it back from his face.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Why?" He looked at me, and his face, for one of the few times, wasn't teasing, but serious, even solemn. He looked less handsome without the smile and glow in his eyes, but he also seemed more real. Being real will get me into trouble faster than any amount of charm. "Do you want to talk about how you killed Harley?" he asked.

"Not really."

"Then why did you ask?"

"You seem uptight. I thought it might help to talk, or is that just a girl thing?"

He smiled, and it almost reached his eyes. "I think it's a girl thing because I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay, let's talk about something else."

"What?" He was staring out the far window now, one shoulder pressed against the glass. The road went down between two hills, and the world was suddenly dark gray. We were literally running out of daylight. But this last attack had most definitely been a daylight attack. So why was I so worried about the coming night? Maybe it was just years of hunting vampires, where darkness meant that we humans no longer had any advantage. I hoped it was just old habits, but the fluttering in my stomach didn't think that was it.

"How long have you known Edward?" I asked.

"About six years."

"Shit," I said.

He looked at me then. "What's wrong?"

"I've known him for five. I was hoping you'd known him longer."

He grinned at me. "Wanting to pump me for information, eh?"

"Something like that."

He turned in the seatbelt until most of his body was facing me, one leg drawn up into the seat. "Let me pump you, and you can pump me all you want." His voice had dropped a notch or two. His head was to one side, the hair sweeping across the seat like black fur.

I shook my head. "You're horny, and I'm available. That isn't very flattering, Bernardo."

He moved back in his seat, sweeping his hair back to his side of the seat. "Now that is a girl thing."

"What is?"

"Complicating things, needing the sex to be about something more than sex."

"I don't know. I know a guy or two that make it just as complicated."

"You don't sound happy with him or them."

"Did Edward call you before Olaf or after?" I asked.

"After, but you're changing the subject."

"No, I'm not. Edward is an expert on people. He knows who to call for any given situation, for any kill. Olaf makes sense. I make sense. You don't make sense. He knows that this isn't your type of crime."

"You lost me."

"Edward encouraged me to sleep with you."

Bernardo looked at me, shocked, I think. Nice to know he could be. "Edward match making. We are talking about the same Edward, right?"

"Maybe Donna has changed him," I said.

"Nothing changes Edward. He's a mountain. He's just there."

I nodded. "True, but he wasn't encouraging me to pick out curtains with you. He said, and I quote, 'What you need is a nice uncomplicated fuck.'"

Bernardo's eyebrows went up into his hair. "Edward said that?"

"Yeah, he did."

He was looking at me now. I could feel his gaze on me even while watching the road. It wasn't sexual now. It was intense. I had his attention. "Are you saying that Edward brought me on to tempt you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's just a coincidence. But he's not happy with my choice of lovers."

"First, there are no coincidences when it comes to Edward. Second, who could you possibly be sleeping with that would bother Edward? He wouldn't care if you were doing your dog."

I ignored the last comment, because I couldn't think of a comeback for it. Though notice I didn't disagree. Usually, Edward just wanted to know if you could shoot. Anything else was not important. "I'll answer your question, if you answer mine first."

"Try me."

"You may look like the cover boy for the Native American GQ, but there's no sense of you coming from a different culture?"

"Too white for you?" and his voice was angry. I'd touched the chip on his shoulder.

"Look, my mother's family is Mexican American, and you have a sense of their culture when you interact with them. My father's family is German, and they'll say things, do things that are sort of European or have a foreign flavor to them. You don't seem to have any specific culture or background. You talk like generic middle America, like television or something."

He looked at me, and he was angry now. "My mother was white. My father was Indian. I'm told he died before I was born. She gave me up at birth. No one wanted a little mixed baby, so I went from one foster home to another. When I was eighteen, I joined the army. They found out I could shoot. I killed things for my country for a few years. Then I went freelance. And here I am." His voice had grown increasingly bitter until it almost hurt to hear it.

Saying I was sorry would have been insulting. Saying I understood would have been a lie. Thanks for answering the question seemed wrong, too.

"Nothing to say?" he asked. "Shocked? Sorry for me? Give me a little pity sex."

I looked at him then. "If someone has sex with you, it isn't out of pity, and you damn well know it."

"But you don't want to have sex with me."

"It's not because of your ethnicity, or lack thereof, or your background. I've got two guys waiting for me at home. Two is one too many. Three would be ridiculous."

"Why doesn't Edward like them?" Bernardo asked.

"One's a werewolf and the other is a vampire." My words were bland, but I watched his face long enough to see the reaction. He gaped at me.

He finally closed his mouth, and said, "You're the Executioner, scourge of the undead. How can you be doing a vampire?"

"I'm not sure I can answer that question, even to myself. But currently, I'm not doing him at all."

"Did you think the werewolf was human? Was he trying to pass?"

"At first, but not for long. I knew what he was when I took him to my bed."

He let out a low whistle. "Edward hates the monsters. But I didn't think he'd give a damn if one of his backups slept with them."

"He cares. I don't know why, but he does."

"So he thought what? That one night with me would change your religion? Make you swear off the monsters?" He was staring at me now, studying my face. "I've heard that shapeshifters can change the shape of their bodies at will. Is that true?"

"Some of them can," I said. We were in the outskirts of Albuquerque. Strip malls and fast food restaurants.

"Can your boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"Can he change the shape of all his body, at will?"

I felt the blush roll up my neck into my face and couldn't stop it.

Bernardo laughed. "I guess he can."

"No comment."

He was still laughing softly to himself, a very masculine chuckle. "Is your vampire an old one?"

"Four hundred years and counting," I said. We'd left the strip malls behind and turned into a residential area. We were coming up to the first landmark on the directions Edward had given me. We'd used up nearly an hour of daylight. I almost drove past the turnoff to Nicandro Baco's place, but if I was right, if the thing we were dealing with was another type of undead from any that I'd ever heard of, then another necromancer might be nice to have around. For all I knew, this type of undead was a regional specialty, and Baco would know more than I did. I turned, checking the rearview to see that Ramirez was still behind me. We were actually all going the speed limit.

"Can you read the directions to me?" I asked.

He didn't answer, just picked the piece of paper up off the dashboard, and began reading off street names. "You're safe on the directions for a little bit. Let's get back to our little talk."

I frowned at him. "Do we have to?"

"Let me get this straight," Bernardo said. "You've been shacking up with a shapeshifter that has such fine control of his body that he can make any one part of it... bigger."

"Or smaller," I said. I was counting streetlights, under my breath. Didn't want to miss the turn. We had time to see this guy and get to the hospital before dark, but not if we got badly lost.

"No man makes things smaller during sex. I don't care what he is, he's still male."

I shrugged. I was not going to discuss Richard's size with Bernardo. The only person I had discussed it with had been Ronnie, and that had been over much giggling, while she shared embarrassing facts about her boyfriend Louie. It has been my experience that women tell more intimate details to their friends than men do. Men may brag more, but women will talk the nitty gritty and share the experience more.

"So, where was I?" Bernardo said. "Ah, you're doing this shapeshifter that has such fine control of his body that he can make any part bigger or smaller at will."

I squirmed in the seat, but finally nodded.

Bernardo smiled happily. "And you're doing a vampire that has been having sex for over four hundred years." He suddenly sounded faux-British. "Can one assume that he is well-skilled by now?"

The blush that had been fading came back with a burn. I'd almost have welcomed darkness to hide behind. "Yes," I said.

"Shit, girlfriend, I may be good, but I'm not that good. I am just a poor mortal boy. I can't compete with the lord of the undead and the wolfman."

We were in a section of town that seemed nearly deserted. Gas station with bars on the windows and graffiti spread across everything like a contagious disease. The storefront across from it had boarded up windows and more graffiti. The afternoon was still thick with reflected sunlight, but

somehow the light didn't quite reach the street, as if there was something here that kept it at bay. The skin on my back crept so hard, I jumped.

"What's wrong?" Bernardo asked.

I shook my head. My mouth was suddenly dry. I knew we had arrived before he called out, "There it is, Los Duendos, the dwarves."

The air was thick and oppressive with the weight of magic. Death magic. Either they had just killed something to gain power for a spell or they were actively working with the dead right at this very moment. Since the sun was still up, that was a trick. Most animators couldn't raise the dead until after dark. Theoretically, I am powerful enough to raise the dead at high noon, but I don't. I was told once that the only reason I couldn't do it was that I believed I couldn't do it. But Nicandro Baco didn't seem to share my doubts. Maybe I wouldn't be the biggest fish after all. Now I got an attack of the doubts. Too late to get Edward down here for backup. If Baco got a whiff of police, he'd either run, be uncooperative, or try to hurt us. His power breathed along my body, and I was still sitting in the car. What was he going to be like in person? Bad. How bad? As the old saying goes, only one way to find out.

Chapter 36

I'D PULLED INTO a deserted parking lot about two blocks down and around the corner from the bar. Ramirez had pulled in beside me, and he and the uniform, Officer Rigby, walked over to us. Rigby was medium height, well built, and moved like he worked out. He had an easy confidence, and a ready smile that went all the way to his eyes. He was entirely too comfortable in his own skin, as if nothing really bad had ever touched him. He lacked entirely that air that most policemen have of having been ridden hard and put up wet. He looked older than I was, but his eyes were younger, and I resented that.

Ramirez had spent his drive time checking out Nicandro Baco, alias Nicky Baco. He was suspected of murders, but witnesses had a strange way of disappearing or forgetting what they'd seen. He was associated with a local biker gang, ah, club. Biker gangs now preferred the more politically correct term of club, according to Ramirez. The local "club" was called Los Lobos. "Not to be confused with the music group," Ramirez said.

I'd blinked at him. Then I got the joke. "Oh, yeah, Los Lobos, the music group."

He looked at me. "Are you all right?"

I nodded. Even two blocks away I could feel a touch of Baco's magic. I was betting if someone took the time, they'd find spells, charms, wards, set up here and there in the surrounding area. I didn't think he was aware of me yet. I think the only reason I'd sensed him so strongly was he was in the middle of a

spell. The charms were scattered around the neighborhood to give off a certain unease. He might have literally driven the other businesses out of business. Illegal, as well as unethical. Of course, why he'd want to destroy the entire economy of the area surrounding his bar was a mystery to me. I'd worry about it later. Murder and mayhem first. Possible real estate scam later. Some days you just have to prioritize.

"The Lobos are small and local, but they've got a bad rep," Ramirez said.

"How bad?" I asked.

"Drug running, murder, murder for hire, assault, assault with a deadly, attempted murder, rape, kidnapping."

Bernardo said, "Kidnapping?" As if the other crimes were to be expected but not the last.

Ramirez looked at him, and his eyes went from friendly to cool. He didn't like Bernardo for some reason. "We think they abducted a teenage girl, but nobody ever surfaced, and the only witness just saw her being dragged into a van that looked like one that their leader, Roland Sanchez, owned at the time. But a lot of people own gray vans."

"Have you had a lot of disappearing teenage girls?" I asked.

"Our share, but no, we haven't noticed a pattern of young women being abducted by the gang. I'm not saying they won't do it, but they're not making a habit of it."

"Glad to hear it," I said.

Ramirez smiled. "You're armed, and ..." He handed me a slender cellphone. "Press this button and it'll call this phone." He held up a matching phone. "Rigby and I will come running with backup."

My eyes flicked to Rigby, who actually tipped his hat at me. "At your service, ma'am."

Ma'am? Either he was five years younger than he looked, or he used ma'am for all women. I turned from his peaceful eyes to Ramirez. His eyes were kind but they weren't peaceful. He'd seen too much of life for true tranquility. I liked his eyes better. "You're not going to try and argue me out of just Bernardo and I walking into the bar?"

"We suspect Baco of using magic to kill people. That is an automatic death sentence. If he gets a whiff of police, then he'll clam up and start asking for a lawyer. If you want information from him, you'll have to play ordinary citizen. Now, if you planned to go in there alone without Bernardo or some man with you, then I'd argue."

I frowned at him. "I can take care of myself."

He shook his head. "In the world that this gang runs in, women do not exist except through men."

My frown deepened. "You've lost me."

"All women are either someone's mother, daughter, wife, sister, girlfriend, lover. They would not know what the hell to do with you, Anita. Go in as Bernardo's girlfriend." He had his hand up, stopping me from interrupting before I could even open my mouth and try. "Trust me on this. You need to have some sort of status that they can grasp quickly and easily. Flashing your

animator's license is too close to a badge. No woman in her right mind would just wander in there for a drink. You have to be something." He glanced at Bernardo not like he was happy. "I'd go in with you as your boyfriend, but like it or not, I look like a cop, or so I've been told."

I looked at him. I wasn't sure what it was about most policemen, but after a while they really did look like cops, even off duty sometimes. It was partially the clothes, partially some indefinable air of authority or bad attitude or something. Whatever "it" was, Ramirez had it. Rigby was in uniform, and I wouldn't have taken him as backup anyway. He made me nervous with his air of contentment. Policemen should never be that well pleased with themselves. It means they haven't had much experience yet.

I looked at Bernardo's smirking face. "Agreed, under protest."

"Good," Ramirez said, but he was looking at Bernardo, too, like he didn't like the look on his face. He held a finger up near the taller man's face. "You get out of line in there with Anita, and I will personally make you sorry for it."

Bernardo's eyes drifted from amused to cool. It reminded me of the way Edward's eyes lost emotion until they were empty and somehow harsh.

I stepped between them, enough to get both of them looking at me. "I can take care of myself when it comes to Bernardo, Detective Ramirez. Thanks anyway." I'd used his title to remind Bernardo who and what he was. Even Edward treaded soft around the cops.

Ramirez's face had closed down, empty. "Suit yourself, Ms. Blake."

I realized that he thought I'd used his title because I was angry with him. Shit. Why was I always ass deep in male egos in the middle of any given crisis?

"It's okay, Hernando. I just like to remind everyone that I'm a big girl." I touched his arm lightly.

He looked at me, and his eyes softened. "Okay." That was male short hand for apology and apology accepted. Though truthfully if one of the parties involved hadn't been female, the short hand would have been shorter.

I stepped away from both of them and changed the subject. "Amazing how many bad guys and monsters will talk to me and not the police."

He nodded, face still serious. "Amazing. That's one word for it." The look he gave me was so studied, so searching, that I wondered if he'd been checking me out as well as Baco.

I didn't ask. I didn't really want to know. But he was right about Baco. If he was what people said, then he wouldn't want the police anywhere near his homes or his work area. They were not kidding about the automatic death penalty. The last execution in this country of a spell caster had been two months ago. It had been in California, which is not a death penalty state for any other crime.

They'd tried and convicted a sorcerer, or would that be sorceress, of trafficking with the demonic. She'd used a demon to kill her sister so she'd inherit the parents' estate. They suspected she'd also killed her parents, but they couldn't prove that. And who cared? They could only kill her once. I'd read some of the trial transcript. She'd been guilty. I had no doubt on that point. But it had been three months from arrest, to conviction, to the carrying out of the

sentence. It was unheard of in the American justice system. Hell, it usually takes longer than that to get a hearing date, let alone a full-blown trial. But even California had learned its lesson a few years back. They'd arrested a sorcerer for very similar crimes. They'd tried to give the sorcerer the usual wait for a trial because some congressman or other was arguing that the death penalty shouldn't be allowed even in cases of magical assassination.

That sorcerer had called a greater demon in his cell. It killed every guard on the cellblock, and some of the prisoners. He'd finally been tracked down with the help of a coven of white wiccans. The death total had been forty-two, forty-three, something like that. He was killed during the capture attempt. He took thirty slugs, which meant people had emptied their clips into his body once it went down. For none of the police to get caught in the crossfire, they must have been standing over him, pointing down. Overkill, you bet, but I didn't blame them. They never did find all the body parts of the guards at the prison.

New Mexico was a death penalty state. I was betting that they would be able to beat California's three months turn-around from arrest to completion of sentence. I mean, after all, in this state they might actually put you to death for a good old-fashioned murder. Add magic to it, and they'd be scattering your ashes to the wind faster than you could say Beelzebub.

The actual method of execution is the same for everyone. America does not allow burning at the stake for any crime. But after you're dead, they burn the body to ash if you were convicted of a crime involving magic. Then they scatter the ashes, usually into running water. Very traditional.

There are parts of Europe where it's still legal to burn a "witch" at the stake. There's more than one reason that I don't travel outside the country much.

"Anita, are you still with us?" Ramirez asked.

I blinked. "Sorry, just thinking about the last execution in California. I don't blame Baco for being worried."

Ramirez shook his head. "Me, either. Be very careful. These are bad people."

"Anita knows about bad people," Bernardo said.

The two men looked at each other, and again I got that hint that Ramirez didn't like him. Bernardo seemed to be teasing him. Did they know each other?

I decided to ask. "Do you guys know each other?"

They both shook their heads. "Why?" Bernardo asked.

"You guys seem to have some sort of personal shit going on."

Bernardo smiled then, and Ramirez looked uncomfortable.

"It's not personal with me," Bernardo said.

Rigby turned away, coughing. If I hadn't known better, I'd have said he was covering a laugh.

Ramirez ignored him, all attention for Bernardo. "I know Anita knows how to handle herself around the bad guys, but a knife blade in the back doesn't care how good you are. The Lobos pride themselves on using blades instead of guns."

"Guns are for sissies," I said.

"Something like that."

I had the black suit jacket on over the navy blue polo shirt. If I buttoned two buttons, the jacket hid the Firestar in front and still left me plenty of room to reach for it, and the Browning. In fact the slender cell phone swinging in the right side pocket was more noticeable than the guns. "I just love taking a gun to a knife fight."

Bernardo had thrown a black short-sleeved dress shirt over his white T-shirt. It fanned in back and covered the Beretta 10 mil on his hip. "Me, too," he said and smiled. It was a fierce smile, and I realized that this may have been the first time in weeks that he was going up against something flesh and blood and killable.

"We're going in for information, not to do the OK Corral. You do understand that?" I said.

"You're the boss," he said, but I didn't like the way his eyes looked. They were anticipatory, eager.

I'd felt paranoid this morning when I slipped the knife in its spine sheath. Now I moved my head a little back and forth feeling the handle against my neck. It was comforting. I almost always carried the wrist sheaths and their matching knives, but the spine sheath was optional. One minute you're paranoid and packing too much hardware, the next you're scared, and under-armed. Life's like that, or my life's like that.

"Do you know what los duendos are?" Ramirez asked.

"Bernardo said it meant the dwarves."

Ramirez nodded. "But around here it's folklore. They're small beings that live in caves and steal things. But they're supposed to be angels that got left suspended between Heaven and Hell during Lucifer's revolt. So many angels were leaving Heaven that God slammed the gates shut and los duendos got trapped outside of Heaven. They were suspended in limbo."

"Why didn't they just go to Hell?" Bernardo asked, It was a good question. Ramirez shrugged. "The story doesn't say."

I glanced at Rigby standing behind Ramirez. He was standing so easy, ready, prepared like a grown-up Boy Scout. He didn't seem worried about anything, It made me nervous. We were about to go into a bar that was thick with bikers, bad guys. There was a necromancer inside so powerful that it made my skin crawl from blocks away. The rest of us looked confident, but it was confidence born of having been there and done that and survived, Rigby's confidence struck me as false, not false confidence, but based on a false assumption. I couldn't know for sure without asking, but I was betting Rigby had never really been in any situation where he thought he might not come out the other side. There was a softness to him despite the lean muscles. I'd take a few less muscles and more depth to the eyes any day. I hoped that Ramirez didn't have to come in with Rigby as his only backup. but I didn't say it out loud. Everyone loses their cherry sometime, somewhere, if things went wrong, tonight might be Rigby's night.

"Did you tell us that little story for a reason, Hernando? I mean you don't think that Baco or this biker gang are los Duendos?" He shook his head. "No, I

just thought you might want to know. It says something about Baco to name his bar after fallen angels."

I opened the driver's side door of the Hummer. Bernardo took the hint and went for the passenger side door. "Not fallen angels, Hernando, just caught in limbo."

Hernando leaned into the open window of the car. "But they're not in Heaven anymore, are they?" With that last cryptic comment he stepped back and let me raise the window. He and Rigby watched us drive off. They looked sort of forlorn standing there in the abandoned, broken parking lot. Or maybe it was just me feeling forlorn.

I looked at Bernardo. "Don't kill anyone, okay?"

He slid back in his seat, snuggling against the leather. He looked more relaxed than I'd seen him in hours.

"If they try to kill us?"

I sighed. "Then we defend ourselves," I said.

"See, I knew you'd see things my way."

"Don't start the fight," I said.

He looked at me with eager brown eyes. "Can I finish it?" I looked back at the road searching for a parking space. Whatever spell Baco had been working was over. The atmosphere was a little easier to breathe. But there was still something in the air like close lightning waiting to strike.

"Yeah, we can finish it."

He started humming under his breath. I think it was the theme from "The Magnificent Seven." To quote an overused movie line, I had a bad feeling about this.

Chapter 37

BY THE TIME I found a parking space, Bernardo and I had a plan. I was an out of town necromancer wanting to talk shop with one of the only other necromancers I'd ever heard of. If it hadn't been so damn close to the truth, it would have been a lousy cover story. Even being the truth, almost, it sounded weak. But we didn't have all day, and besides, I don't think being sneaky was a strong suit for either of us. We were both more comfortable with the bust-the-door-down-and-start-shooting school, than the concoct-a-good-cover-story-and-infiltrate.

Bernardo reached his hand out for me just before we crossed the street, I frowned at him.

He wagged his hand at me. "Come on, Anita, play fair." He was holding his right hand out to me. I stared at the offered hand for a heartbeat, but finally took it. His fingers slid around my hand a little slower, and a little more

proprietary than necessary, but I could live with it. Lucky for us that I was right-handed, and Bernardo was left-handed. We could hold hands and not compromise either of our gun hands. Usually, I was the only one armed when I was cuddling, so it was only my gun hand we had to worry about.

I've dated men that I couldn't walk hand in hand with, like an awkward rhythm between us. Bernardo was not one of those men. He slowed his pace to let me catch up to his longer legs, until he realized I was a step ahead of him, tugging on his hand. I have a lot of tall friends. No one ever complains that I can't keep up.

The door to the bar was black and blended so well with the building's facade that you almost missed it. Bernardo opened the door for me, and I let him. It might blow our cover to argue over who got to hold the door for who. Though if he had been my real boyfriend, we'd have had the discussion. Ah, well.

The minute I stepped inside the bar, no, the second I stepped inside the bar, I knew we were not going to blend in. So many things had already gone wrong. We were not so much overdressed as wrongly dressed. If Bernardo had ditched the black dress shirt and just worn the white T-shirt, and if it hadn't looked fresh out of the box, then he might have mingled. I was so the only suit jacket in the room. But even the polo shirt and jeans seemed a little much beside what some of the women were wearing. Can you say, short-shorts?

A girl near us, and I meant girl—if she was eighteen, I'd eat something icky—looked at me with hostile eyes. She had long brown hair that swung past her shoulders. The hair was clean and shiny even in the dim light. Her makeup was light but expertly applied. She should have been deciding who to take to prom. Instead, she was wearing a black leather bra with metal studs on it and matching shorts that looked like they'd been painted over her narrow hips. A pair of those clunky platform high-heels completed the look. Those platform shoes had been ugly in the seventies and eighties, and they were still ugly two decades later, even if they were back in style.

She was hanging all over a guy that had to be thirty years or more her senior. His hair and ragged beard were gray. At first glance you'd think he was fat, but he was fat the way an offensive lineman was fat, flesh with muscle under it. His eyes were hidden behind small round sunglasses, even though the bar was cast in permanent twilight. He sat at the table closest to the door, big hands resting on the wood. He was totally at rest, but you still got a sense of how very large he was, how physically imposing. The girl was slender and shorter than I was. I hoped she was his daughter, but doubted it.

He stood, and a wave of energy moved off of him in a curling, almost visible roil of power. It was suddenly hard to breathe, and it wasn't the cigarette smoke rolling like a low fog through the room. I'd come in expecting to meet a necromancer. I had not expected a werewolf. I couldn't be a hundred percent sure of the type of animal, but call it a hunch—los lobos—had to be werewolves.

I looked out over that room full of people, and felt their power raise like invisible hackles. Bernardo put his right hand on my shoulder and drew me

towards the bar, slowly. It took almost all the restraint I had not to reach for one of the guns. They had not offered us violence. They probably always did this show to unwanted tourists. Almost anyone would get the message and leave. Leaving actually sounded like a really good idea. Unfortunately, we had business, and a really good threat display was not reason enough to stop us. Pity. Because they would not like the fact that we didn't leave. What if this afternoon's little display wasn't the norm? What if they were trying to chase us away because something illegal was going down? Worse and worse.

The long wooden bar had cleared out as we moved towards it. Fine with me. I didn't want to be outflanked. The bartender was a woman, surprise, and a dwarf, ah, little person. I couldn't see over the bar, but she had to have something she was standing on. She had short, thick hair, dark, shot through with strands of white. Her face was the typical rough square, but her eyes were as hard as any I've ever seen. Her face was heavily lined not with age, but with wear and tear. One eyebrow was bisected by a heavy white scar. All she needed was a sign above her head that said, "I've had a hard life."

"What do you want?" she asked. Her tone matched the rest of her, harsh.

I half expected Bernardo to answer, but his attention was all for the room and the growing air of hostility. "We're looking for Nicky Baco," I said.

Her eyes never flickered. "Never heard of him."

I shook my head. Her answer had been automatic. She didn't even have to think about it. I could have asked to see anyone in the room and the answer would have been the same. I lowered my voice, though I knew most of the things in the room would hear even the barest whisper. "I'm a necromancer. I heard that Baco is one, too. I've met a lot of zombie raisers, but never another necromancer."

She shook her head. "Don't know what you're talking about." She started to rub the top of the bar with a stained rag. She wasn't even looking at me now, as if I'd become something totally without interest.

They'd stall for a while, then they'd get impatient and try to kick us out.

Unless we were willing to start shooting people, they'll succeed. When in doubt, tell the truth. Not my usual ploy, but hey, I'll try anything once.

"I'm Anita Blake," and that was all I got out before her gaze snapped upward, and she really looked at me for the first time.

"Prove it," she said.

I started to reach inside the jacket for my ID. I heard the gun click underneath the bar, as she pulled the hammer back. Just from the sound I'd say it was an old fashioned shotgun, sawed-off or it wouldn't have fit under the bar "Slowly," she said.

I caught Bernardo's movement out of the corner of my eye. Turning towards us, maybe going for a gun. "It's okay, Bernardo. It's under control."

I don't think he believed me.

I said, "Please."

I didn't say please often. Bernardo hesitated but finally turned back to watch the gathering werewolves. He hissed, "Hurry up."

I did what the lady with the shotgun pointed at my chest said, I moved very, very slowly, and handed her my ID.

"Lay it on the bar."

I laid it on the bar.

"Hands flat on the bar. Lean into it."

The bar top was sticky, but I kept my hands on it and leaned into it, in a sort of push-up position. She could have just asked me to assume the position. It was a leg width away from it.

"Him, too," she said.

Bernardo had heard her. "No," he said.

Something passed through her eyes that would have made Edward proud I knew she'd do it. "Either do what she says or get the fuck out of here," I said.

He moved so he could watch the room at large, and see me and the lady behind the bar. He was beside the outer door. One quick move and he could be out in the afternoon sunlight. He didn't go for the door. He looked at me. His eyes flicked to the woman behind the bar. I think he saw in her face what I'd seen because he sighed enough that his shoulders slumped. He shook his head, but he moved towards the long bar. He moved stiffly, as if each small movement pained him. His posture, his face, all screamed that he didn't like doing this, but he leaned beside me against the bar.

"Legs further apart," she said. "Lean into it like you want to see that pretty face in the polish."

I heard Bernardo take a hissing breath, but he spread his legs and leaned close enough to see the varnish on the scarred bar. "Can I just say now that this is a bad idea?" he said.

"Shut up," I said.

The woman opened the ID on the bar top, one hand still hidden under the bar. They had the shotgun attached underneath the bar somehow. I wondered what other surprises they had.

"Why do you want to see Nicky?" she asked.

She hadn't told me to stop leaning, so I didn't. "I told the truth. I want to talk to another necromancer."

"Why didn't you tell me who you were up front?"

"I work with the cops sometimes. I thought it might make you nervous." I had to roll my eyes up to see her face. I was rewarded with a smile. It looked almost awkward on her harsh features, but it was a start.

"Why do you want to talk to another necromancer?"

I let the truth spill out of my mouth without concentrating on the fact that I planned to stop before I'd told all of it. I mean Nicky Baco was a necromancer, and if necromancy was involved in the killings ... So only part of the truth until I knew whether he was a bad guy. "I've got a little problem that involves the dead. I wanted a second opinion."

She laughed then, a harsh sound like the caw of a crow. I jumped, and I swear I could feel the werewolves behind me flinch. If I hadn't known better, I'd have said they were just a little afraid of this small woman. I know I was.

"Nicky'll love that. The famous Anita Blake coming to consult him. Oh, he will just fucking love this." She motioned with her head. "Who's he?"

"This is Bernardo, he's ... a friend."

Her eyes hardened. "How good a friend?"

"Close, very close," I said.

She leaned across the bar, putting her face next to mine, her hand still under the bar on the shotgun. "I should kill you. I can feel it. You'll hurt Nicky." I looked into her eyes from inches away. I expected to see anger or even hatred, but there was nothing. It was the very emptiness that clued me in. If she pulled the trigger on me, it wouldn't be the first time.

My pulse was suddenly thudding in my throat. Blown away by a psychotic dwarf bartender, how ironic. I kept my voice low and even the way you talk to jumpers on ledges, and people with guns pointed at you. "I don't plan to hurt Nicky. I honestly just want to consult with him, one necromancer to another."

She just kept looking at me, not even blinking. She raised up slowly. "If you move, I'll kill you. If he moves, I'll kill you." The way she said it promised that whatever was about to happen, was something we weren't going to like.

She turned her gaze to Bernardo and leaned down so that her head was sideways looking at him, her ear almost pressed to the bar. "Did you hear me, boyfriend?"

"I heard you," he said, and his voice was low and calm, too. He'd seen it, too. She wanted an excuse to kill me. I'd never met her before, so it couldn't be personal. But personal or not, I'd be just as dead.

"We don't let outsiders bring guns into our house."

"No disrespect intended," I said. "I always go armed. Nothing personal."

She leaned back down next to Bernardo's face. "How 'bout you? You always go armed?"

"Yes," he said. He frowned, then went back to staring at the bar. Lucky he'd worn a hair barrette today or his lovely hair would have been covered in sticky gunk. My hands felt like they were becoming permanently glued to the wood.

"Not in here you don't," she said.

It was the big man in front who searched us. Somehow I'd known it would be. His power beat against my back like a nearly solid wall of power. Shit. He patted me down like he'd done it before. He found the knives at my wrist and back, as well as the guns. He also found the cell phone but placed it on the bar in front of me instead of taking it.

You could see the effort it took for Bernardo to let the man touch him, pat him down, take his gun. He also took a knife out of one of Bernardo's boot's. Anything was an improvement over the last crime scene, but the day really wasn't going well.

"Can we stand up now?" I asked.

"Not yet," she said.

Bernardo gave me a look that said plainly if he died, he was coming back to haunt me because it was all my fault.

I kept my voice calm, tried to make sense. "You know I'm Anita Blake. You know why I'm here. What else do you want?"

"Harpo, check the man's wallet. Find out who he is," she said.

Harpo? The big man, the vibrating mountain of mystical energy was named Harpo. I said none of this out loud. I really am getting smarter.

Harpo took out Bernardo's wallet. He'd stuffed Bernardo's ten mil down the side of his pants and my Browning on the other side. I didn't see the Firestar or the knives. Maybe he'd stuffed them in his pockets. "The driver's license says, Bernardo Spotted-Horse, but there ain't no credit cards, no pictures, no nothing."

The woman's eyes had gone back to pitiless. "You say he's a close friend?"

"Yes," I said. I was beginning to get scared again.

"He your lover?" she asked.

If she hadn't had a shotgun pointed at me, I'd have told her to go to hell, but she did, so I answered. "Yeah." I was trusting that Ramirez knew what he was talking about, that I needed to belong to a man. I hoped the lie was the right answer.

"Prove it," she said.

I raised eyebrows at her. "Excuse me?"

"Excuse me," she mimicked, and that brought low rumbling laughter from the rest of the room.

"Is he circumcised?" she asked.

I hesitated. I couldn't help it. The question caught me too far off guard. I swallowed, and said, "Yes." I had a fifty-fifty chance, and being American and under forty I had a better than even chance.

She smiled, but it left her eyes like empty glass. "You can stand up now."

I fought the urge to wipe my hands on my pants. Didn't want to insult her cleanliness, but I also wanted desperately to wash my hands. I moved closer to Bernardo, as if I wanted a hug. I even put my left arm around his waist, though I wondered if I was getting his nice white shirt dirty. His arm slid over my shoulders, but I'd really just wanted out of the line of fire of the damned shotgun. I was betting it was on a stationary mount and not a swiveling one. I hoped I was right.

Her hands were back in plain sight. A good sign. "Drop your pants, Bernardo," she said.

I felt him tense beside me. We both looked at her. I started to say excuse me again, but Bernardo said, "Why?"

I'd have asked her to repeat it, just to make sure I'd understood her. He just asked why, as if this had happened to him before.

"So we can see if you're circumcised."

I moved my hand out from behind Bernardo's back, standing close together but not entangled in each other's arms. We might be in for a fight after all.

"I said he was. Isn't that enough?"

"No. You see, you're right. You do work with the cops a lot. You alone might have been okay to see Nicky, but him, we don't know anything about

him. If he's your lover, then fine, but if he's not, then maybe he's a cop." Bernardo laughed, and the sound startled all of us, I think. "Now that is a new one. Me being mistaken for a cop."

"What are you, if you're not a cop?" she asked.

"Sometimes I'm a bodyguard. Sometimes I'm someone you need to guard the body against. Depends on who's paying better." His voice sounded very sure of itself, very matter of fact.

"Maybe you are, and maybe you're not. Drop the pants, and we'll see."

He started unbuckling his belt. I moved away from him, though not too far. Didn't want to get back in front of the shotgun again.

"What's wrong? You've seen him without his pants before," she said. I was beginning to think she didn't believe me.

"Not in a crowd, I haven't," I said. I let the righteous indignation blaze in my voice. It got more laughter from the crowd.

The women were starting to chant, "Take it off, take it all off," and worse. The girl that had been hanging on Harpo was just behind him, watching the show with glittering excited eyes.

Bernardo didn't complain or blush. He just undid his pants and pushed them to about mid thigh, and stood there. My look away was automatic. The women screamed, and whistled. One voice yelled, "Big daddy, yes!" The men joined in. The men were congratulating him and speculating on how we did it without hurting me.

I had to look. I just couldn't help myself. I had to know if I'd guessed right, find frankly I just had to look. Embarrassing but true. It took me a few seconds to register that he was circumcised because what I saw first was sheer size. He was well, well endowed.

I was blushing, and I couldn't help that. But I knew if I just stood there and gaped that the lies would all be for nothing. I tried to act as if it were Richard or Jean-Claude standing there. What would I have done? I'd have covered them up.

I moved to stand in front of him, though was careful not to touch. I admit though that I couldn't seem to look anywhere else. Richard was impressive. Bernardo had passed impressive and gone over to scary. I shielded him from view with my body, putting my hands on either side of his waist to steady myself. I was blushing so hard, I was dizzy.

I looked at her, still shielding him from the room. "Good enough?" I asked. Even my voice sounded strangled with discomfort.

"Give him a kiss," she said.

I looked at her. "Let him put his pants up and I will."

She shook her head. "I didn't say kiss his lips."

If I blushed any harder, my head was going to explode. I turned around so I couldn't see him anymore. "We are so not doing this."

"I think you'll do anything we want," she said.

I don't know what I would have said to that because a man's voice sounded, "Enough games, Paulina. Give them back their weapons, and let them go."

We all turned. Coming from the dim back of the room was another dwarf, little person. He was maybe half a head taller than the bartender, Paulina, and he was more obviously Hispanic and younger. His hair was a rich black, his skin tanned and unlined. He looked twenty-something, but the aura of power that spread outward from him like an overwhelming perfume felt older.

"I am Nicandro Baco, Nicky to my friends." The crowd parted for him like a curtain being drawn back. He held his hand out to me, and I took it, but he didn't shake hands. He raised my hand to his lips and kissed it. But he kept his eyes rolled up to see my face as he did it, and something about the way his eyes looked, his mouth on my skin, reminded me of much more intimate places for a man's mouth to be. I took my hand back as soon as I could and still be polite.

"Mr. Baco, thank you for seeing me." It sounded so businesslike, as if Bernardo wasn't standing behind us with his pants around his thighs.

"Get dressed," he said. He barely glanced at Bernardo. But I heard him pulling up his pants, struggling to get everything back in place, though frankly I was surprised his jeans could fit over everything.

"Why are you here, Ms. Blake?"

"I really did want to talk to another necromancer."

"It sounds like you've changed your mind," he said. He watched me minutely, studying my face. When I moved a hand to touch my hair, his eyes tracked it.

"The grandstanding has taken up all my time. I've got an appointment with the police that I can't really miss." I'd added the police part on purpose because I had a feeling that Baco had known exactly what was happening out here. They hadn't really hurt us, just embarrassed us or me. He came in just in the nick of time. Yeah, right.

"Like the two policemen that are waiting outside for you."

I felt the knowledge flinch across my face, not much of a reaction, but it was enough. "Do you blame us for backup?"

"Are you saying you are afraid of us?" That brought a low rumble through the room, as if they had all drawn a breath together.

"I would be a fool if I wasn't," I said.

He cocked his head to one side in an almost bird-like movement. "And you are not a fool, are you, Anita?"

"I try not to be."

He motioned to the woman still standing behind the bar. "Paulina does not like you. Do you know why?"

It was my turn to shake my head. "Nope."

"She's my wife."

I must have still looked blank. "Sorry, I don't understand."

"She knows I have a weakness for women with power."

I frowned at him. "She doesn't have to worry. I'm sort of taken."

He smiled. "No more lies, Anita. You and he are not lovers." He took my hand again and gazed up at me with those black eyes. I realized for the first time that he considered himself a ladies man. And that his wife had reason to

worry, not about me, but about other women. It was there in his eyes, the way he stroked my hand.

I drew my hand away from him and moved back to stand with Bernardo. I actually reached out my hand, and he took it. Both our hands were sticky from the bar, but I clutched at him.

Baco was half a body-length shorter than I was, but he made me nervous. Part of it was the push of his magic like a thick curtain filling the room. But part of it was the way any man can make you nervous. I didn't like how blatant he was, with us unarmed. I glanced at Paulina, and her harsh face was stricken. Was it a game he played with her? Tormenting her? Who knew, but I wanted out of here.

"I need to be somewhere before dark. If you don't want to talk to me, fine. We'll go." I started moving backwards, using my body to push Bernardo behind me towards the door.

"Without your weapons?" Baco made it a question, his voice lilting upward.

Bernardo and I froze. We were close enough to the door that we could have made a rush for it, probably made it, but.. . "Our weapons would be nice," I said.

"All you had to do was ask," Baco said.

I said, "May we have our weapons back?"

He nodded. "Harpo, give them back."

Harpo never questioned it, just gave us back the guns, the knives. Then he stepped back to join the rest of the silent watchers. The guns and wrist knives were easy to slide into place. The knife in its spine sheath was another matter. I had to use my left hand to feel for the sheath, then feel the blade's tip at the mouth of the sheath. I'd gotten in the habit of closing my eyes so that all I concentrated on was touch. It actually took only a few seconds now to put it away. The real trick was not chopping off a hunk of my hair as the blade slid home.

When I opened my eyes, Baco was looking at me. "So nice to see a woman who doesn't rely exclusively on sight. Touch is such an important sense for intimate occasions."

Maybe being armed again made me brave, or maybe I was just tired of the tension level. "Men who turn everything into a sexual come on are such bores."

Distaste, anger filled his face, turning his charming eyes to black mirrors, like the eyes of a doll. "Too good to fuck a dwarf?"

I shook my head. "It's not your height that's the problem, Baco. Where I come from, you don't do shit like this in front of your wife."

He laughed then, and it sparkled through his eyes, his face. "The sacrament of marriage? You're offended for my wife's sake? You are a funny girl."

"Yeah, me and Barbara Streisand."

The humor faded a little from his face. I don't think he got the joke. Strangely, it was the young girl in her short-shorts that met my eyes. I think she

got the joke. If she liked early Streisand movies, maybe she wasn't a completely lost soul.

Bernardo touched my shoulder, and I jumped. "We're leaving now, Anita."

I nodded. "I'm with you."

"You never asked your questions," Baco said.

"Have you felt it?" I asked.

His face was suddenly serious. "There is something new here. It is like us. It deals in death. I have felt it."

"Where?" I asked.

"Between Santa Fe and Albuquerque though it began closer to Santa Fe."

"It's moving closer to Albuquerque, to you," I said.

For the first time he looked uncertain, not quite afraid, but not happy either. "It knows that I am here. I have felt that, too." He stared up at me and now there was no teasing in his eyes. "It knows that you are here, too Anita. It knows you are here, too."

I nodded. "We might be able to help each other, Nicky. I've seen the bodies. I've seen what this thing does. Trust me, Nicky. You don't want to go out that way."

"What do you propose?" he asked.

"That we pool our resources and see if we can stop this thing before it gets here, to you. And that we stop playing games. No more teasing. No more power plays."

"Just business between us?" he said.

I nodded. "We don't have time for anything else, Baco."

"Come back later tonight, and I will do what I can to help you. Though the police will not want you to share information with me. I am a very bad man, you know."

I smiled. "You're a bad man, Nicky, but not a stupid one. You need me."

"As you need me, Anita," he said.

"Two necromancers are better than one," I said.

He nodded, face solemn. "Come back tonight when you are finished with your police business. I will be waiting."

"It may be late," I said.

"It is already later than you think, Anita. Pray, if you are the praying sort, that it is not too late."

"Anita?" Bernardo said.

"We're going." I let Bernardo back us out the door, his hand on my shoulder guiding me backwards. I got to watch the room, trusting him to make sure nothing was coming up behind us through the door. The werewolves just watched us, not happy, but willing to take orders. Baco had to be their vargamor, their resident witch. I'd just never met a pack that feared its vargamor before.

It was Paulina's face that stayed with me. She was staring at Baco, and the hatred on her face was raw. I knew in that instant that once she had loved him, really loved him, because only true love could twist to such hatred. I'd looked into Paulina's eyes across the barrel of a gun. I think Nicky Baco had more

problems than just monsters in the desert. If I were him, I'd be sleeping with a gun.

Chapter 38

WE ARRIVED AT THE hospital with the world wrapped in a heavy blue dusk. A twilight so solid it was like cloth, something you could wrap around your hands or wear like a dress. I'd called ahead using Ramirez' cell phone. How do you prove that someone is really dead? I'd seen the "survivors." They drew breath. I assumed they had a heart beat or the doctors would have mentioned it. Their eyes looked at you and seemed to be aware. They reacted to pain. They were alive.

But what if they weren't? What if they were only vessels for a power that made Nicky Baco and I look like backstreet charlatans? There might have been a spell to prove it, but you couldn't take the results of a spell to court and get permission to burn the bodies. And that was what I wanted.

I finally came up with brain waves. I was betting that the higher functions of the brain weren't working. It was the only thing I could think of that might show that something was wrong with the survivors other than not having skin and missing body parts.

Unfortunately, Doctor Evans and company had done monitored brain wave activity long ago. They all had higher brain functions. So much for my brilliant idea. Doctor Evans had wanted to talk in the doctor's lounge, but I'd insisted we talk closer to the survivors' room than that. We talked in low tones in the hallway. He wouldn't let me talk in front of the survivors about the fact that they might be dead. Because if I was wrong, it might cause them distress. He had a point. But I didn't think I was wrong.

The survivors already at the hospital had become agitated and violent, snapping at the hospital staff like dogs on chains. No one had been hurt, but the timing coincided with the last murders. Why had the skinned ones been more violent? Was it the spell used to banish whatever it was from the home? Had that upped the ante somehow? Maybe frightened the creature that we were on to it? I didn't know. I just didn't know.

All I did know was that I could feel the darkness pressing like a hand about to crush us all. It was a heaviness in the air like before a thunderstorm, but worse, closer, harder to breathe through. Something bad was coming, and it was tied to the darkness. I wasn't able to convince Doctor Evans that his patients were dead, but my urgency must have been persuasive because he did give permission for the two officers that were already at the hospital to guard inside the room instead of out. The only proof I had that there were cops inside the room was a hat lying on one of the chairs outside the door.

I wanted to go into the room myself, but by the time I got suited up in gown and mask it would be full dark. It was that close, like a trembling line. So I stood in the hall and pretended that I was okay with it, because there was nothing else I could do.

Since Officer Rigby and Bernardo were new, they got the standard lecture about not shooting inside an oxygen atmosphere. It would be bad, though it wouldn't explode, which is what I thought it would have done. It would be the flash fire to end all flash fires, turning the room into a lower circle of hell for the few moments it took to use up all the oxygen or fuel in the room. But it wouldn't explode in a shower of glass and plaster. Nothing too dramatic, just deadly.

Rigby asked, "And if they try to eat us, what are we supposed to do? Spit on them?"

"I don't know," Evans said. "All I can tell you is what you shouldn't do, and you shouldn't fire a gun into a room full of oxygen."

Bernardo drew a knife from somewhere. He hadn't bent down near his boot, which meant it was a different knife, and one the werewolf in the bar had missed. He held the blade up to the light, letting it gleam. "You cut them."

Darkness fell like a lead curtain, almost clanging in my head like the roll of thunder. I waited for the door to the room to open. I waited for the screaming to start because that's what I was expecting. Nothing happened. Then pressure that had been building for hours vanished. It was as if something swallowed it up. I was just suddenly standing in the hallway feeling light empty, better. I didn't understand the change, and I don't like what I don't understand.

We all waited for a few tense heartbeats, then I couldn't stand it. I spilled a knife into my own hand and reached for the door. The door swung outward. I jumped back. The male nurse that I'd been introduced to earlier paused the door staring at the naked blade in my hand.

He never took his eyes off me, but he talked to Evans. "Doctor, the patients are quiet, quieter than they've been all day. The police officers are wanting know if they can step out of the room for a while."

"The survivors are quieter than they've been all day?" I asked.

Ben the nurse nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

I took two steps back from the door, and let out the tension in my body in a long breath.

"Well, Ms. Blake?" Evans asked. "Can the officers come out?"

I shrugged and looked at Ramirez. "Ask him. He's ranking officer on site. But truthfully, I guess so. Whatever I've been feeling seemed to fade when darkness fell. I don't understand it." I slid the knife back into its sheath. "I guess there's not going to be a fight."

"You sound disappointed," Bernardo said. His knife had vanished to wherever he'd gotten it from.

I shook my head. "Not disappointed, just confused. I felt a great deal of power building for hours, and it just vanished. That much power doesn't just vanish. It went somewhere. Apparently, not into the survivors, but it's off somewhere tonight doing something."

"Any ideas what it's doing and where?" Ramirez asked.

I shook my head. "Not really."

He turned to the doctor. "Tell the men they can come outside."

Ben the nurse looked to Doctor Evans for confirmation. Evans nodded.

The nurse ducked back inside, the door closing slowly behind him.

Evans turned to me. "Well, Ms. Blake, looks like you hurried over here for nothing."

I shrugged. "I thought we'd be ass deep in man-eating corpses by now." I smiled. "It's nice to be wrong once in a while."

We all smiled at each other. The tension spilled out of all of us. Bernardo gave that nervous laugh you sometimes give when the emergency is over, or the bullet passed you by.

"I'm very glad you were wrong, this time, Ms. Blake," Evans said.

"Me, too," I said.

"Me, three," Bernardo said.

"I'm happy, too," Ramirez said, "but it is disappointing to find out you're not perfect."

"If you don't know I'm not perfect after forty-eight hours of working with me on a police investigation, then you are not paying attention."

"I'm paying attention," Ramirez, said, "close attention." There was a weight to his gaze, an intensity to his words that made me want to squirm. In trying not to squirm I caught Bernardo's eyes. He was smiling at me, enjoying my discomfort. Glad someone was.

"If you were wrong about this, you may be wrong about them being dead," Evans said.

I nodded. "Maybe."

"You admit you may be wrong, just like that?" Evans seemed surprised.

"This is magic, not math, Doctor Evans. There are very few hard and fast rules. There are even fewer rules the way I do it. Sometimes I think two and two is going to add up to five, and I'm right. Sometimes all you get is four. If it lowers the body count, I don't mind being wrong."

The door opened, and two men came out dressed in Albuquerque uniforms. They'd headed for the door as soon as Ben the nurse told them they could go. I didn't blame them one bit.

Their eyes looked haunted. The tallest one was blond and built all of squares. Broad shoulders, thick waist, heavy legs, not fat, just solid, strong. His partner was shorter and almost completely bald except for a ring of brown curls low on his head. Apparently, it was his hat sitting in the chair by the door.

Doctor Evans said, "Excuse me." He moved past them into the room.

The short one said, "He can have it."

The blond looked at me, eyes narrowing, not friendly. "Well, if it isn't the wicked witch of the Midwest. I hear we have you to thank for us sitting in there for the last hour."

I didn't recognize him, but apparently he knew me on sight. "I suggested it, yes."

The blond moved closer, using his size to intimidate me, or he tried. Size just isn't as impressive as most men think it is. "Maybe Marks was right about you."

Ah hah. He must have been one of the officers on site when Marks kicked me out. I felt Ramirez start to move up, probably to step between us. I put my hand on his shoulder. "It's all right."

Ramirez didn't move back the step he'd taken, but at least he didn't move forward. It was probably the best I would get out of him. But it meant that I was sandwiched between the two men. The blond's eyes flicked to Ramirez behind me. The look on his face was enough. He wanted a fight and didn't really care who it was with.

He was glaring at Ramirez now, and I could almost feel the testosterone rising on every side. Enough testosterone to get the officer in trouble, maybe suspended when all he needed was to blow off some steam. He was trying to cleanse himself of the horrors in that room.

Both his partner and Bernardo were staying back. I didn't know what the partner was doing, but Bernardo was enjoying the show.

"You must have been one of the officers that helped Marks throw me out," I said. I was looking way up at the man, and he was looking over me at Ramirez.

It took him a second to blink and look at me. He frowned at me, and it was a good frown. I bet it made a lot of bad guys run like hell.

His partner came up behind him. "Yeah, Jarman and I were both there." The partner sounded calm, and I think worried about his partner. Good partners look after more than just your physical health.

"And you are?" I asked. I asked it like his partner, Jarman, wasn't about to pick a fight with everyone in the hallway.

He introduced himself like everything was normal, too. "Jakes."

"Jarman and Jakes?" I made it a question.

He nodded, smiling. "J and J at your service."

I felt the tension easing in the big man in front of me. Hard to stay pissed when you're being ignored, and everyone else is behaving themselves. I pressed my back into Ramirez, trying to urge him to back off. He took the hint stepping back a little.

Officer Rigby came bounding down the hallway. He'd gone to the car to get something less explosive than his gun. What he was carrying was a Tazer gun. It would send a charge of 30,000 to 60,000 volts through a suspect. Theoretically, it could put someone down for the count without the danger of killing him. Unless you get very unlucky, like the perp has a pacemaker.

Ramirez was shaking his head. "What the hell is that for?"

Rigby looked at the Tazer. "I can't use my gun so I'll use this."

"Rigby," Jarman said, "a Tazer makes a spark."

Rigby looked puzzled. "So?"

"If the spark when we fire a gun will set off the oxygen in the room, so will the spark from a Tazer," Ramirez said.

"Go back to the car and find something else," Jarman said.

Jakes and I had moved to one side, watching Ramirez and Jarman ream the rookie. No one was mad anymore, derisive, condescending, but not mad. When Rigby had disappeared through the doors at the far end of the hall, Jarman turned to Ramirez. "Is Rigby all Marks gave you for backup?"

Ramirez nodded, then shrugged. "He'll learn."

"And get someone killed doing it," Jarman said.

Jakes held his hand out low, palm up. He was smiling. I gave him a low five. I was smiling, too, but not because his partner hadn't belted a detective. I was just happy that I'd been wrong. I'd had my fill of corpses for the day. Hell, for the year.

Bernardo was leaning against the opposite wall. He seemed puzzled by my interaction with the cops. I doubt it ever occurred to Bernardo to make friends with them.

The two uniforms had batons stuck in their utility belts. Ramirez looked unarmed except for his gun. "Where's your baton, Hernando?"

"Oooh, Hernando," Jakes said.

"Yeah, Hernando," Jarman said, rolling the name off his tongue, "where's your baton?" That they were willing to give Ramirez shit meant that under normal conditions he and Jarman got along. There is a different flavor to teasing when it's hostile. Rigby's teasing was close to hostile, not quite, as if they weren't sure if he were really one of them yet.

Ramirez took a short metal rod out of his hip pocket. He made a small movement with his wrist, and the rod telescoped into a solid piece of metal about two feet long.

"An asp," I said. "I didn't notice you carrying one when we met. I'm usually pretty aware of weapons."

He flicked the rod back into its compact size. "An asp is pretty small when it's put away. How do you know I wasn't carrying one?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it, and looked at him. He was grinning at me. I debated on whether to rise to the bait, or let it pass. Hell, this was the most fun I'd had all day. "Are you implying that I was staring at your butt?"

"How else would you know I didn't have something about the size of a pen in my back pocket?" His eyes were sparkling like dark jewels, shiny with humor.

I shrugged. "Just checking for weapons."

"That's what they all say."

Jarman said, "Wanna check me for weapons?"

I looked at him. "I can see your weapon from here, Jarman."

He puffed his chest out a little, managing to strut without moving his feet an inch. "When you're my size, it's hard to miss."

I looked at every man in turn and had to really fight the urge to linger on Bernardo. I was willing to bet that his "weapon" was the biggest in the hallway. "Oh, I don't know, Jarman. You know what they say. It's not size that matters. It's talent." Again, I had to fight the urge to stare at Bernardo.

Jarman smiled happily. "Trust me, baby. I've got the talent and the size."

"Easy to brag when you know you'll never have to prove it," I said, and yes, I was baiting him.

Jarman swept his hat off and gave me a look. I think it was supposed to be a come hither look. His scary frown was better than his sexy look, but hey, I bet he got a lot more opportunity to practice scary than sexy.

"Let's find some privacy, babe, and I will prove it."

I shook my head, smiling. "And what would your wife say about you taking me out for a test drive. Nice wedding band, by the way."

He laughed, a good-natured rumble.

Jakes answered for him. "His wife would feed him his dick on a stick."

Jarman nodded, still chuckling. "Yeah, my Bren has a temper, that she does."

He said it like it was a good thing, a thing he valued. He looked at me. "My Bren would have kicked Marks in the balls, not kissed him."

"I thought about it," I said.

"Why didn't you hit him?" Ramirez asked. The humor still sparkled in his eyes but his face was more serious. I think he wanted a real answer, not a joke.

"He was expecting me to hit him. Maybe even wanted me to hit him. He could have pressed assault charges, gotten me behind bars for awhile."

I expected one of the three men to say Marks wouldn't do that, but no one did. I looked from one suddenly serious face to another. "No one going to defend the lieutenant's honor? Protest that he wouldn't do such a dastardly thing?"

Jarman said, "Nope."

Jakes said, "Dastardly. You talk real pretty for a devil-worshipping assassin."

I blinked at him. "Pass that by me again, slowly."

Jakes nodded. "According to the lieutenant, you're suspected in the disappearances of several citizens, as well as dancing naked in the moonlight with the devil himself."

"Marks didn't say that last part."

Jakes grinned. "Can't blame a man for wishful thinking." He wiggled In eyebrows at me.

I laughed. They laughed. A good time being had by all. Except Bernardo who leaned against the wall apart from the general goodwill. He was watching me as if he'd never really seen me before. I'd surprised him in some way

"Marks tried to get you arrested for magical malfeasance, so the rumor mill says," Jarman said.

I stared at him. Magical malfeasance could carry a death sentence. I stared at Ramirez. "Did you know he was trying to do that?"

Ramirez touched my arm. We moved down the hallway to the distant rumble of masculine laughter. The two officers were probably still giving each other good-natured shit. From the caliber of the laughter, if it was about me it was probably something I didn't want to hear. There is always a line to the teasing that must be carefully avoided. I wanted to be a female one of the guys, not get a reputation for being a slut. A thin line to walk sometimes.

Probably best to be out of earshot, but I didn't want to be alone with Ramirez right now. It bothered me that he hadn't told me what Marks had said about me. He was a virtual stranger. He didn't owe me anything, but it made me think less of him.

An African-American nurse walked past us and went into the room. Since all I'd seen were her eyes the first time, I couldn't be sure if she was the same nurse I'd glimpsed earlier in the room. She was small, about the right size, but in full surgical scrubs, who knew?

The men had fallen silent as she walked past. As soon as the door closed safely behind her, the laughter sounded again.

Ramirez looked at me with that honest face, a line of concern between his eyebrows like a tiny wrinkle of discontent. He looked even younger when he frowned. "Doesn't that bother you?" he asked.

"What?" I asked.

He glanced back at the two officers. They were still smiling. "Jakes and Jarman."

"You mean the teasing?"

He nodded.

"When I kissed Marks in front of all of them, I sort of invited a little teasing. Besides, I sort of started it, or rather you did." I shrugged. "It blows off steam, and we all need that right now."

"Most women don't see it that way," Ramirez said.

"I'm not most women. But frankly, one reason a lot of women don't stand for any teasing is that some men don't know when teasing crosses the line to harassment. If I had to work day in and day out with them, I might be more careful. But I don't, so I can afford to push the line a little."

"What is your line, Anita?" He was standing just a little too close for comfort.

"I'll let everyone know when they've reached it. Don't worry." I stepped back from him, giving myself the distance I wanted.

"You're mad at me." He sounded surprised. I half smiled. "Believe me, Detective, when I'm mad at you, you'll know."

"Detective. Not even Ramirez. Now I know you're upset. What did I do?"

I looked at him, studying that open, honest face. "Why didn't you tell me what Marks said about me? What he was telling the other cops about me? It would carry a death sentence."

"No way was Marks going to push that through, Anita."

"You still should have told me."

He looked puzzled for a moment, then shrugged. "I didn't know I was supposed to."

I frowned. "I guess not." But I wasn't happy with his answer.

He touched my arm again, every so lightly. "I didn't believe that Marks could get you arrested. I was right. Isn't that enough?"

"No," I said.

He let his hand fall away from me. "What good would it have done to tell you? You'd have worried for nothing."

"I don't need my feelings protected. I need to feel that I can trust you."

"You don't trust me because I didn't tell you everything that Marks said?"

"Not as much as I trusted you before."

The first hint of anger hardened his eyes. "And you told me everything that happened in Los Duendos? You didn't hold anything back about your interview with Nicky Baco?" His eyes weren't kind now. They were cool and searching, cop eyes.

I looked down once, then fought to maintain eye contact when what I desperately wanted to do was duck my head and say, aw shucks, you caught me. Push me into a corner, and I usually get angry. But somehow looking into his deep brown eyes, I couldn't pull up much moral indignation. Maybe it was having no moral high ground to stand on. Yeah, that might be it.

"I didn't kill anybody, if that's what you're implying." It was one of my usual comments with less than my usual force.

"That's not what I'm implying and you know it, Anita."

There was something familiar, almost intimate about the conversation. We'd known each other for two days, and yet we interacted as if we'd known each other much longer. It was unnerving. I didn't usually bond this quickly with people or monsters.

But if it had been my longtime police friend Sergeant Rudolph Storr himself standing in front of me, I'd have lied. If Nicky Baco got a whiff of cops, he'd back off, and he'd never trust me again. People like Baco don't give second chances when it comes to the police.

"Baco knew you and Rigby were outside the bar, Hernando. He has the entire area wired with magical..." I waffled my hand back and forth, seeking the right word "...wards, spells. He knows what happens in his streets. If I go back in with police as backup, no matter how distant, he won't help us."

"Are you so sure he can help?" Ramirez asked. "He may just be stringing you along, trying to find out what you know."

"He's scared, Hernando. Baco is scared. Call it a feeling, but I don't think much frightens him."

"You've just told me you're withholding information from an ongoing murder investigation."

"If you wire me up or insist on sending someone under cover with me we'll lose Baco. You know I'm right on this."

"We may lose Baco, but you're not right," he said, and the anger was back. A frustrated anger that I'd seen before in other men that I'd known longer and in more intimate ways. That anger that I can't just be a good girl and play by their rules, and be what they want me to be. It made me tired to hear that thread in Ramirez's voice after only two days.

"The most important thing to me right this second is stopping these murders. That is my goal. That is my only goal." I thought about what I'd said and added, "And staying alive. But other than that I don't have any other agenda. Stop the bad guys. Stay alive. It makes things simple, Hernando."

"You told me earlier that you wanted your life to change, to be more than blood and horror. If you want that to change, you are going to have to

complicate your life, Anita. And you are going to have to start trusting people, really trusting them again."

I shook my head. "Thanks for using my moment of weakness against me. Now I remember why I don't confide in strangers." I was finally angry myself, It felt good. It felt familiar. If I could just stay angry, I could stop being so damned confused.

He grabbed my arm, and the grip wasn't gentle this time. It didn't hurt, but I could feel the press of his fingers in my flesh. For the first time since I'd met him, he let me see the hardness underneath. That core of harshness that you either have or acquire if you stay with the cops. Without that core to protect yourself, you may stay on the job, but you won't thrive.

I smiled. "What next, rubber hoses and bright lights?" It was meant to be a joke, but my voice wasn't light when I said it. We were both angry now. Underneath all those smiles and mild manners was a temper. We'd see whose was worse, his or mine.

He spoke low and carefully, the way I do sometimes when to do anything else will start me yelling. "I could just tell Marks about the meeting. Tell him you're holding out on us."

"Fine," I said, "do it. Marks will probably have him arrested, search his bar. He might even find enough magical paraphernalia to get him jailed on suspicion of magical malfeasance. And what will that get us, Detective? Baco in jail, and a few days from now more people dead. More bodies gutted." I leaned into his angry face and whispered, "How will your dreams be then, Hernando?"

He let me go so abruptly that I stumbled. "You really are a bitch, aren't you?"

I nodded. "If the situation warrants it, you bet."

He shook his head, rubbing his hands up and down his arms. "If I hold out on this and it goes wrong, it could be my career."

"Just say you didn't know."

He shook his head. "Too many people know I was your police escort." He managed to make the last two words heavy with irony. "You've got another meeting planned with him, haven't you?"

I tried to keep the surprise off my face, but a blank face was just as bad. It was like when you were asked if you were sleeping with someone, and you refused to answer. Not answering was as good as a yes.

He stalked from one side of the hallway to the other. "Dammit, Anita, I can't sit on this."

I realized he meant it. I stood in his path, so he had to stop pacing and look at me. "You can't tell Marks. He'll screw it up. If he thinks I'm dancing with the devil, he'll have hysterics when he meets Nicky Baco."

The anger was beginning to leak from his eyes. "When's the meeting?"

I shook my head. "Promise first that you won't tell Marks."

"He's in charge of the investigation. If I don't tell him and he finds out, I might as well hand in my badge."

"He doesn't seem very popular around here," I said.

"He's still my superior."

"He's your boss," I said. "He is in no way your superior."

That earned me a smile. "Flattery will get you nowhere with me."

"It's not flattery, Hernando. It's the truth."

He was finally quiet, standing there looking at me. His expression was almost his normal one, or what I thought was normal for him. For all I knew he dissected puppies in his spare time. All right, I didn't believe that, but I didn't really know him. We were strangers, and I was having to remind myself of that. I kept wanting to treat him like a friend or better. What was the matter with me?

"When is the meeting, Anita?"

"If I won't tell you, then what?"

A shadow of that hardness seeped into his eyes. "Then I tell Marks you're withholding evidence."

"And if I tell you?"

"Then I'll go with you."

I shook my head. "No way."

"I promise not to show up looking like a cop."

I looked at him from shined shoes to short, clean hair. "In what alternate reality would you NOT look like a cop?"

I heard the door open behind us, but neither of us turned. We were too busy making major eye contact.

Jarman yelled, "Ramirez!"

There was a tone in that one word that whirled us both around. Doctor Evans was leaning against the wall, holding his wrist upright. Blood gleamed like a scarlet bracelet around his arm.

Ramirez and I started running at the same time down that short space of hallway as if we had farther to go and less time to get there. Jarman and Jakes were disappearing through the door. Bernardo hesitated at the door, holding it open long enough for the screams to cut through the hospital silence. Low and wordless and panicked, and I knew without knowing that it was a man screaming. I was almost at the door, almost to Bernardo, Ramirez pacing me like a shadow.

Bernardo said, "This is a bad idea." But he went through the door, a heartbeat before we reached it. God, I hated being right all the time.

Chapter 39

THE WHITE STERILE ROOM had been a quiet corner of hell. Now it was a loud, chaotic corner of hell. A skinless hand snatched at me. I slashed at it with

the big blade that I'd pulled from the spine sheath. The hand bled and jerked back. They could feel pain. They bled. Good.

I had the blade raised for a neck blow as the corpse came at me again. Ramirez blocked my arms. "They're civilians!"

I looked at him, then back at that raw thing that was held to the bed only by one last wrist restraint. It launched at me again, slashing the air with its bloody hand, screaming wordlessly, butchered tongue flopping like a worm in the lipless ruin of its mouth.

"Just stay out of reach," he said and pulled me past it.

I had time to say, "They're corpses, Ramirez, just corpses."

He held up the asp. "Don't kill them." He moved into the fight, though it wasn't a fight yet. Most of the corpses were still restrained to the beds. They struggled, screaming, wailing, jerking their ruined flesh to bloodier ruin against the restraints, bodies bucking as they thrashed to free themselves.

Ben the nurse was beating at the head of one patient. It had sunk teeth into his arm so deeply that he couldn't free himself. Jarman was with him, beating the thing's head with his baton from far back like you'd hit a baseball. You could hear the soft, melon-like thunk even over the screaming.

Jakes and Bernardo were at the last bed near the windows. The African-American nurse was held in the embrace of a corpse that still had one hand and one ankle attached to the bed. Its head was buried into her chest. Blood plastered her gown to her body like someone had spilled a can of red paint down her. Where the thing was gnawing shouldn't have been a killing spot, but there was too much blood. It had reached something vital.

Jakes was beating at the thing's head so hard that he was rising on tiptoe, his body almost leaving the ground with each blow. The corpse's head was bleeding, cracking, but it wasn't letting go. Its head was buried into her chest like a monstrous child, feeding.

Bernardo was stabbing the corpse in the back over and over. The blade came free in a spray of blood, but it didn't matter. The one by the door had reacted to pain, but once they started feeding, they were just meat. You couldn't hurt meat, and you sure as hell couldn't kill it.

I walked between the beds with the corpses screaming, bodies writhing, and all the eyes looked the same. It was as if there was only one personality looking out of every pair of eyes. Their master, whatever that was, watched me walk between the beds, watching me go to the far bed, away from Ramirez, and his cautions. He still didn't understand what was about to happen when they all freed themselves. We had to be out of this room before that happened.

I moved in beside Bernardo, moving him back a step. I wiggled the blade underneath the thing's jaw. I took a deep breath, centered myself the way you do in martial arts class just before you break something big and permanent-looking, I pictured the blade coming out the top of the skull, and that's what I tried for. I tried to shove it through its head. The blade went through the soft tissue under the jaw with a sharp, wet, movement, then the tip hit the hone at the roof of the mouth, and kept going. The blade didn't come out of the top of its head, but I felt it shove into the strange emptiness of the sinus cavities.

It reared back from the woman, its jaws trying to open around the gleam of the blade. It clawed at its mouth with the one free hand, letting the nurse fall back onto the bed. We got our first glimpse of the wound. There was a hole in the middle of her chest. Broken ribs jutted outward like the broken sides of a frame. The hole was just the size for a human face to shove deep. I stared down into that dark, wet hole, and half her heart was gone, eaten away.

"Oh, God!" Jakes said.

The thing in the bed had freed its other hand. It was tugging at the hilt of the blade, trying to pull it free. Jakes, Bernardo, and I exchanged a look between us. One look, no words, and we turned towards the rest of the room with one goal in mind: get to the door any way we could. There was nothing human in this room but us.

I looked up and found Ramirez and Jarman at the far door with the male nurse sagging between them. Great. I yelled, "Run!"

We tried. I sensed movement and turned in time for the corpse to hit me full on and send us both crashing to the floor. I stabbed for the jaw, trying to pin its teeth like I had the other one, but it moved and I only got the throat. Blood splashed across my face in a hot liquid rush. It blinded me for a second. I could feel it moving over my body, legs straddling my waist. I kept my hand pushed into raw shoulder, holding it back, while it strained over me. I wiped the blood out of my eyes with the back of my hand that held the knife. It snapped at me like a dog, and I screamed. I cut its cheek so deep the blade scraped on teeth. It screamed and sank its teeth into my hand. I screamed as it shook its head like a dog with a bone. My hand opened, and the knife fell.

It came at me, mouth open, pale blue eyes so impossibly wide. It went for my throat. There was no time to try for the last knife. I went for its eyes. I plunged my thumbs into its eyes, and its own momentum pushed them deeper than I could have gotten them. I felt the eyeballs rupture, exploding in warm fluid and thicker things.

It screamed, whipping its head back and forth, hands clawing at its face. Bernardo was suddenly there, pulling it backwards, throwing it one-armed across the room to skid into the wall. Amazing what you can do when you're terrified.

I was on my knees, drawing the last knife. Bernardo dragged me to my feet, and we were almost to the door. Rigby was there with an ax, hacking at the corpses. Hands and less identifiable bits littered the ground around him. Ramirez shoved his asp into one's mouth, so hard the dull tip showed through the back of its throat.

Jakes was dragging Jarman by his wrists, leaving a thick red trail behind him. Jarman's body was wedged in the door. Rigby's ax had chopped two of the corpses into enough pieces that they were down. Two of the corpses were still held to the bed with one last restraint. Ramirez was wrestling with the one that was trying to swallow his asp. A corpse threw itself at Rigby, and the ax sliced air.

I heard the scrambling behind me before Bernardo yelled, "Behind ..."

I was on the way down to the floor with the thing riding my back, before I heard Bernardo yell, "... you."

I tucked my head, trying to protect my neck. Teeth bit through my shoe drawing blood, but having trouble gnawing through the strap of the shoulder holster and spine sheath. It dug its teeth into my flesh, but the leather strap acted like a sort of armor. I drove the knife back into its thigh, once, twice. It didn't care.

Suddenly, there was a wash of air, and a heavy blow, blood spilled across my hair, shoulders, and back, in a scalding wash. I scrambled out from under the corpse and found it was headless.

Rigby stood over it with the bloody ax and a wild look in his eyes. "Go, get out. I'll cover your back." His voice was high-pitched, fear dripping from it, but he stood his ground and started moving us all towards the door.

One of the corpses was on Bernardo's back, but it wasn't trying to eat him. It pounded his head twice into the floor, hard. It looked up at me. There was something in its eyes that hadn't been in any of the others. It was afraid. Afraid of us. Afraid of being stopped. Afraid, just maybe, of dying.

It scrambled through the open glass doors and brushed past Jakes, as if it had somewhere to go and something else to do. And I knew it had to be stopped, knew if it escaped that it would be very bad. But I put a hand under Bernardo's arm and started dragging him for the door. Ramirez took his other arm and it was suddenly easy to drag him through that glass door.

There was a sudden rush in the room behind us. Rigby stumbled back against the button that closed the door. It slid closed with Ramirez beating on it. I saw Rigby swing the ax, then a corpse came in from both sides. Ramirez reached for the button to open the door, but either Rigby's weight had jammed it or something else had.

Ramirez screamed, "Rigby!"

There was a gigantic whoosh of air as if a giant had drawn a breath, and the room filled with fire. Flames licked the glass like orange-gold water through the glass of an aquarium. I could feel the heat beating against the glass. Fire alarms went off with a high-pitched scream. I threw myself to the floor on top of Bernardo, covering my face, waiting for that tremendous heat to crack the glass and spill over all of us.

But it wasn't heat that spilled over me. It was coolness, water. I raised my head to the sprinklers that were filling the room. The glass was blackened, and smoke and steam curled against the glass like fog as the water killed the fire.

Ramirez reached for the button, and the doors opened in a sound of rushing water. The alarm was louder now, and I realized that it was two different alarms now, mixing together in one nerve-jangling screech. Ramirez stepped into the room, and I heard his voice over the maddening noise. "Madre de Dios."

I stood with the water pounding me, soaking my hair, clothing. I didn't follow him into the room. Rigby was beyond any help I could give him. We still had one more corpse on the run. I laid my fingertips on Bernardo's neck just under the jaw. The screech of the fire alarms seemed to make it hard to feel

his pulse, but it was there, strong and sure. He was down for the count, but he was alive. Jakes was kneeling beside Jarman, tears streaming down his face. He was trying to stop a wound in Jarman's neck with his bare hands. The pool of blood that had spilled to either side of Jarman's head was being washed away by the sprinklers. His eyes were fixed and staring, unblinking as the water poured down on him.

Shit. I should have grabbed Jakes and said, "He's dead. Jarman is dead." But I couldn't do it. I got to my feet. "Ramirez."

He was still staring into the room at whatever was left of Rigby.

"Ramirez!" I yelled it, and he turned, but his eyes were unfocused as if he wasn't really seeing me.

"We've got one more corpse to catch. We can't let it get away."

He stared at me with dull eyes. I needed some help here. I took those few steps to stand in the doorway by him, and I slapped him hard enough that my hand stung with the blow. Harder than I'd meant to hit him.

His head whipped back, and I braced for him to hit me back, but he didn't. He stood there, hands in tight fists, shaking with the urge, eyes blazing with a rage that was just looking for someone to rain all over. It wasn't me hitting him. It was everything.

When he didn't slap me back, I said, "The bad thing went that way." I pointed at the door. "We need to go after it."

He started to talk very rapidly in Spanish. I couldn't understand the majority of it, but the anger came through just fine. I caught one word that I did know. He called me a bruja. It meant witch.

"Fuck this," I opened the door, having to edge around Jarman's body. The sprinklers were on in the hallway, too. Evans was still sitting with his back to the wall. He'd pulled his mask down, as if he couldn't get enough air.

"Where did it go?" I asked.

"Down the fire stairs, end of the hall." He had to raise his voice over the sound of fire alarms, but his voice was dull, distant. Maybe later if I was good, I could go into shock, too.

I didn't hear the door open behind me, but Ramirez yelled, "Anita!"

I half-turned as I ran for the door. "I'm taking the stairs, you take the elevators."

He yelled, "Anita!"

I turned, and he tossed one of the cell phones to me. I caught it one-handed awkwardly against my chest.

"If I get to ground and haven't found it, I'll call," he said.

I nodded, jamming the phone into my back pocket, running for the door. I found it. I had the Browning out now. There was no oxygen-filled room now. We'd see if bullets worked as well as knives. I pushed the heavy fire door with my whole body, until it was flat against the wall, and I knew the thing wasn't behind the door. Then I hesitated on the concrete landing. The sprinklers were going in here, too, like waterfalls down the concrete steps. The fire alarms filled the space with high-pitched echoes. I looked up at the rising stairs, then

down. I had no idea which way it had gone. It could have gotten off on any floor above or below me.

Dammit, I needed to find this thing. I wasn't sure why it felt so urgent that it not get away, but I'd been right about the coming dark and the corpses, I'd trust my judgment. They were just animated corpses, just a kind I'd never seen before. But they were dead, and I was a necromancer. Technically, I could control any form of the walking dead. I could sometimes sense a vampire when it was near. I took a breath and centered myself in a solid line, drew my power in, flung it out, searching, my back to the door, the water pouring down on me, the scream of the fire alarms so piercing it was hard to think. I sent that "magic" outward, up the stairs, down the stairs like an invisible line of fog.

I jerked upright. I'd felt something like a pull on the end of a fishing line, Down, it had gone down. If I was wrong, there was nothing I could do about it. But I didn't think I was wrong. I started running down the wet cement steps, one hand on the banister to catch myself when I slipped, the other with the gun pointed upward. There was a woman crumpled outside the next landing, lying across the door, motionless, but breathing. I turned her face to the side so she wouldn't be drowned in the sprinklers, and kept going. Down, it was going down, and it wasn't taking time to feed. It was running, running away from us, running away from me.

I got to my feet, sliding on the wet steps, only my death grip on the slippery metal banister catching me before I fell. I lost my connection to the creature when I slipped. I just couldn't hold the concentration and do everything else. The sprinklers stopped abruptly, but the fire alarms went on and on, more piercing without the water to muffle it. I pushed to my feet and started running again. Very distant, far down below, there was a scream. I vaulted the next turn of banister, sliding down the wet metal, almost going head first over the next turn of railing. I was going as fast as I could, faster than was safe. I ran and slid and stumbled down the stairs, and all the time the growing sense that I was going to be too late. That no matter how fast I ran, I wouldn't get there in time.

Chapter 40

I COULDN'T REGAIN the link with the thing without stopping and concentrating. I made the decision to keep chasing, and hoped I didn't miss it as I ran past the doors. Besides, on the 19th floor there was a huddled group of water-soaked patients with a nurse. They all pointed wordlessly down. At 17 there was a man with a bouquet of flowers with a bloody lip that babbled at me and pointed down. The door opened on 14, and nurse in a pink smock rushed out and ran into me. She screamed, jerking back against the wall, staring at me with huge eyes. She had a baby in each arm, in those little blankets. One even

had its little pink knit hat still in place. Both babies were screaming, their high cat-like wails competing with the fire alarm.

The nurse just stared at me, unable to speak or afraid to. Maybe it was the gun, or maybe not all the blood had washed away in the sprinklers. I raised my voice above the noise, "Is it on this floor?"

She just nodded. She was mumbling something over and over. I had to lean into her to understand it. "It's in the nursery, It's in the nursery. It's in the nursery."

I didn't think my adrenaline could get any higher. I was wrong. I could suddenly feel the blood rushing through my body, feel my heart like a painful thing in my chest. I opened the door, scanning the hallway with the Browning. Nothing moved. The corridor stretched long and empty with too many closed doors for comfort. The fire alarm was still screaming, making my skin tight with the noise. But even over the screech of the alarm I could hear the babies... crying... screaming.

I slipped the phone out of my pocket, hit the button he'd told me to hit earlier, and started jogging down the hallway towards the sounds. Ramirez answered it in the middle of the first ring. "Anita?"

"I'm on maternity. It's the 14th floor. A nurse says the thing is in the nursery." I was at the first corner. I threw myself against the far wall, but didn't really stop. I'm usually more cautious around corners, but the crying was getting closer, more piteous.

"I'm on my way," Ramirez said.

I hit the button that cut us off, but still had it in my hand when I came around the next corner. There was a body pushed through a pane of wired safety glass. I could tell it was a man, but that was about all. The face looked like hamburger. I stepped on a stethoscope on the floor below him. Doctor or nurse. I didn't check for a pulse. If he was alive, I didn't know how to help him. If he was dead, it didn't matter. One last door, then a long expanse of window. But I didn't need to see the long window to know it was the nursery. I could hear the babies crying. Even over the fire alarm the sound of those panicked cries made my heart flutter, made me want to run and help them. A hard wiring response that I hadn't even known I had made me reach for the door. I still had the phone in my left, and made one attempt to shove it in my pocket. The bite on my left hand made me awkward. The phone slipped, and I let it fall to the floor.

The handle turned, but the door stopped just inches open. I put my shoulder into it, and realized it was a body, an adult body. I backed off and hit it again, moving it by painful inches. There was a woman screaming, not just the babies. I couldn't open the door. Dammit!

Then the window crashed outward in a spray of glass and a body. A woman hit the ground and lay there sprawled and bleeding. I left the wedged door and went for the window. There were shards of glass like small swords on the bottom of the break. But I'd taken falls in Judo higher than this. I'd practiced falling for years. I glanced in to check one thing. The herd of little plastic cribs was pushed to either side. I had room. I took a running leap at it and threw

myself over the broken glass, rolling as I fell. I only had one free hand to slap the floor with and take the impact of the fall, but I wanted the gun in my hand ready to fire. I hit the floor, and the force of my blow, the jump, whatever, was still there, still rolling me. I used it to come to my feet before I even knew what was in the room.

I didn't so much see what was happening as take pictures of isolated things. I registered the overturned cribs: a tiny, tiny baby lying on the floor like a broken doll, the center of its body eaten away, like the center sucked out of a piece of candy; cribs still standing upright splattered with blood, some with tiny twisted bodies inside, some empty except for the blood; then in the far corner was the monster.

It held a tiny blanket-wrapped bundle. Tiny fists waving in the air. I couldn't hear it crying. I couldn't hear anything. There was nothing but sight, and that skinless face bending over the baby. My first bullet took it through the forehead, the second through the face as its head was thrown back by the impact of the first shot. It raised the struggling baby up in front of its face, and our eyes locked over the tiny form. It looked at me. The bullet holes in its face filled in like soft clay. I fired into its stomach because that's what I could hit without endangering the baby. It jerked back, but it threw itself to the floor. It didn't fall. I hadn't really hurt it. It took cover behind a row of tiny cribs. They were all on thin-legged wheels. I dropped to a crouch and sighted through that forest of thin metal legs, and saw it crouching, bringing the baby to its mouth.

There was no clear shot. I fired anyway, shooting into the wall beside it. It flinched, scuttling away, but didn't drop the baby. I fired through the legs of the wheeled cribs, keeping it moving. Where was Ramirez?

It stood and ran straight at me. I fired into its body. It shuddered but kept coming. The baby was naked except for a little diaper now, but it was alive, The thing threw the baby at me. It wasn't even a decision. I just caught cradling it to my chest, both hands compromised. The monster smashed into me. The momentum took us all back through the window I'd come through. We landed with the monster on bottom as if we'd flipped in midair. My gun barrel was pressed into its stomach, and I started pulling the trigger with my right hand before I even started cradling the baby tight with my left.

The creature jerked like a broken-backed snake. I got to my knees beside it, firing until the gun clicked empty. I dropped the Browning and went for the Firestar. I had it almost pointed when it hit me with the back of one hand, and the blow sent me crashing into the wall. I'd tried to protect the baby from the impact and had taken more of it than was good for me. I was stunned for a second, and it grabbed me by the hair, turning me towards it.

I fired into its chest and stomach. Each bullet made the body jerk, and somewhere around the sixth or seventh shot, it let go of my hair. A bullet later and the Firestar clicked empty. It stood over me, and that lipless mouth smiled.

The fire alarm stopped. The sudden silence was almost frightening. I could hear my heart pounding in my head. The baby in my arms was suddenly piercingly loud, more frantic sounding. The thing tensed, and I knew a second before it came that it was going to rush me. I used that second to try and put the

baby on a clear piece of floor. I was half-turned when it picked me up and flung me into the opposite wall. I didn't have the baby to worry about anymore. I slapped my hands and arms into the wall taking as much of the impact as I could. When it closed the distance, I wasn't stunned. It grabbed one upper arm, and I struggled to keep it from grabbing the other.

I knew how to grapple, but not with something that was slick and skinless. There was nothing to grab onto. It picked me up by my shirt, the other hand under my thigh, and dead lifted me like a barbell. I hit the wall as though it had tried to throw me through it. I tried to protect myself, but I slid to the floor, stunned, unable to breathe or think for a space of heartbeats.

It knelt beside me, tearing my shirt out of my pants, baring my stomach and my bra. It put a hand under my back and lifted me almost gently, bowing my back, raising me up, and lowering its face towards my bare flesh, as if it meant to kiss me. I heard a voice in my head. It whispered, "I hunger." Everything seemed distant, dreamlike, and I knew that I was close to passing out. I raised my hand and almost didn't feel like it was mine. But I moved it. I caressed that slick, fleshless face. And it rolled those strange lidless eyes up at me as it lowered its mouth to feed. My thumb slid along the flesh, feeling, feeling for the eye. It didn't stop me. It bit into my upper stomach, as my thumb slid into its eye. We both screamed.

It reared back, dropping me to the floor. It was a short fall, and I was on my knees, edging away from it when the first bullet whirled it around. Ramirez came down the hallway from the direction of the fire stairs, firing in a two-handed stance as he advanced down the hall.

The body jerked, but the wounds were closing faster and faster, as if the more we shot it, the better the flesh was at healing the damage. I expected the thing to attack Ramirez or me, or escape, but it didn't. It leaped into the broken window of the nursery. And I knew what it meant to do. It wasn't trying to escape. It was trying to take as many lives as it could before we destroyed it. Its master was feeding off the deaths.

Ramirez went to the door that I'd tried earlier. I left him banging against it with his shoulder. I pulled myself up to the window. It was tearing the blanket off of another baby, like unwrapping a present. I didn't know where my guns were. I had nothing left to throw at it. It turned in silhouette, and the baby was grabbing for the air with tiny matchstick arms. The monster's mouth widened showing a mouth already red with blood.

Ramirez had gotten the door open enough to slip inside. He shot at its legs and lower body, afraid to try a head shot so close to the baby. The monster ignored him, and everything slowed down to a crystalline crawl. The face lowered, mouth wide to take that tiny heart. I screamed, and I put all my rage, all my helplessness into that shout. I pulled that power that let me raise the dead, I pulled it around me like a shining thing and flung it outward. I could actually see it in my mind like a thin white rope of fog. I threw my aura, my essence around the thing. I was a necromancer, and all this fucking thing was, was a corpse.

I screamed, "Stop!"

It froze in mid-motion, the baby almost at its mouth. I felt the power that animated it. I felt it inside that dead shell. Its master's power was like a dark flame inside it. I had a hand outstretched as if I needed it to point my power. I opened my hand and flared that white rope over the corpse. I covered it in my aura like growing a new body. I closed my aura like a fist around the thing and severed it from the power that made it move. The corpse shuddered, then collapsed instantly like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

I felt its master. I felt him like a cold wind across my skin. I felt him coming for me, following the line of my own aura towards me, like a string through a maze. I tried to pull it back, tried to fold it into myself again, but I'd never tried anything like this before, and I wasn't fast enough. Your aura is your magical shield, your armor. When I lashed out at the corpse, I'd opened myself to anything and everything. I thought I'd understood the risks, but I was wrong.

The master's power lashed out at me like fire following a trail of gasoline, and when it hit, there was a moment where I threw back my head, and I couldn't breathe. I felt my heart flutter and stop. I felt my body fall to the floor, but it didn't hurt, as if I were already numb. My vision went gray, then black, and there was a voice in the blackness. "I have many servants. That you stopped this one is nothing to me. I will feed through others. You die in vain."

I tried to form words to answer that voice and found that I could. "Fuck you."

I felt his anger, his outrage that I could defy him,

I tried to laugh at him, at his impotence, but there wasn't enough left of me to laugh. The darkness became something thicker. I passed beyond the master's voice, beyond my own, then there was . . . nothing.

Chapter 41

THE FIRST HINT I had that I wasn't dead was pain. The second was light. My chest was burning. I jerked back to consciousness, gasping for air, trying to pull the burning things off of me. I blinked up into a burning white light, then voices.

"Hold her down!"

Weight on my arms and legs, hands holding me down. I tried to struggle, but couldn't feel my body enough to be sure I was moving at all.

"BP sixty over eighty and dropping fast."

I saw shapes, blurred with light moving around me. A sharp jab in my arm, a needle. A man's face swam into view, blond, wire-framed glasses. His face slid back out of sight into a white-rimmed fog.

Gray spots slid like greasy streamers across my vision, and I felt myself sinking backwards, downwards, outwards.

A man's voice, "We're losing her!"

Darkness rolled over me taking the pain, and the light. A woman's voice floated through the dark, "Let me try." Then silence in the dark. There was no alien voice this time. There was nothing but the floating dark and me. Then there was just the dark.

Chapter 42

I WOKE UP SMELLING sage incense. Sage for cleansing and ridding you of negativity, or so my teacher Marianne was fond of telling me when I complained about the smell. Sage incense always gave me a headache. Was I in Tennessee with Marianne? I didn't remember going there. I opened my eyes to see where I was, and it was a hospital room. If you wake up in enough of them, you recognize the signs.

I lay there blinking into the light, happy to be awake. Happy to be alive. A woman came to stand by the bed. She was smiling. She had shoulder-length black hair, cut blunt around a strong face. Her eyes seemed too small for the rest of her face, but those eyes stared down at me like she knew things I didn't, and they were good things or at least important ones. She was wearing something long and flowing, violet with a hint of red in the pattern.

I tried to talk, cleared my throat. The woman got a glass from the small bedside table, her many necklaces clinking as she moved. She bent the straw so I could drink. One of the necklaces was a pentagram.

"Not a nurse," I said. My voice still sounded rough. She offered the water again, and I took it. I tried again, and this time my voice sounded more like me. "You're not a nurse."

She smiled, and the smile turned an ordinary face into something lovely, just as the burning intelligence in her eyes made her striking. "What was your first clue?" She had a soft rolling accent that I couldn't place; Mexican, Spanish, but not.

"You're too well dressed for one thing, and the pentagram." I tried to point at the necklace, but my arm was taped to a board with an IV running into my skin. The hand was bandaged, and I remembered the corpse biting me. I finished the gesture with my right hand, which seemed unharmed. My left arm seemed to have a sign over it that said cut here, bite here, whatever here. I moved the fingers of my left hand to see if I could. I could. It didn't even really hurt, just tight, as if the skin needed to stretch a little.

The woman was watching me with those eyes of hers. "I am Leonora Evans. I believe you've met my husband."

"You're Doctor Evans' wife?"

She nodded.

"He mentioned you were a witch."

She nodded, again. "I arrived at the hospital in the . . . how do you say, nick of time, for you." Her accent thickened when she said, how do you say.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

She sat down in the chair beside the bed, and I wondered how long she'd been sitting there, watching me. "They restarted your heart, but they couldn't keep life in your body."

I shook my head, and the beginnings of a headache was starting behind my eyes. "Can you put out the incense? Sage always gives me a headache."

She didn't question it, just got up and moved to one of those little folding tables on wheels that they have in hospitals. There was incense stuck in a small brazier, a long wooden wand, a small knife, and two candles burning. It was an altar, her altar, or a portable version of it.

"Don't take this wrong, but why are you here and a nurse isn't?"

She spoke with her back to me as she quenched the incense. "Because if the creature that attacked you tried to kill you a second time, the nurse would probably not even notice it was happening until it was too late." She came and sat back down by the bed.

I stared at her. "I think the nurse would notice if a flesh-eating corpse came into the room."

She smiled and it was patient, even condescending. "You and I both know that as horrible as its servants are, the true danger is in the master."

My eyes widened. I couldn't help it. Fear thudded in my throat. "How did you . . . know that?"

"I touched his power when I helped cast him out of you. I heard his voice, felt his presence. He was willing you to die, Anita, draining you of life."

I swallowed, my pulse still too fast. "I'd like a nurse now, please."

"You're afraid of me?" She smiled when she said it.

I started to say no, but then . . . "Yeah, but it's not personal. Let's just say after my brush with death, I'm not sure who to trust, magically speaking."

"Are you saying I saved you because this master allowed me to save you?"

"I don't know."

She frowned for the first time. "Trust me on this, Anita. It was not easy to save you. I had to encircle you with protection, and some of that protection was my own power, my own essence. If I had not been strong enough, if the names I called on for aid had not been strong enough, I would have died with you."

I looked up at her and wanted to believe her, but. . . "Thank you."

She sighed, settling the skirt of her dress with fingers aglitter with rings. "Very well, I will fetch you a familiar face, but then we must talk. Your friend Ted told me of the marks that bind you to the werewolf and the vampire."

Something must have shown on my face because she said, "I needed to know in order to help you. I'd saved your life by the time he arrived here, but I was trying to fix your aura, and I couldn't." She passed a hand just above my body and I felt that trail of warmth that was her power caressing over mine. She

hesitated over my chest, over my heart. "There is a hole here as if there is a piece of yourself missing." Her hands slid further down my body and hesitated low on my stomach, or high on my abdomen depending on how you looked at it. "Here is another hole. They are both chakra points, important energy points for your body. Bad places to have no ability to shield from magical attack."

My heart was back to beating faster than it should have. "They are closed. I've worked for the last six months to close them up."

Leonora shook her head, taking her hands gently back from me. "If I understand what your friend told me of this triumvirate of power you are a part of, then these spaces are like electrical sockets in the wall of your aura, your body. The two creatures have the plugs that fit their respective sockets."

"They aren't creatures," I said.

"Ted painted a very unflattering picture of them."

I frowned. It sounded like something Edward would do. "Ted doesn't like the fact that I'm ... intimate with monsters."

"You are lovers with both then?"

"No. I mean ..." I tried to think of a quick version. "I was sleeping with them at separate times. I mean for a little while I was ... dating them both at the same time, but it didn't work out."

"Why did it not work?"

"We were invading each other's dreams. Thinking each other's thoughts. Every time we had sex, it was worse, as if the sex was tying the knots tighter and tighter," I stopped talking, not because I was finished, but because the words weren't enough. I started over. "One night the three of us were alone, just talking, trying to work things out. A thought popped into my head, and it wasn't mine, or I didn't think it was mine, but I didn't know whose thought it was." I looked up at her, trying to will her to understand the moment of sheer terror that had been for me.

She nodded, as if she did, but her next words said she'd missed the point. "That frightened you."

"Yeah," I said, making the word two syllables so she'd catch the sarcasm.

"The lack of control," she said.

"Yes."

"The lack of individual privacy."

"Yes," I said.

"Why did you take on these marks?"

"They would have died if I hadn't done it. We might all have died."

"So you did it to save your own life." She sat there, hands crossed in her lap, perfectly at ease while she probed my psychic wounds. I hate people who are at peace with themselves.

"No, I couldn't lose them both. I might have survived losing one, but not both, not if I could save them."

"The marks gave you all enough power to overcome your enemies."

"Yes."

"If the thought of sharing your life with them is so terrifying, then why did their deaths loom so large?"

I opened my mouth, closed it, tried again. "I loved them, I guess."

"Past tense, loved, not love?"

I was suddenly tired. "I don't know anymore. I just don't know."

"If you love someone, then your freedom is curtailed. If you love someone, you give up much of your privacy. If you love someone, then you are no longer merely one person but half of couple. To think or behave any other way is to risk losing that love."

"It's not like having to share the bathroom, or argue over which side of the bed you get to sleep on. They're trying to share my mind, my soul."

"Do you really believe that last about your soul?"

I settled into the pillow, and closed my eyes. "I don't know. I guess not, but it..." I opened my eyes. "Thank you for saving my life. If I can ever return the favor, I will, but I don't owe you an explanation of my personal life."

"You're quite right." She straightened her shoulders as if pulling herself back, and suddenly she seemed less intrusive, more businesslike. "Let's return to my analogy of the holes being like light sockets, and the men being the plugs that fit them. What you did was spackle over the holes, cover them with plaster. When the master attacked you, his power tore off the plaster and reopened the holes. You cannot close these holes with your own aura. I cannot imagine the amount of effort it took to put patches over them. Ted said you were learning ritual from a witch."

I shook my head. "She's more psychic than witch. It's not a religion, just natural ability."

Leonora nodded. "Did she approve of you closing the holes the way you did?"

"I told her I wanted to learn how to shield myself from them, and she helped me do that."

"Did she tell you it was a temporary repair?"

I frowned at her. "No."

"Your hostility flares every time we approach the fact that you have given these two men in effect the keys to your soul. You cannot block them permanently, and by trying to you weaken yourself, and probably them as well."

"We'll all just have to live with it," I said.

"You almost didn't live with it."

She had my attention now. "Are you saying that the reason the master was able to almost kill me was the weakness in my aura?"

"He would have hurt you badly, even without them, but I believe the holes made you unable to resist him, especially with them freshly opened as they were. Think of them, perhaps, as wounds, freshly opened wounds that any preternatural infection can enter you through."

I thought about what she was saying. I believed it. "What can I do?"

"The holes are meant to be filled by only one thing, the auras of the men you loved. Your auras must now be like jigsaw puzzles with pieces missing, and only the three of you together are a whole now."

"I can't accept that."

She shrugged. "Accept it or not, but it is still the truth."

"I'm not ready to give up the fight just yet. Thanks anyway."

She stood, frowning. "Do as you will, but remember that if you come up against other preternatural powers, then you will not be able to protect yourself from them."

"I've been like this for a year. I think I can manage."

"Are you that arrogant, or just that determined not to talk about it any more?" She looked down at me as if she expected an answer.

I gave her the only one I had. "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

She nodded. "Then I will get your friend, and I'm sure the doctor will want to speak with you." She turned and walked out.

The room was very quiet, full of that hush that hospitals are so fond of. I looked at her makeshift altar and wondered what she'd had to do to save me. Of course, I only had her word for that. The moment I thought it, I was sorry. Why was I so distrustful of her? Because she was a witch, the way Marks hated me because I was a necromancer? Or was it just that I didn't like the truth she was telling me? That I couldn't shield myself from magical critters until the holes in my "aura" had been filled in. It had taken me most of the last six months to fill up those holes. Six months of effort, and they were raw again. Shit.

But if they were open, why didn't I sense Jean-Claude and Richard? If the marks were truly unshielded again, then why wasn't there a burst of closeness? I needed to call my teacher Marianne. I trusted her to tell me the truth. She'd warned me that simply blocking off the marks was only temporary. But she helped me do it because she felt I needed some time to adjust, to accept. I wasn't sure I had another six months of meditative prayer, psychic visualization, and celibacy in me. It had taken all that and power, energy. Hers and mine.

Of course, Marianne had taught me other things, and one of those meant I could check myself. I could run my hand down my own aura and see if the holes were there. The trouble was I needed my left hand for that, and it was wrapped in bandages, strapped to a board with a tube in it.

Now that I was alone and not being pestered with hard questions, I began to feel my body. It hurt. Every time I moved my back, it hurt. Some of it was the dull ache of bruises, but there were two spots that had the sharp bite of things that had bled. I tried to remember how I could have cut my back. The glass in the window when the corpse took us back through it, that had to be it.

My face ached in a line from jaw to forehead. I remembered the corpse hitting me backhand. It had been almost casual, but it had knocked me half-senseless. Just once I'd like to meet a type of walking dead that wasn't stronger than a living person.

I lifted the loose neck of my hospital gown and found little round pads stuck to my chest. I glanced at the heart monitor beside the bed, giving that reassuring sound that said my heart was still working. I had a sudden memory of the moment when my heart had stopped, when the master had willed it to stop. I was suddenly cold, and it wasn't the overly ambitious air conditioner. I'd come very close to dying yesterday. . . today? I didn't know what day it was.

Only the sunshine pressing against the drawn blinds let me know it was day and not night.

There were red patches on the skin of my upper body like bad sunburns. I touched one, gently. It hurt. How the hell had I gotten burns? I lifted the gown until it made a cave and I could see down the line of my body, at least until mid-thigh where the weight of the covers hid me from view. There was a bandage just below my rib cage. I remembered the thing's mouth opening over my skin while he cradled me, gently. The moment when he bit down ... I pushed the memory away. Later, much, much later. I checked my left shoulder, but the scrape marks from teeth had already scabbed over.

Scabbed over? How long had I been out?

A man came into the room. He seemed familiar, but I knew I did not know him. He was tall with blond hair and silver-framed glasses. "I'm Doctor Cunningham, and I am very glad to see you awake."

"Me, too," I said.

He smiled and started checking me over. He used a penlight and made me follow the light, his finger, and kept staring into my eyes so long, he had me worried. "Did I have a concussion?"

"No," he said. "Why? Does your head hurt?"

"A little but I think it's from the sage incense."

He looked embarrassed. "I am sorry about that, Ms. Blake, but she seemed to think all this was very important, and frankly I don't know why you almost died to begin with, or why you didn't just keep on dying, I let her do what she wanted."

"I thought my heart stopped," I said.

He tucked his stethoscope into his ears and pressed it to my chest.

"Technically, yes." He stopped talking, listening to my heart. He asked me to breathe deeply a couple of times, then made some notes on the chart at the foot of my bed. "Yes, your heart did stop, but I don't know why it stopped. None of your injuries were that serious, or for that matter, that kind of injury," He shook his head and came back to stand by me.

"How did I get the burns on my chest?"

"We used the difibulator to start your heart. It can leave mild burns,"

"How long have I been here?"

"Two days. This is your third day with us."

I took a deep breath and tried not to panic. I'd lost two days. "Have there been any more murders?"

The smile wilted on his face, leaving his, eyes even more serious than they had been. "You mean the mutilation murders?"

I nodded.

"No, no new bodies."

I let out the breath. "Good."

He was frowning now. "No more questions about your health? Just about the murders?"

"You said you don't know why I almost died, or why I didn't go ahead and die. I assume that means Leonora Evans saved me."

He looked even more uncomfortable. "All I know is that once we allowed her to lay hands on you, your blood pressure started to go back up, your heart rhythm steadied out." He shook his head. "I simply don't know what happened, and if you knew how hard it is for a doctor, any doctor, to admit ignorance, you'd be much more impressed with me saying that."

I smiled. "Actually, I've been in the hospital before. I appreciate you telling me the truth and not trying to claim credit for my miraculous recovery."

"Miraculous is a good word for it." He touched the one thin knife scar on my right forearm. "You have quite a collection of war injuries, Ms. Blake. I believe you have seen a lot of hospitals."

"Yeah," I said.

He shook his head. "You're what, twenty-two, twenty-three?"

"Twenty-six," I said.

"You look younger," he said.

"It's being short," I said.

"No," he said, "it isn't. But still to have these kinds of scars at twenty-six is not a good sign, Ms. Blake. I did my residency in a very bad section of a very big city. We used to get a lot of gang members. If they lived to see twenty-six, their bodies looked like yours. Knife scars ..." He leaned across the bed and raised the sleeve of the gown enough to touch the healed bullet wound on my upper arm. "... bullet wounds. We even had a shapeshifter gang, so I've seen the claw marks and bites, too."

"You must have been in New York," I said.

He blinked. "How did you know?"

"It's illegal to purposefully give lycanthropy to a minor even with their permission, so the gang leaders were put under a death sentence. They sent in special forces along with New York's finest to wipe them out."

He nodded. "I left the city just before they did that. I'd treated a lot of those kids." His eyes were distant with remembering. "We had two of them shapechange during treatment. Then they wouldn't let them in the hospital anymore. If you wore their colors, you were left to die."

"Most of them probably lived anyway, Doctor Cunningham. If the initial wound doesn't kill them immediately, they probably aren't going to die."

"Are you trying to comfort me?" he asked.

"Maybe."

He looked down at me. "Then I'll tell you what I told all of them. Get out. Get out of this line of work or you will not live to see forty."

"I was actually wondering if I was going to make it to thirty," I said.

"Was that a joke?"

"I think so."

"You know the old saying, half in jest, all in seriousness?" he asked.

"Can't say I've heard that one."

"Listen to yourself, Ms. Blake. Take it to heart and find something a little safer to be doing."

"If I was a cop, you wouldn't be saying this."

"I have never treated a policeman that had this many scars. The closest I've ever seen outside the gangs was a marine."

"Did you tell him to quit his job?"

"The war was over, Ms. Blake. Normal military duty just isn't that dangerous."

He looked at me, all serious. I looked back, blank-faced, giving him nothing. He sighed. "You'll do what you want to do, and it's none of my business anyway." He turned and walked towards the door.

I called after him. "I do appreciate the concern, Doctor. Honestly, I do."

He nodded, one hand on either side of his stethoscope like it was a towel. "You appreciate my concern, but you're going to ignore my advice."

"Actually, if I live through this case, I'm planning to take some time off. It's not the injury rate, doctor. It's the erosion of the ethics that's beginning to get to me."

He tugged on the stethoscope. "Are you telling me that if I think you look bad, I should see the other guy?"

I gazed down, sort of taking it all in. "I execute people, Doctor Cunningham. There are no bodies to look at."

"Don't you mean you execute vampires?" he said.

"Once upon a time, that's what I meant."

We had another long moment of looking at each other, then he said, "Are you saying you kill humans?"

"No, I'm saying that there's not as much difference between vamps and humans as I used to tell myself."

"A moral dilemma," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"I don't envy you the problem, Ms. Blake, but try to stay out of the line of fire until you figure out the answer to it."

"I always try and stay out of the line of fire, Doctor."

"Try harder," he said and walked out.

Chapter 43

EDWARD CAME IN the door before it had time to swing closed. He was wearing one of those short-sleeved shirts with little pockets on the front. If it had been tan, I'd have said he looked dressed for a safari, but the shirt was black. So were his freshly pressed jeans, the belt that encircled his narrow waist, down to the black-over belt buckle, so it wouldn't shine in the dark and give you away. The belt buckle matched the shoulder holster and gun that outlined his chest. There was a line of white undershirt at the open neck of the shirt, but other than that it was unrelieved blackness. It made his hair and eyes

look even paler. It was the first time I'd seen him without the cowboy hat out of doors since I arrived.

"If you're dressed for my funeral, it's too casual. If it's just street clothes, then you must be scaring the tourists."

"You're alive. Good," he said.

I gave him a look. "Very funny."

"I wasn't being funny."

We looked at each other. "Why so serious, Edward? I asked the doc, and he said there hadn't been any more murders."

He shook his head and came to stand at the foot of the bed, near the makeshift altar. I ended up looking down the length of the bed at him, and it was awkward. I found the button controls with my right hand and raised the head of the bed slowly. I'd been in enough hospital beds to know where everything was.

"No, there haven't been any more murders," he said.

"Then what's with the long face?" I was paying attention to my body while the bed raised, waiting for it to hurt. I ached all over, which you tend to do after being thrown into walls. My chest hurt, and it wasn't just the burns. I stopped when I was sitting up enough to see him without straining.

He gave a very small smile. "You nearly die, and you ask what's wrong?"

I raised eyebrows at him. "I didn't know you cared."

"More than I should."

I didn't know what to say to that, but I tried. "Does this mean you won't kill me just for sport?"

He blinked, and the emotion was gone. Edward was standing there staring at me, his usual amused blankness showing on his face. "You know I only kill for money."

"Bullshit," I said. "I've seen you kill people when you weren't getting a paycheck."

"Only when I'm with you."

I'd tried to play it tough and guylike. He wasn't having any of it. I tried for honesty next. "You look tired, Edward."

He nodded. "I am."

"If there haven't been any more murders, why do you look so beat?"

"Bernardo only got out of the hospital yesterday."

I raised eyebrows at him. "How bad was he hurt?"

"Broken arm, concussion. He'll heal."

"Good," I said.

There was still an air to him of strangeness, more than normal Edward strangeness, as if there was more to tell and he didn't want to tell it. "Drop the other shoe, Edward."

His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Tell me what's got you all bothered."

"I tried to see Nicky Baco without you or Bernardo."

"Bernardo tell you about the meet?" I asked.

"No, your detective friend, Ramirez, told me."

That surprised me. "Last time I talked to him, he was sort of insisting that he go along with me to meet Baco."

"He still wanted to come along, but Baco wouldn't see any of us. He insisted that you and Bernardo, or at least you, had to be there."

"You're not upset just because Nicky wouldn't dance with you," I said. "Just tell me."

"Do you really need Baco, Anita?"

"Why?"

"Just answer the question." I knew Edward well enough to know he meant it. I answered his question or he wouldn't answer mine.

"Yeah, I need him. He's a necromancer, Edward, and whatever this thing is, it is just a form of necromancy."

"But you're a better necromancer than he is, stronger."

"Maybe, but I don't know much about ritual necromancy. What I do is actually closer to voodoo than traditional necromancy."

He gave a dim smile, shaking his head. "And what exactly is traditional necromancy, and how are you so sure that Baco practices it?"

"If he was an animator, I'd have heard of him. There just aren't that many of us. So he doesn't raise zombies. But you and everyone else in the metaphysical community in and around Santa Fe say that Baco works with the dead."

"I only know his reputation, Anita. I've never seen him do shit."

"Fine, but I've met him. He doesn't do vaudun, voodoo. I've seen that enough to know the trappings and the feel of it. So if he's not a zombie raiser or a vaudun priest, and people still call him a necromancer, then he must do ritual necromancy."

"Which is?" Edward said.

"To my knowledge it's raising the spirits of the dead for sort of divination purposes or to get questions answered."

Edward shook his head. "Whatever Baco does, it has to be worse than raising a few ghosts. People are scared of him."

"Nice of you to mention that before I met him the first time," I said.

He took a deep breath, hands on hips, not looking at me. "I was careless."

I looked at him. "You're a lot of things, Edward. Careless isn't one of them."

He nodded and looked up at me. "How about competitive?"

I frowned at him, but said, "Competitive, I'll give you. But what does that have to do with Baco?"

"I knew that his bar was the hangout for the local werewolves."

I stared at him, just stared at him. When I closed my mouth, I said, "You competitive shit. You let Bernardo and me walk in there unprepared, You could have gotten us killed."

"You're not even going to ask why I let you walk in blind?" he asked,

"Let me take a wild guess. You wanted to see how I'd handle it cold, maybe how Bernardo would handle it, or maybe both."

He nodded.

"Fuck, Edward. This isn't a game."

"I know that."

"No you don't. You've been keeping things from me from the moment I stepped off the plane. You keep testing my nerve to see if it's better than yours. It is so junior high, so damned ..." I struggled to find the right word "... such a guy thing to do."

"I'm sorry," he said, and his voice was soft.

The apology stopped me, drained some of the righteous indignation. "I've never heard you apologize for anything, Edward, not to anyone."

"It's been a long time since I said I was sorry to anyone."

"Does this mean the games are over, and you'll quit trying to see who is the biggest, baddest person?"

He nodded. "That's what it means."

I lay there and looked at him. "Is it just being with Donna, or is something else starting to open you up?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you don't stop all this sentimental shit, I'll begin to think you're just a mere mortal like the rest of us."

He smiled. "Speaking of immortals," he said.

"We weren't," I said.

"I'm changing the subject," he said.

"Okay."

"If this monster really is an Aztec boogey-man, then it is a hell of a coincidence that the Master of the City, who just happens to be an Aztec, doesn't know anything about it."

"We talked to her, Edward."

"Do you think a vamp, even a master vamp, could do all the things we've been seeing?"

I thought about it, but finally said, "Not just from vampiric powers, no, but if she were some kind of Aztec sorcerer in life, she might retain her powers after death. I just don't know that much about Aztec magic. It doesn't come up a lot. She was different from any vampire I've ever met. It could mean that she was a sorcerer in life."

"I think you need to see her again."

"And what, ask her if she's involved in the murder and mutilation of some twenty people?"

He grinned. "Something like that."

I nodded. "Okay. When I get out of the hospital, a visit to vampire central goes up to the head of my list."

His face went very blank.

"What is it, Edward?"

"Do you really need Baco?" he said.

"I sensed this thing the first night I arrived or first day. It sensed me right back, and it shielded itself. I haven't picked it up that strongly since, and I've driven past the spot where I felt it. Baco can sense it, too, and he's afraid of it. So yeah, I want to talk to him."

"You don't think he's behind it?"

"I've felt this thing's power. Baco is powerful, but he's not that powerful. Whatever this thing is, it's not human."

He sighed. "Fine." He said it like he'd made a decision. "Baco says you have to meet him before ten this morning or don't bother coming."

I searched the room until I found the clock on the wall. It was eight.

"Shit,"

I said.

"The doc says you need at least another twenty-four hours in here. Leonora Evans that if the monster tries for you again, you won't make it."

"You have a point to make," I said.

"I almost didn't tell you."

I was beginning to get pissed. "I don't need you to protect me, Edward. I thought you of all people knew better than that."

"Are you sure you're up to it?"

I almost just said yes, but I was so tired. It was a bone weariness that had nothing to do with lack of sleep. I was hurt, and it went beyond the bruises and cuts that I could feel. "No," I said.

He blinked. "You must feel like shit to admit that."

"I've felt better, but something's scaring Baco. If he says meet before ten this morning, we meet. Maybe the great bad thing is coming to get him at eleven today. Can't miss that, can we?"

"I've got a bag of fresh clothes out in the hall for you. They cut your shoulder holster off of you in the emergency room, and the spine sheath."

"Shit," I said, "that spine sheath was a custom job."

He shrugged. "You can order a new one." He went to the door, stepped out a moment, then came back in with a small overnight bag. He came around to the side of the bed that Leonora's chair was on. The other side of the bed was a little too crowded with equipment for visitors to stand.

He opened it and started laying out the clothes. His button-down black shirt didn't fit perfectly smoothly around his ribs. He laid out the clothes in neat piles: black jeans, black polo shirt, black socks, even the underwear and bra matched the theme. "What's with the funerary color scheme?"

"The dark blue polo shirt and jeans were trashed. All you had left was black, red, and purple for shirts. We need something dark today, authoritative."

"Why are you in black, then?" I was watching the way the shirt lay when he moved. It wasn't a gun. I didn't think it was knives. What was under his shirt?

"White shows blood."

"What's under your shirt, Edward?"

He smiled and unbuttoned the middle buttons. He had what looked like a modified belly band holster strapped across his upper body. But it wasn't a gun. It was metal pieces, too big to be ammo, and too oddly shaped on the end I could see. They looked like teeny-tiny metal darts . . . "Are those some sort of itty-bitty throwing knife?"

He nodded. "Bernardo said that if you took out an eye the flayed ones didn't like it."

"I poked out eyes on them twice, and each time it seemed to hurt and disorient them. Truthfully, I didn't think Bernardo noticed what I was doing."

He smiled and started buttoning his shirt up. "You shouldn't underestimate him."

"Could you really hit an eye throwing one of those things?" He slipped one out of its little holster and threw it into the wall in one flick of his hand. He pierced one of the tiny designs on the wallpaper across the room.

"I can't hit shit with something like that."

He retrieved it from the wall and replaced it on his chest, and walked back to me. "You can even have your very own flamethrower, if you want it."

"Gee, and it isn't even Christmas."

He smiled. "Not Christmas, more like Easter."

I frowned up at him. "I don't get the Easter reference."

"You came back from the dead, or didn't anyone tell you?"

I shook my head. "Tell me what?"

"Your heart stopped three times. Ramirez kept it going with CPR until the doctors got to you. But they lost you twice. You were going down for the third time when Leonora Evans convinced them to let her try and save you with some of that good old time religion."

My heart was suddenly beating too hard, and I could have sworn that the inside of my ribs hurt with each beat. "Are you trying to scare me?"

"No, just explaining the Easter reference. You know, Christ rose from the dead."

"I get it, I get it." I was suddenly scared and angry. I am rarely one without being the other.

"If you still believe in it, I'd light a candle or two," he said.

"I'll think about it," I said, and my voice sounded defensive even to me.

He was smiling again, and I was beginning to distrust his smile almost as much as the rest of him. "Or maybe you should talk to Leonora and ask her who she asked for help to get you back. Maybe it's not a church candle you need to light. Maybe you need to slaughter a few chickens."

"Wiccans do not kill things to raise power."

He shrugged. "Sorry, they don't teach comparative religion or metaphysics in assassin school."

"You've scared me, reminded me how hurt I am, and now you're yanking my chain, teasing me. Do you want me to get up out of this bed and meet Baco or not?"

His face was all serious, the last of the humor draining away like ice melting down a hot plate. "I want you to do whatever you need to do, Anita. I thought I wanted to get this son of a bitch at any price." He touched my right hand where it lay on the sheet. He didn't hold it, just touched it, then pulled away. "I was wrong. Some things I'm not willing to pay."

Before I could think of anything to say, he turned and left. I wasn't sure which was confusing me more: this case, or the new and more emotional

Edward. I caught sight of the clock. Shit. I had an hour and forty minutes to get dressed, check out of the hospital against doctor's orders, and drive to Los Duendos. I was betting arguing with Doctor Cunningham was going to take longer than either of the other two.

Chapter 44

I PRESSED THE BUTTON to slowly raise the bed. The closer I got to a sitting position, the more I hurt. My chest ached as if the muscles around my ribs had been overused. The cuts on my back did not like sitting up and would probably like walking even less. There was a certain tightness to the skin, like a shoe laced too tightly, that said I had stitches on my back. They would be a pain all their own when I insisted on moving. Nothing feels quite like stitches. I wondered how many I had in my back. It felt like a lot.

When I was in a sitting position, I waited for a few seconds listening to my body complain. I usually don't get this hurt until the end of a case. I hadn't even met the great-bad-thing face to face yet. It had nearly killed me from a nice supposedly safe distance.

I let myself think about that for a few minutes. I'd almost died. Seems like I should get a few days of grace before having to crawl back into the trenches. But crime and tide wait for no woman, or something like that. I'll admit I thought about just staying put, just letting someone else be heroic for a change. But the moment I seriously thought it, I flashed on the nursery and those red-splashed cribs. I couldn't just lie here and trust that everyone would muddle through without me. I just couldn't do it.

I had my gown halfway down my arms when I realized I couldn't just yank the sticky pads that connected me to the heart monitor. Just yanking them off would give the hospital staff just a little too much excitement.

I finally pressed the nurse call button. I had to get unplugged from all the drips and machines.

The nurse came almost immediately, which either meant the hospital had more nurses on staff than most hospitals could afford these days, or I was really hurt and they were paying extra attention to me. I was hoping for a surplus of nurses, but wasn't betting on it.

The nurse was shorter than I am, very petite, with blond hair cut short and sort of bouncy. Her professional smile wilted when she saw me sitting up with the gown obviously coming off.

"What are you doing, Ms. Blake?"

"Getting dressed," I said.

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Look, I'd prefer help getting all the tubes and wires off me, but it is all coming off because I'm checking out."

"I'll get Doctor Cunningham." She turned and walked out.

"You do that," I said to the empty room. I got a death grip on the little wires that attached to the sticky pads and pulled. It felt like I'd pulled a foot worth of skin off with them, a sharp, grinding ache, like it would hurt to touch the skin. The high pitched scream of the machine let people know my heart was no longer going pitty-pat on the other end of the wires. The sound reminded me uncomfortably of the fire alarm, though it was much less obnoxious.

The pads had left large circular welts on my skin, but they were not nearly as big as they felt. The fact that the welts hurt enough to rise above all the other aches and pains lets you know how raw my skin felt.

Doctor Cunningham came through the door while I was still working on the tape that bound my hand to the IV board. He turned the screaming heart monitor off.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

"Getting dressed."

"Like hell you are."

I looked up at his enraged face and just didn't have any anger to throw back at him. I was too tired and too hurt to waste energy on anything but the process of getting up and getting out of this bed.

"I have to go, Doctor." I kept picking at the tape and wasn't making much progress. I needed a knife. "Where are my weapons?"

He ignored the question, and asked one of his own. "Where could you possibly need to go badly enough to climb out of this bed?"

"I need to get back to work."

"The police can handle things for a few days, Ms. Blake."

"There are people who will talk to me that won't talk to the police." I'd gotten an edge of tape up.

"Then your friends in the hallway can talk to them." Doctor Cunningham got points for realizing that Edward and company were the kind of men that people who avoided the police might talk to.

"This particular person won't talk to anyone but me." I finally stopped picking at the tape. "Can you please get this off of me?"

He took a breath, to argue, I think, but what he said was, "I'll help you check out if you let me show you something first."

I must have looked as suspicious as I felt, but I nodded.

"I'll be right back," and he left the room. Everyone seemed to be doing that today. He was gone long enough that Edward came in to see what the hold up was. I lifted the taped arm, and he produced a switchblade from his pocket. The blade cut through the tape like paper. Edward always did take good care of his tools.

I was still left with having to peel the tape off my arm, and the IV itself had to come out, mustn't forget that.

"If you want it fast, I'll do it," Edward said.

I nodded, and he ripped the tape off my arm along with the IV. "Ow!"

He smiled. "Sissy."

"Sociopath."

Doctor Cunningham came in carrying a large hand mirror. His gaze flicked to Edward and my now free arm. It was not a friendly look. "If you'll step back for a moment, Mr. Forrester?"

"You're the doctor," Edward said, moving back to the foot of the bed.

"Nice of you to remember that," Doctor Cunningham said. He held the mirror in front of my face.

I looked startled, eyes too wide and so dark they looked black. I'm naturally pale, but my skin was ghost-white, ethereal like flexible ivory. It was what made my eyes look even darker than normal, or maybe it was the bruise.

I'd known my face hurt, and I'd even known why. Being hit hard enough to slam into a wall should leave a mark.

The bruise went up to the edge of my cheek, just under the eye, and catty-corner down to my jaw line just under the ear. My skin was a rainbow of purple-black with a core of red skin with darker red scattered across it. It was one of those really deep bruises that probably hadn't even shown much of a mark for the first day, but it would go through all the color changes once it started. I had shades of green, yellow, and brown to look forward to. If I hadn't had three vampire marks on me, I'd have had at least a broken jaw, or maybe a broken neck.

There were moments when I'd give almost anything to be free of the marks, but staring at the bruise, knowing that I healed faster than normal for a human and it still looked this bad, was not one of them. I was grateful to be alive.

I said a brief silent prayer while I stared at my face. "Thank you, dear God, for me not being dead." Aloud, I said, "Nasty," and handed the mirror to the doctor.

He frowned; obviously it wasn't the reaction he'd wanted. "You've got over forty stitches in your back."

My eyes went wide before I could stop them. "Gee, that's a record even for me."

"This isn't a joke, Ms. Blake."

"It might as well be funny, doctor."

"If you start moving around, you're going to rip the stitches open. Right now, if you're careful, the scars won't be bad, but if you start moving around, you'll scar."

I sighed. "It'll have plenty of company, doctor."

He stood there, shaking his head slowly, face set in harsh lines. "Nothing I can say is going to make any difference, is it?"

"No," I said.

"You're a fool," he said.

"If I stay in here until I'm healed, what am I going to say to myself when I'm staring down at the next round of bodies?"

"Saving the world is not your job, Ms. Blake."

"I'm not that ambitious," I said. "I'm just trying to save a few lives."

"And you truly believe that only you can solve this case?"

"No, but I know that I am the only one that... this man will talk to." I'd almost said Nicky Baco, but I didn't want Doctor Cunningham calling the police and telling them where we were going. Not that he would do that, but better safe than sorry.

"I told you that I'd check you out if you looked at your injuries. I keep my word."

"I appreciate that in a person, Doctor Cunningham. Thank you."

"Don't thank me, Ms. Blake. Don't thank me." He moved towards the door, giving both the makeshift altar and Edward a medium-wide berth, as if both made him uncomfortable. At the door he turned. "I'll send a nurse in to help you dress because you will need the help." He walked out before I could say thank you again. Probably just as well.

Edward stayed until the nurse arrived. It was a different nurse, tall, light brunette, if that wasn't an oxymoron. Her gaze stayed on my bruised face longer than was politic, and when she helped me slip out of the gown, she gave a low hiss at my back. It was unprofessional and sort of unnurselike. They were usually blankly cheerful to the point of nausea when you were hurt or blunt. Anything to cover that what had happened to you bothered them.

"You'll never be able to wear a bra over the stitches in your back," she said.

I sighed. I hated to go without a bra. It always made me feel underdressed no matter what else I was wearing. "Let's just get the shirt on."

She held it and helped me slip it over my head. Putting my arms up to go through the sleeves made the pain in my back sharp and immediate, as if the skin would pull apart if I moved too quickly. I wondered if that would have been the analogy that I'd chosen if Doctor Cunningham hadn't warned me about the stitches pulling apart. I'd have shrugged if I hadn't been sure it would hurt.

"I normally work in the nursery," the nurse said as she helped me straighten the shirt, buttoning the first two buttons.

I looked up at her, not sure what to say. But I didn't need to worry. She knew exactly what to say. "They called me in after you destroyed the monster. For the ... cleanup." She helped me sit on the edge of the bed. I sat there for a few seconds with my legs dangling off the edge, letting my body adjust to the fact that we were getting dressed, we were going to stand ... in just a second.

"I'm sorry you had to see it," I said, because I had to say something, I wasn't even comfortable with her saying I'd "destroyed" the monster. It made it sound entirely too heroic, and what it had felt like was desperate. Desperation is the true mother of invention, at least for me.

She started to help me into the black panties, but I took them from her hands. If I couldn't even put on my own underwear, I was in serious trouble. And if I was truly that hurt, I needed to know it. It would cut down on my urge to be heroic.

I started to simply bend at the waist, but it just wasn't that easy. I lowered myself downward a little bit at a time, and I was still nowhere near low enough.

"Let me start them up your legs, so you don't have to bend all the way down," the nurse said.

I finally let her, and even pulling them only part way up my body turned my back into one great big hurt. I leaned against the bed when they were on, and didn't even argue when she bent down to put on my socks. She never argued that I was too hurt to be leaving. It was too obvious to argue about it.

"I'd worked with Vicki for two years. It was Meg's first job." Her eyes were dry, wide, and I noticed the dark circles under them like purplish smudges, as if she hadn't slept much in the last three days.

I remembered the body that had blocked the door into the nursery, and the nurse that had been thrown through the window. Vicki and Meg, though I'd probably never know which had been which, not that it mattered. They were dead and didn't care, and the nurse helping me slip into a pair of black jeans looked too fragile for questions. My job was to listen, and make encouraging noises where needed.

I slipped the jeans over my butt without help, buttoned them and zipped them all by myself. Things were looking up. I'd tried tucking the shirt into my pants out of habit, but that required more back movement than I thought.

Besides, untucked, my braless state would be a little less noticeable. I was really too well endowed to go without, but my modesty wasn't worth the pain, not today.

"Every time I close my eyes, I see the babies." She was kneeling with one of my shoes in her hands, when she looked up. "I keep thinking I should be dreaming about my friends, but I only see the babies, their little bodies, and they cry. Every time I close my eyes, I hear the babies screaming. I wasn't there, and I hear them, every night." The tears were finally there, sliding soundlessly down her face as if she didn't know she was crying. She slid the shoe on my foot and looked down, paying attention to what she was doing.

"See a councilor or a priest or whoever you trust," I said. "You'll need help."

She got my other shoe off the bed, and gazed up at me, the tears drying in tracks down her pale cheeks. "I heard that there's some sort of witch making these corpses, causing them to attack people."

"Not a witch," I said. "What's behind all this isn't human."

She slipped the shoe on me, frowning. "Is it immortal like a vampire?"

I didn't do my usual lecture about how vamps aren't immortal, only hard to kill. She didn't need that particular lecture. "I don't know yet."

She laced my shoe solid, but not too tight, as if she did this regularly. She looked up at me with those strange empty eyes of hers, tear tracks still visible on her face. "If it's not immortal, kill it."

Her face held that absolute trust that is usually reserved for small children or people that are not quite all there. There was no questioning in her shocked eyes, no doubt in that pale face. I answered that trust. Reality could wait until she was ready for it. I said what she needed to hear. "If it can die, I'll kill it."

I said it because she needed to hear it. I said it because after what I'd seen it do, that was the plan. Maybe it had been the plan all along. Knowing Edward

it probably had been. He said solve the case when what he usually meant was kill them, kill them all. As a plan, I'd heard worse. As a way of life, it lacked a certain romance. As a way to stay alive, it was just about perfect. As a way to keep your soul intact, it sucked. But I was willing to trade a piece of my soul to stop this thing. And that was perhaps my biggest problem. I was always willing to compromise my soul if it would take out the great evil. But there always seemed to be another great evil coming down the road. No matter how many times I saved the day and took out the monster, there was always another monster, and there always would be. The monster supply was unlimited. I was not. The parts of myself that I was using up to slay the monsters was finite, and once I used it all up, there would be no going back. I'd be Edward in drag. I could save the world and lose myself.

And staring down into the woman's face, watching that perfect faith fill her lost eyes, I wasn't sure the bargain was a good one, but I was sure of one thing. I couldn't say no. I couldn't let the monsters win, not even if it meant becoming one of them. God forgive me if it was arrogance. God protect me if it wasn't. I got up out of bed and went in search of monsters.

Chapter 45

I WAS BUCKLED into the front seat of Edward's Hummer, holding myself stiff and careful, glad the ride was smooth. Bernardo and Olaf were in the back seat, dressed in someone's idea of assassin chic. Bernardo was in a leather vest. His cast looked very white and awkward, right arm at a forty-five degree angle, a white strap going from arm to around his neck. His long hair was done in a vaguely oriental style, with one large, deceptively loose knot held back with what looked like two long gold chopsticks. It held back the sides of his hair, but left most of the length swinging free down his back. Black jeans of a looser cut with holes worn through across his knees, and the black boots I'd seen him wear since I arrived. But who was I to complain? I had three pairs of black Nikes, and I had brought all three with me,

There was a swollen bump to the side of his forehead and bruises like a pattern of modern art tattoos down one side of his face. His right eye was still puffy around one edge. But he managed not to look pale or ill like I did. In fact, if you could ignore the cast and bruises, he looked dandy. I hoped he felt as good as he looked, because I looked like shit and felt worse.

"Who did your hair?" I asked, because with only one good arm, I knew he hadn't.

"Olaf," he said, and that one word was very bland, very empty.

I widened my eye and looked over at Olaf.

He sat beside Bernardo on the side behind Edward, as far from me as he could get and still be in the car. He hadn't spoken a word to me since I walked out of the hospital room and the four of us walked to the car. It hadn't bothered me at the time because I'd been too busy trying to walk without making small pain noises under my breath.

Whimpering while you walked was always a bad sign. But now I was sitting down and as comfortable as I was likely to get for a while. I was also in a momentarily bad mood because I was scared. I felt physically weak and not up to a fight. Psychically, my hard-won shields were crap again, full of holes, and if the "master" tried for me again, I was in very deep shit.

Leonora Evans had given me a woven silk cord with a little drawstring bag on it. The little bag was lumpy, packed full with small hard objects that felt like rocks, and dry crumbling things that were probably herbs. She'd told me not to open the bag because that would let all the goodness out. She was the witch, so I did what she told me.

The bag was a charm of protection, and it would work without my believing in its power. Which was good since except for my cross I didn't believe in very much. Leonora had been making the charm for three days, since she saved me in the emergency room. She had not intended it to be a cure all for the holes in my defenses, but it was all she had to give me on such short notice. She was almost as angry with me as Doctor Cunningham had been for leaving the hospital early.

She had taken one of her own necklaces and placed it over my head. It was a large piece of polished semiprecious stone. A strange dark gold color, Citrine for protection and to absorb negativity and magical attacks directed at me. To say that I wasn't a big believer in crystals and the new age was an understatement, but I took it. Mainly because she was so angry and so sincerely worried about me out in the world with my aura hanging open for the bad guys to munch on. I knew I had holes in my aura. I could feel them, but it was all just a little too hocus-pocus for me.

So I turned in my seat, feeling the stitches in my back tighten, adding a little push to the pain I was already feeling, and stared at Olaf. He was staring out the window as if there was something fascinating in the rows of small houses on that side of the car.

"Olaf," I said.

He never moved, just watched the passing scenery.

"Olaf!" It was almost a yell in the small confines of the car. His shoulders twitched, but that was all. It was like I was some kind of insect buzzing around him. You might wave a hand at it, but you wouldn't talk to it.

It pissed me off. "Now I understand why you don't like women. You should have just said you were homosexual, and my feelings wouldn't have been so hurt."

Edward said, softly, "Jesus, Anita."

Olaf turned very slowly almost in slow motion as if each muscle in his neck were pulling him around in small jerks. "What—did—you—say?" Each word was rage-filled, hot with hatred.

"You did a great job on Bernardo's hair. You made him look very pretty." I didn't believe that particular sexual stereotype, but I was betting that Olaf did. I was also betting that he was homophobic. A lot of ultramasculine men are.

He undid his seatbelt with a noticeable click and eased forward. I pulled the Firestar out of the holster that was sitting in my lap. The pants that Edward had brought to the hospital were a little too tight for my innerpants holster. I watched Olaf's hand vanish underneath the black leather jacket. Maybe he hadn't understood the movement when I'd unholstered the gun. Maybe he expected me to raise the gun and sight along the back of the car. I pointed the gun between the small space between the seats. It wasn't a perfect angle, but I had my gun pointed first, and that counted in a gun fight.

He'd pulled his gun out from under the jacket, but it wasn't pointed yet. If I'd meant to kill him, I'd have won.

Edward slammed on the brakes. Olaf slammed into the back of the seat, gun at a bad angle, driving his wrist backwards. It wasn't being thrown into the seatbelt, and nearly the dashboard that hurt. It was the being flung backwards into the seat. My breath went out in a sharp gasp. Olaf's face ended up very close to the space between the seats, and he saw the gun barrel pointed, now, at his chest. I was hurting so bad that my skin twitched with the need to writhe, but I kept my hand tight around the gun, using my free hand to brace myself and make sure I didn't move. I had the drop on him, and I was keeping it.

The Hummer skidded to a stop against the curb. Edward had his seatbelt off and was whirling around in his seat. I caught the flash of a gun in his hand and had a heartbeat to decide whether to try and take the gun off Olaf and try for Edward, or keep the gun where it was. I kept the gun on Olaf, I didn't think Edward would shoot me, and Olaf might.

Edward shoved the barrel of his gun against the back of Olaf's bald head. The tension level in the car skyrocketed. Edward went to his knees, gun never moving from Olaf's head. I could see Olaf's eyes rolled up. We looked at each other, and I saw that he was afraid. He believed that Edward would do it. So did I, though I didn't know why, and with Edward there was always a why, even if it was only money.

I had a sense of Bernardo sitting very stiff on his side of the seat, trying to pull back from the mess that was about to spill all over the car.

"Do you want me to kill him?" Edward asked. His voice was quiet and empty, as if he'd asked, did I want him to pass the salt. I could do an empty uninterested voice, but not like Edward. I could never be that dispassionate, not yet anyway.

I said, "No," automatically, then added, "not like this."

Something passed through Olaf's eyes. It wasn't fear. It was more like surprise. Surprise that I hadn't said, yeah, shoot him, or surprise about something else I couldn't fathom. Who knew?

Edward took the gun from Olaf's hand, then clicked the safety off on his own gun, and leaned back still on his knees in the driver's seat. "Then stop baiting him, Anita."

Olaf sat back in his seat, slowly, almost stiffly as if afraid to move too quickly. Nothing like having a gun to your head to teach you caution. He smoothed his hands down the leather jacket, which still looked like way too much to wear in the heat. "I will not owe my life to any woman." His voice was sort of subdued, but it was clear.

I eased the Firestar back out from between the seats, and said, "Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, Olaf."

He frowned at me. Maybe he didn't get the quote.

Edward looked at both of us, shaking his head. "You're both scared, and that makes you both stupid."

"I'm not scared," Olaf said.

"Ditto," I said.

He frowned at me. "You just crawled out of a hospital bed. Of course, you're scared. Wondering if the next time you meet the monster will be your last."

I looked back at him, and it was not a friendly look.

"So you picked a fight with Olaf because you'd rather fight him than be scared."

"Just like a woman to be so irrational," Olaf said.

Edward turned to the big man. "And you, Olaf, you're afraid that Anita is tougher than you are."

"I am not!"

"You've been quiet ever since we saw the mess at the hospital. Ever since you heard what Anita did, how much damage she took and survived. You're wondering just how good is she? Is she as good as you are? Is she better?"

"She is a woman," Olaf said, and his voice was thick with some dark emotion as if he was choking on it. "She cannot be as good as I am. She cannot be better than I am. That is not possible."

"Don't make this a competition, Edward," I said.

"Because you will lose," Olaf said.

"I'm not going to arm wrestle you, Olaf. But I will stop picking on you. I'm sorry."

Olaf blinked at me as if he couldn't quite follow the conversation. I didn't think I'd overstepped his English, more like his logic circuits were overloading. "I do not need your pity."

I moved up from being "she" or "a woman" to a neuter pronoun. It was a start. "It's not pity. I acted badly. Edward's right. I'm scared, and fighting with you is a nice diversion."

He shook his head. "I don't understand."

"If it's any consolation, you confuse me, too."

Edward smiled, his Ted smile. "Now kiss and make up."

We both frowned at him and said simultaneously, "Don't push it," and "I do not think so."

"Good," Edward said. He looked at Olaf's gun in his hand for a second, then handed it back with a lot of heavy-duty eye contact. "I need you to be my backup, Olaf. Can you do that?"

He nodded once and took the gun slowly from Edward's hand. "I am your backup until this creature is dead, then we will talk."

Edward nodded. "I look forward to it."

I glanced at Bernardo, but his face told me nothing, nothing except that it had gone blank and empty and confirmed what I was thinking. Olaf had just warned Edward that when the case was over, he would try and kill him. Edward had agreed to it. Just like that.

"Just one big happy family," I said into the thick silence that had filled the car.

Edward turned around in his seat and buckled back in. He gave me sparkling Ted eyes. "And just like family we'll fight among ourselves, but we're much more likely to kill an outsider."

"Actually," I said, "the vast majority of murders are done by your nearest and dearest blood relatives."

"Or spouse, don't forget the spouse," Edward said and put the car in gear, pulling carefully out into the sparse traffic.

"Like I said, your nearest and dearest."

"But you said blood relative, and there's no blood between husband and wife."

"Sharing one body fluid or another, doesn't seem to matter. We kill those we're closest to."

"We are not close," Olaf said.

"No, we are not close," I said.

"But I hate you all the same," he said.

I spoke without turning around. "Right back at you."

"And I thought the two of you would never agree on anything," Bernardo said. His voice was cheerful, joking. No one laughed.

Chapter 46

THE BLACK-PAINTED FRONT of the bar looked tired in the morning sunlight. You could see where the paint was cracked and beginning to peel. The front of the bar looked almost as neglected as the rest of the street. Maybe Nicky Baco hadn't tried to run the other businesses off. Maybe it had been an accident. Standing there in the soft heat of morning, I felt something I hadn't felt at night. It was as if the street had been used up in a mystical sense. I'd felt very strongly when I'd been here last time that Baco had drained the street of vitality, caused this to happen, but if that were true, then it hadn't been enough energy to sustain him. Or maybe all that negativity was finally coming home to roost. Most systems of magic or mysticism have rules of conduct, things you do and things you do not. You break the rules at your peril. The wiccans call it the

threefold law: what you do to others comes back to you threefold. Buddhists call it karma. Christians call it answering for your sins. I call it what goes around comes around. It really does, you know.

I had the Firestar tucked into the front of my pants, minus the innerpant holster, because the gun could ride higher and not dig in as much. Edward had loaned me a paddle holster for the Browning, and I had ended up with it in front, so that I looked like one of those wild west gunslingers with two guns crossed over my hips. Though actually the black polo shirt came down low enough to hide both guns. Untucked, most shirts are too long on me. It looked sloppy, but it did hide the guns if you weren't looking too close. The polo shirt was a little too close to the body not to show telltale lumps, though Edward had been thoughtful enough to bring my black suit jacket, which helped camouflage the lumps. Last time I'd been here with guns I'd had the police backing me, but now we were taking guns into a bar, very illegal in New Mexico. Strangely, it wasn't a big worry, but I did hope the cops didn't choose today for a raid.

I still had the wrist sheaths plus knives on my wrists. Ramirez had collected all my knives from the inferno and given them to Edward, who had scrubbed, cleaned, oiled, and sharpened them to an inch of their lives. I'd had to leave the big blade in the car because I couldn't figure out how to carry it concealed, and carrying what amounted to a small sword barehanded seemed a little too aggressive.

Edward had even given me an incendiary grenade for my jacket pocket. It helped balance out the derringer in my right hand pocket so that the jacket didn't swing too funny as I walked. The derringer had been his idea, too, though I had brought it with me from St. Louis. I wasn't sure I really needed it today, but I'd learned never to argue with Edward when he gave me a weapon. If he thought I might need it, I almost certainly would. Scary thought on the grenade, isn't it?

At some unknown signal, Olaf moved up and tried the bar door. It was locked. He knocked twice hard enough to rattle the door. He also stood right in front of the door. After staring down a sawed-off shotgun the last time I came to the bar, I might not have stood facing front at that black door. Either Olaf hadn't heard about the shotgun, or he didn't care. Maybe he was trying to be muy macho for my benefit or maybe for his own benefit. If he'd been more secure in himself, then he wouldn't have been so easy to piss off.

Even standing off to one side, the sound of the locks being drawn back was loud. Good, solid locks just from the sound of it. The door pushed open, slowly, showing a thick slice of darkness like a cave pressing against the sunlight. The door continued to push slowly open as if on its own power. Only at the very last did a large beefy arm come into view, spoiling the illusion.

Harpo stood in the doorway peering out at us, eyes hidden behind the same small black sunglasses he'd been wearing the first time I saw him. He had changed clothes, though. He was wearing a jean vest open over a very hairy chest and stomach. He looked more like a bear than a werewolf. He looked like a great big sleepy bear that had rolled out of bed, pulled on some clothes and

rumbled out to the door. Even his otherworldly energy seemed dimmer than last time.

But he blocked the door with his bulk, and growled out, "Anita, but not the others."

I moved around Olaf, and he actually moved back so I could face Harpo. Either Olaf was being nicer, or he figured better me than him in the door.

"Nicky said I could bring some friends."

Harpo peered down at me. "Looks like you need better friends."

I didn't touch the bruise. It wouldn't help. "Let's just say I was relying on police backup and they were late." Which was true, and I still wanted to know where the hell Ramirez had been while I'd been playing lone ranger. I like policemen, but I knew the comment would please Harpo.

It did. He smiled a quick baring of teeth that flashed wolf fangs in the thickness of his beard. He had definitely been spending too much time in wolf form. There was a low murmuring voice, male. Harpo turned to look over one massive shoulder towards the voice. Then he turned back to me. The smile was gone.

"Boss says you were invited but not the others."

I gave a very small shake of my head because a big one would have hurt. "Look, Nicky invited me here. He said I could bring friends. I brought them. I'm here before ten in the fucking morning. I came down here to talk about our common problem, not to be dicked around at the door."

"This ain't dicking around," Harpo said, hand cupping his groin. "I can show you dicking around."

I held up a hand. "Fine, my mistake for using the wrong word. I didn't come down here to be stopped at the door."

He was still rubbing himself, getting into it or trying to piss me off. He'd succeeded on the last. I was so not standing here with forty-plus stitches in my back watching some werewolf ape jack off before I'd even had coffee.

"I am too tired for this shit," I said.

He started to get a little body language into it, smiling at me.

I raised my voice so it would carry into the open door of the bar. "I am not going anywhere today without my friends here. If you're waiting for me to give in on that point, then we're wasting each other's time."

There was no answer from inside the bar. Harpo had gotten a little hip action into his show. I'd had enough. "When the monster sucks your life out Nicky, don't worry. It doesn't really hurt. Have a nice day."

I turned to my friends. "They're not going to let us see Nicky."

Edward nodded. "Then let's go." He made a small motion, and Bernardo and Olaf moved off down the sidewalk. Edward lagged a little behind with me. I think we were both hoping that Harpo would call my bluff. Except it was only partially a bluff. We could have forced our way in there with weapons, but Nicky wouldn't talk at the end of a gun. I needed a dialogue, not an interrogation.

I started walking away. Edward fell into step behind me, but kept an eye on our backs. I wasn't flexible enough to do much back trailing without turning

my entire body around which was awkward. Besides I trusted Edward to watch our backs.

I admit there was a tension between my shoulder blades, waiting for Harpo to come running out and say come back, let's talk. But he didn't. So I kept walking. Olaf and Bernardo were beside the Hummer waiting for Edward to unlock the doors.

We were actually getting in the car when Harpo appeared on the sidewalk and started to walk towards us. He looked unarmed, but not happy.

I sat in the seat, and closed the door. "Start the engine," I said.

Edward did what I told him.

Harpo started jogging towards us waving those big arms. Some shapeshifters run like their animal counterparts, all grace and God-given motion. Harpo was not one of those. He ran awkwardly, as if he hadn't done it in a while, at least not in human form. It made me smile.

"You just wanted to see him run," Edward said. "Petty."

"Yeah, it's petty. Fun though," I said.

He put the car in gear, and Harpo put on a burst of awkward speed. He got to the car as Edward was starting to pull away. He actually slammed a big meaty hand on the hood.

Edward stopped. My window glide down, and I looked up at Harpo. There was sweat beading on his naked chest. His breath came harsh and too quick. "Fuck," he said.

"Did you want something?" I asked.

"Boss says—that you can all—come inside." He was leaning his hands against the Hummer while he got his breath back.

"Okay," I said.

Edward pulled the car back into the curb, while Harpo moved so there was room. We all got back out of the car. Harpo was still not breathing right.

"Aerobic exercise is the key to good cardiovascular health," I said, sweetly, as we waited for him to start walking back to the bar.

"Fuck you."

I thought about getting back in the Hummer, but I'd played the game as far as I was willing to go. I wanted to talk to Baco, but only with backup. Harpo had said I could do both. I'd achieved my goal. Anything else was pure childishness. I was feeling petty, but not that petty.

When he recovered, he was once again the sunglasses-wearing muscle man, face impassive. He strode back, hands in loose fists, doing his best impression of a moving mountain of flesh. His otherworldly energy prickled along my skin. Just a whisper of power, as if it were leaking out without him meaning for it to. Which probably meant he was pissed. Strong emotions made it harder to hold all that vibrating energy inside.

None of us spoke on the short walk back. Men are usually not good at useless small talk or don't see a need for it, and I was just too busy concentrating on walking normally without giving away just how much it hurt to chitchat.

Harpo held the door for us. I glanced at Edward. He gave me blank eyes back. Fine. I walked inside and the others followed. Three days ago I'd have been nervous stepping into that dark with the vibrating energy of werewolves rising like an invisible tide. But that was three days ago, and there just wasn't that much fear left in me. My body hurt, but the rest of me was oddly numb. Maybe I'd finally crossed that line that Edward seemed to live behind. Maybe I'd never really feel anything again. When even that thought didn't scare me, I knew I was in trouble.

Chapter 47

IT TOOK A SECOND for my eyes to adjust to the dark interior, but it wasn't my eyes that told me something was wrong. It was the skin on the back of my neck. I didn't argue with it. I had my hand on the Browning underneath the shirt and didn't care if it gave away the fact that I was carrying a gun. They'd be fools to think we'd come in here unarmed. Los Lobos Biker Club might have a lot of faults, but being that kind of fool wasn't one of them.

Nicky Baco was lying on the bar with his hands tied to his ankles so that the ropes formed a sort of handle like he was some kind of carry-on bag. His face was bloody and bruised, and the injuries were a lot fresher than mine.

I had the Browning out, and I felt rather than saw the other three fan out until we were the corners of a box, and each corner held a gun. Each corner watched its section of the room, and whether we liked each other or not, I trusted all of us to take care of our sections of the room, even Olaf. It was good to be sure.

My part of the room included the bar with Nicky on it; a tall man with a beard, and a curl of waist-length pony tail over one shoulder; two wolves the size of ponies; and a man's body staring sightless at the room, his throat cut like a second mouth red and screaming.

I had a peripheral sense of the how full the room was of crowding bodies. The energy was thick enough to choke on. I heard a noise to the right and did three things almost simultaneously. I pointed the Browning at the noise, drew the Firestar left-handed to point at the man with the ponytail, and let my eyes flick to the side to see what I'd heard. Good that I'd been practicing left-handed firing drills. The heavy slithering sound came again from behind the bar. The bar was in my section of the room. It was my ball, so to speak. I felt the others surging forward like a trembling tide about to swallow us all. We could shoot a lot of them, but there had to be over a hundred in this room and we were dead if they all came at once.

Fear tightened my stomach, jerking my pulse into my throat. Just like that the numbness was gone, chased away by adrenaline, and the musky scent of

wolves. There were more wolves than just the two in front of me out in that packed, darkened room. I could smell them. My stomach jerked again, but not from fear. The mark that tied me to Richard, tied me to his pack, was alive again. It flared in my body like a tiny flame reborn, waiting to be fed so it could grow. Great, just great. I had to worry about it later. My concentration was all used up.

The ponytailed man just stood there smiling. He was handsome in a rough around the edges, tattooed prison sort of way. Even in the dimness his eyes flashed wolf amber, not human. I also knew what, or would that be who, I was looking at. This was their Ulfric, their wolf king. He stood in a space of emptiness with most of the pack huddled further back into the room, and yet his power made up for theirs. His power filled the nearly empty side of the room with a flesh-creeping energy like thunder just before it strikes.

The tension was thick enough that I had to swallow some of it before I could speak. "Greetings, Ulfric of the Los Lobos clan. What's shaking?"

He threw his head back and laughed, a big hearty, good-natured sound that ended with a howl that crawled out of his human throat and down my spine. "Nice effect," I said, "but this is an official police investigation into the mutilation murders. I'm sure you've heard about them." He turned those startling pale eyes to me. "I've heard."

"Then you know that we aren't investigating your pack." He laid a casual hand on Nicky, who whimpered even though I don't think it really hurt. "Nicky is my vargamor. If the police wish to speak with him, then they must ask me first." He smiled, and I was close enough to notice that his teeth were human, no fangs for the Ulfric.

"Sorry. The only other pack I've ever met that had a vargamor doesn't make you talk to the Ulfric first. My apologies on the oversight." I hoped whatever we were doing was going to be over soon, because I couldn't keep up the gun in each hand stance for long. I'd practiced left-handed, but it was still my weak hand, and the bite in it was already starting a faint tremble in the muscles. I had to be able to lower my hand soon or it would begin to shake.

"If you were the police, then I would accept your apologies. We are always ready to help the police." That last brought a wave of snickers from the packed house. "But I don't see any police in this room."

"I'm Anita Blake. I'm a vampire executioner ..."

He cut me off. "I know who you are. I know what you are."

I didn't like that last, made me nervous. "And just what am I?"

"You are the lupa of the Thronnos Roke clan, and you have come to my clan for help, but you have not honored me or my lupa. You enter my lands without permission. You contact my vargamor without talking to me first, and you give us no tribute." His power grew with every sentence until it was like standing in warm water up to your chin, knowing that if it got much deeper you'd drown.

But I understood the rules now. I'd insulted him, and he had to wipe out that insult. I'd try sweet reason, but I didn't have much hope for it. Besides, my left arm was getting tired. Hell, so was my right. Whatever was behind the bar

moved in a huge roll of motion that you could feel and hear. It sounded bigger than a werewolf,

"I flew down here on police business. I did not enter your lands as lupa of the Thronnos Roke clan. I came down here as Anita Blake, the Executioner, that's all."

"But you contacted my vargamor." He slapped Nicky's thigh, and that did seem to hurt, because he closed his eyes and writhed at the touch, straining through his gag to scream.

"I didn't know Nicky was your vargamor until after I'd talked to him. No one told me that this bar was your lair. You're Ulfric. You can smell that I'm not lying."

He gave a small nod. "You tell the truth." He looked at the small man on the bar, running his hand over his body the way you'd stroke a dog, though the dog doesn't usually wince and try to pull back. "But he knew that he was my vargamor. Nicky knew that you were a lupa of another clan. It was the hot topic for a while, a human lupa."

"Lupa's often just another word for the Ulfric's girlfriend," I said.

He turned those golden eyes to me, more gold because of the heavy black eyebrows that framed them. "Nicky agreed to help you without asking me later, or even telling me about your visit." He gave a low growl that refreshed the fading goosebumps on my skin. "I am Ulfric. I lead here." He slapped Nicky and fresh blood trickled from his nose.

I badly wanted to put a stop to the abuse, just out of principle, but I didn't want it badly enough to die for it, so I waited and watched Nicky Baco bleed. I didn't like it, but I let it happen. My left hand was beginning to cramp. I needed to either start shooting people or put my guns up. Even holding my arms out for this long was putting a strain on my back and chest.

"Anita," Edward said, and just the tone of my own name was enough. He was quietly telling me to hurry it up.

"Look, Ulfric, I didn't mean to walk into some inner pack squabble. I'm just trying to do my job. Trying to keep more innocent people from being killed."

"Humans are fun," he said. "Sex and a meal and you never have to leave your car. But-you-do-not-make-them-your-queen!" His voice rose until with the last word he was screaming. Howls echoed him from the mob that was pressing close and closer.

"Anita," Edward said, and this time there was more of a warning to his voice.

"I'm working on it, Edward."

"Work faster," he said.

"You're a racist, Ulfric," I said.

He stared at me. "What?"

"I'm human so I'm good enough to fuck, good enough to kill but not good enough to be your equal just because I'm human. You're a racist chauvinistic big bad wolf."

"You come into my lands, ask aid of my pack, give no tribute to me or my lupa, and now you're calling me names." I don't know if he made some kind of psychic signal or his anger was enough, but the two giant wolves at his feet began to stalk forward on stiff legs.

My left hand was beginning to shake, visibly. Whatever was behind the bar thrashed, sounding large and bestial. My left hand was threatening to give out completely, and I needed both hands. "You die first, Ulfric," I said.

"What?" and he sort of laughed when he said it.

"The first thing that jumps any of us, and I shoot you. No matter what else happens today, you'll be dead. Your two pony wolves better stop right where they are."

"Your hand is shaking so badly, I don't think you've got it in you to kill anyone."

It was my turn to laugh. "You think my hand is shaking because I feel remorse about the thought of shooting you. Boy, have you got the wrong girl. Look at my right hand, Ulfric. It's not shaking. A walking corpse took a bite out of my left hand a couple of days ago, so I'm a little shaky with my left, but trust me. I hit what I aim at." This is usually when I give my victim full eye contact and let them know I'm not bluffing, but I was divided between the Ulfric and his entourage, and the bar. "How many of your wolves are you willing to sacrifice for your wounded pride?"

"If we fight, Anita, you and your friends will die."

"And you'll die, and some of your best people, so wouldn't it be nice to avoid the carnage and have you tell me what the hell you want from me. You know I'm telling the truth. I didn't know that I was stepping on your toes. If Nicky is making some kind of power play behind your back, I didn't know it. So, tell me what you want to make this . . . social gaffe okay between us. Tell me before my left hand starts spasming so badly that I start shooting things just because I have to."

He was watching me very narrowly, and I saw intelligence behind all the bragging and pride. There might be somebody home to bargain with. If there wasn't, then we were going to die. We were going to die, not because of the case but because I had been at one time Richard's girlfriend. It was a stupid reason to die.

"Tribute, I want the lupa of the Thronnos Roke Clan to give me tribute."

"You mean a gift," I said.

He nodded. "If it's the right kind of gift, yeah."

If I'd been coming to Albuquerque with Richard on personal business I'd have expected to make a gift to the local pack. The gift was usually a freshly killed animal, jewelry for the lupa, or something mystical. Death, jewelry, or magic. I didn't have any jewelry on me except Leonora's necklace, and I wasn't exactly sure what it would do for someone other than me. For all I knew it might be harmful, if it was just handed out. I didn't have enough information. The charm was so not leaving my body.

I lowered my left hand. One, it was twitching so badly, I wasn't a hundred percent sure I could hit anything with it. Two, I couldn't keep pointing guns if we weren't going to kill people. Three, my hand was hurting.

"Your word that if I give you a suitable gift, we all leave here in safety."

"You'd take the word of an ex-con, drug dealing, biker gang leader?"

"No, but I'll take the word of the Ulfric of the Broken Spear Clan. That I'll take." There were rules, and if he broke his word as Ulfric, he lost brownie points. He had to be on shaky ground anyway for a human, no matter how magically powerful, vargamor to have challenged his authority. He wouldn't give his word and break it, not in front of his pack.

"I am Ulfric of the Broken Spear Clan, and I give my word that you will all go in safety, if your gift is worthy."

I didn't like the wording on that last. "I didn't have time to stop at Tiffany's and pick up something for the little lady. Didn't get to hunt on the way here from the hospital. Cops frown on you shooting animals in town. The mystical shit is beyond me today."

"Then you have nothing worthy," he said, but he looked puzzled as though he was sure I had a gift of some kind.

"Let me see what's behind the bar, and I'll put up my guns and make tribute." I'd tried to put up the Firestar, but my left hand was shaking so badly that I couldn't raise the shirt and slide it inside my pants. I needed two hands for it. Which meant I needed to be able to holster the Browning.

"Done," he said. "Monstruo, rise, greet our guest."

It rose above the bar in a thin line of pale flesh like the rising of a crescent moon, then a face came into view. It was a woman's face with one eye gone stiff and dry like some kind of mummy. Face after face, rose brown and withered like a string of monstrous beads, strung together with pieces of body, arms, legs, and thick black thread like gigantic stitches holding it all together, holding the magic inside. It rose up and up until it towered against the ceiling, curving like a giant snake to stare down at me. I estimated forty heads, more, before I lost count, or lost heart to count anymore.

The werewolves had moved back further into the room like the tide retreating backwards. They feared the thing. I didn't blame them.

I heard Bernardo say, "Fuck."

Olaf said something in German, which meant he wasn't watching his part of the room. Only Edward remained silent and on the job, ever vigilant. I have to admit that if the werewolves had wanted to jump me while that thing rose above me like some demented snake I would have been slow. It was too much horror to leave room for anything else.

I'd only seen something like it once before. That monster had been made by the most powerful vaudun priestess I'd ever met. But hers had been formed of fresh zombies and pulled seamlessly together into one monstrous ball of flesh. Pure magic. This had been stitched together like Frankenstein's monster, and the bodies being dead like that, dried, deliberately mummified, or an after effect of the spell.

I dragged my gaze from the thing to the Nicky Baco still lying on the bar, gagged and bound and bloody. I heard my voice like a distant thing, "Why, Nicky, you bad, bad boy." I'd made a joke, when what I wanted to do was put a gun to his head and blow him away. Some things you did not do. Some things you simply did not do.

"You see why he's still alive," the Ulfric said.

"Too powerful to get rid of," I said, voice still oddly detached, as if I wasn't really concentrating on what I was saying.

"I used him as my threat. He would lay his magic on a wolf that was misbehaving, and they would be turned into what you see. And he would stitch them into the monstuo. But my wolves fear him now more than they fear me."

I was nodding over and over because I couldn't think of a good thing to say. Alive, they were alive when Nicky did his magic. I had a truly awful thought. Somehow it seemed wrong to be putting away the guns, but I needed my hands for other things. I raised the shirt and slid the Browning home, though it wasn't as smooth as it would have been if the holster had been familiar. But my left hand was pretty much gone. I had to raise the shirt with my right and very carefully tuck the Firestar into the front of my pants. Even after the hand was empty, it continued to twitch uncontrollably. There was nothing I could do but wait for it to calm down on its own. I cradled the hand against my body and walked towards the monster.

I stood on the other side of the bar from it, looking at one of those dried faces. The mouth had been sewn shut on this one. I didn't know why. I took a few deep cleansing breaths, and there was an odor of herbs to it, but mostly just a dry smell like tanned leather and dust. I reached out with my left hand. Even with the bandages and the muscle cramps this was still my power hand, the hand to sense magic with. Most people have a hand that is better for sensing stuff, usually the opposite hand from the one you write with. I have no idea what ambidextrous people do.

There was an amazing amount of power pushing out from the thing, but the bar was wide and I was hurt so my concentration wasn't good, and I still couldn't answer the one question I needed answered. I used my right hand to sort of jump-sit on the bar, then got onto my knees. There was a face at eye level with me, and this one had eyes. A man's face, I think, with pale grey wolf eyes trapped in a dried mummy face. Those eyes stared out at me, and there was someone home. The walking dead don't show fear. I knew what I'd feel before I stretched my hand out toward the face. There was Nicky's power like a warm blanket of worms, squirming over my skin. It was some of the most uncomfortable magic I'd ever felt, unclean, as if the power itself would eat your flesh if you stayed too close to it for too long. This was where Nicky's energy had gone, and this was why no matter how much energy he gathered, it would never be enough. Magic this negative, this evil, is like a drug. It takes more and more energy to get the same result with worse and worse effect on the spellcaster.

I sent my own magic into that mess, not to empower, but seeking. I felt the cool brush of a soul, and before I could pull back, my power ran up that column

of trapped flesh, and the souls glowed behind my eyelids with cool white light. None of them had been dead when he did this to them. I wasn't a hundred percent sure they were dead now.

I opened my eye and pulled my hand back from the thing. His power sucked at my hand like invisible mud. I pulled free with an almost audible pop. The man's face moved its withered mouth, and made a long dry sound, twice. "Help," it said, "help."

I swallowed a wave of nausea and was very glad I'd missed breakfast. I crawled on one arm and my knees to Nicky. I bent over him and whispered, "Would burning it free their souls?"

He shook his head.

"Can you free their souls?"

He nodded.

I think if he'd said yes to the first question, I'd have put the Browning to his head and killed him. But I needed him to free them, and I added that to my list of things to do before I left town. But there was nothing I could do for them today, except stay alive, and strangely, keep Nicky Baco alive. One of life's little ironies, that last.

I sat on the bar with my legs dangling over the edge, hand cradled to my chest, dazed with the sheer evil of it. I'd seen my share, but this was near the top. This was near the top after what I'd seen in the hospital. At least the corpses were just eating bodies, not souls.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," the Ulfric said.

"You're closer than you know," I said.

"Where is our gift?" he said.

"Where's your lupa?"

He stroked the head of one of the wolves by his legs. "This is my lupa."

"I can't share the gift with anyone in animal form," I said.

He frowned, and it was very close to being angry. "You must honor us."

"I plan to." I rolled the sleeve of my jacket back over my left arm. The wrist sheath had to go. I undid the straps, propping the blade, sheath and all between my legs. The monster hovered behind me, peering curiously. It was distracting me. I couldn't save them today, and didn't want to see it anymore until I could fix it.

"Can you order it to leave the room?"

He looked at me. "Scared?"

"I can feel the souls crying out for help. It's sort of distracting."

He looked at me, and I watched the color drain from his face. "You mean that."

I smiled, but not like it was funny. "You didn't know that he's trapping their souls in that thing?"

"He said he was." His voice had gone softer.

"You didn't believe him," I said.

The Ulfric was gazing up at the thing as if he'd never seen it before. "You wouldn't believe something like that, would you?"

"I would." I shrugged, wished I hadn't, and said, "but then this is my line of work. Can you please send it away?"

He nodded, and spoke rapidly in Spanish. The thing folded down on itself and crept away on arms and legs and bodies like a broken centipede. Sitting on the bar, I could see it go down a trap door behind the bar. When the last segment of it had slithered out of sight, I turned back to the Ulfric. He still looked pale.

"Baco is the only one who can free their souls. Don't kill him until he's done that."

"I didn't plan to kill him," the man said.

"That was before you knew. I don't know you well enough to know if when I leave, you'll get all self-righteous and try to end this evil. Don't, please, or you condemn them all to an eternity of that."

He swallowed like he was having a little trouble keeping down his own breakfast. "I won't kill him."

"Good." I drew the knife from between my knees right-handed. "Now gather round, boys and girls, because I'm only going to do this trick once."

There was a general movement as the wolves moved forward. I spared a glance for the boys I'd come in with. They hadn't put their guns up, but they had them pointed at the floor or the ceiling. Edward was watching the wolves, Bernardo was watching the wolves, too, though he looked pale. Olaf was watching me. I really, really, didn't like him.

"I give honor to the Ulfric and lupa of the Broken Spear Clan. I give the most precious of gifts to the Ulfric, but not being true lukoi, I cannot share this gift with the lupa in her present form. For that, I apologize most sincerely. If I come back this way, I'll shop better." I sat the blade on the bar and leaned over the edge until I could reach a clean glass. One of those thick chunky ones that people are so fond of putting scotch in. It was a strain to get back into a sitting position on the bar, but I managed it with the glass in one hand. I put the glass beside me on the bar and picked the knife up. I laid the blade against my left arm, just above the wrist, and stared at the whole, pale, unscarred flesh. There were scars just above it where a shapeshifted witch had clawed me, and the cross-shaped burn scar that was now a little crooked from the claw marks, but this one patch was still pure. I hoped it didn't scar, but what was one more.

I took in a deep breath and sliced the blade down my skin. A sigh ran through the watching werewolves, and whimpers from a few of the furrer throats. I ignored them. I'd known it would get a crowd reaction. I kept looking at my flesh and the damage I'd just done to it. The wound didn't bleed immediately. It was just a thin red line, then the first drop spilled from the wound, and the rest of the wound spilled in crimson rivulets down my arm. Deeper than I'd wanted it, but probably about what was needed. I held the wound over the glass. Some of it splashed around the edges, trailing down the sides, but I managed to get it going into the cup. I didn't even need to squeeze the wound much to encourage the flow. Deeper than I wanted it, oh yeah.

The Ulfric had moved closer, close enough that he was standing with his body touching my legs. The wolf that he'd introduced as his lupa moved up to

nuzzle at my knee, and he hit her. He backhanded her the way you'd hit a dog you didn't like much. Where was women's lib when you needed it? She went to her belly, crying in doggy fashion, telling him she hadn't meant any harm with her tail tight curled to her rump.

No one else tried to move forward. If the lupa couldn't share, the rest of them knew better than to try.

The Ulfric stayed pressed against my legs. "Let me take it out of your arm." He stared at my bleeding arm like I'd stripped for him, something beyond sex, beyond hunger, and yet a little of both. I raised the arm so the blood trickled down it in fast little streams of red, splashing down into the glass. His gaze followed the movement like a dog after a piece of food.

The truth was that letting people lick a wound directly tended to distract me. Through the marks I was bound to a werewolf and a vampire. Both of which found blood exciting. The thoughts that filled me when I shared blood with anyone were too primitive, too overwhelming. Especially now with my shields in ruins, I couldn't risk it. "Is the gift worthy?" I asked.

"You know it is," and his voice had that peculiar hoarseness that men get when sex is in the air.

"Then drink, Ulfric, drink. Don't waste it." I held the bloody glass out to him. He took it reverently in both hands. He drank, and I watched his throat convulse as he swallowed my blood. It should have bothered me more, I guess, but it didn't. The numbness was back, a distant almost comfortable feeling. I fished under the bar until I found a stack of clean napkins and pressed them to my arm. The napkins soaked crimson in moments.

The Ulfric had waded into the pack with my blood in his hands. They surrounded him, touching him, caressing, begging for him to share. He dipped his fingers in the nearly empty cup and held them down for the wolves to lick.

Edward came to stand near me. He said nothing, just helped me put pressure on the wound, got more napkins from under the bar and a clean cloth to tie it tight. Our eyes met, and he just shook his head, the faintest of smiles playing on his face. "Most people pay money for information."

"Money doesn't interest most of the people I deal with."

The Ulfric called back to me through the reaching werewolves. His mouth was bloodstained, his neat beard and mustache thick with my blood. He stared at me with his golden eyes and said, "If you want to talk to Nicky, help yourself."

"Thank you, Ulfric," I said. I hopped down off the bar, and Edward had to catch me or I'd have fallen. Fresh blood loss on top of everything else was not what I had needed. I waved him away, and he didn't argue.

Edward undid Nicky's gag, and took a step back. The werewolves had pulled back, giving us the illusion of privacy, though I knew that every werewolf in the room would hear us, even if we whispered.

"Hi, Nicky," I said.

He had to try twice before he said, "Anita."

"I was here before ten." I put my hands on the bar and propped my chin on them so he wouldn't have to strain. The movement hurt my back, but somehow

I wanted to be on eye level with him. The bulky makeshift bandage seemed to be in the way, but I wanted to keep the arm elevated. Nicky looked even worse up close. One eye was completely closed, blackened and bloodfilled. His nose looked broken, blood bubbling from it when he breathed.

"He came back into town early."

"I figured as much. You've been a very bad boy, Nicky. Pissing off your Ulfric, power play behind his back when you're just human, not even a werewolf, and that thing. That's not voodoo. How the hell did you do that?"

"Older magic than voodoo," he said.

"What kind of magic?" I asked.

"I thought you wanted to talk about the monster that's killing innocent citizens?" His voice was strained, pain-filled. Normally, I'm against torture, but I just couldn't find much pity in my heart for Nicky. I'd seen his creation, and I felt the torment of its parts. Nope, I just couldn't spare much sympathy for Nicky. He'd never take enough damage to make up for what he'd done, not at least while he was alive. Hell might be a very nasty place for Nicky Baco. I trusted the divine to have a better sense of justice and irony than I did.

"Okay, what do you really know about the thing that's out there?" I asked.

He lay there on the bar, wrists and ankles bound together, blood trickling from his mouth, and talked as if he were sitting behind a desk. Except for the little pain sounds he made every once in a while, which spoiled some of the effect.

"I felt it years ago, maybe ten. I felt it wake."

"What do you mean wake?"

"Have you had it in your mind yet?" he asked, and this time I heard the fear in his voice.

"Yeah," I said.

"It was sluggish at first, as if it had been asleep or imprisoned, dormant for a very long time. It grew stronger every year."

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

"Ten years ago the police didn't have any psychics or witches working for them. And I already had a criminal record." He coughed and spat blood, and a tooth out on the bar. It made me raise my head up, which forced Nicky to roll his head a little. "What was I going to tell them? That there was this thing out there somewhere, this voice in my head, and it was getting stronger. I didn't know what it could do at first. I didn't know what it was."

"What is it?"

"It's a god."

I raised eyebrows at him.

"It was worshipped as a god once. It wants to be worshipped again. It says that gods need tribute to survive."

"You got all this from just a voice in your head?"

"I've had ten years with the thing whispering in my head. What have you learned in less than that many days?"

I thought about that. I knew it was killing to feed, not just for sport. Though it enjoyed the slaughter, that I'd felt, too. I knew it both feared me and

wanted me. It feared another death worker on the opposite side, but it wanted to drink my powers and would have if Leonora hadn't stopped it.

"Why has it just started to kill people now? Why after a decade?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Why does it slaughter some and skin others?"

"I don't know."

"What is it doing with the body parts that it takes away from the scenes?"

Which was a detail that the police would not like me sharing with someone outside the investigation, but I wanted answers more than I wanted to be cautious.

"I don't know." He coughed again, but didn't spit out anything. Good. If he'd continued to spit blood, I'd have worried about internal injuries. I didn't want to have to persuade the pack to take him to the hospital. I didn't think I'd have much luck.

"Where is it?"

"I've never been there. But understand that what's been killing people is not the god. He's still trapped wherever he started. His servants have done all the murders, not him."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that if you think you've got trouble now, you ain't seen nothing yet. I can feel him in the dark, lying like some kind of bloated thing, filling up with power. When he's full enough, he'll rise, and it'll be hell to pay."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?"

"You had the police with you the first time. If you turn me over to them I'm dead. You've seen what I do. There wouldn't even need to be a jury."

He had a point. "When this is over, you have to dismantle it. You have to free their souls, agreed?"

"When I can walk again, agreed."

I glanced at his legs and saw that there was a lump under his pants leg. It was the bone of the leg, a compound fracture. Jesus. Some days there are so many stones to throw in so many different directions that I don't even know where to start.

"Does this god have a name?"

"He calls himself the Red Woman's Husband."

"That can't be an original English phrase."

"I think he knows what his victims know. By the time he came to me, he spoke in English."

"So you think he's been here a long time."

"I think he's always been here."

"What do you mean, always? Like eternity, or a really, really long time."

"I don't know how long he's been here." Nicky closed his good eye, as if he were tired.

"Okay, Nicky, okay." I turned to the Ulfric. "Is he telling the truth?"

The man nodded. "He didn't lie."

"Great. Thank you for your hospitality and please don't kill him. We may need him in the next few days to help kill this thing, not to mention freeing the souls of your pack mates."

"I'll lay off on the beating."

It was the closest thing I was going to get to a "yes, we are going to let him go and make sure he isn't hurt anymore."

"Great, I'll be in touch."

Edward stayed near me as we walked to the door. He didn't offer me his arm, but he stayed close enough that if I stumbled he'd be there. Bernardo already had the door open. Olaf just watched us walk towards them. I stumbled a little up the two steps to the door, and Olaf caught my arm. I looked up into his eyes, and it wasn't pride or honor or respect that I saw. It was . . . hunger, a desire so great it was a physical need, a hunger.

I pulled away from him and left a smear of blood on his hand. Edward was at my back, helping me towards the door. Olaf raised his hand to his mouth and pressed it to his mouth like a kiss, but he was doing the same thing that the wolves did. He was tasting my blood and liked it. There are all kinds of monsters. Most of them crave blood. Some for food, some for pleasure, but you're dead either way.

Chapter 48

EVERYONE WAS QUIET in the car. Olaf consumed by his own thoughts, which I wanted no details about. Bernardo had finally said, "Where to?"

"My house," Edward said. "I don't think Anita's up to anything else today."

For once, I didn't argue. I was so tired, I was nauseated. If I could have found a comfortable position, I think I could have slept.

We drove out of Albuquerque and headed towards the distant mountains, bright and cheerful in the morning light. I wished for a pair of sunglasses, because I suddenly was neither cheerful nor bright.

"Did you learn anything worth getting out of the hospital early?" Edward asked.

"I learned that the thing has a name, the Red Woman's Husband. It is hiding some place that it can't move from, which means if we can track it, we can kill it." I added, because just in case, they needed to know. "Nicky says it was worshipped as a god once, and that it still thinks it is one."

"It can't be a god," Bernardo said, "not a real one."

"I'm the wrong person to ask," I said. "I'm a monotheist."

"Edward?" Bernardo made a question of his name.

"I've never met anything that was truly immortal. It's just a matter of figuring out how to kill it."

I actually had met a few things that seemed immortal. Maybe Edward was right, but I'd seen things that I still couldn't figure out how to kill. Lucky me, the naga had been a crime victim and not a bad guy, and the lamia had been converted to our side. But as far as I knew they were both immortal. Of course, I'd never shoved an incendiary grenade down their pants or tried to set them on fire. Maybe I just hadn't been trying hard enough. For all our sakes, I hoped Edward was right.

We pulled onto the long road that led, as far as I could tell, just to Edward's house. It had a steeper drop off than I'd noticed at night, enough of a drop off that being an all terrain vehicle didn't mean anything unless you could fly. A white truck pulled in behind us and started following us.

"Do you know them?" Olaf asked.

"No," Edward said.

I managed to turn in the seat far enough to watch the truck. It didn't try and overtake us or anything. There was nothing wrong with the truck except for the fact that it was on the road to Edward's house and he didn't recognize it. Add to that that all four of us were paranoid by profession, and it made for tension.

Edward pulled into the turnaround in front of his house. "Everybody into the house until we find out who it is."

Everyone was quicker out of the car than I was, but then I'd just managed to get the bleeding on my arm stopped. Lucky for me, Edward had a heavy duty first aid kit in the back seat. I had a nice big bandage taped to my arm, and the wrist sheath shoved in my pocket.

Edward was at the door, unlocking it. Olaf was behind him. Bernardo had actually waited for me, as if he would have liked to offer to help me out of the car, but was afraid to. I was actually feeling rough enough that I didn't mind the babysitting, which told you how truly bad I felt.

There was a small, sharp sound, a bolt being drawn back on a rifle, and everything happened at once. Edward had his gun out and pointed at the sound. Olaf's gun was out but not pointed. Bernardo had his gun pointed, using the door as a brace. I have to admit my gun was in my hand but not pointed. I just wasn't used to the new holster, and having to lift the shirt with a wounded left hand. Damn, I was slow.

Harold of the scarred face was leaning at the far end of Edward's house with a high-powered rifle pointed at Edward. He had most of his body hidden behind the house, and held the rifle like he knew what he was doing. If he'd wanted to drop Edward, he could have done it before Edward got the drop on him. That Harold hadn't shot anyone yet meant they had come for more than just killing. Probably.

Harold said, "Nobody panics, nobody gets hurt."

"Harold," Edward said, "when did you guys make bail?" He was still staring down the barrel of his Beretta at Harold. I could almost guarantee he

was sighting on the top of the other man's head, his best killing target from what little he had to shoot at. Edward did not shoot to wound.

"Only Russell got arrested," Harold said, rifle settled comfortably against his shoulder.

Speak of the devil. Russell came around the corner behind Harold. His nose was packed with white cotton and covered in a hard bandage. I'd broken his nose. Great.

"I thought terrorizing women and children carried more time than this," I said. I kept the gun behind the open door. I didn't want to give anyone an excuse to start shooting.

The tall silent Newt came around the other side of the house with a large shiny revolver in his hands. He held it two-handed and moved in a cross-foot glide that said he knew what he was doing. There was a woman beside him, moving like a smooth oiled shadow. She was six foot if she was an inch, and the tank top she was wearing showed off shoulders and arms that made most of the men look puny. Only her breasts pressed against the shirt showed her braless and very much a girl.

Olaf pointed his gun at them. Bernardo moved up with his gun, and the woman turned to him. Olaf turned as Newt moved across in front of him like a long distance dance. The woman and Bernardo were more practical. They just stood a little bit apart and stared at each other over their guns.

Only Russell kept walking and didn't pull a gun. I tried pulling mine and pointing it at him. He did stop, but his smile got wider and the look in his eyes got worse, as if he had plans for me, and they were all about to come true.

"You shoot me and they shoot your friends. You're the only one our boss wants," Russell said.

"But we're not here to kill anyone," Harold said, very quickly, as if he wanted to be clear on that. If I were staring down a gun barrel that Edward was holding, I'd want to be clear, too.

Russell started walking towards me, even though I had the Browning pointed at his chest.

"Our boss just wants to talk to you, that's all," Harold said. "I promise he just wants to talk to the girl."

I was backing up with the gun held out. Russell was still walking forward very confident. Unless I was willing to shoot him, he wasn't stopping. I did not want to be the one who fired the first shot. People were going to die, and I couldn't control which people that would be.

I could hear the truck now, crunching over the gravel. I did the only thing I could think of, I turned and ran. I heard a surprised, "Hey," from behind me. But I was over the edge of the slope and down the other side. I suddenly wasn't worried about tearing my stitches up, or how tired I was. My heart was in my throat, and I found that not only could I walk without falling down, I could run. My mind seemed to be working fast and faster. I saw a dry wash at the base of the slope and a clump of trees to one side. I slid into the wash in a rush of small stones. I landed on all fours, heavy, and was scrambling to my feet before I felt

the first trickle of blood down my back. I was behind the trees as I heard Russell slither down the slope behind me.

I couldn't shoot him, but there were other options. I was aiming for the clump of trees. But say what you liked about Russell, he could run, because I could hear him doing it. He wasn't going to give me enough time to hide. I ran past the trees and knew that I couldn't outrun him. The adrenaline was already beginning to fade, and the heat folded around me like a hand. I just wasn't up to a long chase today. I had to end it, soon.

I slowed, just a little, one to save energy, and one to let Russell catch up sooner. I took a big breath and prepared. I knew what I wanted to do. But my body had to do it. I couldn't hesitate because my back or my arm or anything else hurt. I risked a glance back, and Russell was almost there, almost on me. I kicked him, full out, straight in the balls. I did it without hesitating, almost without setting up for it, letting his own momentum carry him into me. The shock sent me hopping backward, and I did what I still wasn't smooth at in class, I did a reverse roundhouse kick, to where I thought his face would be, and it was. He'd crumbled, clutching himself, and he went to his knees with the kick. He stayed on all fours shaking his head, but he didn't go down. Dammit!

A voice yelled from up the slope. "I don't see them."

There was a long piece of bleached wood on the floor of the wash. I picked it up and hit him twice, hard. He finally slumped on the ground and didn't move. I didn't have time to check for a pulse. The wash stretched straight for about a hundred yards before brush filled the end of it. There was a place in the bank that had washed away more than the rest. It was like a shallow cave. I had a split second to decide which way to go. I took the knife sheath out of my back pocket, and threw it knife and all as far as I could towards the brush. I went for the cave, scrambling on feet and hands like a monkey, keeping low. I was in the cooler shade of the depression when I heard the men coming down the slope.

"I don't see them," the first man said.

"They went this way," a woman's voice. Could there be two female bad guys, I didn't think so. Did that mean that there was one less gun up with Edward and the others? I let the thought go. I had my own problems.

Rocks cascaded down over the overhang like a dry waterfall. At least one of them was coming down directly on top of me. Would the ceiling of the little cave hold the weight? I was already regretting hiding. But the wash stretched open and straight for too far. I'd have never made it to the place where it emptied and there was brush. I just wasn't that fast today. If they thought I'd gone that way and didn't see me, then it would be a good plan. If they turned and spotted me, it was a bad plan. I heard them coming, but the man's voice was right above me. It made me jump. He had to be standing just to the right of the roof. "Jesus, there's Russell." He jumped into the wash and started running towards the fallen man.

The woman was more cautious, sliding down into the wash, searching up and down the wash. She was so close, I could have reached out and touched the leg of her jeans. My heart was thundering in my throat, but I'd stopped

breathing. I was holding my breath, willing her to go to the men, to walk away, and not look back.

"He's alive," the man said. Then he was up and moving towards the sheath I'd thrown. "She went this way." He went for the brush.

The woman walked towards him.

He was already at the brush, pushing into it.

"Maury, dammit, don't go in there." She had to jog to have any chance of catching him. She didn't look back to see me crouched in the hole. When her broad back vanished into the brush, and I heard the man curse, I crawled out of the hole and started up the slope on all fours. If the woman and Maury came out now, I would be caught like a black speck on a white sheet of paper. But they didn't come, and I made the top of the slope down from where I'd first entered, crawling on my belly to lie under the sage bushes that edged Edward's front yard.

Something slithered off to my right, and it wasn't human. A snake. A snake had slithered away deeper into the bushes. Shit. Thank you, dear God, that it left. One more problem and I was out of solutions. Of course, now every noise seemed to be reptilian, and crawling on my belly through the thick bushes, the smell of sage thick in the hot air was a little slice of nightmare. I kept waiting to hear that dry rattle that would tell me I'd used up all my luck. Every twig that brushed my leg seemed to have scales. The only thing that kept me from screaming was the knowledge that someone would probably shoot me before they knew it was me.

By the time I crawled to the very edge of the bushes one painful inch at a time, I was sweating and it was only partially from heat. The sweat stung on my back, and I knew that some of the thicker trickles were blood and not sweat. I could see the yard through the last screen of sage. Things had not improved.

The woman and the new man, Maury, had left the yard, but three others had taken their places. They had the men on their knees. Olaf had his hands laced on his bald head. Bernardo had his one good hand on his head, and his cast raised as high as he could. Edward was the closest to me. Newt was so close I could have put the knife into his foot. Harold was talking into a cell phone. He was waving one hand and had the rifle slung over one arm. He put the phone away from his mouth, and said, "He says search the house."

"What for?" one of the new men said, he had dark hair and a revolver.

"For an artifact, something the girl used against the monster."

"What kind of artifact?" the dark man asked.

"Just do it," Harold said.

Dark hair grumbled, but he motioned and the two men left to go into the open door of the house. Edward must have unlocked it for them. What the hell had been happening while I was crawling through the bushes?

The three men went into the house. Harold was still talking on the phone. That left just Newt with his .45, and he wasn't even pointing it at anyone's head. It would never get better than this. Any second now the others would come back up the wash or out of the house. I'd have liked to have at least gotten to

my knees and plunged the knife into a vital area, but the bushes were too thick. I'd never push to my knees without making all kinds of noise,

If I fired a gun, I'd alert all the others. Shit. I had two knives. I had one idea. I slipped the blade out of my right arm sheath, making sure my left hand had a good grip. Newt's foot was still so temptingly close. I took the invitation, I stabbed the right-hand knife into the foot opposite from his gun. I felt the blade sink into the ground underneath his shoe, as he screamed. I was on my knees behind him, as he tried to twist and bring the gun on me, but he had the gun pointed for someone standing on his left side, and I wasn't there. I plunged the other knife up into his pants, into the front of his pants, my hand between his legs, and I missed. I didn't hit flesh. Fuck. I twitched the blade to the side and felt him, but he wasn't cut. But he was very, very still.

I hissed, "Don't move."

He didn't move. He stayed like some kind of awkward statue.

Harold started walking towards us. "What's wrong, Newt?"

Newt swallowed, and said, "N—nothing. Thought I saw a snake."

I whispered, "Good boy, Newt. If you want to keep the family jewels intact, very quietly hand me your gun." He let the .45 fall into my hand. I was close enough to whisper to Edward, "What do you want me to do?"

"Call Harold over."

"You heard him, Newt," I said.

The man never argued. "Hey, Harold, can you come over here a second?"

Harold sighed, snapping the cell phone shut. "What is it now, Newt?" He was almost even with Edward when he noticed that Newt's gun was gone. I was still hidden behind the larger man's body; even the blade was hidden in the cloth of his pants. "What the hell?"

Bernardo pulled one of the gold chopsticks out of his hair, and it was a blade that ended in Harold's arm. Edward hit him in the gut, doubled him over, and disarmed him. He stood over him with the rifle. Olaf and Bernardo were on their feet. I don't know what the plan would have been next because we heard the sirens. Police sirens.

"Did you call the cops, Harold?" Edward asked.

"Don't be an ass," Harold said.

"Anita," Edward said.

"I didn't call them. I've still got a .45 pointed at you, Newt. Don't get cute." But I withdrew the blade very carefully and stood up. I kept his gun pointed at his back, but I was beginning to doubt I'd have to shoot anybody. The sirens were almost here.

The three guys came out of the house with their guns in plain sight. They looked to Harold, saw him on the ground, and Edward had the rifle to his shoulder and was sighting down the barrel at them. Their eyes flicked to the cops coming at a fast pace, and back to Edward. They threw their guns down and laced their fingers on their heads without being told. I doubted it was the first time they'd had to do it.

It was an unmarked car with a marked car following it. They skidded to a stop on opposite sides of the black truck and four cops spilled out. Lieutenant

Marks, Detective Ramirez, and two uniforms I didn't know. They had guns pointed but looked a little unsure who the bad guys were. Couldn't blame them. We had all the guns.

"Detective Ramirez," I said. "Thank God."

"What's going on?" Marks said, before Ramirez, could answer me.

Edward told them that Harold and his men had jumped us and were trying to question us about the mutilation murders. Marks found that fascinating. Edward had known he would. Yes, Ted Forrester would press assault charges. Any good citizen would. There were enough handcuffs to go around, barely.

"There are two more out there somewhere," Edward said in his best helpful voice.

"There's one unconscious in the wash that way," I said.

Everyone looked at me. I didn't have to pretend to be uncomfortable. "He was chasing me. I thought they were going to kill the others." I shrugged and winced. "He's alive." It sounded like an excuse even to me.

They called for more men to search the area. They called for an ambulance for Harold, Newt, and Russell, when they found him. I'd sat down on the ground, waiting for everyone to do their jobs. I was using both hands to prop myself up. Now that the emergency seemed to be over, I wasn't feeling so good.

Marks was yelling at me. "You left the hospital against doctor's orders! I don't give a damn, but I want a statement. I want to know exactly what happened at that hospital."

I looked up at him, and he seemed to be taller than he was, further away somehow. "Are you saying that all the lights and sirens were because you were mad at me for not giving a statement before I left the hospital?"

A flush spread up his face, and I knew that that was exactly it. One of the uniforms called, "Lieutenant."

"I want that statement today." He turned and walked away. I hoped he stayed there.

Ramirez knelt beside me. He was wearing his usual, shirtsleeves rolled back, a striped tie at half-mast, around an open collar. "You all right?"

"No," I said.

"I went to the hospital today, and you were already gone. That night, the elevator had been turned off because of the fire alarms. I had to double back and get the stairs, and come up behind you. That's why I was late. That's why I wasn't there for you." For it to be almost the first thing out of his mouth, it must have been bugging him. I liked that.

I managed something close to a smile. "Thanks for telling me." I was so hot. The yard seemed to be swimming in heat, as if I were looking at the world through rippling glass.

He touched my back, I think to help me up. He drew his hand away from my shirt. His hand was bloody. He went on all fours, using one hand to raise my shirt. It was so blood-soaked that he had to peel it away from my skin.

"Jesus, and Joseph, what the hell have you done to yourself?"

"It doesn't even hurt anymore." I heard myself saying it from a long way away, then I was sliding over into his arms, his lap. I heard someone call my name, and I finally passed out.

I woke up in the hospital. Doctor Cunningham was bending over me. I thought, "We have to stop meeting like this," but didn't even try to say it out loud.

"You've lost blood and had your stitches redone. Do you think you can stay in here long enough for me to actually release you this time?"

I think I smiled. "Yes, Doctor."

"Just in case you got any funny ideas about leaving, I've doped you up with enough pain killers to make you feel really good. So sleep, and I'll see you in the morning."

My eyes fluttered shut once, then opened. Edward was there. He bent over me and whispered, "Crawling through bushes on your belly, threatening to cut off a man's balls. Such a hard ass."

My voice came faintly even to me. "Had to save your ass."

He bent over me and kissed on my forehead, or maybe I dreamed that part.

Chapter 49

SOME TIME DURING the second day in the hospital they lowered the meds, and I started having the dreams. I was wandering in a maze made up of high green hedges. I was wearing a long, heavy dress, made of white silk. There were heavy things under it, weighting it down. I could feel the tightness of a corset under the dress, and I knew it wasn't my dream. I would never dream of clothing that I had never worn. I stopped running through the green maze looked up into a flawless blue sky, and shouted, "Jean-Claude!"

His voice came, rich, seductive. He could do things with his voice that most men couldn't do with their hands. "Where are you, *ma petite*? Where you?"

"You promised to stay out of my dreams."

"We felt you dying. We felt the marks open. We worried."

I knew who "we" was. "Richard isn't invading my dreams, just you."

"I have come to warn you. If you had picked up a phone to call us, this would not be necessary."

I turned and there was a mirror in the middle of the grass and the hedges. It was a full-length mirror with a gilt edged frame. Very antique, very Louis XIV. My reflection was startling. It wasn't just the clothes. My hair was in some kind of complicated mound, with thick curls hanging down here and there. There was also more of it, and I knew at least some of it was a wig or at least hairpieces. There was even one of those beauty marks on my cheek. I

expected to look ridiculous, but I didn't. I looked delicate, like a china doll, but it wasn't ridiculous. My reflection wavered, then grew taller, and it was Jean-Claude in the mirror, and my reflection had vanished.

He was tall, slender, dressed head to foot in white satin, in a suit that matched my dress. Gold brocade glittered down his sleeves, the seams of the pants. White boots rode over his knees tied with huge white and gold ribbons. It was a foppish outfit, sissy to use a modern word, but he didn't look foppish. He looked elegant and at ease like a man who'd pulled off his tie and slipped into something more comfortable. His hair fell in long black banana curls. Only the delicate masculinity of his face and his midnight blue eyes looked normal, familiar.

I shook my head, and the weight of the hair made it awkward. "I am so out of here," and I started to reach out to shred the dream.

"Wait, please, *ma petite*. Truly, I have a warning for you." He looked up as if seeing the mirror as a sort of prison. "This is to let you know that I will not touch you. I come only to talk."

"Then talk."

"Was it the Master of Albuquerque who harmed you?"

It seemed an odd question. "No, Itzpapalotl didn't hurt me."

He winced at her name. "Do not use her name aloud within this dream."

"Okay, but she didn't hurt me."

"But you have seen her?" he asked.

"Yes."

He looked puzzled, and he lifted a white hat and slapped it against his leg like it was a habitual gesture, though I'd never seen him do it before. But then I'd only seen him in clothes like this once before, and we'd been fighting for our lives, so there really hadn't been time to notice the small stuff.

"Albuquerque is taboo. The high council has declared the city off limits to all vampires and their minions."

"Why?"

"Because the Master of the City has slain every vampire or minion that has entered her city in the last fifty years."

I stared at him. "You're joking."

"No, *ma petite*, I do not joke." He looked worried, no, scared.

"She didn't try anything hostile, Jean-Claude, honest."

"Then there was a reason for it. Were the police with you?"

"No."

He shook his head, slapping the hat against his leg again. "Then she wants something from you."

"What could she want from me?"

"I do not know." He slapped the hat against his leg again and stared out at me through the glass wall.

"Has she really killed any vampire that just happened to be passing through?"

"Oui."

"Why hasn't the council sent someone to kick her ass?"

He looked down, then up, and the fear was in his eyes again. "The Council fears her, I believe."

Having met three of the council members personally, that raised my eyebrows as far as they would go. "Why? I mean I know she's powerful, but she's not that powerful."

"I do not know, *ma petite*, but I do know they decreed her territory taboo, rather than fight her."

That was just plain scary. "It would have been nice to know that before I got here."

"I know you value your privacy, *ma petite*. I have not contacted you in all these long months. I have respected your decision, but it is not merely our romance, or lack of it, that is important between us. You are my human servant whether you will or no. It means that you cannot simply enter another vampire's territory without some diplomacy."

"I'm here on police business. I thought I could enter anyone's territory as long as it was police business. I'm here as Anita Blake, preternatural expert, not as your human servant."

"Normally, that is true, but the Master whose lands you are in does not obey council decrees. She is a law unto herself."

"What does that mean for me here and now?"

"Perhaps she fears human law. Perhaps she will not harm you for fear of the humans destroying her. Your authorities can be very effective at times. Or she simply wants something from you. You've met her. What do you think?" he said.

It came to my lips before I thought about it. "Power, she's attracted to power."

"You are a necromancer."

I shook my head, and again the hairpieces made it awkward. I closed my eyes in the dream, and when I opened them, my hair just hung around my shoulders like normal. "The hair was heavy."

"It could be," he said, "I am happy that you left the dress. I cannot tell you how long I have wished to see you in something like it."

"Don't push it, Jean-Claude."

"My apologies," and he did a sweeping bow, using the hat in the gesture, so that it swept across his chest.

"I think it's more than the necromancy. She figured out that I was part of a triumvirate the first moment she met me. I felt her sift through the three of us, like unwinding a string. She knew. I think that's what she wants. She wants to figure out how it works."

"Could she repeat it?" he asked.

"She's got a human servant and jaguars are her animal to call. Theoretically, I guess she could, though can you make it a three-way when you've already got marks on a human, and no animal?"

"If the marks are recent, perhaps."

"No, not recent. They've been a couple a long time."

"Then no, her human's marks will be too entrenched to stretch for a third."

"So she may be interested in me for a power she can't have? If she finds out then I can't be of help to her?" I said.

"It would perhaps be best if she did not learn that, *ma petite*."

"You think she'd kill me."

"She has killed all that crossed her path for half a century. I do not see why she should change her ways now."

I was standing very close to the mirror now. Close enough that I could see the gold buttons on his jacket, and the rise and fall of his chest as he drew breath. This was the closest I'd been to him in months. It was just a dream, but we both knew it wasn't just a dream. He'd put the mirror barrier between us because once we'd used our dreams to enter each other's fantasies. He'd come like a demon lover in my dreams, in my sleep. We'd done the real thing, too, but the dreams had been sweet, sometimes a prelude to the real thing, sometimes an end in themselves.

The glass grew thinner, as if the glass were wearing away. It was like a thin pane of spun sugar. He touched fingertips to it, and the glass moved like clear plastic, giving at his touch.

My fingertips touched his, and the thin barrier vanished. Our fingers touched, and it was startling, electric. His fingers slid over mine, entwining, our palms touching, and even that one chaste touch sent my breath racing.

I stepped back but didn't let go of his hand, so the movement drew him out of the mirror. He stepped out of the golden frame and was suddenly standing in front of me, our hands still raised in front of us. I could feel his heart beating through his palm, feel the rise and pulse of his body through my hand as if all of him were contained in that one pale hand where it lay pressed against mine.

He leaned down towards me, as if to kiss me, and I started to pull away, afraid, but the dream shattered, and I was suddenly awake, staring up at the hospital ceiling. A nurse was in the room, checking my vitals. She'd woken me. I wasn't sure whether I was glad or sad.

The marks had been open for less than a week, and Jean-Claude was already pushing me. Okay, okay, I needed the warning, but... Oh, hell. My teacher, Marianne, had told me that I couldn't just ignore the boys, that that would be dangerous. I thought she meant ignoring the power that bound us, but maybe she meant more than that. I was Jean-Claude's human servant, and that made things complicated when I traveled. Each vampire's territory was like a foreign country. Sometimes you had diplomatic treaties between them. Sometimes you didn't. Occasionally, you just had a couple of master vamps that were enemies pure and simple, so if you belonged to one, you stayed the hell out of the other one's lands. By refusing to contact Jean-Claude, I could screw up, get myself killed or held hostage. But I'd thought I was safe as long as I was on police business or animating zombies. That was work. It had nothing to do with Jean-Claude and vampire politics. But I could always be wrong, like now.

Why, you may ask, did I believe Jean-Claude and his warning? Because it gained him nothing to lie about it. I'd also felt his fear. One of the things about

the marks, you could usually tell what the other person was feeling. Sometimes that bugged me. Sometimes it was helpful.

The nurse shoved a thermometer with a little plastic sheath on it under my tongue. She took my pulse while we waited for the thermometer to beep. What really bugged me about the dream was how attracted to him I was. When I had the marks closed off, I'd have never touched him in the dream. Of course, I hadn't let him enter my dreams when I had the marks blocked off. With the barriers up, I'd policed my dreams, kept him and Richard out. I could still keep them out, but it took more work to do it. I was out of practice. I was going to have to get back into practice, fast.

The thermometer beeped. The nurse read the little monitor on her belt, gave me an empty smile that could have meant anything, and made a note. "I hear you're getting out of here today."

I looked up at her. "I am. Great."

"Doctor Cunningham will be in to see you before you leave." She smiled again. "He seems to want to oversee your release personally."

"I'm one of his favorite patients," I said.

The nurse's smile slipped just a touch. I think she knew exactly what Doctor Cunningham thought of me. "He should be in to see you soon."

"But I am definitely getting out of here today?" I asked.

"That's what I hear."

"Can I call a friend to come pick me up?"

"I can call them for you."

"If I'm getting out today, can't I have a phone?" The good doctor had made sure there was no phone in my room because he didn't want me trying to do work, any work, not even business phone calls. When I'd promised not to use the phone if he'd just give me one, he'd just looked at me, made some kind of note in his file, and left. I don't think he trusted me.

"If the doctor says you can have a phone, I'll bring you one, but just in case, give me the number and I'll contact your friend."

I gave her Edward's number. She wrote it down, smiled, and left.

There was a knock on the door. I expected Doctor Cunningham, but it was Detective Ramirez. His shirt today was a pale tan. The half-mast tie was deep brown with a small white and yellow design on it. But he'd also kept a brown suit jacket that matched his pants. It was the first time I'd seen him with an entire suit on at once. I wondered if the sleeves were rolled up underneath the jacket sleeves. He had a bouquet of shiny Mylar balloons with cartoon characters on them. The balloons said things like "get well soon," and "oh, bother." That was the Winnie the Pooh balloon.

I had to smile. "You already sent flowers." There was a small, but nice arrangement running long to daisies and miniature carnations on the bedside table.

"I wanted to bring something in person. I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner."

My smile wilted around the edges. "This level of apology is usually reserved for boyfriends or lovers, detective. Why are you feeling so guilty?"

"I keep having to remind you to call me Hernando."

"I keep forgetting." I said.

"No, you don't. You keep trying to distance yourself."

I just looked at him. It was probably true. "Maybe."

"If I was your lover, I'd have followed you to the hospital and been by your side every minute," he said.

"Even with a murder investigation going on?" I asked.

He had the grace to shrug and look sheepish. "I'd have tried to be here every minute."

"What's been happening while I've been in here? My doctor has made sure I haven't found out anything."

Ramirez put the balloons beside the flowers. The balloons had one of those little weights on them to keep them from drifting away. "The last time I tried to see you, your doctor made me promise not to talk about the case."

"I didn't know you were here before."

"You were pretty out of it."

"Was I awake?"

He shook his head.

Great. I wondered how many other people had paraded through here while I was passed out cold. "I'm getting out today, so I think it's safe to talk about the case."

He looked at me, and the expression was enough. He didn't believe me.

"Doesn't anyone trust me?"

"You're like most of the cops I know. You never really get off work."

I raised my hand in the Boy Scout's salute. "Honest, the nurse told me I'm being released today."

He smiled. "I saw your back, remember. Even if you're being let out, you won't be going back on the case, not in person anyway."

"What? I'm going to look at pictures and listen to the clues that other people find?"

He nodded. "Something like that."

"Do I look like Nero Wolfe? I am not a staying at home, out of the firing line, kind of girl."

He laughed, and it was still a good laugh. A nice normal laugh. It had none of Jean-Claude's touchable sex appeal, but in some ways I liked it better for its very normalcy. But. . . but as nice and warm as Ramirez was, I had the memory of Jean-Claude's dream in my head. I could feel the touch of his hand on mine, a touch that lingered on my skin the way an expensive perfume will linger in a room long after the woman who wears it is gone.

Maybe it was love, but whatever it was, it was hard to find a man who could compete with it, no matter how much I wanted to find one. It was as if when he was with me, all other men just faded into the background, except Richard. Was that what it meant to be in love? Was it? I wish I knew.

"What are you thinking about?" Ramirez asked.

"Nothing."

"Whatever that nothing is, it makes you look very serious, almost sad." He'd moved very close to the bed, fingers touching the edge of the sheet. His

face was gentle, questioning, very open. I realized in a way that Ramirez had my ticket. He knew what punched my buttons, partly just coincidence, partly he read me well. He read what I liked and what I hated in a man better than Jean-Claude had for years. I liked honesty, openness, and a sort of little boy charm. There were other things that led to lust, but for my heart that was the way. Jean-Claude was almost never open about anything. He always had a dozen different motives for everything he did. Honesty was not his best thing, and his little boy charm . . . nope. Jean-Claude had gotten there first, and for better or worse that was the way things were.

Maybe a little honesty would work here, too. "I'm wondering how different my life would be if I'd met you or someone like you first."

"First, that implies that you've already met someone."

"I told you I had two guys back home."

"You also said you couldn't decide between them. My grandmother always said that the only reason a woman hesitates between two men is that she hasn't met the right one."

"Your grandmother didn't say that."

He nodded. "Yes, she did. She was being courted by two men, sort of halfway engaged to both, then she met my grandfather and she knew why she'd been hesitating. She didn't love either of the two men."

I sighed. "Don't tell me I've got caught up in some family folklore?"

"You never said you were taken. Tell me I'm wasting my time and I'll stop."

I looked up at him, really looked at him, let my eye follow the smiling line of his face, the shining humor in his eyes. "You're wasting your time. I am sorry, but I think you are."

"Think?"

I shook my head. "Stop it, Hernando. I'm taken, okay."

"You're not taken until you make a final choice, but that's okay. I'm not the one. If I were, you'd know it. When you meet him, you won't have any doubts."

"Don't tell me you believe in true love, soul mate kind of stuff."

He shrugged, fingers running up and down the edge of the sheet. "What can I say? I was raised on stories about love at first sight. My grandmother, both my parents, even my great-grandfather said the same thing. They met that special person, and no one else existed after that."

"You're descended from a family of romantics," I said.

He nodded happily. "My great-grandfather, Poppy, talked about my great-grandmother like they were still school kids right up until he died."

"It sounds nice, really, but I don't believe in true love, Hernando. I don't believe that there's only one special person for your whole life's happiness."

"You don't want to believe it," he said.

I shook my head. "This is about to go from cute to irritating, Hernando."

"At least you're using my first name."

"Maybe because I don't see you as a threat anymore."

"A threat? Just because I like you? Just because I asked you out?" He frowned when he said it.

It was my turn to shrug. "Whatever I mean, Hernando, just cut the juice. It ain't going nowhere. Whatever I decide, it's between the two guys I have waiting for me back home."

"It sounds like you weren't sure of that until just now."

I thought about that for a heartbeat, or two. "You know, I think you're right. I think I've been looking around for someone else, anyone else. But it's no good."

"You don't sound happy about that. Love should make you happy, Anita."

I smiled and knew it was wistful. "If you think love makes you happy, Hernando, you've either never been in love, or never been in love long enough to have to start compromising."

"You're not old enough to be this cynical."

"It's not cynicism. It's reality."

His face was soft and sad. "You've lost your sense of romance."

"I never had a sense of romance. Trust me, the guys at home will back me on it."

"Then I'm even sorrier."

"Don't take this wrong, but hearing you go on about true love and romance, makes me sorry for you. You are setting yourself up for the big fall, Hernando."

"Not if it works out," he said.

I smiled and shook my head. "Isn't it against the rules for homicide detectives to be naive?"

"You think it's naive?" he asked.

"I know it is, but it's sweet. I wish you luck finding your Ms. Right."

The door opened and it was Doctor Cunningham. Ramirez asked, "Does she really get out today, Doctor?"

"Yes, she does."

"Why doesn't anyone believe me?" I asked.

They both looked at me. Funny how quickly people caught onto certain aspects of my personality. "I want to do one more check on your back, then you're free to go."

"You got a ride out of here?" Ramirez asked.

"I asked the nurse to call Ted, but I don't know if she did, or if he's home."

"I'll wait around to give you a ride." Before I could say anything, he added, "What are friends for?"

"Thanks, and this means you can fill me in on the case on the way out."

"You never give up, do you?"

"Not about a case," I said.

Ramirez walked out shaking his head, giving the doctor and me some privacy. Dr. Cunningham poked and prodded, and finally just ran his hands over my back. It was nearly healed. "It's just impressive. I've treated lycanthropes before, Ms. Blake, and you're healing almost that fast."

I flexed my left hand, stretching the skin where the bite mark still showed where the flayed one had bitten me. The bite was pale pink, settling into a nice

ordinary scar, only weeks ahead of schedule. I wondered if the scar would eventually disappear, or if it would be another permanent one.

"I've done blood work up on you. I even snuck some of your blood down to the genetics department and had them look for something not human."

"Genetic work takes weeks or months," I said.

"I've got a friend in the department."

"Some friend," I said.

He smiled and it was warmer than it should have been. "She is."

"So I'm free to go?"

"You are." His face got all serious again. "But I'd still like to know what the hell you are."

"You wouldn't believe human?"

"Forty-eight hours after your second injury, we had to remove the stitches from your back because the skin was starting to grow over them. No, I won't believe human."

"It's too long a story, Doc. If it was something I could teach you to use on other people, I'd tell, but it's not that kind of thing. You might call the healing a bonus for some other less pleasant shit that I put up with."

"Unless the other shit is really awful, the healing makes up for it. You'd never have survived the original injuries if you'd been human."

"Maybe."

"No maybe," he said.

"I'm glad to be alive. I'm glad to be nearly healed. I'm glad it didn't take months to recover. What more do you want me to say?"

He draped his stethoscope over his shoulders, holding onto the ends, frowning at me. "Nothing. I'll tell Detective Ramirez that he can tell you about the case now and that you are getting out today." He glanced at the flowers and the balloons. "You've been here, what, five days?"

"Something like that."

He touched a balloon, making them bounce on their strings. "You work fast."

"I don't think it's me that works fast."

He gave the balloons one more whack so they bobbed and weaved like some underwater creature. "Whatever, enjoy your stay in Albuquerque. Try to stay healthy." With that he left, and Ramirez came back in.

"Doctor says I can talk the case with you again."

"Yep."

"You're not going to like it." He looked all serious.

"What's happened?"

"There's been another murder, and not only are you not invited to the scene, neither am I."

Chapter 50

"WHAT ARE YOU talking about?"

"Marks is in charge of the case. He has the right to use his resources as he sees fit."

"Stop talking political rhetoric and tell me what the little shithead has done now."

He smiled. "Okay. The men assigned to the case are one of those resources. He decided that I was best used at the police property room going over the items that we've confiscated from the victim's homes, and matching them to the pictures and video we have of some of the houses before the murders."

"Pictures and videos for what?" I asked.

"Insurance purposes. A lot of the houses hit had enough rare and antique pieces that they insured them, and that meant they needed proof that they had the pieces to begin with."

"What pieces did you find in the last scene I was at, the one on the Ranch?"

The smile didn't change, but the eyes did. They went from pleasant to shrewd. "It's not just that you're cute. I like the way you think."

"Just tell me."

"There were a lot of similar pieces since most of the people had collected things from this area, or the southwest in general, but nothing out of the ordinary. Except for this." He reached behind his back underneath the suit jacket and pulled a manila envelope out that must have been inside his belt underneath the jacket.

"I knew you had to be wearing the suit jacket for some reason."

He laughed. He unfolded the envelope and spilled out pictures into my lap. Half of them were semiprofessional shots of a small carved piece of turquoise. A glance and I wanted to say Mayan, Aztec, something like that. I still couldn't tell the difference at a glance. The second set were a few better shots of the object in the study of the man that had been killed. The one that had used salt to interrupt the critter. Then a series of Polaroids, taken from every angle.

"You took the Polaroids?" I asked.

He nodded. "This afternoon after he decided my best use was not at the murder site."

I lifted one of the first series of pictures. "These are sitting on a wooden surface, much better light, natural, I think. Insurance pictures?"

He nodded.

"Who did it belong to?"

"The first house you saw."

"The Bromwells'," I said.

He lifted another picture. "This one was from the Carsons', and that's it. Either no one else owned one, or they didn't think to get it insured."

"Did the people who didn't try to get it insured, try to insure their other pieces?"

"Yes."

"Shit," I said. "I don't know much about this stuff, but I know that it's valuable. Why wouldn't they try to insure it, if they owned one? "

"What if they thought it was hot?"

"Illegal? Why would they think that?" I asked.

"Maybe because of the two houses we can prove had it, their history of the piece—where they got it and when— isn't real."

"What do you mean?"

"Something like this doesn't just show up. It has to have a history if you want it insured. They gave their papers, what they'd been given to the insurance company, and just a little investigation showed that the people that were supposed to have unearthed the piece, sold the piece, had never heard of it."

"They refused to insure it," I said.

"Yes." There was something in his face, a suppressed excitement like a kid with a secret.

"You're holding something back. What is it?"

"You know what Riker is?"

"He's a pot hunter, an illegal dealer in artifacts."

"Why would he be so interested in you and this case?"

"I have no idea." I looked at the pictures in my lap. "You're saying that he sold these to the victims?"

"Not him personally, but Thad Bromwell, the teenage son, he was with his mother when she purchased it. It was a present for Mr. Bromwell's birthday. They bought it from a shop that is a known associate of Riker. It takes pieces and makes them look legit."

"Have you talked to the shop owners?"

"Unless you've got a ouija board, we're not going to be talking to him."

"He's the newest victim," I said.

Ramirez nodded, smiling. "You got it."

I shook my head. "Okay, Riker is unusually interested in the case. He wanted to see me specifically about it. At least two of the victims are people who bought one of his pieces. The shop owner that sold it is dead now, too." I looked up at him. "Is it enough for a warrant?"

"We already searched his house. Riker's men are suspected in the killing of two local cops. It wasn't hard to find a judge that would give us a warrant on the crap they pulled out at Ted's house."

"What the hell did the warrant give you permission to search for? They didn't mention stolen artifacts at Ted's house. They just pointed guns at us and said Riker wanted to talk about the case."

"The warrant was to search for weapons."

I shook my head. "So even if you found stolen artifacts, you wouldn't be able to use them in court."

"It was just an excuse to search the house, Anita. You know how that goes,"

"Did you find anything?"

"A few guns, two without license, but the warrant didn't allow us to knock down walls or destroy things. We couldn't pull up carpet or pull down shelves, Riker has a secret cache of artifacts, but we didn't find it."

"Was Ted with you on the search?"

"Yes, he was." He was frowning now.

"What's wrong?"

"Ted wanted to take a sledge hammer to some of the walls. He seemed pretty certain there was a hidden room in the lower areas, but we couldn't find a way to open it."

"And the warrant didn't allow you to tear up things," I said.

"No."

"What did Riker think of all the fun?"

"He had his lawyer screaming about harassment. Ted got up in his face, not yelling, but in his face, speaking real quiet. The lawyer said he threatened Riker, but Riker wouldn't back it up. He wouldn't say what Ted had said to him."

"You think he threatened him?"

"Oh, yeah."

It wasn't like Edward to threaten anyone, especially in front of the police. The case really was getting to him. "So what the hell are these little figures?"

"No one knows. According to experts, they are Aztec, but very late period like after the conquest."

"Wait a minute, you mean these were carved after the Spanish came and kicked the Aztecs' butts?"

"Not after, but right about the same time."

"Who was your expert?"

He mentioned a name I wasn't familiar with at the university. "Does it matter who it was?"

"I thought you were using Professor Dallas."

"Marks thinks she's spending too much time with the unholy demons."

"If he means Obsidian Butterfly, then I agree. Marks and I agreeing on anything. Jeez, that's almost scary."

"So you think she's a contaminated source, too."

"I think Dallas thinks the sun shines out of Itzpapalotl's butt, so yeah. Have you shown any of these pictures to Dallas?"

He nodded. "The ones from the Bromwells'."

"What did she say?"

"That it was a fake."

I raised eyebrows at him. "What's the other expert think?"

"That he understands why someone would think it was a fake just from pictures. The figure has rubies for eyes, and the Aztecs didn't have access to rubies. So just from pictures, you might assume it was a fake."

"I hear a 'but' coming," I said.

"Doctor Martinez got to hold it in his hand, look at it up close, and he thinks it's authentic, something made after the Spaniards arrived."

"I didn't think anything was made after the Spaniards arrived. Didn't they destroy everything?"

"If these are authentic, then apparently not. Doctor Martinez says that he'll need more tests to be a hundred percent sure."

"Cautious man."

"Most academics are."

I shrugged. Some were. Some weren't. "So let's say for argument's sake that Riker found these things, and he sold them to some people who knew they were hot, or suspected they were, and sold some to shops that passed them off as legit. Now something is killing off the customers and following the trail back to Riker. Is that what he's afraid of?"

"Sounds reasonable," Ramirez said.

I started looking through the Polaroids. They were back and front shots, not great pics, but from every angle. It looked like the figure was wearing armor, sort of. Its hands held long thick strings of things. "What did Martinez say this figure's holding?"

"He wasn't sure."

There were people curled around its feet, but they were thin and sticklike, not fat and square like the figure itself. The eyes were rubies, the mouth open and full of teeth. There was a long tongue coming out of the mouth, and what looked like blood pouring from the mouth. "Nasty looking."

"Yeah." He picked up one of the pictures from the sheet, staring at it as he spoke. "Do you think this thing is out there killing people?"

I looked at him. "An Aztec god, as in the real deal, out there slaughtering people?"

He nodded, still staring at the picture.

"If you mean a real god with a capital G, then I'm a monotheist, so no. If you mean some kind of preternatural nasty associated with this particular god, then why not?"

He looked up then. "Why not?"

I shrugged. "You were expecting a definitive yes or no? I don't know much about Aztec pantheon stuff, except that most of the deities are big and bad and required sacrifice, usually human. They don't have much in their pantheon that isn't a major god. Something big and bad enough that you don't fight it, you just try and stop it with magic or sacrifice, or you die. And whatever this thing is that's been doing the killings, it's not that bad."

I remembered what Nicky Baco had said, that the voice in his head was still trapped, that what had been doing the killings was just a minion, not the real deal.

"You're all serious again. What did you just think of?" Ramirez asked.

I looked up at him and tried to decide how much of a cop he was, and how much of a player he would be. I could never have told Dolph. He'd have used the info for strict cop stuff. "I have information from an informant that I don't want to name right now. But I think you need to know what was said."

His own face was solemn now. "Did you obtain this information legally?"

"I did nothing illegal to obtain this information."

"Not exactly a no," he said.

"Do you want it or not?"

He took a deep breath and blew it out slow. "Yeah, I want it."

I told him what Nicky had said about the voice and the thing being trapped.

I finished with, "I don't believe in a real god, but I do believe there are things out there so terrible that once upon a time they were worshipped as gods."

"Are you saying that we haven't seen the worst of it?"

"If what is doing the killings is just a minion, and the master isn't up and around yet, then yeah, I'm saying the worst is yet to come."

"I'd really like to talk to this informant."

"You would be dandy, but Marks would have this informant up on charges so fast, we'd never find out what this person knew. Once you slap an automatic death sentence on someone, they tend not to cooperate."

We looked at each other. "There's only one person you've talked to that has a rep to get himself an automatic death sentence. That's Nicky Baco."

I didn't even blink. It wasn't like I hadn't known he'd figure it out. I was ready for it, and I'd gotten much better at lying. "You have no idea who I've talked to since I arrived. I've talked to at least three people that could be put up on charges with a death sentence attached."

"Three?" He made it a question.

I nodded. "At least."

"Either you are a better liar than I thought you were, or you're telling the truth."

I just looked up at him, giving him blank but earnest face. Even my eyes were quiet and able to meet his gaze, no flinching. There had been a time, not long ago, when I couldn't have pulled it off. But that was then, and I wasn't the same person anymore.

"All right, if there is some sort of Aztec god out there, what do we do about it?"

There was only one answer. "Itzpapalotl should know what this is."

"We questioned her about the killings."

"So did I."

He looked at me long and hard. "You went without police backup, and you didn't share what you found."

"I didn't find anything about the murders. She told me about what she told you, nothing. But when I talked to her, she stressed that no deity she knew of would flay people and keep them alive. Later I figured out that they were dead. She stressed that only through death could the sacrifice be a suitable messenger to the gods. She repeated almost word for word that she didn't know a being or god that would flay people and keep them alive. Maybe we should go back and ask her if she knows of any deity or creature that would flay people and not keep them alive."

"Oh, you're inviting the police now."

"I'm inviting you," I said.

He started picking up the pictures and showing them back in the envelope. "I took the pictures out of the property room, but I signed for them. I brought Doctor Martinez in to see the statue, but it was official. I haven't done anything wrong, yet."

"Marks is going to be so pissed that you found out important stuff when he meant to just get you out of the way."

Ramirez smiled, but it wasn't exactly a pleased smile. "I've got better than that. Marks will take credit for the brilliant idea of putting one of his senior detectives on special detail to investigate the relics."

"You're kidding me."

"He did send me to the property room to look at what we took from the victims' houses."

"But he did it to humiliate you and get you out of the way."

"But that's not what he said out loud. Out loud it's going to make him seem inspired."

"He's done shit like this before, I take it."

Ramirez nodded. "He's a very good politician, and when he's not on his right-wing high horse, he's a good detective."

"Fine. You mentioned that I wasn't allowed on the murder scene either. What gives there?"

"Well, we all thought you were still out of the game, but he got Ted and company excluded by getting the powers that be to agree that Ted hadn't been a big help on the case, and that without you, his newest expert, Ted wasn't necessary on the murder scene."

"Oh, I bet Ted's going to love that."

Ramirez nodded. "He was very . . . unprofessional, or unlike himself when we searched Riker's place. I've never seen Ted so ..." Ramirez shook his head. "I don't know, he just seemed different, close to the edge."

Edward had let a little of his real self peek out where the police could see. He had to be under immense pressure to be screwing up like that, or he thought that it was necessary. Either way, things were bad when Ted started losing focus and Edward's real self came through, accident or on purpose.

The door opened, no knock. It was Edward.

"Speak of the devil," I said.

His Edward face had been on, and I watched it move like liquid into Ted, smiling, but still weary around the eyes. "Detective Ramirez, I didn't know you were here."

They shook hands. "I was just filling Anita in on some of the things she's missed."

"You tell her about the search at Riker's?"

Ramirez nodded.

Edward hefted a gym bag. "Clothes."

"You didn't have time to drive from your house to here since the nurse called."

"I packed the bag the night you went in the hospital. I've been riding around with it in my Hummer ever since."

We looked at each other, and there was a weight of things unsaid and unsayable in front of company. Maybe it showed, or maybe Ramirez just felt it. "I'll leave you two alone. You probably have things to talk about. Mystery informants and things like that." He went for the door.

I called after him. "Don't go far, Hernando. When I'm dressed, we'll go see Obsidian Butterfly."

"Only if it's official, Anita. I go in, and we call for uniform backup."

It was our turn for solid eye contact and the weight of wills. I blinked first. "Fine, we go in with the cops like good little boys and girls."

He flashed that warm smile that he could draw from his bag anytime he wanted, or maybe it was real and my cynical nature was showing. "Good, I'll wait outside." He hesitated, then walked back and handed the envelope Edward. He looked at me one more time then walked out.

Edward opened the envelope and looked inside. "What is this?"

"The link, I think." I explained what Ramirez and I had been discussing, about Riker and why he might be interested in the case on a very personal level.

"That would mean that Obsidian Butterfly lied to us," he said.

"No, she never lied. She said she knew of no deity or creature that would flay people and keep them alive. They aren't alive. They're dead. Technically, it wasn't a lie."

Edward smiled. "That is cutting it very thin."

"She's a nine hundred, nearly a thousand year old vampire. They tend to cut the truth pretty thin."

"I hope you like what I picked out for you to wear."

The way he said it made me start pulling things out of the gym bag. Black jeans, black scoop-neck T-shirt, black jogging socks, black Nikes, a black leather belt, my black suit jacket, the worse for being folded for two days, black bra, black satin panties—Jean-Claude had been a bad influence on my clothing—and under it all was the Browning, the Firestar, all the knives, an extra clip for the Browning, two boxes of ammo, and a new shoulder rig. It was one of the lightweight nylon ones with the holster itself angled for the front carry, downward draw that I favored. I always needed one with a very sharp downward angle to avoid scraping my breast every time I drew the gun. I'd found that the millisecond I lost from the angle was made up for from the second I lost everytime I went past my breast and had the flinch reaction. Concealed carry is the art of compromise.

"I know you like leather, but most of those would have to be tailored down for you. The straps on the nylon ones can be adjusted down smaller," Edward said.

"Thanks, Edward. I was missing my rig." I looked at him, trying to read past the neutral baby blues. "Why this much ammo?"

"Better to not need and have it," he said.

I frowned at him. "Are we going some place where I'll need this much ammo?"

"If I thought that, I'd have packed the mini-Uzi and the sawed-off shotgun. This is just the normal stuff you carry."

I drew the big blade that would have normally rode down my back. "When they cut off the shoulder holster, they cut through the rig for this, too."

"Was it a specialty item?"

I nodded.

"I thought it must be because I asked around and no one had a sheath for concealment of something that large for the back, especially not when you throw in how damn narrow you are through the shoulders."

"It was a custom job." I laid the big knife back in the bag, almost sadly. "There's no way to conceal this thing without a rig for it."

"Did the best I could."

I smiled at him. "No, it's great. I mean it."

"Why are we taking the police in with us to Obsidian Butterfly?"

I told him what Jean-Claude had told me, though not how the message had gotten through. "With the police at our backs, she'll know it's not vampire politics and we'll probably be able to walk out without a fight."

He was leaning against the wall arms crossed. The white shirt didn't quite lay smooth over the front of him. His gun was showing but only if you knew what you were looking for. A paddle holster or a clip holster because the gun was riding outside the pants. It explained why the white shirt wasn't tucked in, and the fact that he was wearing a T-shirt under the shirt probably meant that he had something on him that would chafe without cloth between it and his skin.

"You still carrying that band of throwing darts?" I asked.

"You can't see it, not with the shirt untucked." He didn't even try to deny it. Why should he?

"Because you're wearing an undershirt, and because the shirt is untucked. I know, it's partially to hide the gun, but you never wear an undershirt, so you've got to be wearing something under the shirt that would chafe without the undershirt."

He smiled, and it was a pleased smile, almost proud, as if I'd done something smart. "I'm carrying two more guns, a knife, and a garrote. Tell me where they are and I'll give you a prize."

My eyes had gone wide. "A garrote. Even for you that's a little Psychos'R'Us."

"Give up?"

"No. Is there a time limit?"

He shook his head. "We've got all night."

"If I guess wrong, is there a penalty?"

He shook his head.

"What's the prize if I figure out where everything is?"

He smiled that close, secretive smile that said he knew things that I didn't. "It's a surprise prize."

"Get out so I can get dressed."

He touched the belt where it lay on the bed. "This buckle didn't come black. Who painted it?"

"I did."

"Why?"

He knew the answer. "So that if I'm out after dark, the buckle doesn't catch the light and give me away." I lifted the tail of his white shirt exposing the large ornate silver belt buckle. "This is like a freaking target after dark."

He looked down at me, making no move to lower the shirt. "It just clips on over the real buckle."

I let the shirt slide back. "The buckle underneath?"

"It's blacked," he said.

We smiled at each other. It went all the way to our eyes. We did like each other. We were friends. "Sometimes I think I don't want to be you when I grow up, Edward, sometimes I think it's too late, I'm already there."

The smile faded, leaving his eyes the color of winter skies and just as pitiless.

"Only you decide how far gone you are, Anita. Only you can decide how far you'll go."

I looked at the weapons and the black clothing like funeral clothes, even down to the things that touched my skin. "Maybe it would be a start if I bought something pink."

"Pink?" Edward said.

"Yeah, you know, pink, like Easter Bunny grass."

"Like cotton candy," he said. "Or almost everything women give each other at baby showers."

"When were you at a baby shower?" I asked.

"Donna's taken me to two of them. It's the new thing, couples baby showers."

I looked at him, eyes wide. "You, at a couples baby shower, Edward."

"You in something the color of children's candy and baby doll clothes." He shook his head. "Anita, you are one of the least pink women I've ever met."

"When I was a little girl, I'd have given a small body part to have a pink canopy bed, and ballerina wallpaper would have been perfect."

He gave me wide, surprised eyes. "You, in a pink canopy bed with ballerina wallpaper." He shook his head. "Just trying to imagine you in a room like that gives me a headache."

I looked at the things spread on the bed. "I was pink once, Edward."

"Most of us start off soft," he said, "but you can't stay that way, not and survive."

"There's got to be someplace I won't go, something I won't do, some line I won't cross, Edward."

"Why?" That one word held more curiosity than he usually allowed himself.

"Because if I don't have any lines, limits, then what kind of person does that make me?" I asked.

He shook his head, moving the cowboy hat low on his head. "You're having a crisis of conscience."

I nodded. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"Don't go soft, Anita, not on my dime. I need you to do what you do best, and what you do best isn't soft or gentle or kind. What you do best is what I do best."

"And what is that? What is it that we do best?" I asked, and I knew the anger came through in my voice. I was getting angry with Edward.

"We do what it takes, whatever it takes, to get the job done."

"There's got to be more to life than the ultimate practicality, Edward."

"If it makes you feel any better, we have different motives. I do what I do because I love it. It's not just what I do. It's who I am. You do the job to save lives, to keep the damage down." He looked at me with eyes gone as empty and bottomless as any vampire's. "But you love it, too, Anita. You love it, and that bothers you."

"Violence is one of my top three responses now, Edward, maybe my number one."

"And it's kept you alive."

"At what price?"

He shook his head, and now the blankness was replaced by anger. He was just suddenly moving forward. I caught his hand going under the shirt, and I was rolling off the bed, with the Browning in my hand. I had a round in the chamber and was falling back onto the floor with the gun pointed up, eyes searching for movement.

He was gone.

My heart was thudding so loudly that I could barely hear, and I was straining to hear. A movement, something. He had to be on the bed. It was the only place he could have gone. From my angle I couldn't see anything on top of the bed, just the corner of the mattress and the trail of sheet.

Knowing Edward, the ammo in the Browning was probably his homemade brew, which meant that it would pierce the bottom of the bed and go up into whatever lay on top of the bed. I felt the last of the air in my body slide outward, and I sighted on the underneath of the bed. The first bullet would either hit him or make him move, then I'd have a better idea of where he was.

"Don't shoot, Anita."

His voice made me move the gun barrel just a touch more right. It would take him mid-body because he was crouched up there, not lying down. I knew that without seeing it.

"It was a test, Anita. If I wanted to come against you, I'd warn you first, you know that."

I did know that, but... I heard the bed creak. "Don't move, Edward. I mean it."

"You think you can just decide to turn all this off. You can't. The genie is out of the bottle for you, Anita, just like it is for me. You can't unmake yourself. Think of all the effort, all the pain, that went into making you who you are. Do you really want to throw all that away?"

I was lying flat on my back, gun pointed two-handed. The floor was cold where the gown had gaped at my back. "No," I said, finally.

"If your heart starts bleeding for all the bad things you do, it won't be the last thing that bleeds."

"You really did this to test me. You son of a bitch."

"Can I move now?"

I took my finger off the trigger and sat up on the floor. "Yeah, you can move."

He eased back off the other side of the bed as I stood up on this one. "Did you see how fast you went for the gun? You knew where it was, you had the safety off and a round chambered, and you were looking for cover, and trying to target me." Again there was that pride, like a teacher with a favorite student.

I looked across at him. "Don't ever do anything like that again, Edward."

"A threat?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No threat, just instinct. I came so close to putting a bullet through the bed and into you."

"And while you were doing it, your conscience wasn't bothering you. You weren't thinking, 'It's Edward. I'm about to shoot my friend.' "

"No," I said. "I wasn't thinking anything but how to get the best shot possible before you had time to shoot me." It didn't make me happy to say it. It felt like I'd been mourning dead pieces of myself, and Edward's little demonstration had confirmed the deaths. It made me sad, and a little depressed, and not happy with Edward.

"I knew a man once who was as good as you are," Edward said. "He started second-guessing himself, worrying about whether he was a bad person. It got him killed. I don't want to see you dead because you hesitated. If I have to bury you, then I want it to be because someone was just that good or that lucky."

"I want to be cremated," I said, "not buried."

"Good little Christian, fallen Catholic, practicing Episcopalian, and you want to be cremated."

"I don't want anyone trying to raise me from the dead or stealing body parts for spells. Just burn it all, thanks."

"Cremated. I'll remember."

"How about you, Edward? Where do you want the body shipped?"

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I'll be dead, and I won't care."

"No family?"

"Just Donna and the kids."

"They are not your family, Edward."

"Maybe they will be."

I put the safety on the Browning. "We don't have time to discuss your love life and my moral crisis. Get out so I can get dressed."

He had his hand on the door when he turned. "Speaking of love life, Richard Zeeman called."

That got my attention. "What do you mean Richard called?"

"He seemed to know that something bad had happened to you. He was worried."

"When did he call?"

"Earlier tonight."

"Did he say anything else?"

"That he'd finally called Ronnie and had her track down Ted Forrester's unlisted number. He seemed to think that you leaving a forwarding number with him would be a good idea." His face was utterly blank, empty. Only his eyes held a faint hint of amusement.

So both the boys had finally grown frustrated at my silence. Richard had turned to my good friend, Ronnie, who happened to be a private investigator. Jean-Claude had taken a more direct route. But they'd both finally gotten hold of me on the same night. Would they compare notes?

"What did you tell Richard?" I laid the gun on the bed with the rest.

"That you were all right." Edward was looking around the room. "Doctor Cunningham still not allowing you a phone in here?"

"Nope," I said. I had managed to untie the back of the gown.

"Then how did Jean-Claude contact you?"

I stopped in mid-motion. The gown slid off one shoulder and I had to catch it with my hand. It caught me off guard and I'm never as good a liar on the spur of the moment. "I never said it was a phone call."

"Then what was it?"

I shook my head. "Just go, Edward. The night's not getting any younger."

He just stood there, looking at me. His face had gone all cold and suspicious.

I got the bra in one hand and turned my back on him. I let the gown slide to my waist, leaned back against the bed to hold it in place, and slipped the bra on. There was no sound from behind me. I got the panties and slipped them on underneath the gown. I had the jeans halfway up my legs under the cover of the gown when I heard the door hush open and close.

I turned and found the doorway empty. I finished dressing. I had my toilettes in the bathroom already, so I threw them in the gym bag along with the big knife, and the boxes of ammo. The new shoulder holster felt odd. I was used to a leather one which fit tight and secure. I guess nylon was secure, but it was almost too comfortable, as if it seemed less substantial than my leather one had. But it beat the heck out of sticking it down my jeans.

The knives went in the wrist sheaths. I checked to see what kind of ammo the Firestar had in it. Edward's homemade stuff. I checked the Browning, and it was his stuff, too. The backup clip for the Browning was the Homady XTP Silver-Edge. I changed the clip. We were going into the Obsidian Butterfly as cops, which meant if I had to shoot someone, I'd have to explain it to the authorities later. Which meant I didn't want to go in there with some possibly illegal homemade shit in my gun. Besides I'd seen what the Homady Silver-Edge could do to a vampire. It was enough.

The Firestar went into an Uncle Mike's inner pants holster, though truthfully the jeans were too tight for an inner pants holster. Maybe I wasn't spending enough time in the gym. I had been on the road more than I'd been home. The Kenpo was neat stuff, but it wasn't the same thing as a full workout

with weights and running. Another thing to pay more attention to when I got back to St. Louis. I'd been letting a lot of things slide.

I finally transferred the Firestar to the small of my back and hated it, but it dug in something fierce in front. I have a slight sway to my back so there's always more room for a gun there, but it wasn't a quick place to draw from. Something about a woman's hip structure makes a gun at the small of the back not the best idea. That I kept the gun at the small of my back tells you just how tight the jeans were. Definitely going to have to get back into a regular gym schedule. The first five pounds are easy to get rid of, the second five are harder, and it gets even harder from there. I'd been chunky in junior high, close to fat, so I knew what I was talking about. So that no teenager out there will get the wrong idea and go all anorexic on me, I was a size thirteen in jeans, and that was at five foot nothing. See, I really was chunky. I hate women who complain about being fat when they're like a size five. Anything under size five isn't a woman. It's a boy with breasts.

I stared at the black jacket. Two days folded in a gym bag and it desperately needed to go to the dry cleaners. I decided to carry it folded over one arm, on the theory it would uncrease a little. I didn't really need to hide the weapons until we got to the club. The knives were illegal if I'd been a cop or a civvie, but I was a vampire executioner, and we got to carry knives. Gerald Mallory, the grandfather of our business, had testified before a senate subcommittee, or something like that, at how many times knives had saved his life. Mallory was well liked in Washington. It was his home base. So the law got changed to let us carry knives, even really big ones. If someone challenged me, all I had to do was whip out my executioner's license, and I was legal. Of course, that predicated on them knowing the loophole in the law. Not every cop on the beat is going to know. But my heart is pure because I'm legal.

Edward and Ramirez were waiting for me in the hallway. They both smiled and the smiles were so close to identical it was unnerving. Will the real good guys please stand up? But Edward's smile never faltered as I walked towards them. Ramirez's did. His gaze hesitated on the wrist sheath. The jacket hid the other one. I walked up to them smiling, and my eyes were shiny, too. I put a hand around Edward's waist and brushed my arm along the gun I'd thought was there at the small of his back.

"I've called for backup," Ramirez said.

Edward had given me a quick Ted hug and let me go, though he knew I'd found the gun. "Great. It's been a long time since I visited a Master of the City with the police."

"How do you usually do it?" Ramirez asked.

"Carefully," I said.

Edward turned his head away and coughed. I think he was trying not to laugh, but you can never tell with Edward. Maybe he just had a tickle in his throat. I watched him walk and wondered where in the world he was hiding the third gun.

Chapter 51

ONE OF THE THINGS I liked about working with the police was that when you went into a business and asked to speak with the manager or owner, no one argued. Ramirez flashed his badge and asked to speak with the owner, Itzpapalotl, also known as Obsidian Butterfly.

The hostess, the same darkly elegant woman that had shown Edward and me to a table last time, took Ramirez's business card, showed us all to a table, and left us. The only difference was this time we didn't get any menus. The two uniforms stayed at the door, but kept us in sight. I'd put the wrinkled jacket on to cover the guns and knives, but I was glad the club was dark, because the jacket had seen better days.

Ramirez leaned over and asked, "How long do you think she'll keep us waiting?"

Funny how he didn't ask if she would keep us waiting. "Not sure, but a while. She's a goddess and you've just ordered her to appear before you. Her ego won't let her be quick."

Edward was leaning in on the other side. "Half hour, at least."

A waitress came. Ramirez and I ordered Cokes. Edward got water. The lights on the stage dimmed, then came up brighter. We settled back for the show. Cesar had probably healed by now, but not by much. So it would either be a different wereanimal or a different show altogether.

There was what looked like a stone coffin propped up on the stage, sitting on its end with the carved lid staring out at the audience. Our table wasn't as good as last time. I spotted Professor Dallas at her usual table, alone this time. She didn't seem to mind.

The stone lid was carved in a crouching jaguar with a necklace of human skulls. The high priest Pinotl came onto the stage. He was dressed only in that skirt thing, a maxtlatl, that left the legs and most of the hips bare. I'd asked Dallas what the skirt was. His face was painted black with a stripe of white across the eyes and nose. His long black hair had been formed into individual strands curling at the ends. He wore a white crown, and it took me a second to realize it was made of bones. The stage lights flickered over the white bones, making them shimmer, and almost bleed white color when he moved his head. Finger bones had been restrung and formed a fan above the main band, reminiscent of the feathers I'd seen him wearing the first time. His ear spools of gold had been replaced by bones. He looked totally different from the first time, and yet the moment he stepped out on stage I knew it was him. No one else had had that aura of command.

I leaned into Ramirez. "You wearing a cross?"

"Yes, why?"

"His voice can be a little overwhelming without a little help."

"He's human, isn't he?"

"He's her human servant."

Ramirez turned his face full into mine, and we were too close. I had to move back to keep from bumping noses. "What?"

Did he really not know what a human servant was for a vampire? I didn't have time to give him a preternatural lesson, and this wasn't the place anyway. Far too many listening ears. I shook my head. "I'll explain later."

Two very Aztec-looking bouncers came on stage and lifted the lid of the coffin off. They moved to one side with it, and the way they shuffled, muscles in their arms and back working, it looked heavy. There was a cloth-draped body in the coffin. I didn't know for certain that it was a body, but it was shaped like a body. There just aren't that many things that are body-shaped.

Pinotl began to speak. "Those of you who have been with us before, know what it is to make sacrifice to the gods. You have shared in that glory, taken the offering into yourselves. But only the bravest, the most virtuous, are fit sacrifices. There are those that are not fit to feed the gods with their lives, but they, too, may serve." He drew the cloth off in one large movement, sending the black and sequined draped cloth spreading wide like a fisherman's net. As that glittering cloth fell to the stage, the contents of the coffin were revealed. Gasps, screams spread through the audience like ripples in a pool.

There was a body in the coffin. It was dried and wizened, as if the body had been buried in the desert and had mummified naturally. No artificial preservatives. The spotlight on the coffin seemed very bright, harsh. It showed every line in the dried skin. The skeletal shadow of bones underneath was painfully clear.

We were only three rows back, close enough to see more detail than I cared to see. At least this time they wouldn't be cutting anyone up. I really wasn't in the mood to see inside anyone's chest tonight. I was searching the crowd, trying to see if she was coming or if we were about to be surrounded by werejaguars.

I turned and looked. The dead mummy's eyes were open. I looked at Edward. He answered the question without me having to say it. "Its eyes just opened. Nobody touched it."

I stared at that skull trapped under dry parchment skin. The eyes were full of something dry and brown. There was no life to the eyes, but they were open. The mouth began to open slowly, as if the mouth were on a stiff hinge. As the mouth opened a sound came out of it, a sigh that grew into a scream.

A scream that echoed through the room, reverberated off the ceiling, the walls the inside of my head.

"It's a trick, right?" Ramirez said.

I just shook my head. It wasn't a trick. Dear God, it wasn't a trick. I looked at Edward, and he just shook his head. He'd never seen this particular act either.

The scream died, and there was a silence so thick you could have dropped a pin and heard it bounce. I think everyone was holding their breath, straining to hear. To hear what I didn't know, but I was doing it, too. I think I was trying

to hear it breathe. I studied that skeletal chest, but it didn't rise and fall. It didn't move. I said a silent prayer of thanks.

"This one's energy went to feed our dark goddess, but she is merciful. What was taken shall be given back. This is Micapetlacalli, the box of death. I am Nextepeua. In legend I was the husband of Micapetlacalli, and I am still married to death. Death runs through my veins. My blood tastes of death. Only the blood of one consecrated to death will free this one of torment."

I realized that Pinotl's voice was just a voice, a good voice, like a good stage actor, but nothing more. Either he wasn't trying to bespell the audience, or I wasn't as susceptible tonight. The only change that I knew for certain was the marks. They were wide open now. I'd been told by my teacher and by Leonora Evans that the marks made me more vulnerable to psychic attack, but maybe on some things having a direct link to the boys helped me. Whatever it was, his voice didn't move me tonight. Great.

Pinotl drew an obsidian blade from behind his back. He'd probably been carrying it the way Edward and I were carrying guns, at the small of his back. He held his arm over the open coffin, over that gaping mouth. He drew the blade across his skin. It wasn't clear to the audience what he'd done. It would have been much better theater for Pinotl to slash his arm where the audience could see that first crimson slash. For him to hide it, there had to be some ritual significance, some importance, to those first drops of blood going into the corpse's mouth.

He dripped blood on the top of the thing's skull, dabbed it in the middle of that skull forehead, touched it to the throat, the chest, the stomach, the abdomen. He went down the line of chakras, energy points, of the body. I'd never believed in chakras until this year, when I'd found they were real, and they seemed to work. I hated all this new age stuff. I hated it worse when it worked. Of course, this wasn't new age stuff. This was very old stuff. With each touch of blood to that dried thing I felt magic. Each drop of blood made it grow, until the air hummed with it and my skin crept in waves of goose bumps.

Edward sat unmoved, but Ramirez was rubbing his arms, chasing goosebumps. "What's happening?"

He was at the very least a sensitive. I guess I couldn't possibly be attracted to a totally normal human being. I whispered, "Magic."

He looked at me, eyes showing too much white. "What kind?"

I shook my head. That I didn't know. I had a few clues, but I really had never seen anything like it, not exactly.

Pinotl walked around the coffin in a counter-clockwise motion, bleeding arm and bloody knife held apart, palm up while he chanted. The power built and built in the air like close thunder until my throat closed with it, and I was having trouble breathing. Pinotl came back to the front of the coffin where he'd begun. He made some kind of sign with his hands, then flung a spray of blood onto the body, and began to back slowly away. The lights dimmed until the only light was the harsh white light on the thing in the coffin.

The power had built to a screaming pitch. My skin was trying to crawl off my body and hide. The air was too thick to breathe, as if it had grown more solid, thick with magic.

Something was happening to the body. The power broke like a cloud bursting with rain, and that invisible rain broke over the body, over the room, over us all, but the focus was that dried thing. The skin began to move, to twitch. It filled out as if water flowed beneath it. Something liquid moved under that dry, wasted skin, and where it flowed the skin began to stretch. It was like watching one of those blow up dolls fill up. Flesh, flesh was flowing under the skin. It plumped like some obscene kind of dough. The body, the man, began to thrash and twist against the sides of the coffin. The chest finally rose, drawing in a great draught of air, as if he were struggling back from the dead. It was like the opposite of that death rattle where the breath flows away for the last time. Of course, that was exactly what it was: life returning, the last breath being drawn back in. When he had air to breathe, he began to scream. One long ragged shriek after another. As fast as his healing chest could bring in the air, he screamed.

The dry hair on his head turned curly, brown, and soft. His skin was tanned and young, smooth and flawless. He'd been under thirty when he went into the coffin. Who knew how long he'd been in there? Even after he looked human again, he kept shrieking, as if he had been waiting a very long time to scream.

A woman near the front screamed and took off running for the door. The vampires had moved up quietly through the tables. I hadn't sensed them over the suffocating flow of magic, and the sheer horror of the show. Careless of me. A vampire caught the running woman, held her, and she grew instantly still. He led her quietly back to her table, to the man that was standing, wondering what he should do. The vampires moved through the crowd touching someone here, stroking a hand there, soothing, soothing, telling the great lie.

It was safe, it was peaceful, it was good.

Ramirez watched the vampires. He turned to me. "What are they doing?"

"Soothing the crowd so they don't all bolt for the exits."

"They aren't allowed to use one on one hypnosis."

"I don't think it's personal, more like crowd hypnosis." I looked back to the stage and found the man had collapsed onto the stage, pushing his way out of the coffin as soon as he got the strength. He was trying to crawl away.

Pinotl appeared in the growing circle of light. The man screamed and held his hands up in front of his face as if to ward off a blow. Pinotl spoke, and he didn't yell, so he must have been using a microphone of some kind. "Have you learned humility?" he asked.

The man whimpered and hid his face.

"Have you learned obedience?"

The man nodded his head over and over, still hiding his face. He started to cry, great sobs that made his shoulders shake. Three rows out and I could hear him sobbing.

Pinotl motioned and the two bouncers that had opened the coffin walked on stage. They lifted the weeping man up, carrying him between them. His legs didn't seem to move yet, so they carried him, with an arm on either of their shoulders, his feet dangling off the floor. He wasn't a small man, and again you got that sense of how strong the two men were. They were human, too, not wereanything.

Two werejaguars walked on stage in their spotted skin clothes, and between them they held another man. No, not a man, a wereanimal. It was Seth. He'd been stripped down to a G-string that left very little to the imagination. His long yellow hair was unbound, streaked with light and color. He didn't struggle as they brought him up on stage. The jaguar men had him kneel in front of Pinotl.

"Do you acknowledge our dark goddess as your one and true mistress?"

Seth nodded. "I do." His voice didn't have the resonance of the other man's, and I doubted that the people in the back could hear him.

"She has given you life, Seth, and it is right that she should ask you give that life back to her."

"Yes," Seth said.

"Then I will be her hand, and take that which is hers." He cradled Seth's face between his hands. It was gentle. The two jaguar men let go of Seth and backed away. But they stayed close, almost as if afraid that he might run. But his face was turned upward with a near beatific expression on it, as if this were wonderful. He'd been so afraid of being tortured by Itzpapalotl's four sisters weird, and yet now he seemed at peace with what they were about to do. I thought I knew, and I hoped I was wrong. Just once when I expect something truly hideous is about to happen, I'd like to be wrong. It would be a nice change.

It wasn't flashy. There was no fire or light or even a shimmer of heat. Lines appeared on Seth's twenty-something skin. The muscles under his skin began to shrink as though he had a wasting disease, but what should have taken months was happening in seconds. No matter how willing the sacrifice, it can still hurt. Seth started screaming as fast as he could draw breath. His lungs were working better than the other man's, and he drew breath so fast, it was like one continuous shriek. The skin darkened as it drew in and in like something were sucking him dry. It was like watching a balloon shrivel. Except there was muscle and when the muscle vanished, there was bone, and finally there was nothing but dried skin over bones, and still he screamed.

I've become something of a connoisseur of screams over the years, and I've heard some good ones. Some of them have even been mine, but I'd never heard anything like this. The sound stopped being human and became like the high-pitched sound of some wounded animal, but underneath it all you knew, knew at a level that you couldn't even explain, that it was a person.

Finally, there was no more air for screaming, but that dry, empty mouth kept opening and closing, opening and closing. Long after the screaming stopped, that skeletal thing was still writhing, still flinging its head from side to side.

Pinotl kept his hands pressed to Seth's face. He held him, and it looked gentle the whole time, but he had to be gripping with all the strength he had because he never lost his grip. While the flesh of that handsome face shriveled and died between his hands, Pinotl never moved. And through it all, Seth never once raised his hands up to save himself. He struggled because he couldn't not struggle, it hurt that much, but he never raised his hands against the other man. A willing sacrifice, a fit sacrifice.

My throat was tight, and something burned behind my eyes. I just wanted it over now. I just wanted it to stop. But it didn't stop. The skeletal thing that had been Seth kept twitching, opening and closing its mouth, as if trying to scream.

Pinotl looked up, breaking eye contact with Seth for a heartbeat. The two jaguar men that had escorted him onto the stage came into the light. One of them held a silver needle with black thread on it. The other held a pale green ball, tiny, the size of a marble maybe. If I'd been sitting much further out, I'd have never known what it was. Jade, I think, a jade ball. They placed it in that gaping mouth, and the mouth closed. The other jaguar began to sew his mouth but, driving the silver needle through the dry lipless flesh, tugging it tight.

I looked at the table too, resting my forehead on the cool stone of the table. I would not faint. I never fainted. But I had a sudden flash of the creature that Nicky Baco had created out of the werewolves. Some of them had had their mouths sewn shut. I'd never seen a power like this. It was too big a coincidence that two people in one town could do it and not be connected.

Ramirez touched my shoulder. I raised my head and shook it. "I'm all right." I looked up and they were putting Seth in the coffin. I knew without trying to sense it that he was still in there. Still aware. He could not have understood what he was letting them do to him. He couldn't have. Could he?

Pinotl turned to the audience, and his eyes glowed with black fire the way a vampire's do when their power is high. Black flames licked around his eye sockets, and his skin seemed to glow with the power.

The thing that Seth had become was covered with the same black glittering cloth that had covered the last body. The jaguar assistants closed the coffin, securing the heavy lid. A collective sigh ran through the audience as if they were all relieved that it was covered. I wasn't the only one that didn't want to see it anymore.

Itzpapalotl glided on stage. She was wearing the same crimson cloak as before. Pinotl went to one knee in front of her, extending his hands. She put her delicate hands on his strong ones, and I felt the rush of power like the brush of bird's wings.

Pinotl stood, holding her hand, and they turned to the audience and now both of them had eyes of black flame, spreading over their faces like a mask.

Soft spotlights filled the darkness of the tables like giant, soft fireflies. Each light found one of the vampires. They were pale and wan, hungry, fasted maybe, because I wasn't the only one that could tell they hadn't fed. You heard the exclamations through the audience, how pale, how frightening, oh, my god. No, she wanted everyone to see them for what they truly were.

She and Pinotl stared off into that soft-lit dark and again I felt the rush of power, like a chittering flight of birds, brushing across my face, my skin, as if I had no clothes, and the swift passing of feathered things caressed my body. I felt it almost like a series of physical blows as the power hit each vampire, and their eyes filled with black fire. They became shining things with skin of alabaster, bronze, copper, all glowing, all beautiful with eyes filled with the light of black stars.

Then they fell into line and began to sing. A song of praise to her, their dark goddess. Diego, the vampire we'd seen whipped senseless, passed by our table with a leash in his hand. On the end of that leash was a tall, pale-skinned man with curly yellow hair. Was it Cristobal, one of the starved ones? There were no starved ones in line. All of them were glowing and well fed and filled to bursting with a dark, sweet power like overripe berries before they fall to the ground, when they are poised between the sweetest of ripeness and rotting. Life is often like that, the best balancing on a knife edge with the worst.

The vampires left the stage still singing her praises. Pinotl and she walked hand and hand down the steps, and I knew where they were coming, and I didn't want them near me. I could still feel the power as though I were standing in the middle of a cloud of butterflies, and they were beating at my skin with soft wings, beating at me, trying to come inside.

They came and stood in front of our table. Her face was smiling, soft as she gazed down at me. The black flames had quieted, but her eyes were still an empty blackness with a flicker of light in their depths. Pinotl's eyes echoed hers like a mirror, but it wasn't black flame. It was the blackness of endless night, and there were stars in her eyes, an endless fall of stars.

Edward had my arm. He had turned me to face him. We were both standing, though I didn't remember getting up. "Anita, are you okay?"

I had to swallow twice to find my voice. "I'm okay, I think. Yeah, I'm okay." But the power was still beating against me like frantic wings, birds crying that they've been shut out in the dark and they want inside to the light and the warmth. How could I leave them crying in the dark when all I had to do was open and they would be safe?

"Stop it," I said. I turned to face them. They were still smiling, still welcoming. She held her hand out to me, the other still holding Pinotl's hand. I knew if I took that hand that all this power would flow into me. That I could share it with them. It was an offering to share. But at what price, because there was always a price?

"What do you want?" I asked. I wasn't even sure who I was asking.

"I want the knowledge of how your triad of power was achieved."

"I can tell you that. You don't need to do this."

"You know that I cannot tell truth from lie. It is not one of my powers. Touch me and I will gain the knowledge from you."

The wings were flowing over my skin as if the flying things had found a current of air just above my body. "What do I gain?"

"Think of one question, and if I have the answer, you will draw it from my mind."

Ramirez was standing. He motioned and I knew without looking that the uniforms were coming this way. "I don't know what's happening, but we're not doing it."

"Answer one question first," I said.

"If I can," she said.

"Who is the Red Woman's Husband?"

Her face showed nothing, but her voice was puzzled. "The Red Woman was another term for blood among the Mexicanas, among the Azteca. I truly do not know who the Red Woman's Husband would be."

I'd half reached out to her. I didn't really mean to. Three things happened almost together. Ramirez and Edward both grabbed me to pull me back, and Itzpapalotl grabbed my hand.

The wings erupted into a torrent of birds. My body opened, though I knew I didn't, and the winged things, only half-glimpsed spilled into that opening. The power flowed into me, through me, and out again. I was part of some great circuit, and I felt the connection with every vampire she'd touched. It was as if I flowed through them, and they through me like water coming together to form something larger. Then I was floating in the soothing dark, and there were stars, distant and glittering.

A voice, her voice came, "Ask one question, and it shall be yours."

I asked, though my mouth never moved, still I heard the words. "How did Nicky Baco learn to do what Pinotl did to Seth?" With the words came the image of Nicky's creature so clear I could smell the dryness of it, and hear that voice whispering, "Help me."

Images then, and they had force to them like things slamming into my body. I saw Itzpapalotl standing on the top of a pyramid temple surrounded by trees, jungle. I could smell the rich greenness of it, and hear the night call of a monkey, the scream of a jaguar. Pinotl knelt and fed from the bloody wound on her chest. He became her servant, and he gained power. Many powers, and one of them was this. And I understood how he'd taken Seth's essence. More than that I understood how it was done, and how it was undone. I knew how to unmake Nicky's creature, though what he'd done to them might mean that to bring them back to flesh would kill them. We didn't need Nicky to undo the spell; I could do it. Pinotl could do it.

She didn't ask if I understood. She knew when I had it all. "Now for my question." And before I could say or think "Wait," she was inside my head. She drew the memories from me: images, pieces, and I couldn't stop her. She saw Jean-Claude mark me, and she saw Richard, and she saw the three of us calling power on purpose for the first time. She saw that last night when I'd taken the second and third mark to save our lives, all our lives.

I was suddenly back in my own skin, standing on one side of the table, still holding her hand. I was gasping, fast and faster, and I knew if I didn't get control, I was going to hyperventilate. She released my hand, and all I could do was concentrate on my own breathing. Ramirez was yelling at me, was I all right. Edward had his gun out, pointed at her. She and Pinotl just stood there, peaceful. I could see everything as though I were looking through crystal. The

colors seemed darker, more vivid. Things stood out in bold relief, and it wasn't the things I would normally have noticed. The way the band in Edward's hat had a small ridge in it, and I knew where the garrote was.

When I could finally talk, I said, "It's all right. It's all right. I'm not hurt." I touched Edward's hand, lowering the gun to point at the table. "Chill, okay, I'm all right."

"She said it would harm you if we forced you to let go early," Edward said.

"It might have," I said. I'd expected to feel badly, drained, tired, but I didn't. I felt energized, exhilarated. "I feel great."

"You don't look great," Edward said, and there was something in his voice that made me look at him.

He grabbed my hand and started leading me through the tables towards the door. I tried to slow down and he jerked me with him, pulling me along.

"You're hurting my wrist," I said.

He pushed through the doors with the gun still naked in his hand, my wrist gripped in his other hand. He hit the lobby doors with his shoulders. I remembered it being darker in the lobby, but it wasn't dark now. It wasn't exactly light. It just wasn't dark. He pushed one of the wall hangings apart, and there was the men's room door. He pushed it open before I could say anything. The urinals stretched empty, and I was grateful. The lights were bright, made me squint.

Edward whirled me around to face the mirrors. My eyes were a solid shining black. There was no pupil, no white, nothing. I looked blind, yet I could see everything, every crack in the wall, the smallest dint on the edge of the mirror. I walked forward, and he let me go. I reached out until I could touch my reflection. I jumped when my fingers met the cool glass, as if I'd expected my hand to keep on going. I stared at my hand, and I could almost see the bones under my skin, the muscles working as I moved my fingers. Underneath that, I could see the flow of blood under my skin. I turned and looked at Edward. I looked at him slowly, and I could see the slight difference in the pants leg where the hilt of the knife was sticking out of his boot. There was the faintest line where the second knife was strapped to his thigh, and he could reach through his pants pocket and touch the hilt. There was a bulge in his other pocket, small, but I knew it was a gun, a derringer probably, but that last bit of knowledge was my knowledge. The rest was this extraordinary vision. It was like some fantasy spell of true seeing.

If this was how all vampires saw the world, then I should just stop trying to hide weapons. But I'd fooled vampires before, master-level vampires. So this was how she saw the world, but not necessarily how they all saw the world.

"Say something, Anita."

"I wish you could see what I'm seeing."

"I don't want to," he said.

"The garrote is in the band of your hat. You've got a knife in a sheath in your right boot, and a knife on your left thigh. You reach the hilt through your pants pocket. There's a derringer in your right pants pocket."

He paled, and I saw it. I saw the pulse in his throat beat faster. I could see the small changes in his body as the fear rushed through it. No wonder she'd been able to read me so easily. But it should have worked like a lie detector for her. That's what other vamps and wereanimals pick up on, the minute changes we all make when we lie. Even the smell changes, so Richard said. So why couldn't she tell if someone were lying?

The answer came in a wave of clarity that you usually have to meditate to have. She couldn't read things she didn't have inside herself. She wasn't a goddess. She was a vampire, not like any vampire I'd ever known before, but that was what she was. Yet she believed she was Itzpapalotl the living personification of the sacrificial knife, the obsidian blade. She was lying to herself, and thus she couldn't see a lie in someone else. She didn't understand what truth was, so she couldn't recognize that either. She was fooling herself on a cosmic scale, and it weakened her. But I wasn't going to march out there and point out the error of her ways. She was just a vampire and not a goddess, but I'd had a taste of her power and I did not want to be on her dirty list.

With her power flowing through me like a rising wind, warm and smelling of flowers that I did not recognize, I didn't even want to burst her bubble. I hadn't felt this good in days. I turned back to the mirror, and my eyes were still that spreading blackness. I should have been scared or screaming, but I wasn't scared, and all I could think was, cool.

"Shouldn't your eyes go back to normal?" he asked, and again I felt that tightness of fear in him.

"Eventually, but if we really want answers to our questions, we need to go back and ask her."

He gave one quick nod, after you, and I realized that Edward didn't trust me at his back. He thought that she had possessed me. I didn't argue with him. I just walked through the door first and went back to talk to Itzpapalotl. I hoped Ramirez hadn't tried to put handcuffs on her. She wouldn't like that, and what she didn't like, her followers didn't like, and there were a hundred and two vampires. I had no idea how many werejaguars she had. This was a feeding not meant for them. But it was a small army, and Ramirez hadn't brought that much backup.

Chapter 52

RAMIREZ HADN'T PUT cuffs on anyone, but he had called for more backup. There were four more uniforms in the room, and about twenty werejaguars. The audience was watching it all as if it were part of the show. I guess if they could sit through what had been done to Seth, they could sit through a little police action.

I was ahead of Edward as we came into the room. He fell a step behind me, the way we often did when one of us was going to be in charge of the next few minutes. Maybe my eyes were glowing black pits, but Edward still trusted me to calm the situation. Good to know.

The werejaguars were moving through the tables, trying to flank the cops. The uniforms had their hands on their guns. The holsters were unbuckled. It wasn't going to take much to get a gun drawn and the shit to hit the fan. Be a shame to push this big a button when the vampires weren't trying to hurt anybody.

One of the jaguars was moving again, trying to close the circle around the police. I touched his arm. His power trembled over my hand, and it was more than just my own power, or the marks, that flared and answered that rush. He looked down at me and saw the eyes or felt her power, whatever it was, when I said, "Back up, go stand with the others." He did it. Progress. Now if only the police would be as reasonable.

I turned to the police and started walking towards them. One of the new uniforms said, "Shit," hand on gun, other hand out like a traffic stop. "Don't come any closer."

"Ramirez," I said, and made sure my voice carried.

"It's okay. She's with us," he said.

"But her eyes," the uniform said.

"She's with us. Let her through, now." Ramirez's voice was low, but the anger carried.

The uniforms parted like a curtain, very careful not to touch me as I went past. I guess I couldn't blame them, though I wanted to. I was finally at the table with Edward behind me, and the nervous uniforms beyond him. I faced Itzpapalotl across the table. Pinotl was at her side, but they were no longer holding hands. His eyes were still as black as mine, but hers were normal. Strangely, with the hood pushed back to show that delicate face and those normal seeming eyes, she looked the most human of the three of us.

Ramirez had laid some of the pictures on the table. "Tell me what this is." It sounded like a question he'd asked before.

She looked at me.

"Do you know what it is?" I asked.

"No, I truly do not. It does look like one of our artisans could have made it, but the eyes are stones that came with the Spaniards. I do not recognize all the elements of the symbolism."

"But you recognize some of them," I said.

"Yes."

"What do you recognize?"

"The bodies around the base could be the ones you drink."

"You mean like you did with Seth tonight?"

She nodded.

"What is it holding in its hands?"

"It could be many things, but I think it is the lesser things of the body. The heart is spoken for, as are the bones, and many other parts, but no god feeds on the ..." she frowned searching for the word, "... intestines, and other viscera."

"That makes sense," I said.

I felt Ramirez shift beside me, as if he badly wanted to say it does. But he kept quiet because he was a good cop, and she was talking to me. Did it really matter why? Not right that second it didn't.

"You saw the creature that..." it was my turn to hesitate. If the police knew what Nicky had done, it was an automatic death sentence. But frankly, he deserved it. The werewolves that he had sucked dry hadn't been willing sacrifices. And he'd cut them up, knowing they were still alive, he'd cut them up and sewn them into that monster behind the bar. It was one of the worst things I'd come across, and that was saying a lot.

I made my decision and knew that it would eventually cost Nicky his life. "You saw the creature that Nicky Baco made?"

She nodded. "I saw. It is a corruption of a great gift."

"Does his master gain power through it just like you do?"

"Yes, and Nicky Baco gains power through it, much as Pinotl does. As you have."

"Can he pass that power to others, like maybe a werewolf pack?"

She seemed to think about that, head to one side, then finally nodded. "It would be possible to share with wereanimals if you had some bond with them of a mystical nature."

"He's vargamor for the local pack," I said.

"I am not familiar with the word vargamor."

It was a wolf term. "It's their witch, their brujo, and they are bound to the pack."

"Then certainly he could share the power with them."

"Nicky said he didn't know where this god lay."

"He lies," she said. "You do not gain this power without the touch of your god's hand."

I'd gotten that from the images that had filled me, but I wanted it confirmed.

"Then Nicky should be able to take us to the place where the god is hiding?"

She nodded. "He knows."

"Do you have a problem with us hunting down and killing a god from your pantheon?"

A look crossed her face that I didn't understand. "If it is a god, then you cannot kill it, and if you can kill it, then it is not a god. I do not mourn the death of false gods."

It was kind of funny coming from her, but I let it go. It wasn't my job to convince her what she was, or what she wasn't. "Thank you for your help, Itzpalotl."

She gave me a long look, and I knew what she wanted, but... "You are indeed a goddess, but I cannot serve two masters," I said.

"His power is lust, and you deny him his power."

I felt the heat rush up my face and wondered what a blush looked like with glowing black eyes. It wasn't what she'd said. It was me knowing what she'd seen in my head. She knew more intimate details than my best friend. Just as I'd shared what she and Pinotl considered a very private and intimate moment of their sharing. Fair is fair, but somehow I didn't think Itzpapalotl blushed.

"I thought I was just denying him sex."

She looked at me the way you'd look a child that was deliberately misunderstanding a point. "Tell me, Anita, what is the base of my power?"

The question surprised me, but I answered it; the time for lying between us was past. "Power, you feed off of pure power regardless of the source."

She smiled, and that thread of power in me smiled with her, made me feel glowy all over. "Now, what is your master's base of power?"

I'd been running from this particular truth for a very long time. Not all master vampires had a secondary power base, another way to draw energy, other than blood or human servants or animals to call. But some did, and Jean-Claude was one of them.

"Anita," she said, as if reminding me that I was supposed to be saying something.

"Sex, his base of power is sex," I said.

Again, she smiled happily at me, and I felt that warm answering glow. It was good to be truthful. It was good to be smart. It was good to please her. And that of course was one of her dangers. If you stayed near her long enough, it might become an end in itself to please her. Even thinking it, I couldn't be afraid of her. Good that I didn't live in Albuquerque.

"By denying him and your wolf, you cripple not just the triad of power, but him. You have crippled him, Anita. You have crippled your master."

I heard myself say, "I'm sorry."

"It is not me that you must be sorry to. It is him. Go home and beg his forgiveness, lay yourself at his feet and feed his power."

I closed my eyes, because what I really wanted to do was nod and just agree. I was pretty sure the spell would wear off before I got home to St. Louis, but putting this woman and Jean-Claude together as a team would have been my undoing. Even now, I was glad he was hundreds of miles away, because I nodded, eyes still closed.

She took the nod as assent. "Good, very good. If your master is grateful for my aid in this matter, let him contact me. I know that we can come to an understanding."

And for the first time since she'd zapped me, I felt a thrill of fear. I looked at her through a veil of her power and was afraid of her.

She read it in me. "You should always be afraid of gods, Anita. If you are not afraid, then you are a fool and you are not a fool." She looked past me to Ramirez. "I believe that I have helped you all that I can, Detective Ramirez."

He said, "Anita?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it's time to go see Nicky Baco."

"If Nicky lied to us, then so did his pack leader," Edward said, "because he said Nicky was telling the truth about not knowing where the monster was."

"If Nicky can share this kind of power with the werewolves, then I know why the pack lied."

"The werewolves will fight to protect Nicky," Edward said.

We looked at each other. "It'll be a blood bath if the police go in force." I shook my head. "But what choice do we have?"

"Nicky isn't at the bar," Ramirez said.

We turned to him, said in unison, "Where is he?"

"In the hospital. Someone beat the shit out of him."

Edward and I exchanged glances, and we both smiled. "Back to the hospital, then," I said.

He nodded. "Back to the hospital."

I looked at Ramirez. "If that's all right with you?"

"Can you prove what you've been saying about Baco?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Then it's a death sentence. He'll know that. I've seen Baco in an interrogation. He's tough, and he knows that he has nothing to gain and everything to lose by telling us the truth."

"Then we'll have to find something that he's more afraid of than being executed." I couldn't help it. I turned and looked at Itzpapalotl. I met her eyes and there was no pull to them now. Her own power protected me from her. No stars, no endless night, just a dark knowledge of what I was thinking, and her approval of the plan.

"We can't do anything illegal," Ramirez said.

"Of course not," I said.

"I mean it, Anita."

I looked at him, and watched him flinch when he met my eyes, "Would I do that to you?"

He searched my face as if trying to decipher it. It was the way I looked at Edward sometimes, or Jean-Claude. Finally, he said, "I don't know what you'd do." And that, for better or worse, was the truth.

Chapter 53

EDWARD GOT HIS SUNGLASSES out of the glove compartment and handed them to me before we went inside the hospital. My eyes hadn't changed back, though I knew the effect was beginning to wear off, because the fact that my eyes were still black and glowy was beginning to worry me. It was a good sign.

Nicky Baco was not in a private room. The police had his roommate moved to a different room. Nicky was in traction, and wasn't going anywhere. He lay in the bed and looked smaller than I knew he was. The leg that had been badly broken was in a cast from toe to thigh. Little pulleys and cords held his leg up at an odd angle that must have been hell on the back.

Ramirez had been questioning Nicky for about thirty minutes and was getting nowhere. Edward and I leaned against the wall and watched the show. But Nicky had done exactly what we'd feared he'd do. He'd grasped his situation and his options right away. He was going to die. So why should he help us?

"We know where the monster you made is, Nicky. We know what you did. Help us stop this thing before it kills again."

"And what?" Nicky said. "I know the law. There's no life in prison for a witch that uses magic to kill. It's an automatic death sentence. You got nothing to offer me, Ramirez."

I pushed away from the wall and touched Ramirez's arm. He looked at me, and the frustration was already showing. He'd been informed that Lieutenant Marks was on the way. He wanted to crack Baco before Marks arrived so he would get credit and not his lieutenant. Political, but the reality in most police work.

"Can I ask a few questions, Detective?"

He took a breath, let it out slow. "Sure." He stepped back to let me stand beside the bed.

I looked down at Nicky. Someone had handcuffed one of his wrists to the bed rail. I wasn't sure it was necessary with the traction, but it made a nice point. "What would the Red Woman's Husband do if he knew you gave away his secret hideout?"

He stared up at me, and even through the sunglasses I could see the hate in his eyes. I could also see the fast rise and fall of his chest, the thud of the pulse in his neck. He was scared.

"Answer me, Nicky."

"He'd kill me."

"How?"

That made him frown. "What do you mean, how?"

"I mean what method of death would he use? How would he kill you?"

Nicky shifted in the bed, trying to find a comfortable spot. The leg pulled tight, and he jerked on the handcuffed wrist, making it rattle up and down the bar. There was no comfortable position for Nicky tonight.

"He'd probably send his monster after me. It'd cut me up and gut me like it's done to the others."

"His minion slaughtered all the witches or psychics, and skinned the mundanes. That's it, isn't it?"

"If you're so smart, you don't need to ask me. You have all the answers."

"Not all of them," I said. I touched the bed rail that he was cuffed to, wrapped my hands around it on either side of the cuff so he couldn't slide it

without hitting one of my hands. "I've seen the bodies, Nicky. It's a bad way to go, but there are worse things."

He gave a harsh laugh. "Being gutted alive—doesn't get much worse than that," he said.

I took the sunglasses off and let him see the eyes.

He stopped breathing for a heartbeat. He just stared up at me, eyes growing wide, breath trapped in his throat.

I touched his hand, and he screamed. "Don't touch me! Don't you fucking touch me!" He was jerking on the handcuff frantically, over and over, as if that would help.

Ramirez came to stand on the other side of the bed across from me. He looked a question at me.

"I didn't hurt him, Hernando."

"Get her the fuck away from me."

"Tell us where the monster is, and I'll send her out of the room."

Nicky looked from one to the other of us, and the fear showed on his face now. You didn't have to have vampire vision to see it. "You can't do this to me. You're the cops."

"We're not doing anything to you," Ramirez said.

Nicky's eyes flicked back to me. "You're the cops. You can execute me, but you can't torture me. That's the law."

"You're right, Nicky. The police aren't allowed to torture prisoners." I leaned in close and whispered, "But I'm not the police."

He started tugging on the chain again, rattling it up and down the bar. "Get her away from me, now! I want a lawyer. I want a fucking lawyer."

Ramirez turned to the two uniformed cops waiting by the door. "Go call Mr. Baco a lawyer."

The two cops looked at each other. "Both of us?" one asked.

Ramirez nodded. "Yeah, both of you."

They exchanged another look and went for the door. The taller one asked, "How long you think this phone call should take?"

"A while, and knock before you come back in."

The uniforms left, and it was just Edward, Ramirez, Nicky, and me. Nicky was staring up at Ramirez. "You're a good cop, Ramirez. I've never heard any dirt on you. You won't let her hurt me. You're a good guy. You won't let her hurt me." His voice was high and frantic, but each time he said it, he seemed more sure of himself, more certain that Ramirez's goodness would be his shield.

He was probably right on one thing, Ramirez wouldn't let me hurt him, but I was willing to bet that Ramirez would let me scare him.

I reached out like I'd stroke Nicky's face. He jerked back, out of reach.

"Ramirez, shit, please, don't let her touch me."

"I'll be over there if you need me, Anita." He walked away from the bed and went to sit in a chair at the end of the room near Edward.

Nicky screamed after him, "Ramirez, please, please!"

I touched his mouth with fingertips, and he froze under that gentle touch. His eyes moved slowly, so slowly until he was looking up into mine. "Shhh," I said and lowered my face towards his, as if I'd kiss his forehead.

He opened his mouth, drew a breath, and shrieked. I grabbed his face between my hands the way I'd seen Pinotl do, but I knew that it didn't have to be the hands. I could suck him dry with a kiss. "Shut up, Nicky, shut up!"

He started to cry. "Please, oh, god, please don't."

"Did the werewolves beg like this?" I asked. "Did they, Nicky?" I pressed my hands into his face until the skin puckered.

"Yes," he said, voice squeezed by how tight I was holding his face. I had to force myself to release his face, or I was going to leave red marks. Couldn't mark him up. Couldn't give Marks a reason to punish Ramirez.

I leaned my arms on the bed rail that he was chained to. He pulled his hand to the length of the chain, but didn't struggle. He watched me the way mice watch cats when they know there's no way out. I leaned towards him. It was a very casual movement, but it put my face close to his, not close enough to touch but close enough that he got an up close look at the eyes.

"You see, Nicky, there are worse things."

"You need me to bring the others back. You do me, and I can't give them back their lives."

"You see, Nicky. I don't need you anymore. I know how to bring them back all by myself." I leaned over, balancing on tiptoe and my arms on the rail, leaning in, as if to whisper in his ear. "Your services are no longer needed."

"Please," he whispered.

I spoke with my mouth so close to his face that I could feel my breath coming back from his skin in a warm pulse. "The doctors will certify you dead, Nicky. They'll bury you in a box somewhere, and you'll hear every shovel full of dirt as it hits the coffin lid. You'll lie there in the dark and scream in your head, and no one will hear you. Maybe we'll have to put a jade bead in your mouth and sew it shut to make you lie still."

Tears trailed from his eyes, but his face was blank, as if he didn't know he was crying.

"Tell them where your master is, Nicky, or I swear I will do worse than kill you." I kissed him on the forehead, very gently.

He whimpered.

I kissed the tip of his nose, the way you do with children. I hovered over his mouth. "Tell them, Nicky." I lowered my mouth over his, our lips brushed, and he turned his head.

"I'll tell you. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

I moved away from the bed and let Ramirez move up to take his turn.

A phone rang, and Edward pulled his cell phone from his back pocket. He opened the door and went into the hall to take the call.

Ramirez's voice was not happy. "What do you mean you can't tell me how to get there?" He had his notebook open, his pen poised, and nothing written down.

I started to walk back toward the bed.

Nicky held his hands up as if to ward me off. "I swear to you that I can take you to it, but I can't give you directions and be sure you'll find it. I don't want to send you out into the dark, and have you not find it. You'd blame me, and it wouldn't be my fault."

Ramirez looked at me.

I nodded. He was too scared to lie, and it was too stupid a story to be made up.

"I can take you to it. If I'm there, I can take you to it."

"Of course, if you're there, you can warn your master," I said.

"I wouldn't do that." But I saw the change in his skin color, the rise in breathing, the flick of his eyes.

"Liar," I said.

"All right, but I'd be a fool not to try and get away. They're going to kill me, Anita. Why shouldn't I try to get away?"

I guess I couldn't blame him on that one. "Call Leonora Evans. She's a witch. Have her ward him, make sure that he can't contact his master by anything other than yelling."

"And the yelling?" Ramirez said.

"Gag him when the time comes," I said.

"You trust Leonora Evans to do this?"

"She saved my life, so I guess I do."

Ramirez nodded. "Okay, I'll call her in." He looked at the traction ropes. "The doctors aren't going to want him going anywhere tonight."

"Talk to them, Hernando. Explain what's at stake. Besides, what good does it do to heal him if you're just going to turn around and execute him?"

Ramirez looked at me. "That was harsh."

"Yeah, it was, but it's still true."

Edward knocked and came in the door just far enough to say, "I need you out here."

I glanced at Ramirez. "I think we can take it from here, thank you," he said.

"My pleasure." I slipped the sunglasses back on as I followed Edward out into the hall. The moment I looked at Edward's face, I knew something bad had happened. He didn't show it the way a normal person would, but it was there, the tightness around his eyes, the way he held himself, carefully, as if he were afraid to move too suddenly or he'd break. I don't think I'd have seen it without the vampire vision.

"What's wrong?" I stepped in close, because something told me this was not for police consumption. With Edward it so seldom was.

He took me by the arm down the hallway, further away from the uniforms that were staring our way. "Riker has Donna's kids." His grip tightened, and I didn't tell him it hurt. "He has Peter and Becca. He's going to kill them if I don't bring you to him now. He knows we're at the hospital. He's given me an hour to make the drive, then he starts torturing them. If I'm not there in two hours, he'll kill them. If I bring the police in, he'll kill them."

I touched his arm. If it had been almost any other friend, I'd have hugged him.

"Is Donna okay?"

He seemed to realize he was digging into my arm and let me go. "This is Donna's night at her group. I don't know if the babysitter's still alive, but Donna won't even be home for two, maybe three hours. She doesn't know."

"Let's go," I said.

We turned and started walking down the hallway. Ramirez yelled behind us.

"Where are you two going? I thought you'd want to be in on it."

"Personal emergency," Edward said, and kept walking.

I turned around, walking backwards, trying to talk at the same time. "In two hours call Ted's house. The call will be forwarded to his cell phone. We'll join you on the monster hunt."

"Why two hours?" he asked.

"The emergency will be taken care of by then," I said. I had to touch Edward's arm, to keep walking backwards and not fall.

"Everything could be over two hours from now," Ramirez said.

"I'm sorry." Edward was at the doors that led into the next section of hallway. He pulled me through, the doors shut behind us. He was already punching numbers on the cell phone. "I'll have Olaf and Bernardo meet us at the turnoff to Riker's place."

I don't know which of them answered, but he gave a long list of things to bring, and he made them write it down. We were out of the hospital, through the parking lot and getting into his Hummer before he clicked the telephone off.

Edward drove, and all I had to do was think. Not a good thing. I was remembering last May when some bad guys kidnapped Richard's mother and younger brother. They'd sent us a box with a lock of his brother's hair, and his mother's finger in it. Everyone that had touched them was dead. Everyone that had hurt them would never hurt anyone again. I only had two regrets: one, that I hadn't gotten there in time to save them from being tortured; two, that the bad guys hadn't suffered enough before they died.

If Riker hurt Peter and Becca ... I wasn't sure I wanted to see what Edward would do to him. I prayed as we rode through the darkness, "Please, God, don't let them be hurt. Let them be safe." Riker could be lying. They could already be dead, but I didn't think so. Maybe because I needed them to be alive. I remembered Becca in her sunflower dress with that sprig of lilacs in her hair, laughing in Edward's arms. I saw Peter's sullen resentment when Edward and his mother touched. I remembered the way Peter had stood up to Russell in the restaurant when he threatened Becca. He was a brave kid. I tried not to think about what could be happening to them right this second.

Edward had gone very, very quiet. When I looked at him, the dark crystal vision showed me further into him than I'd ever seen before. I didn't have to guess whether he cared for the children. I could see it. He loved them. As much as he was capable of it, he loved them. If someone hurt them his vengeance was going to be a thing of great and awesome terror. I wouldn't be able to stop him

no matter what he wanted to do to them. All I would be able to do was stand and watch and try not to get too much blood on my shoes.

Chapter 54

IT WAS A DARK night. It didn't seem to be cloudy, just dark, as if something besides clouds was blocking the moon. Or maybe that was just my frame of mind. The one thing I'd wanted to avoid while I was doing my favor for Edward was dealing with Edward at his most illegal. We'd picked up Olaf and Bernardo at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere with those empty rolling hills stretching out and out into the darkness. There had been no cover except some scrub bushes, and when Edward stopped the car and cut the engine, I thought we'd have a wait ahead of us.

"Get out. We'll need to suit up." He'd gotten out without waiting to see if I was getting out or not.

I got out. The silence seemed as big as the sky overhead, an immense emptiness. A man stood up not five feet in front of me. I had the Browning pointed before the man held a flashlight under his face and I realized it was Bernardo.

Olaf had magically appeared on the other side of the road. There was no ditch on either side of the road. There was nothing on the side of the road. What was even more impressive was that they began lifting large black bags of equipment out of that same nowhere. If we'd had the time, I'd have asked how they did it, though I doubt I'd have understood the answer. Training probably. Training I didn't have, though it might be nice to get it.

Of course, most of the things I hid from could have heard Bernardo's and Olaf's heart beat no matter how well hidden they were. It was almost a relief to be up against mere humans. It meant you could at least hide in the dark.

Twenty minutes later we were on the road again, and Edward hadn't been joking on the suiting up part. I'd had to strip to my bra and put on a Kevlar vest. It was my size.

Which meant it had to be a special purchase because Kevlar doesn't come in my size off the rack.

"It's your prize for spotting all the weapons," Edward said. He always knows just what to buy me.

I needed to adjust the shoulder holster after putting on the vest, but I was told to do it in the car. I didn't argue. We had less than ten minutes to get to Riker's place. My T-shirt didn't quite fit over the body armor. I mean it did fit, but not well. Bernardo handed me a black, long-sleeved, man's shirt. "Put it on over the T-shirt. Button it up part way after you've got your holsters adjusted."

The shoulder holster was just a matter of readjusting straps. The inner pants holster just didn't work once the vest was on. I put the Firestar down the front of my jeans and angled it until I was as happy as I was going to get with the way it fit. It still dug into my stomach, but I wanted it where I could get it fast. I could live with bruises tomorrow.

I practiced drawing the Browning through the half open shirt a few times, though it's hard to practice drawing from a sitting position, but we didn't have time for me to get out and practice standing.

"You guys are making me nervous, putting me in Kevlar."

"You didn't argue," Bernardo said.

"We don't have time to argue. Tell me what to do, I'll do it. But why the Kevlar?"

"Olaf," Edward said.

"Riker employs twenty men, ten are just hired muscle. We've met half of them already. But he's got ten that he keeps close to him. Three ex-seals, two ex-army rangers, one ex-police, and four guys who have black files. Which means whatever they do or did, it's top secret and maybe rogue."

I remembered what FBI Agent Bradford had said about Olaf. That he had a black file. "Isn't this a little too commando raidish for a pot hunter?"

Olaf continued like I hadn't said anything. Bernardo started showing me the contents of a large leather purse at the same time. I listened to Olaf and watched Bernardo.

"Riker has connections in South America that supply him with contraband. Suspicions are that he's running more than just artifacts. Maybe drugs. The locals have no idea how big a bad guy they've got here."

"When did you find all this out?"

"After they came to the house," Edward said.

"How did you find all this out?" I asked.

"If we told you, we'd have to kill you," Olaf said.

I started to smile, thinking it was a joke, but I caught a glimpse of his face as the only car we'd seen passed by, flashing lights over us as it passed. He didn't look like he was joking.

Bernardo said, "This looks like a can of hair spray. You can even squirt out a small amount of cresol." He demonstrated. "But lift here." He did and revealed a second layer of metal. "This is the pin. This is the depressor. It's an incendiary grenade. You pull the pin, let up on the depressor, and you have three seconds to get a minimum of fifty feet away from it. It's got white phosphorus in it. This shit burns under water. If you get a tiny piece on your sleeve, it will eat through the cloth, your skin, bone, all the way to the other side."

He clicked the secret compartment shut and handed it to me. "Damned heavy for hairspray," I said.

"Yeah, but how many ex-navy whatevers are going to notice?"

He had a point. Next was a small thing of breath freshener that was really heavy-duty mace. A key ring that when you hit the button on it, a four-inch blade popped out.

There was a heavy ink pen that actually wrote, that if you pressed the little switch, a six-inch blade came out the end. There was real perfume with a higher than normal alcohol content. "Go for the eyes," was the advice. A disposable lighter, because you never know when you might need some fire, and a package of cigarettes to explain the lighter. There was a transmitter in the collar of the black shirt that would allow them to find me inside the buildings or at least find the shirt. I was beginning to feel like I'd been shanghaied into a James Bond movie.

I lifted out a hairbrush with a heavier than normal handle. "What's this?"

"It's a hairbrush," Bernardo said.

Oh. I looked at Edward. The only thing he'd changed was putting a white Kevlar vest under his undershirt and white shirt. He was even still wearing his cowboy hat. Olaf and Bernardo were both dressed in commando black, and backpacks that looked full. They were bristling with weapons, blacked so they didn't show up at night, but not hidden.

"I take it that the guys here aren't going in the front door with us," I said

"No," Edward said. He hit the brakes, and Olaf and Bernardo slipped out of the car and into the darkness. Because I knew what I was looking for, I could see them in a running crouch going over the hill. But if you hadn't been looking, you'd have missed them.

"You're scaring me, Edward. I'm not like a commando raid, James Bond kind of girl. Where the hell did you get a hairspray grenade?"

"A lot of female secret service now. It's a prototype."

"Nice to know where my tax dollars are going."

We were going down a long gravel driveway. There was a big house sitting; up on a hill. Lights blazed out of the windows as if someone had gone through and hit every light, as if they were scared of the dark. If Riker really thought the monsters were coming, the analogy was accurate.

Edward outlined his plan as we drove the last few yards. I was to pretend to do a spell of protection for Riker. While I delayed, Olaf and Bernardo would try to find the kids. If they couldn't find them or couldn't get them out, Olaf was supposed to find a man and kill him as messily as possible in a short space of time, leave the body where it would be found, and hope to make Riker think the monsters had already gotten inside. They might take us to the point where the monster kill had been found to get my expert advice, which would put us and whoever was with us, hopefully Riker, near where Olaf and Bernardo could help us kill them. If that failed, Bernardo would start blowing things up. Which would create panic and hopefully allow us to find the kids. Unless Bernardo decided the structure wasn't sturdy enough to blow up and not cave in around us. Then we'd need another plan.

Edward stopped the car at a gravel turnaround near the crest of the hill. Men armed with automatic submachine guns walked towards the car. None of them were Harold or Russell. They moved like Olaf and Edward moved, like predators.

"You don't believe they're going to give back the kids, do you?"

"Do you?" he asked. He'd put his hands on the steering wheel at ten and two, in plain sight.

I raised my hands in the air where they could be seen. "No," I said.

"If the kids are okay, we'll do as little killing as possible, but if the kids aren't okay, it's zero survivors."

"The police are going to find out about this one, Edward. You will blow your Ted 'Good ol' boy' Forrester image all to hell."

"If the kids don't make it out, I don't give a damn."

"How will Olaf and Bernardo know whether to kill or not?"

"There's a wire worked into my vest. They've both got ear pieces, so they'll be able to hear."

"You're going to tell them to kill," I said.

"If I have to."

The machine-gun-toting men were at either side of the car. They made motions for us to get out. We did what they wanted, being sure to keep our hands in sight. We wouldn't want any misunderstandings.

Chapter 55

THE MACHINE GUN GUY on my side wasn't that tall, five foot eight or maybe shorter, but his arms were corded with so much muscle that veins stood out against his skin like snakes. Some people vein up if they lift even a little, but most of the time you don't get that much popping up without some major effort. It was as if he was trying to make up for the lack of height by being obscenely strong. Most muscle-bound guys are slow and rarely know how to fight. They rely on sheer strength and just being a bully. But this one moved smoothly, almost gliding on his feet, sort of sideways, which hinted at some martial art training. He moved well, and his bicep was bigger than my neck. He was also pointing a very modern looking submachine gun at me. Muscle bound, trained fighter, and better armed than me—weren't there rules against that?

"Lean on the hood, assume the position," he said.

I put my hands on the hood and leaned. The engine was still warm, not hot, but warm. Muscle man kicked my legs. "Further apart." I did what he asked. I looked across the hood and met Edward's eyes. He was getting the same treatment on his side from a taller, slender man who wore silver frame glasses. Edward's eyes were at their empty, pitiless best. But somehow I knew he wasn't pleased. When I realized that, I realized I still had the sunglasses on, and my vision was still good through dark lenses at night. Funny, how neither Olaf nor Bernardo had asked in the car. There hadn't been time for many questions.

The vampire vision had toned down, but it was still there or I'd have been night blind with the glasses on. Wondered what Muscle Man would think of the eyes.

He kicked my right leg again, hard enough that it hurt. "I said, lean!" He had that drill sergeant voice going.

"If I lean any further, I'll be lying down."

I felt him move behind me and had my head turned to the side when he slapped me in the back of the head, hard enough that my cheek hit the hood. It would have hurt if it had been the front, nose, mouth. He'd meant it to hurt.

"Do what you're told, and you won't get hurt."

I was beginning not to believe him, but I leaned, cheek pressed to the hood, arms out flat like I was being nailed down, feet spread so far that one good foot sweep would have dumped me to the ground. But it was nice and unsteady, the way he wanted it apparently. In a way it was flattering. He was treating me as a dangerous person. A lot of bad guys don't. Usually, they live to regret it, but not always. If muscle man died tonight, it wasn't going to be because of carelessness.

He searched me, top to bottom, even running his fingers through my hair, He'd have found Bernardo's stiletto hairpins that the others had missed at the house. He took the sunglasses off and looked at them as if looking for things that I would never have thought to find in a pair of sunglasses. He didn't really look at my face, didn't catch the eyes, or maybe they weren't glowing black anymore. Muscle Man found everything but the transmitter that was sewn somewhere in the shirt and the contents of the purse. He did dump it out on the ground and shine a flashlight on every item. He made sure the ink pen wrote, that the hairspray sprayed, and took the breath freshener mace as if he recognized it on sight. But that was all he took out of the purse, though once it was empty, he kneaded it with his left hand, the right still holding the submachine gun.

"This wouldn't be one of those with a compartment for a gun, would it?"

I'd raised my head enough to watch him empty the purse, so we could look at each other while he held the gun on me and glanced down at things. "No, it wouldn't be."

"I was betting it would be," he said.

"Nope," I said.

He finished by standing on the purse and stomping it flat. Glad it wasn't really my purse. "I guess there's no gun," he said.

"Told ya."

He took three big steps back, out of reach. He was treating me like I was dangerous. Darn. I sometimes counted on passing for harmless, but I guess I'd been packing too much hardware to pass for anything but dangerous.

"You can stand up."

I stood up.

He tossed the sunglasses to me. I caught them. My eyes were in the light from the house now, but he never flinched. Apparently, the glowy stuff had faded. He motioned with the gun for me to pick up the contents of the purse. I

put everything back inside and almost put the sunglasses in, but decided to put them back on. Two reasons: one, when the night got too dark to wear them, I'd know the vampire stuff had left me completely; two, knowing Edward, they were probably expensive, and I didn't want to get them scratched up.

He motioned with the gun, and said, "Just walk slow, straight to the house, and it'll be all right."

"Why don't I believe you?" I asked.

He looked at me with eyes as dead and empty as a doll's. "I don't like smart mouths."

"You'll have to wait until I do the spell before you can shoot me," I said.

"So they tell me. Get moving."

The slender guy with glasses who had Edward at gunpoint was waiting for muscle man to get me moving. When I started walking, Glasses moved Edward forward. They kept us walking side by side, telling us to stay together. They kept us together so that if they had to start shooting they could kill us both with one spray of bullets, True professionals. I hoped Olaf and Bernardo were as good as they were supposed to be. If they weren't, we were in deep trouble.

The house was one of those nouveau architect homes that people with more money than taste are always hiring people to build. It looked like a giant had dumped white concrete in a free form slide putting windows and doors here and there like raisins in an oatmeal cookie. A nice surprise, but never where you expect to find them. The mismatched windows made the house look deformed. The door was off center but round, like a wide open mouth. The windows were not only round and mismatched, but the number of windows didn't seem to match the floor plan as if some of the windows looked into blank walls where no room could possibly be.

White steps led up to the round door like one of those cartoon tongues that spill out of mouths and go tumbling downstairs. The steps weren't wide enough for us to walk side by side, so Edward moved a couple of steps ahead. Neither of the men behind us protested, so we kept moving.

It had been so long since I carried a purse instead of a fanny pack that it felt awkward on my shoulder. I had to keep a hand on it to keep it from swinging around. I'd put it on the left shoulder, leaving my right hand uncompromised out of habit. Not that I had anything left to draw or pull or whatever. But it was always good to have your strong hand empty, just in case. So Edward and Dolph had always told me.

At the top of the porch in a spill of bright yellow light, they told us to stop. We stopped. They moved up to flank us and move a little back to either side. I didn't understand what they were doing at first, until the door opened and another man pointed the same kind of submachine gun at us. Muscle Man and Glasses had moved out of his line of fire and moved so they wouldn't catch him in their fire line. It is not easy to use three submachine guns in that small a space without crossing your own men, but they made it look easy, very smooth. The other men had carried an extra clip for the sub guns in a thigh holster, but this one had two clips at his waist.

The man in the door was African American and tall, like Olaf's height, very six foot plus. He was also completely bald just like Olaf. If they ever met, they'd look like light and dark versions of each other.

"What took so long?" he asked; his voice matched the body, deep.

"They were carrying a lot of hardware," Muscle Man said.

The new guy was smirking at me. "From the way Russell talked I expected you to look like Amanda. You're just a little bitch."

"Amanda the Amazon that came to Ted's house?" I asked.

He nodded.

I shrugged. "I wouldn't believe much that Russell said."

"He said you broke his nose, kicked him in the balls, and beat his head in with a piece of wood."

"Everything but the last bit. If I'd beaten his head in, he'd be dead."

"What's the hold up, Simon?" Muscle Man asked.

"Deuce is having some trouble locating the wand."

"Deuce would have trouble keeping track of his head if it wasn't attached," Muscle Man said.

"True, but we still wait." He was looking at both of us, the gun held easily in his big hands. "What's with the sunglasses, bitch?"

I let the name calling go. They had all the guns. "They look cool," I said

He laughed then, a warm growly sound. A nice laugh if he hadn't been armed.

"What about you, Ted? I hear you are a bad dude."

Edward transformed into Ted, like a magician deciding he was going to have to perform after all. "I'm a bounty hunter. I kill monsters."

Simon looked at him, and there was something about the way he did it that said the Ted act wasn't fooling him. "Van Cleef recognized your picture, Undertaker."

Undertaker?

Ted smiled and shook his head. "I don't know anybody named Van Cleef."

Simon just looked at Glasses. Edward had time to turn his head so he took the blow on his shoulder. He moved a step, but didn't fall. Simon gave another look. Glasses hit his knee, and Edward collapsed onto one knee.

"We only need the girl up and running," Simon said. "So I'll ask you this just once, do you know Van Cleef?"

I stood there, not sure what to do. We were so totally covered by the guns, and the priority had to be getting the children out. So no heroics until they were safe. If we died, I wasn't a hundred percent sure that Bernardo and Olaf would risk their lives to get them out. So I stood there and looked at Edward kneeling on the porch, waiting for him to give me some kind of sign what I was supposed to do.

Edward looked up at Simon. "Yes."

"Yes, what, asshole?"

"Yes, I know Van Cleef."

Simon smiled broadly, obviously happy with himself. "Boys, this is the Undertaker, the man that still has the highest body count of anyone Van Cleef ever trained."

I felt, rather than saw, the two men twitch. The information not only made sense to them, but it scared them. It made them afraid of Edward. Who the hell was Van Cleef, and when had he trained Edward, and for what? I wanted to know the answers, but not badly enough to ask. Later, if we survived, I'd ask Edward. Maybe he'd even tell me. "I don't know you," Edward said.

"I came in just after you left," Simon said.

"Simon?" Edward made the name a question, and the big man seemed to understand what was being asked.

"As in whatever the fuck Simon says, you damn well better do."

How colorful, I thought, but didn't say out loud.

"Can I get up now?" Edward asked.

"If you can stand, then help yourself."

Edward got to his feet. If it hurt, it didn't show. His face was empty, eyes like bits of pale blue ice. I'd seen him kill with that face.

Simon's smile faltered around the edges. "You're supposed to be one mean son of a bitch."

"Van Cleef never said I was mean." He sounded very sure of that.

Simon's smile disappeared altogether. "No, he didn't. He said you were dangerous."

"What would Van Cleef say about you?" Edward asked.

"Same thing," Simon said.

"I doubt that," Edward said.

They looked at each other, and there was a weight and a testing like something nearly visible in the air between them. Muscle Man's nerve broke first. "Where the hell is Deuce with the wand?"

Simon blinked, and switched very cold brown eyes to the man behind me. "Shut up, Mickey."

Mickey? It didn't have quite the ring to it that the other nicknames did. Of course, Simon hadn't sounded too tough until it was explained.

"Van Cleef didn't recognize her picture."

"No reason he should," Edward said.

"The newspapers call her the Executioner."

"That's what the vampires call her."

"Why do they call her that?"

"Why do you think?"

Simon looked at me. "How many vampire kills you got, bitch?"

If I had a chance tonight, I was going to teach Simon some manners, but not right now. "I don't know exactly."

"Guess."

I thought about it. "I stopped keeping track around thirty."

Simon laughed. "Hell, every man on this porch has more kills than that."

More kills than thirty? Who the hell were these guys? I shrugged. "I didn't know it was a competition."

"Did you count the human kills?" Edward asked.

I shook my head. "He asked about vampire kills, not human."

"Add those in," he said.

That was harder. "Eleven, twelve maybe."

"Forty-three," Simon said, "you got Mickey beat, but not Rooster."

Apparently, Rooster was Glasses.

"Add in the shapeshifters," Edward said.

It had turned into a competition. I wasn't really sure that I wanted to seem as dangerous as I really was, but I trusted Edward's judgment. "Oh, hell, Edward, I don't know." I started counting in my head. Finally, I said, "Seven."

"So fifty," he said.

Just hearing it out loud made me want to cringe. It sounded so Psychos'R'Us.

"I've still got you beat, bitch," Simon said.

He was beginning to get on my nerves. "The fifty only counts the people I did personally with a weapon."

"You mean it doesn't count the ones you killed barehanded?" He smiled when he said it, like he didn't believe it.

"No, I counted those."

The smile got positively condescending. "Then what didn't you count, little bitch."

"Witches, necromancers, things like that."

"Why not count them?" This from Mickey.

I shrugged.

"Because using magic to kill is an automatic death sentence," Edward said.

I frowned at him. "I never said anything about magic."

"We aren't friends," Simon said, "but you can be honest tonight, bitch. We won't tell the cops. Will we, boys?" He laughed and they laughed with him, with that same sort of nervous mirth that Itzpapalotl's vampires had had, like they were afraid not to laugh.

I shrugged. "Most of the fifty are sanctioned kills. The cops already know about them."

"You ever been on trial?" This from the until now silent Rooster.

"No."

"Fifty legal kills," Simon said.

"Give or take," I said.

Simon looked at Edward. They had another one of those weighted staring contests.

"Would Van Cleef like her?"

"Yes, but she wouldn't like him."

"Why not?"

"She's not big on orders and listening to people just because they've got an extra stripe on their shoulder."

"Not disciplined," Simon said.

"She's disciplined. You just got to have more than rank to get her to listen to you."

"She listens to you," Simon said. "She didn't want to talk about her kills, but she took your lead."

His saying that meant Simon was very observant, too observant for comfort actually. I'd underestimated him. Stupid of me. No, not stupid, careless.

Another man came up with the identical gun in his hands. He was just shy of six foot, but seemed smaller, delicate somehow. The hair was a deep brown, cut short, curly. The face was pretty in a girlish kind of way. His skin was that dark tan that isn't really tan at all. He had a set of small headphones around his neck, with wires connecting them to a metal box and a small flat. . . wand attached with a cord to the box. It had to be Deuce and the wand.

I didn't know what it was, but Edward went very still. He knew what it was, and he didn't like it. Not a good sign.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Mickey said.

"Mickey," Simon said, and he said 'Mickey' the way that Edward could say 'Olaf' and get perfect obedience. There was no more comment from the backup players. Simon looked at Deuce. "Do it."

Deuce slipped the headphones on, hit a switch and some knobs on the box, and a light went on on the box. He got a distracted inward look on his face as if he were listening to things we couldn't hear. He started at Edward's hat and worked down, hesitated over the chest area, then continued the sweep. He knelt on the ground beside Edward and waved the wand up the backside of Edward. He was careful to stay out of the line of fire of all three guns. His own gun was on a sling that he pushed far behind his back, keeping it out of the way with a well-placed elbow as he moved.

He stood, slipped the headphones off, and unplugged them from the box. "Listen to this." He waved the wand over Edward's chest. It beeped frantically.

"Take off the shirt," Simon said.

Edward didn't argue, He unbuttoned the shirt and handed it to Deuce, who waved the wand over it. The thing stayed silent.

Deuce waved the wand over Edward's chest again, and the wand beeped. He ran the wand over the shirt in his hand, no noise. Deuce shook his head.

"The undershirt," Simon said.

Edward had to take his hat off. He handed it to me, then lifted the undershirt over his head. The Kevlar looked very artificial and white. He handed the undershirt to Deuce, and we went through the same routine again.

"Take the vest off," Simon said.

"Tell me one thing first," Edward asked. "Are the kids all right?"

"Why the fuck do you care about some bitch's kids?"

Edward just looked at him, but there was something in that look that made Simon take a step back. He noticed what he'd done and took the step back, pointing the gun very solidly at Edward's chest. "Take off the damn vest."

"It's too hot for body armor anyway," Edward said. It seemed an odd thing to say for Edward man of few words, but you had to know Edward to know it

was odd. I had the feeling that Edward had just put the word out for zero survivors. He undid the Velcro, slipped it over his head and handed it to Deuce.

Edward stood there naked from the waist up. He looked fragile beside the musclebound Mickey or the very tall Simon, but they saw in him what I saw in him because unarmed and half-naked they were still scared of him. It was there in the way Simon reacted to him. The way the others, except Deuce kept their distance. Deuce didn't seem to be working on the same instincts as the rest, though he never once crossed the fire line. He made Edward stretch out his hand, or he knelt under the direct line of fire. None of them were careless. It wasn't a good sign.

He ran the wand over the vest. When the wand beeped, he handed it to Simon. Then he ran the wand over Edward's bare chest. Silence. Good, because I think Simon would have said, "Skin," in the same voice he'd said, shirt, undershirt, vest. Just because Edward made him nervous didn't mean he wasn't scary all of his own.

"In the body armor, that's good," Simon said. "Most people, even if they have you strip, don't check the armor."

Edward just looked at him.

"Her next."

Deuce duck-walked in front of us. Just in case someone started shooting, he was safe. No one shot anyone. Of course the night was young. He stood on the other side of me. He didn't bother to put the earphones back on, just ran the wand over me. It beeped. "Hand the hat back to him, please."

Please—refreshing after hearing myself called bitch about a dozen times. "My pleasure," I said and handed Edward's hat back to him.

Deuce had looked up when I spoke, as if he wasn't used to politeness in others either. The wand ran over me, and it beeped at chest level.

"Take the shirt off, bitch," Simon said.

I untucked the shirt and started unbuttoning it. "My name's Anita, not bitch."

"Like I give a fuck," he said.

Fine, I'd tried being nice. I handed the shirt to Deuce and his magic wand.

It beeped, but when he ran it back over me, nothing. He laid the box gently on the ground, the wand on top of it, and started looking at the shirt. In less than a minute he'd found a small wire with a slightly thicker head sewn into the collar of the shirt. "Looks like a transmitter, maybe a homing beacon."

Simon tossed the vest to Deuce. "Cut it open, find out what's inside."

Deuce pulled a gravity knife from his back pocket, did one of those quick wrist movements that spilled the blade open. He went over the vest with his hands first, eyes closed, then he started cutting. It was a longer wire, with a little box attached. "It's a receiver. Someone out there is hearing everything we say."

"Destroy the homer."

Deuce crushed mine under his heel. When it was a little metallic and plastic slimy place on the porch, he smiled up at us as if he'd done a good thing.

Deuce was a few bricks shy of a load. Funny how many people that Edward introduced me to were.

"Who's out there, Undertaker?" Simon asked.

Edward had put his hat back on. It looked funny with the shirt gone, but he seemed perfectly at ease. If he was nervous, you couldn't tell it.

"I am going to ask you this, one more time nice, then it won't be so nice." He seemed to square his shoulders as if he were the one about to take a beating. "Who was on the other end of this wire? Who's out there?"

Edward shook his head.

Simon nodded.

Rooster hit him in the back, and it must have been hard because it drove him to his knees. Something on the butt of the gun broke the skin in two small cuts. He stayed on all fours for a few seconds as if it had stunned him, then he got up, on his feet and faced Simon.

"Answer the question, Undertaker."

Edward shook his head, again. He was ready for the next blow. It staggered him, but he didn't go down. There was a third small cut. The cuts weren't anything, but they showed how much force was being used. He was going to be bruised all to hell come morning.

"Maybe she knows," Mickey said.

"I don't know who they are," I said, and the lie fell smoothly off my tongue. "Edward said we needed backup. He found some."

"You'd come into a situation like this with unknown people at your back? You don't seem that stupid," Simon said.

"Edward vouched for them," I said.

"And you trust him?"

I nodded.

"You trust him with your life?"

"Yes," I said.

Simon looked at me, then back to Edward. "She your squeeze?"

Edward blinked, and I knew that was him trying to buy time to think what answer would be the least painful. "No."

"I'm not sure I believe you, either of you, but if we start beating up the bitch, and she gets too hurt to do the spell, Riker'd be pissed."

"Why don't you have Undertaker ask the backup to come in?" Deuce said.

Everyone sort of froze, then looked at him, Simon said, "What did you say? "

"If they can hear us, why not have him ask them to come up, hands up, that sort of thing."

Simon nodded, then turned back to Edward. "Tell them to come up to the house. Hands where we can see them."

"They won't come," Edward said.

"They'll come or we'll blow your fucking head off." Simon put the short-butted gun to his shoulder, and put the barrel against Edward's forehead. "Ask them to come into the house. Hands up. Throw their guns down."

It was funny how Simon had never once thought it might be the police out there, as if he didn't believe the Undertaker would bring the police to the party.

Edward stared down the barrel of that gun, looked past it, into Simon's eyes, and the look was his usual look. His eyes were cold and empty as winter skies. There was no fear. There was no anything. It was like he wasn't there at all.

Edward may have been calm, but I wasn't. I'd seen enough bad men to know that Simon meant it. More than that, he wanted to do it. He'd feel safer if Edward were dead. I was out of ideas, but I couldn't just stand here and watch it happen.

"Tell them, Undertaker, or I will blow your head all over this porch."

"Even if I asked, they wouldn't come."

Simon pressed the barrel in, so that Edward had to brace his feet against it to keep from being pushed backwards. "You better hope they come. We don't need you alive, just her."

"I need him alive," I said.

Simon's eyes flicked to me, then settled back on Edward. "Lying bitch."

"Are you a witch, Simon?" I asked, though I knew the answer. I'd have spotted it if he had been a practitioner.

"What the fuck does that matter?"

"Then you don't know what I need to do this spell, do you? Your boss would be pissed if you blew away someone I needed to keep him safe from the monsters."

"Why do you need him?" Deuce asked.

I swallowed and tried to think, nothing good was coming. I tried for truth. When I'm out of other options, it still works. "Riker said he wouldn't hurt the kids. He said he wouldn't hurt us. He said he just wanted me to save him from the monster. If you blow ... Ted's brains into the next county, then I'm not going to believe any of Riker's other promises. The second I think that Riker is going to kill the kids and us once I do the job, then I don't have any incentive to help him."

Simon's eyes flicked to me again. "We can give you incentive." I didn't see him nod, but I felt Mickey moving behind me. I've never been good at taking a blow. I moved without thinking and he missed my shoulder, but I'd been right. He knew how to fight. I was turning towards him to do what, I'm not sure, when the butt of the gun caught me on the chin. I think I'd made him mad by ducking because he hit me hard.

The next thing I knew I was on the ground, looking up. Deuce was kneeling by me, stroking my face. I had the impression he'd been petting me for awhile, as if I'd passed out. I didn't remember passing out. The sunglasses were gone. I didn't know if Deuce took them off, or if they flew off when my head went back.

"She's awake," Deuce said, voice sort of dreamy. He gave me a gentle smile and kept stroking my face.

Simon knelt by me, blocking out the light. "What's your name?"

"Anita, Anita Blake."

"How many fingers?"

I watched his hand move back and forth, following it with my eyes.

"Two."

"Can you sit up?"

It was a good question. "With help, maybe."

Deuce put his arm behind my back and lifted me. I let him take a lot of the weight, not because it was necessary, but because them thinking I was more hurt than I was might make them think I was less of a threat. We needed some sort of edge.

I rested against Deuce's shoulder. He was humming something tuneless under his breath, his hand cupping my face, stroking the skin, over and over. I was finally able to see everything. Edward was on his knees with his hands clasped on top of his cowboy hat. Rooster had a gun touching his head. Edward didn't look hurt. More like they'd done it to keep him from doing anything heroic.

Mickey had a bloody lip. He was carefully not making eye contact with anyone.

"Can you stand?" Simon asked.

"With help, yeah."

"Deuce."

Deuce helped me to my feet, and the world wavered. I clung to Deuce, hands digging in as the world tried to slide out my ear. Maybe I wasn't pretending to be hurt.

"Shit," Simon said. "Can you walk if Deuce helps you?"

I started to nod, and that made me nauseated. I had to breathe through it before I could answer him. "I think so."

"Good. Let's go." He backed into the house, eyes watching the darkness beyond, though with all the lights his night vision was probably shit. Deuce and I went next. He had Edward's wire hung around his neck like a doctor's stethoscope. Edward was next, hands still firmly on top of his head. Rooster, then Mickey bringing up the rear. They staggered us so that if someone started shooting, there was room to maneuver.

Simon started up a flight of stairs. I looked up the long flight and the world swam. Deuce called, "Simon, I'm not sure she's up to stairs."

"Mickey." The man in question moved up to the foot of the stairs. "Carry her."

"I don't want him touching me," I said.

"I didn't ask you, either of you," Simon said.

Mickey gave his gun to Simon, then took my arm. He pulled me too fast and I was suddenly airborne on his shoulder, my head hanging down. I couldn't breathe. The world was spinning, and I was going to be sick.

"I'm going to throw up."

He dumped me unceremoniously back to my feet, and I fell. It was Simon who caught me, "Are you too hurt to do the spell?"

I knew the answer to that one-no. Because if Riker thought I couldn't help him, he would kill us all. "I can do it if Mickey here doesn't dangle me over his

shoulder with my head hanging down. I need to stay upright, or it's not going to get any better."

"Carry her in your arms, not over your shoulders," Simon said. "All those muscles got to be good for something."

Mickey picked me up in his arms like you'd carry a small child. He stood there like I weighed nothing. He was strong but carrying like this is harder than it looks.. We'd see how he did if there was more than one floor to climb. Here's hoping he didn't drop me.

I put my arm around his shoulders. I'd have clasped hands around his neck to be more secure, but I couldn't reach around his deltoids without straining. "How much do you bench press?"

"Three-ninety."

"I'm impressed," I said.

He preened a little. Mickey was dangerous, but if I could keep him from hitting me, he was the weak one. Rooster followed orders too well. Simon was Simon. Deuce seemed harmless, but there was something in those dreamy eyes that was a little scary. Maybe I was wrong, but I'd try Mickey before I tried Deuce, for trickery anyway. Arm wrestling, I'd take Deuce.

Mickey walked up the stairs with me in his arms, effortlessly. I could feel the muscles in his legs pushing, working. Again, I had the sense of immense physical potential and quickness.

"What's Mickey mean?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"Simon explained his nickname, I'm just wanting to know what yours means."

Deuce answered. "It's for Mickey Mouse."

"Shut up, Deuce."

"He's got a tattoo of Mickey on his butt," Deuce said as if Mickey hadn't spoken.

Mickey's face darkened, and he turned to glare at the other man. I just fought to keep my face blank. What kind of moron would have Mickey Mouse tattooed on his butt? But not out loud, not with those tree trunk arms wrapped around my tender body. If I hadn't had the marks on me, he'd have probably killed me with that one blow. No, I didn't want Mickey angry with me.

There was a landing, and a second flight of stairs. Mickey didn't even hesitate on the landing. He just went for the next set of stairs. His legs moved as easily up the second set as the first. He never paused to catch his breath. In fact, his breathing barely sped up. Whatever you could complain about Mickey, being out of shape wasn't part of it.

I told him so. "How far you jog a day?"

"Five miles, every other day. How'd you know?"

"A lot of body builders would be having trouble by now. They neglect the aerobic stuff, but you move like some kind of well-oiled machine. You're not even breathing hard." There was something very intimate about being carried in someone's arms like this, a reminder of childhood and your parents' arms maybe.

Mickey's hands tightened on me; the one on my thigh began to massage my leg. I didn't tell him not to. It's been my experience that if a man is interested in having sex with you, they hesitate to kill you before they've had the sex. This rule is not always true, but more often than not. The trick is to get the man thinking more about sex than violence, so he's a little confused, We needed a little confusion among our enemies right now.

We were in a wide white hallway that ran the length of the top of the house. There were white doors with silver knobs. Nothing differentiated one door from the other. Simon went to the furthest door, and Mickey followed with me in tow. I could see Deuce following, and Edward just topping the last stairs with Rooster behind him, walking well back out of arm's or leg's length, These guys were good. I'd gotten to where I counted on the bad guys not being this good. Even if they were vampires and werewolves they'd be unprofessional. But I'd never been around professional bad guys that were this professional. It cut our options from bad to worse.

Simon opened the door. We were here. We were still alive. The night still had possibilities.

Chapter 56

MICKEY sat me down near the middle of a very nice Persian rug. He kept an arm around my shoulder, as if it had been his idea to carry me. I gave his arm a squeeze before I stepped away from him. Didn't want to be slutty, but wanted him hopeful in case it was useful. The room looked like the study of a prosperous academic. There were antique maps framed on the walls. Shelves lined almost every extra space of wall, a lot of books that looked well read and well used. There were books open on the big leather-topped desk with bookmarks in them and sticky notes covered in writing, as if we'd interrupted someone's research.

A man sat behind the desk. He was a big man, both tall and wide. Not fat exactly but headed that way. He rose from his chair with a smile and walked towards us, hand outstretched. He moved with a confident, easy stride, like an ex-athlete going soft with normal living. His dark hair was cut very short and mostly bald on top. His hands were big, and the new weight showed in the hands where a college ring was beginning to cut into his flesh. He had calluses on his hands like he wasn't afraid to do the real work himself, but the calluses were losing that hard edge, softening, smoothing back into his skin. He'd probably done some of his dirty work once, but no more.

He gripped my hand with both of his, when one of his hands could have swallowed both of mine. "So glad you're here, Ms. Blake." He said it like I'd been invited instead of blackmailed.

"I'm glad one of us is glad I'm here," I said.

The smile widened, and he let my hand go. "I am sorry for our little theatrics, Simon called up and he thought Mickey had broken your neck. So happy that he exaggerated."

"Not by much, Mr. Riker,"

"Are you feeling well enough to do the spell? We could have some tea first, let you rest."

I managed a smile. "I am grateful that we're being all civilized, and coffee would be great, but where are the children?"

His eyes flicked past me to Edward. He still had his hands clasped on top of his hat, but at least they hadn't made him kneel again. "Ah, yes, the children."

I didn't like the way he said it, like it was going to be bad news.

"Where are they?" Edward asked, and Rooster hit him in the back with the gun again. It staggered him, and he had to wait for it to pass before he straightened up. His hands never left his head, as if he knew they were looking for an excuse to hurt him again.

"You promised us that they wouldn't be harmed," I said.

"You were late," Riker said.

"No," Edward said.

"Don't," I said, as Rooster raised his arm back for another blow. He did it anyway. Fuck. I turned back to Riker. "Every cruel thing you do helps convince me that you have no intention of any of us getting out of here alive."

"I assure you, Ms. Blake, that I intend to let you go."

"What about the others?"

He gave a small shrug, and walked back behind his desk. "Unfortunately, my men think that Mr. Forrester is too dangerous to be allowed to live. I do regret that." He sat down at his nice swivel chair, elbows on the chair arms, thick fingers steepled. "But he will serve a useful purpose before he dies. If you are reluctant, we will take it out on Mr. Forrester. Since we intend to kill him anyway, we can do anything we want to him, and it doesn't really matter."

My stomach was a hard knot, my pulse beating in my throat hard enough that I had to try twice to talk. "What about the kids?"

"Do you really care?"

"I'm asking, aren't I?"

He reached behind the desk and pressed something. The rear walls of the room slid open, revealing enough equipment to make NASA proud. There were four blank TV screens, but somehow I didn't think this was Riker's new Digital Television system.

"What the hell is all that for?" I asked.

"That is not really your concern. I have signaled for additional men to be brought up. When they arrive, then I will show you the children."

"Why the additional men?" I asked.

"You'll see," he said.

We didn't have long to wait. Four men came through the door. Two I recognized: Harold of the scarred face and Newt who I'd nearly made a

soprano. Harold had a shotgun, and Newt his big nickel-plated .45. But it was the two men behind them that were the problem.

One was tall and planed down to nothing but muscle and dark, burnished skin. He didn't have Mickey's bulk, but he didn't need it. He entered the room surrounded by a cloud of his own violent potential. He set my lizard sense screaming, as if it knew here was someone to avoid. He had the same gun the other pros were carrying, but he'd added knives. At his forearms, his upper arms, both hips, and even hilts sticking up from behind his shoulders. It was very primitive somehow and very effective. If he'd walked into a cell, you might have dropped to your knees and begged for mercy.

The other one was just medium height, medium brown hair cut short, not too dark, not too light, not too anything. He had a face that you wouldn't remember two seconds after you saw it, because he was not handsome enough or ugly enough to stand out. He was one of the most unmemorable people I'd ever seen, and yet when his brown eyes swept over me, met mine for a second, I felt a jolt all the way down to my feet. One flash, and I knew that of the two men, he would kill you quicker.

He had the same submachine gun the others had, but paired with what looked like a 10 mil automatic. I didn't recognize the brand. My hands aren't big enough for a 10 mil so I don't pay that much attention.

"Simon, I want two men on both of our guests."

"Make it four on him," Simon said.

"I bow to your expertise."

Rooster made Edward get on his knees. Simon made Mickey go to Edward. I guess he didn't want to risk the Muscle Man hitting me again. If they killed Edward early, they still had the kids to blackmail with. Simon sent the medium man to Edward, and Simon himself took up a post by Edward. They thought he was a very dangerous man, and they were right.

The nausea had been fading, but all the preparations were making me nervous. I was afraid of what we were going to see. If they hadn't been afraid to show us, they wouldn't have had four men on Edward. I was left with Deuce and the knife guy. Harold and Newt stayed near the door. Harold seemed nervous.

Deuce touched my arm, tracing the mound of scar tissue at my elbow.

"What did it?"

"Vampire."

He raised his shirt up, and his stomach was a mass of white scars. "Mortar round."

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say. But I was saved from the decision because the knife guy grabbed my arm and turned me to look at Riker. He kept his hand on my arm, and since his hand completely encircled my upper arm, it wasn't going to be easy to get away.

"Show time," Riker said. He hit another switch, and two of the monitors flickered to life. Black and white film of cells. At first, all I saw was Russell's back in one room, and the Amazon Amanda's back in the other room. Then my

eyes saw legs sticking out from around the woman. Legs in jeans and jogging shoes, ankles tied together. Too big for Becca. Had to be Peter.

She'd stripped down to the waist, and that broad muscular back made everyone in this room look frail except for Mickey. It was only the length of her hair that made me guess her. She leaned forward, revealing more of Peter's body. She'd pulled his jeans and underwear down to his knees. She was playing with him.

I looked at the floor, then back up.

She tried to kiss him, and when he turned his head away, she slapped him twice hard, first one cheek then the other. There was already blood on his mouth as if it wasn't the first time she'd hit him. She leaned back in for the kiss, revealing small tight breasts to the camera. She kissed him and this time he let her. Her hand never stopped working on his body.

I turned slowly to look at the other monitor. Please, God, please, don't let Russell be doing the same thing to Becca. He wasn't, and I was grateful. He'd turned with her on his lap, as if he knew he had an audience to play to now. He cradled her like you'd hold any small child, but he'd pinned one small arm, and two of the fingers on the tiny hand were at a bad angle. He broke a third finger while we watched, and her mouth opened in a soundless scream.

"Shall we have sound?" Riker asked.

Becca was screaming high and piteous. Russell cradled her and murmured soothing things. He stroked her hair and looked directly at the camera. His nose was still packed and bandaged. He knew we were there.

Peter's voice came high. He'd never sounded more like a little boy.

"Please, don't. Please stop!" His arms were tied behind his back, but he was still struggling.

She slapped him. "It'll feel good, I promise."

I looked at Edward. Simon had the gun against his head. The hat was on the ground. The medium-looking man had conjured a knife from somewhere and had it pressed to Edward's throat. A trickle of blood slid down his skin. I met his eyes, and I knew that everyone in this room, everyone in this house was dead. They just didn't know it yet.

Edward started to say something, but Simon said, "No, no talking from you or Shooter will slit your throat."

The medium guy must be Shooter. The name didn't suit him. He looked more like a Tom, Dick, or Harry.

They wouldn't let Edward talk, so it was my play, but we both knew where the game would end. Sudden death.

"Get them out of there, Riker."

"The children?" He gave a questioning lilt to his voice.

"Order them to leave the kids alone, now."

"And if I don't?"

I smiled. "Then the monster is going to come in here and gut you."

His eyes flinched. That bothered him. Good. "Knowing what is happening to them should speed up the spell of protection, I think."

"If you don't stop it, Riker, there won't be anything left to salvage."

"I don't know. I think the boy is enjoying himself, from the sound of things."

I'd been trying not to hear, but Peter's breath was coming faster and faster, frantic, but it wasn't the sound of pain. He screamed, "Don't, please don't."

I looked and I wished I hadn't. Some sights cut through your mind leaving a scar behind that never really heals. Watching Peter writhe caught between his first pleasure and the horror of it all, was one of those sights. I pride myself on never flinching. If someone is being tortured I don't look away. To look away only saves me pain, not them. If I can't save them the pain, then I watch as a kind of respect and as a punishment for myself, to remind me what happens to people when I fail them. But I failed Peter twice because I looked away just before a wordless scream tore from his mouth. It wasn't the sound of pain.

I turned away, and maybe I moved too fast for the head injury, or maybe it was something else, because the room swam in streamers of color. I tried to go to my knees, and the knife man jerked my arm, kept me on my feet. Fine, I threw up on him.

He jerked back, actually let go of my arm. I fell to my knees grateful to be low to the ground. Throwing up had brought a roaring headache. Riker's voice came through the next wave of nausea.

"Amanda, Russell, be so good as to leave the children alone. Our Ms. Blake is too squeamish to do her work while she fears for their safety."

I looked up at the monitors to make sure they actually left the rooms. Russell kissed Becca on the head, then left her huddled in the corner, crying for her mommy. Amanda blindfolded Peter while he begged her not to. She whispered something in his ear that caused him to curl into a ball. She left his pants down, picked up her shirt from the floor and walked out.

I huddled into my own version of a ball on the floor. I stayed on my knees while I tried to decide whether I was going to throw up again or not. Nausea like this is usually a sign of a concussion. The headache was another. But I think sheer nerves had pushed me over the edge. I used to throw up at crime scenes quite a bit. Apparently, there were still things I couldn't handle, like child abuse. Dear God, please give us some help here. Help us get them out of here safe.

There was a beeping, and Riker hit another button on his desk. "What is it?"

"We've got two dead down here. They were fucking butchered."

Riker went pale. "The monster."

"Knives, some kind of fucking big knife."

"You're sure of that?" Riker asked. "You are positive?"

"Yes, sir."

"It seems we have intruders." He looked at Simon. "What are you going to do about our company, Simon?"

"Kill them, sir."

"Then do it."

"Shooter, Rooster, stay with him and kill him as soon as Riker gives the word. Mickey, you're with me." He looked across at the two men by me. "You stay with her. Make sure no one else hits her. Harold, Newt, come with me."

Then they were gone, and we were down to two bad guys a piece, and Riker. It would never get better than this.

"Is there a bathroom?" I asked.

"Are you going to be ill again?"

"It's a thought."

"The two of you take her. And Deuce, if you can come up with something creative that won't leave a mark or physically harm Ms. Blake in any way, but will convince her that the children and Mr. Forrester are not the only ones that can be hurt, do so. Perhaps you can show her your namesake. You've got thirty minutes."

There aren't a lot of things you can do to a person that fulfilled Riker's requirements. The ones I could think of were mostly sexual. Usually, the talk of my impending rape upsets me, but all I could think of now was that I had thirty minutes with two men who might want to fuck me more than kill me. All I wanted to do was kill them. It made my options easier. But I said, "Is there a reason for torturing me, too, or is it just a hobby?"

He smiled, pleasant, confident. "I thought you would be worthy of my men, but I find you weak, Ms. Blake. Weakness should be punished. But it must be done carefully, so you can still do the spell, because I do want that."

"Isn't the line, these things must be done delicately or you injure the spell?"

Deuce laughed. Riker frowned at me. "It's from The Wizard of Oz" Deuce said. "The Wicked Witch of the West says it to Dorothy."

"Take her away, Deuce," he wrinkled his nose, "and clean yourself up, Blade. You're welcome to help in the punishment, but Deuce is in charge. I don't want her damaged."

Deuce grabbed my arm almost gently and helped me to my feet. The guy I'd thrown up on, Blade, followed us by a few steps. Evidently, he was taking no chances. At the door a man appeared. He was darkly Hispanic with longish hair, a shoulder holster, complete with 9 millimeter automatic. He looked like local hired muscle, but he wasn't. He vibrated with power. A shimmering energy flowed off of him. Psychic or maybe more.

"Ms. Blake, meet our resident expert on the supernatural, Alario. He was in charge of the protection spells on all my establishments. His art failed him recently at one of my shops, and my workers are dead. You will succeed where he has failed."

Alario watched me with cool dark eyes. His power flared over mine as Deuce led me past him. We recognized each other as powers, but there wasn't time for anything else, but there would be later. Which was what I was afraid of. Alario was the real deal, a practitioner of the arts. He'd figure out pretty quickly that I didn't know shit about spells of protection, at least not the kind Riker wanted.

Deuce led me down the white hall, with Blade trailing us. We were out of time. I couldn't go back into that room and fake a spell. Olaf had failed to make his kills horrendous enough to fool the bad guys. The only good thing he'd done was divide their forces, and I had to take advantage of that while it lasted. Which meant that if at all possible only one person was coming back from the bathroom. Hopefully, it would be me.

Chapter 57

IT WAS ONE of those bathrooms with a double sink separate from the rest of the bathroom. Deuce led me into the little bathroom area, complete with shower. I managed to do some dry heaving, but that was the best I could do, and even that made my head ache. It hurt so much I closed my eyes trying to keep my brains from leaking out through them. If it wasn't a concussion, it was a hell of an imitation.

Deuce wet a washcloth and gave it to me.

"Thanks." I put it over my face and tried to think. So far, Deuce hadn't touched me. Blade was trying to clean up in the sink area, but he'd want the shower soon.

"I loved the look on Blade's face when you puked on him. It was priceless."

I put the wash rag to the back of my neck. I was thinking furiously about what was in the purse and what options I had. But my voice was calm, point for me. "Blade? As in the comic book character?"

He nodded. "Yeah, the vampire killer. They both carry knives."

"And they're both African American," I said.

"Yeah."

I looked into his face, wash cloth that he'd so kindly given me still on my neck. I tried to read behind those pleasant, slightly dreamy, brown eyes, but it was like trying to read Edward. I just couldn't read between the lines.

"I think that Blade actually used wooden knives and like a cross-bow in the comic books," I said.

Deuce shrugged. "You're either very brave, or you don't think I'll hurt you."

"I believe you'll hurt me, if you want to."

"Then you're brave," he said. He was leaning against the wall, fingers playing lightly with the gun on its sling at his shoulder.

It was my turn to shrug. "Yeah, but it's not really bravery that's keeping me calm."

He looked interested for the first time. "What is?"

"After what I saw being done to Becca and Peter, I just can't get too excited about myself."

Blade banged on the door. "We don't have all night, and I want a shower."

Deuce and I both jumped when he banged on the door. We shared one of those embarrassed smiles, then he opened the door and ushered me through.

Blade had tried to scrub at his clothes in the sink, but it hadn't helped. He tried to go through the door, and Deuce stepped in his way. "Riker won't like you taking a shower."

"He told me to get cleaned up."

"Simon told us to keep two people on her. We can't do that if you're in the shower."

Blade looked at me. "I think Simon overestimated her. Anyone that throws up after seeing mild torture like that, I'm not afraid of. Now get out of my way, Deuce."

Deuce moved to one side, moving just ahead and to one side of him. Blade brushed past us without a word, his anger trailing behind him like a loose coat. He slammed the door behind him.

I went to the sink and re-wet the wash cloth. He was watching me in the mirror now. His eyes were still pleasant, but something else had crept in. Something that promised pain, the way the wind can bring the smell of rain against your skin just before it starts to pour.

I started fishing in the purse. "I've got some breath stuff in here somewhere."

"I could lock you in the room with Blade. He strips real pretty, and he's not very happy with you right now."

My hand closed on the pen with its hidden blade.

"You really think he could control himself enough to just rape me and not do other damage? Like you said, he's not very happy with me."

"You never asked about my nickname," he said.

The conversation was moving too fast for me. "I assumed it was some kind of card-playing thing."

He shook his head while I watched him in the mirror. Then he started unzipping his pants. He was too far away to touch me, or for me to fight back. All I could do was wait for him to come to me.

He slipped inside his open fly and lifted himself out in a smooth practiced movement. He was huge, impressive even limp and soft. If I hadn't seen Bernardo earlier, I'd have been more impressed. Of course, you could never be a hundred percent sure how big a man got when he was erect. Some barely changed size. Some grew a lot. Maybe he'd been very impressive. Then I realized he had a tattoo on it.

I had to turn and look, rather than trust to the mirror. "Am I supposed to run screaming or ask to touch it?" I wasn't even scared. It was too bizarre.

"Which do you want to do?"

I admit I was having a hard time looking at his face and not his penis because it was growing, and I could see the tattoo more clearly. "Can't rape the willing, hey?"

He smiled, as if this approach had worked before with women. It was certainly something a girl didn't get offered everyday. "I won't tell, if you don't."

"Is that the two of hearts on your . . . penis?"

His smile widened.

"Didn't that hurt?"

"Not as much as it's going to," Deuce said. He moved slowly towards me, so I could get a good look. He had a flair for theatrics, did Deuce. I didn't want him using his flair or anything else on me. I turned and stumbled on purpose. He caught me, as he'd caught me all the other times. I put the pen against his chest, just under the sternum, angled upward. I was a vampire hunter. If there was one thing I knew how to do, it was to find the heart with the first blow.

I pressed the button the second I touched him. There was no upward movement, no feel of shoving the blade, because the blade did its own work.

His eyes went wide, mouth opened, but no sound came out. I twisted the blade left, then right, making sure he'd never draw breath to warn the man in the other room.

Deuce started to slide down the cabinets. I caught him and lowered him gently to the floor, glad he was one of the smaller men. I'd have had trouble wrestling Mickey's body around. The water was still running in the shower. Blade probably wouldn't have heard the sound of the body hitting the ground over the shower, but better safe than sorry.

Deuce lay there on the floor, the blade sticking out of his chest, his pants still unzipped, his namesake naked to the world. He looked very sad lying there dead. If I had time before I left, I'd zip him up, but first Blade. I got the gun off Deuce's shoulder and put the sling around my shoulder. I checked to make sure I knew where the safety was, and that it was off. The switch on the side had three settings, not just two like the Uzi. I put the setting on high. Logic said it would make the most bullets come out in the shortest space of time. I got Deuce's extra clip for the sub-gun. A clip only holds twenty rounds. Normally, that sounded like a lot, but not tonight. There wasn't enough ammo in the world to make me feel safe tonight. I put the extra clips for both sub-guns and the hand guns in the purse and crossed the purse straps across my chest.

Deuce's backup was a 9 mm Glock. Personally, I find Glock's awkward to shoot, though I know people that swear by them, once the learning curve was over at the firing range. But I was happy to see this one.

The guns were great, but they would make a lot of noise. If I shot Blade, it would bring the rest of the bad guys down on me, and worse yet, they might kill Edward before coming after me. They had three hostages. They only needed one.

I needed something quiet. Trouble was I didn't think I could take Blade with a blade. Hand to hand, forget it. That left me with the contents of the purse.

I pulled the blade out of Deuce's chest. Blood welled up darker than most, like heart blood is supposed to be. I cleaned the blade automatically on a sleeve of his shirt and slipped it into my front pocket.

One of his hands was lying against the cabinet doors far under the sink. Maybe I did have more than just what was in the purse. I moved his arm and looked. It's amazing how much lethal stuff people keep in their bathroom cabinets. Almost everything has hazardous warning labels, yelling poison caustic agent, if accidental contact with eyes, flush with water immediately. But there was a pile of big, fluffy towels, and I had Deuce's handgun. Homemade silencer. But I was going to have to hold the gun at about waist level, close into my body, to keep the towels tight enough to act as a muffler. Holding the gun that way meant I'd want to get in close before I fired. If Blade were as good as the rest of them, he'd have his gun close. I'd only get one shot, and it had to count.

How do you get that close to a well-armed man? Answer—take off some clothes. I took off the T-shirt and the vest. It wouldn't stop a knife, and the idea was that he wouldn't get a shot off, right? Besides, I was trying for romance or at least lust. Kevlar just lacks that certain something.

I kept the bra. My nerves weren't that good. Besides, if he demanded I take some clothes off, it left me something besides my pants. It was like playing strip poker. More clothes give you more to work with.

The shower went off. Shit. My time had just run out. My heart was suddenly in my throat. But I had to get in there, before he came out here. If he saw the body, it wasn't rape I had to worry about.

I tucked the gun down the front of my pants, towels clutched to my chest and stomach, and opened the door. I closed the door with me leaning against it. Blade looked up. His dark skin was beaded with water, and Deuce had been right. Blade stripped real pretty. Under other circumstances, it would have been a pleasure to see him. Now, I was so scared I was having trouble breathing.

He reached for the gun that had been propped against the tub. His knife sheaths were draped across the back towel rack like you'd hang a wash rag, to keep them dry but handy. He stopped in mid-motion, fingers trailing on the gun.

"What do you want?"

"Deuce said to bring you towels." I let the fear slide into my voice, making it breathy.

"How'd he get you to strip down?"

I looked down, an embarrassed head bob. "He gave me a choice of him or you."

Blade laughed, and it was a purely masculine sound. "He show his deuce?"

I nodded. I didn't have to pretend to be embarrassed. I just didn't try and hide it.

"Take off the bra." He straightened up, hand going further away from the big gun, but still too close to the knives and his handgun on the towel rack.

I slid out of the straps, and pressed the towels to my chest, reached back and undid the snaps. I lifted the towels away from my body just enough to pull the bra out and let it fall to the floor. I kept the towels tight against me, for modesty's sake, and to hide the gun in my waistband.

He stepped out of the tub and started to take those three steps that would close the distance. I turned my body, sort of sideways, getting the gun out, still held behind the towels.

He was right in front of me, three steps away from all his weapons. He curled his fingers over the top of the towel and pushed them lower, exposing my breasts an inch at a time. He was less than ten inches away from me. His hand stroked the upper mound of my breast, and I fired. His body jerked, and I think he said, "Fuck." I kept pulling the trigger until he collapsed to his knees, eyes rolled back. His stomach and lower chest were a red ruin. The towels were shredded, and covered in black powder stains. The shots had been muffled, but not silenced. I waited there in the small room, the shots seeming to echo in the walls. I waited for cries of alarm. Nothing.

I picked up my bra, but didn't take time to put it on, before I opened the connecting door and listened. Silence. Great. I got dressed and took all the weapons. Blade's handgun was a Heckler and Koch. Nice gun. I tucked it in the front of my pants where the Firestar would have normally gone. I put both the big guns over the same shoulder, and the knife sheaths I draped over the other shoulder. I brought the sub-gun around, clicked the safety off, and I was as ready as I was going to be.

The last time I'd seen Edward, he'd been on his knees. His two guards had been standing. If I was careful and the gun didn't kick too much, I could take them out over Edward's head. My plan was to spray the room. As plans went, it was crude, and secrecy would be very lost if we were within hearing of anyone, but once I knew the noise wasn't going to get Edward killed, I didn't care as much. They'd have killed Edward because he was a threat, and they'd want to take out the threat at their back before turning to face a new threat. The kids weren't a threat. If Riker was dead and couldn't give the order to hurt them, then they'd be okay until we reached them. That was the theory, and it was the best one I had.

Bristling with weapons, I listened at the outer door. Nothing. I opened it just a little. The hallway was empty. Better. I locked the door behind me so that when I shut it, people might assume it was occupied by more than dead people. The knives moved too much slung over my shoulder, so I set them down in a pile against the wall, being as quiet as I could. The corridor that had seemed so long, now seemed short because this was one of those plans that was either going to work really well or be a total disaster. In less than two minutes, I'd be at the door, and we'd see.

Chapter 58

THE GUN HAD a short stock, but I braced it against my shoulder, and my arms were short enough that it was probably easier for me than the men I took them off. I was only steps from the open study door. Voices came out into the hallway.

"What do you mean that Antonio and Bandit are missing?" That was Riker. "I thought your men were good, Simon."

Shit. Was Simon back in the room? It didn't matter. It didn't change the plan. But I'd have preferred that Simon be elsewhere, at least until Edward was safe and armed. But Simon's voice came tinny and staticy. It was the intercom system. Shit, I didn't want them to hear the shots. The best I could do was wait until I didn't hear him using it. The longer I lurked in the hallway, the less chance the plan had. Someone was going to come up the stairs or out of the room or out of the study. If I lost surprise, it was over.

I was scared, really scared, not about killing or being killed, but about accidentally shooting Edward. I had an unfamiliar submachine gun in my hands. I'd never even seen one like this used. If you aim too high with a machine gun, more the full machine guns, but the subs, too, you can actually miss. If I fired into that room and missed everyone, I guess I deserved to get shot. I took the last deep breath and eased around the door frame. I know people always stand in the middle of the freaking door in the movies, but that's a good way to get killed. "Use cover when you have it."

I had a split second to see the room. Rooster and Shooter had Edward covered, still on his knees. Alario the Witch had moved beside Riker's desk. I started firing almost before I'd finished looking. The sound was enormous, but the gun had almost no recoil. I had to adjust my aim because I'd been expecting to have to fight the gun, but it was smooth, for a sub gun. Shooter actually got a burst off, but it was angled wrong and took out the ceiling above me. Rooster turned, but that was it. Seconds for both of them to go down, seconds to move the gun in a continuous spray that took out the control panels and monitors, and Riker, sitting behind his desk. Alario was the furthest away, and he had time to dive to the floor.

I went for the floor, too, hitting on my stomach as I aimed for him. I was angled away from Edward. I didn't have to be careful. I kept the trigger down and hit Alario before he could get a shot off. His body danced with the slap of bullets. There was something fascinating about the way the bullets shredded him, or maybe I just couldn't let go of the trigger.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and rolled on one shoulder, gun pointed. I let off the trigger just in time. Edward was kneeling with a gun in his hand by the bodies of his guards.. He had a hand out as if to ward off the bullets, as if he hadn't been sure I'd remember in time.

We stayed that way for a frozen second, me on my side, the sub-gun pointed at him, finger still on the trigger, but not pressing down. Him with his hand out, the automatic pistol in his hand but pointed down.

His mouth moved, but I couldn't hear him. Part shock, adrenaline, and part firing a submachine gun without ear protection in a closed room. I eased to a kneeling position and stopped pointing the gun at him. He seemed to realize I

was having trouble hearing because he held up two fingers and did thumbs down. Rooster and Shooter were dead. Hurrah.

I knew Alario was dead. I'd gone way overboard on him. I looked across the room at Riker. He was sitting in his chair, mouth gaping open and closed like a landed fish. The front of his nice white shirt and suit jacket were stained red in a row across the entire front of his body, including his arms. He was sitting so that I could see his hands clearly. I don't know if the force of the shots had pushed the wheeled chair back or he'd started that way.

Edward pointed at Riker, and I heard one word of the sentence, "Guard." He wanted me to guard Riker, not kill him. Of course, we needed to know where the children were being held. I hoped he didn't die before he told us.

My hearing came back in stages. I could hear Riker saying, "Please, don't." It was what Peter had been saying on the monitor. It pleased me that Riker was begging. Edward came back from checking the hallway. He had one of the sub-guns in his hands. He'd closed the door so that if we had company, we'd get a little warning.

By the time he started asking Riker questions, I could hear, but there was a ringing echo in my head that didn't seem to want to go away.

"Tell me where to find Peter and Becca?" Edward said. He was leaning on the back of Riker's chair, face very close to his.

Riker rolled his eyes to look at him. There was bloody foam at his lips. I'd pierced at least one lung. If it had been both, he was dying. If only one, then maybe he could survive if he got to the hospital soon enough.

"Please," he managed to say again.

"Tell me where the children are being kept, and I'll let Anita call an ambulance."

"Promise?" he said, in a voice thick with things that should never be in a throat.

"I promise, just like you promised me," Edward said.

Either Riker didn't get the double entendre, or he didn't want to. People will believe a lot of things when they're afraid they're dying. He believed we'd call an ambulance because he gave directions in that thick wet voice. He told us where they were being held.

"Thank you," Edward said.

"Call now," Riker said.

Edward put his face almost next to Riker's. "You want to be safe from the monster?"

Riker swallowed, coughed blood, and nodded.

"I'll keep you safe from the monster. I'll keep you safe from everything." And he shot Riker in the head with the Beretta 9 mil he'd reclaimed from Rooster's body. My guns were still on Mickey somewhere out there.

Edward felt for Riker's pulse and didn't find it. He looked at me across the man's body. I'd always thought Edward killed with coldness, but his baby blues held a fine, heated rage, like a forest fire barely under control. He was still in control of himself, but for the first time I wondered if there would come a point tonight where he'd lose it. You can only stay cool and collected when things

don't matter. And Peter and Becca mattered to Edward. They mattered more than I'd have ever thought anyone would matter to him. Them and Donna, his family.

He told me to reload the sub gun. I did what he asked. If Edward said I'd nearly emptied an entire clip in just a few seconds, I believed him. I added the extra clip from the dead man to the purse.

Edward went for the door, and I followed him. I'd thought that nothing could be scarier than Edward at his most cold. I was wrong. Edward the family man was downright terrifying.

Chapter 59

HOURS LATER, THOUGH my watch said thirty minutes, I was plastered to a wall, crouched as low as I could get, trying not to get shot. I knew that I originally started out to rescue the kids, and I still planned to do that, but my immediate plan was just to avoid catching a bullet. That had been the plan for about five minutes. I'd heard the expression a hail of bullets, but I'd really never understood what it meant. It was as if the very air had turned into a moving, spattering thing, where tiny fast-moving objects peppered the air around you, bit into the solid rock wall beyond and left holes. There were two submachine guns down the hall, pinning us in cross fire. I'd never been shot at by fully automatic machine guns before. I was so impressed, I hadn't done anything in the last five minutes except hug the wall, and keep my head down.

The secret panel had been exactly where Riker said it would be. Edward had killed the guard on the other side with a knife, quick, efficient. We'd killed two more men before Simon and his crew, or what was left of it, found us and started fighting back. I'd thought I was good at killing people. I'd thought I was good in a gunfight. I was wrong. If what was happening to me now was a gunfight, then I'd never been in one before. I'd shot people and been shot, but that had been one on one with semi-auto pistols. The bullets whined by me in a near constant stream of noise and percussion. I was so not putting my face out there.

It was pure luck that I hadn't been shot before we got this far. The only thing I'd been doing right that had helped my chances was using every freaking bit of cover offered. The one comfort to my new-found cowardice was that Edward was crouched with me, though he kept peeking around the corner and firing short bursts at the shooters that had us pinned.

He reached around me, firing. I could feel the vibration of the gun against my body, the tremble of his arms as he held it. He darted back behind the wall, and a fresh burst of bullets thundered down at us. Edward held his hand out and I handed him another clip from the purse. I felt like a surgical nurse.

I leaned close to Edward's ear and whisper-screamed, "You want the vest? I'm not using it."

"I've got a vest on." Deuce had kindly left Edward's vest in the study.

"You could put mine on your head," I said.

He actually smiled at me as if I'd been joking. He motioned for me to scoot over, an acknowledgment from both of us that I wasn't doing much. He took up my post at the corner of the wall, and I flattened my back where he'd been. He went to his belly, firing around the corner. It only took seconds for him to peek around the corner, fire and come back, but while he was staring down the corridor I saw the tiniest corner of a head peek round the bend of the stairs just above us. The head ducked back out of sight.

I started to touch Edward, to let him know we had company, when something came sailing through the air. Something small and roundish. I don't remember thinking about it. I was just on my knees, letting the sub-gun dangle. I caught the object in my hands and threw it back up the stairs, before my brain even had time to form the word grenade. I threw myself back to the floor, touching Edward's leg, and then there was an explosion. The world shuddered, and the stairway collapsed in a shower of rock and dust. Rock rained down on my arms where I'd curled them over my head. I thought that if the bad guys came running down the hall now, I wouldn't be much help, which made me raise my head enough to see the corner and Edward.

He had his head covered by one arm, but was looking round the corner, gun in one hand. Of course, nothing would make Edward forget the bad guys, certainly not a little thing like an explosion and the ceiling about to come down on us.

The silence came gradually full of creaks and groans from the stones around us. The dust lay like a thin mist in the air. I started to cough, and Edward's hand was just suddenly on my mouth. How had he known? He gave a small shake of his head.

I got the idea that he wanted me to be quiet, but I didn't know why. Of course, I didn't need to know.

We lay quiet, and the silence seemed to build. Finally, I heard the first scrape of a footstep coming down the hall. I tensed, and Edward's hand pressed on my shoulder. Easy, he was saying, easy. I swallowed as quietly as I could and tried to relax. Quiet I could do. Relaxed was not happening.

The movements were stealthy, very quiet. Someone was creeping down the hallway towards us. Wondering if we'd gotten blown up. We were pretending that we had, but once the man got down here, the jig would be up. We could kill him, but there was another man at the end of the hall. If he didn't run out of ammo, he could hold the hall against us. He didn't want to come to us, and we needed to go down that hall. Becca and Peter were in cells in the hall. The bad guys had the upper hand because we needed to move forward, and all they needed to do was hold position.

Of course, one of them was coming to us.

Edward pantomimed for me to go forward and lie down. I knew he wanted me to play dead, but that far out from the wall was kill zone. If they started

firing, even flat on the ground, I might be hit. But... I crawled forward through the debris, being very, very careful not to scrape any weapons or the purse against the floor or make the rocks roll. I was further out than I wanted to be when I looked back, and Edward gave one nod. I lay down on the floor, quietly. I lay face down because my acting abilities aren't up to playing dead, My hair flung across my face and I left it there, the better to peek through. I kept the sub-gun in my hand, but Edward shook his head. I let the gun go, moved my hand minutely away from it, and played dead. If Edward were wrong, I wouldn't be playing for long. I'd never get to the gun in time. Once the man cleared the corner, it was over.

I lay there and strained to hear movement. Mostly, what I heard was the thudding of my heart. Whoever it was, was being even quieter than before. Maybe he'd chickened out. Maybe he wasn't coming at all, and they'd start shooting again. I had to fight to keep still, not to move, not to breathe too much. I willed myself to relax into the floor, and I'd almost succeeded when I caught movement in the hallway. I was far enough out from Edward that I had a better view at the end of the hall. Would he see the shine of my eyes through my hair? I took in a deep breath, closed my eyes, and held it. Either Edward would kill him, or he'd kill me. I trusted Edward. I trusted Edward. I trusted Edward.

Noises, soft, slithering noises, the brush of cloth. Then a sharp exhale of breath. Nothing you'd hear from the other end of the hallway. Silence so thick it was frightening, but if Edward hadn't won, there would have been gunfire. I opened my eyes a slit, then wider, because Edward was kneeling over Mickey's body, searching it.

I must not have been the only one who thought the silence was a long one because a man's voice sounded, "Mickey, you okay?"

Edward answered, and it didn't sound like his voice. It wasn't a perfect imitation but it was good. "All clear."

"What's the roger?" the man asked. I didn't recognize the voice. One of Simon's men we had yet to meet face to face.

Edward looked at me and shook his head. I didn't know what a roger was, but apparently, we couldn't fake it, though Edward tried. "Get the fuck down here and help me search the bodies."

The answer to that was gunfire. I was already as low as I could get to the ground, but I tried to get lower. The bullets sprayed over me into the wall beyond, and the only thing that kept me from screaming was pride.

Edward gave one abrupt motion. I thought I knew what he wanted. When the shots ended, I belly crawled back towards the wall. I was actually almost there when he fired again. I froze in place, face to the ground. The firing ended, and I put my back to the wall on the other side of Mickey's body from Edward.

Mickey was still carrying my guns. I took them back.

Edward had a canister in his hand that looked suspiciously like the incendiary grenade they'd put in my purse, minus the camouflaging hairspray can. My eyes widened. He shook his head, as if reading my mind, and mouthed, "Smoke."

Okay.

He leaned over the body, and I leaned into him. He whispered, "Cover me while I throw it. Belly crawl down the hall. When you see anyone through the smoke, shoot them." Then he leaned back, pulled the pin on the smoke grenade, and stood with the wall still hiding him.

I crawled to him, hugging the wall and his legs, sub-gun clutched tight. My heart was inside my head, pounding away. I had time to think, "Gee, the headache's gone," then Edward said, softly, "Now."

I peeked around the corner, my finger on the trigger, spraying down the hallway. Edward threw the smoke grenade. He jerked back around the corner, and so did I. Thick white smoke filled the hallway. I dropped to my belly, behind the wall, waiting for the smoke to find me. Edward motioned that he'd take the other side, but he pointed forward for me. He combat crawled and was almost immediately lost to the thick smoke. The smoke was bitter, like burning cotton soaked in something bad.

I crawled with the wall on my left, the sub-gun held out in front of me. I had two guns shoved down the front of my jeans now, and it wasn't comfortable for crawling, but nothing could have persuaded me to stop and adjust them. The purse stayed solid against my back like a bulky backpack. The world had narrowed down to soft rolling smoke, the feel of the floor under my arms and legs, the brush of the wall against my left elbow when I moved too close to it. There was nothing but me moving down the hall, eyes trying to see anything in the white mass of clouds.

Nothing moved but me.

Then bullets ripped through the smoke, and I was close enough to see the flash of the gun through the smoke. I was almost on top of him, and he was firing chest high into the smoke. I was about ankle high and looking up at him. I could actually see him like a shadowy figure above me when I pressed the trigger and watched that shadow jerk. I rolled onto my side to sweep my fire line up his body, still afraid to stand or even kneel until I knew he wasn't firing back.

He collapsed to his knees, face suddenly looming out of the smoke. I fired nearly point blank into his chest, and he fell backwards half vanishing in the fading smoke, like he'd fallen into clouds. I stayed low and realized I could see his feet. The smoke was almost gone at floor level, which was one of many reasons that Edward had had us crawl.

"It's me," Edward said, before he crawled out of the smoke. He was wise to have warned me. My finger was still on the trigger, and I was beginning to appreciate how you could accidentally shoot your friends in a combat situation, unless you were very careful.

He moved a little way, and the smoke was thinning enough that I could see him check the man's pulse. "Stay here," and he was gone into the dying smoke.

It pissed me off, but I stayed on the floor by the man I'd killed and waited. I might have been pissed off, but we were in a kind of fighting that I knew almost nothing about. I'd somehow fallen into Edward's other life, and he was

better at surviving here than I was. I was going to do what I was told. It was pretty much my only hope for getting out alive.

Edward came back, walking instead of crawling. Probably a good sign. "The area's clear, but it won't be for long." He held the keys we'd taken from Riker. "Let's do it."

He unlocked the cell that was supposed to be Peter's and went across the hall to Becca's before he did more than push the door open. I guess I was getting Peter. I dropped to one knee and pushed the door open until it was flat against the wall. See, no one hiding behind it. If there had been someone in the room, they'd have probably shot over my head. Kneeling, I was a lot shorter than most people. But a glance showed the room was empty except for the narrow bed with Peter on it.

I stood, debated for a second whether to shut the door and risk someone locking it behind me, or leave it open and risk someone coming up behind me with a gun. I left it open, not because it was the best option, but because I just didn't want the door shut on me in the cell. Part claustrophobia, part just having been locked in too many places waiting for things to eat me. Sometimes I think that last part contributes to the claustrophobia.

It had been bad on the black and white monitor, but it was worse in person. Peter was curled into the tightest ball he could manage. His hands tied behind his back, tied ankles tucked up tight to his bare butt. His clothes were still bunched around his knees, and the expanse of pale flesh looked incredibly vulnerable. She'd meant to humiliate him, leaving him like this. The blindfold was still in place, cutting a bright patch of color across his dark hair. His mouth was stained with drying blood, his lower lip already swollen, bruises beginning to spread across his face like ugly lipstick from an overzealous kiss.

I didn't try to be quiet. I tried to hurry. He heard me coming because he started talking through the gag. I could understand him.

"Please, don't, please don't." He kept saying it over and over in a progressively more frantic voice until his voice broke, not from adolescence, but from fear.

"It's me, Peter," I said.

He didn't seem to hear me, just kept begging over and over.

I touched his shoulder, and he screamed. "Peter, it's Anita."

I think he stopped breathing for a heart beat, then he said, "Anita?"

"Yeah, I'm here to get you out."

He started to cry, thin shoulders shaking. I drew one of Blade's blades and fitted it carefully between his wrists, jerking upward. The cord sliced clean under the sharp, sharp blade. I tried to lift the blindfold off of him, but it was too tight.

"I'm going to have to cut the blindfold off, Peter. Don't move."

His breathing slowed, and he held still while I slid the blade between the cloth and the side of his head. It was harder to cut than the rope because it was tighter to his skin and just a bad angle. But the blade finally sliced through it, and the cloth fell away. I had an impression of red marks in his skin where the blindfold had marked him. Then he flung himself on me, hugging me.

I hugged him back, knife in one hand.

He whispered, "She said she was going to cut it off when she came back." He didn't start crying again. He just held on. I rubbed his back with my free hand. I wanted to give him comfort, but we had to get out of here.

"She won't hurt you anymore, Peter. I promise that, but we've got to get out of here." I pulled back from his desperate arms until I could see his face and he could see mine. I held his face in my hands, the knife carefully pointed up. I looked into his eyes. They were wide and shocky, but there wasn't much I could do about it now.

"Peter, we have to go. Ted's getting Becca, and we're leaving."

Maybe it was his sister's name, but he blinked and gave a small nod. "I'm okay," he said, which was the best lie I'd heard all night.

But I accepted it and said, "Good." I had to stand to reach the ropes at his ankles. He was just that tall or I was that short. The hug had put him facing forward, and he seemed suddenly aware that he was exposed. He started grabbing at his underwear and pants while I tried to cut his ankles free.

I had to pull the knife back. "If you don't hold still, you're going to end up cut."

"I want my clothes on," he said.

I stood at the foot of the bed, and said, "Get dressed."

"Don't look," he said.

"I'm not looking."

"But you're looking at me," he said.

"But I'm not looking at you." But I couldn't explain it to him, so I turned and looked at the door while he struggled into his pants.

"You can look now."

He had everything zipped and buttoned, and just that had taken some of the raw terror out of his eyes. I cut his ankles free, sheathed the knife, and helped him to his feet. He jerked away from me, then almost fell because the ankles had been tied too tight for too long, and he didn't have all the feeling back. Only my hand on his arm kept him upright.

"You need to walk a little with help before you can run," I said.

He let me help him to the door, but he wouldn't look at me. His first reaction had been that of a child, grateful to be saved, wanting to hold on to someone, but his second reaction was older. He was embarrassed now. Embarrassed at what had happened, and probably at me seeing him nearly naked. He was fourteen, a trembling age between child and adult. Somehow, I think he'd been younger when he went into the cell than when he came out.

Edward met us in the hallway with Becca held in his arms. She looked pale and sick. Bruises had already started blooming on her face. But it was her hand that made me want to cry. That tiny hand that I'd held only days ago, while Edward and I swung her in the air. Three of the fingers looked crippled, at unnatural angles. They were swelling, the skin discolored. It was early for that, which meant they were bad breaks and wouldn't heal easily.

She said, "Anita, you came to save me, too." Her voice was high and thin. It made my throat tight.

"Yeah, sweetie, I came to save you, too."

Peter and Edward stood staring at each other. It was Edward that reached out first, just his hand, because the arm was underneath Becca's legs. Peter took that hand and hugged them both. His fingers hovered over Becca's hand, and fresh tears fell down his face, but there was no sobbing now, just tears so quiet you wouldn't have known he was crying if you hadn't seen them. "She'll be all right," Edward said.

Peter looked up at him, as if he wasn't sure he believed, but he wanted to. But he stepped away from them, rubbed the tears from his face with his hands. "Can I have a gun?"

I opened my mouth to say, no, but Edward spoke first. "Give him your Firestar, Anita."

"You're kidding," I said.

"I've seen him shoot. He can handle it."

I'd been following Edward's orders for a while. He was usually right but...

"If we go down, I want him armed." Edward looked at me, and the weight in his eyes was enough. He didn't want Peter and Becca taken again. If he put a gun in Peter's hand, they'd kill him not torture him. If the worst happened, Edward had decided how the boy would go out. And, God help me, I agreed.

I pulled the gun out of the band of my jeans. "Why the Firestar?"

"Smallest grip."

I handed it to Peter, feeling vaguely like a child molester myself, or maybe a corrupter. "It holds nine if you carry one in the chamber. It's only holding eight. Safety's here."

He took the gun and popped the clip out to check it, then looked vaguely embarrassed. "Ted says to always check if something's loaded." He popped the clip back in, put a round in the chamber so it was ready to fire.

"Try not to shoot any of us," I said.

He clicked the safety on. "I won't."

Looking into his eyes, I believed him.

"I want to go home," Becca said.

"We're going home, honey," Edward said.

Edward led the way around the corner still carrying Becca. Peter went next, and I brought up the rear. I didn't burst anyone's bubble, but I knew we were a long way from safe. We had Simon and the rest of his men to get through, not to mention Harold and Newt and the local guys. Where were Russell and Amanda? I was really hoping to see them before we left. I'd promised Peter that she would never hurt him again. I always keep my promises.

Chapter 60

THE HALLWAY SPILLED OUT into a large open space. Edward stopped, and Peter and I did, too. Becca was still being carried, so she didn't have much choice. I kept an eye on our back trail and waited for Edward to decide what to do. I couldn't see how big the open space was, so I figured it was big enough for Edward to worry about us being out in that much open. He finally moved slowly forward, hugging the left-hand wall. When I could see the room clearly, I realized why he'd hesitated. It wasn't just this huge open space. There were three tunnels leading off to the right, dark mouths where anything might lurk, like Simon and the rest of his men. But there was a fourth opening with stairs leading up. Up was what we needed.

I walked with my back to the solid wall behind me, trying to keep an eye on the hall we'd come out of and the three tunnels to the right. I left the stairs to Edward.

The stairway was narrow, barely broad enough for two slender people to walk abreast. It wound upward and had a sharp angle at the top, a blind corner. I kept watching behind us, because I knew that if shooters came up behind us, and in front of us at the same time, we were dead. It was a perfect place for an ambush.

Peter seemed to feel the tension because he moved closer to Edward, almost touching him as they moved up the stairs. We were about three fourths of the way up to that first blind corner, when Edward hesitated, staring down at the steps. Peter took one extra step. Edward hit him with his shoulder, knocking him back. He dropped Becca to the steps, still holding her good arm, trying to save her from the full fall. I think if he'd just dropped Becca, he might have gotten them all out of harm's way, but that last effort cost him the second he needed.

I saw a blur of movement, and there was a wooden stake sticking out of Edward's back. I started to go to him, but he said, "Up the stairs, now. Shoot them."

I didn't ask questions. I went up the last few steps as fast as I could go and threw myself around the corner on my side, and was shooting down the hallway before I saw what I was shooting at.

Harold, Russell, Newt, and Amanda were running down another level of stairs. I fired up into them, fighting the angle to make the spray pattern hit them. The three men went down, but Amanda turned and darted back around the corner they'd come from. I made sure the men weren't getting up, firing into their down bodies, then I got to my feet and ran up the stairs after her. I crouched at the corner, but the stairs were empty. Fuck. I didn't dare pursue her and leave the kids and Edward alone.

I went back down the steps and slipped on blood so that I ended up sitting down hard on the steps, my elbow hit Harold's body, and the body grunted.

I put the barrel of the gun against his chest as his eyes fluttered open. "Didn't make the ambush site in time. Simon's going to be pissed," he said, and the tone of his voice said he was hurting.

"I don't think you have to worry about Simon anymore, Harold. You're not going to be around to answer to him."

"Never approved of hurting kids," he said.

"But you didn't stop it," I said.

He took a breath and that seemed to hurt, too. "Simon called someone on the radio. Said he'd failed. Said they needed to clean up the mess. I think they're coming to kill us all."

"Who's coming?"

He opened his mouth, and I think he'd have told me, but his breath ran out in a long sigh. I felt for the pulse in his neck, but it wasn't there. I'd known he was dead, but still you check. I checked Russell and Newt just to be sure, but they were dead. I actually left everyone's guns because I just couldn't carry anymore.

I heard voices as I neared the bend that would take me back to Edward. Fuck. Then I recognized one of the voices. It was Olaf.

I came around the corner and found Olaf and Bernardo kneeling by Edward. Peter was sitting on the steps holding Becca. She was crying. He wasn't. He was staring at Edward, face white with shock.

Bernardo spotted me first. "Are they dead?"

I nodded. "Russell, Newt, and Harold. Amanda got away."

Peter's eyes flicked to me, and they were huge and dark in his pale, pale face. The bruised mouth stood out against his skin like it was makeup, too bright to be real.

Edward made a small sound, and Peter turned back to him. "I'm sorry, Ted," he said. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Pete. Just next time follow my lead better." His voice was strained, but Peter seemed to take heart from talk of a next time. I wasn't so sure.

Olaf and Bernardo had turned him so that you could see the sharpened end of the stake that had pierced his chest. It was upper chest, close to the left shoulder. It had missed the heart or he'd be dead, but it could have pierced the sack around the heart, and blood could be spilling into that sack as we watched. Or it could have missed it entirely. It was high enough up that it had probably missed the lungs. Probably.

"How'd you know that they were coming?" I asked.

"Heard them," and his voice reminded me of Harold's, pain stressed.

I was suddenly cold, and it wasn't the temperature. I started to kneel by them all, but Edward said, "Watch our backs."

So I stood up, put my back to the wall, and let my peripheral vision try to keep track of both up and down the stairs. But my eyes kept going back to him. Was he dying? Please, God, not like this. It wasn't just Edward. It was the look on Peter's face. If Edward died, Peter would blame himself. The boy was having a bad enough night. That kind of guilt he did not need.

"Give me your T-shirt," Olaf said.

I looked at him.

"We need to pack the wound and keep the stake from moving around. We can't remove it here. It's too close to his heart. He will need a hospital."

I agreed with that. "Someone else watch for bad guys while I undress."

Bernardo stood up and took my place at the wall. I noticed there was a blade sticking out of his cast like a spearhead. The blade was stained black with blood.

I pulled off my T-shirt and handed it to Olaf. He'd already stripped down to his black Kevlar vest, shoving his own shirt around the wound.

"Do you need mine?" Peter asked.

"Yes," Olaf said.

Peter moved Becca forward on his lap and took off his shirt. His upper body was thin and pale. He was tall, but the rest of him hadn't caught up. Olaf used pieces of Bernardo's shirt to hold the makeshift bandage in place. The wound looked terrible, but it wasn't bleeding much. I didn't know if that was a good sign or a bad one.

"We caught the other half of your ambush on its way to the stairs," Bernardo said.

"I wondered why there weren't more," I said. I remembered what Harold had said. "Before Harold died, he said that Simon called someone. Told them he'd failed and they needed to clean up the mess. Does that mean what I think it means?"

Edward looked up at me, as Olaf used more shirt strips to bind his left arm tight, so he wouldn't move it and risk jarring the stake into something vital. "They'll kill everything they find." His voice was almost normal, only slightly breathy, a touch tight. "They'll burn the place to ash. Maybe they even salt the earth." I think that last was the wound talking, but you never know with Edward.

Olaf lifted Edward to his feet, but the height difference was too much. Edward couldn't keep his arm over the big man's shoulders. "Bernardo will have to help you."

"No, Anita can do it."

Olaf opened his mouth to argue, I think, but Edward said, "Bernardo only has one good arm. He needs that to shoot."

Olaf closed his mouth into a tight line, but he handed Edward over to me. Edward's arm went around my shoulders. I put my left arm around his waist. We tried a couple of steps, and it worked okay.

Olaf led the way. I came next with Edward, then Peter, carrying Becca wrapped around his body like a sad little monkey. Bernardo brought up the rear. Olaf looked at the bodies of the dead men as he passed. He spoke without looking back at me. "You did this?"

"Yeah." I'd have usually come up with something sarcastic like, "you see anyone else?" but I was too worried about Edward to waste the effort. Sweat had popped out on his face, as if it was taking a lot to keep going. Trouble was, a fireman's carry would disturb the stake, and if any of us could carry him just in his arms, it was Olaf, but it would mean not being able to shoot. We needed the gun.

"You okay, Edward?" I asked.

He swallowed before he said, "Fine."

I didn't believe him, but I didn't ask again. This was probably as good as it was going to get for awhile.

Edward tried to turn and say something to the kids, but it hurt, and I had to turn for him, moving us both to face backwards. "Cover Becca's eyes, Peter."

Peter had Becca bury her face against his shoulder and kept his hand pressed to the back of her head. He didn't have the Firestar in his hands. I wondered where it was but not enough to ask.

I turned Edward back around, and we started up the stairs again. Olaf was almost at the next bend in the stairs, when he stopped. He was looking down at the steps. I froze and said, "No one move."

"Is it a trap?" Edward asked.

"No," Olaf said.

I saw it then, thin rivulets of blood sliding down the steps towards us. It snaked around Olaf's feet and dripped its way toward Edward and me.

Peter wasn't that far behind us. He asked, "What is that?"

"Blood," Olaf said.

"Please tell me that this is your handiwork, Olaf," I said.

"No," he said.

I watched the blood flow around my Nikes and knew that our problems had just gotten worse.

Chapter 61

I LEANED EDWARD up against the wall. He wanted me free to shoot if Olaf told me to. Olaf got to scout ahead and see what the problem was. He vanished around that corner, and I pressed myself to the wall and gave the briefest of looks ahead. The stairs ended just up ahead. The electric lights showed a cave, I think. The lights glistened on blood and bodies.

Olaf backed up, and came down to us again. "I can see the exit."

"What are the bodies?"

"Riker's men."

"What killed them?"

"I think it is our murderous beast. But there is no other way out. The other entrance has been blocked by an explosion. We must go out this way."

I figured if the murderous beast was up there waiting for us, Olaf would have been more excited. So I went back to Edward. His skin was the color of bad paste. His eyes were closed. They opened when I touched him, but they were brighter than they should have been. "We're almost out," I said.

He didn't say anything, just let me settle his arm over my shoulder. He was still holding on to me, but every step we took, my arm around his waist was taking more and more of his weight. "Hold on, Edward, just a little further."

His head jerked as if he'd just heard me, but his feet kept moving with me. We were going to make it, all of us. The blood got thicker the farther up we walked. Edward slipped in it, and I had to catch him and barely managed to keep us both standing. But it was a sudden movement, and he let out a small sound of pain. Shit.

"Watch your step, Peter," I said. "It's slippery."

Olaf was waiting for us at the bodies. There were only three of them. One was a man I didn't recognize, but I recognized the gun near his body. He was one of Simon's men. Simon was lying in a pool of blood and darker fluids. The entire lower chest, stomach, abdomen were open. His intestines trailed out onto the cave floor, but his eyes were still blinking upward, still alive.

The third body was Amanda, and she was still moving, too. But Olaf had her covered, so I kept my attention on Simon. He smiled up at us. "At least I killed the Undertaker."

"He's not nearly as dead as you are," I said.

"You're all dead, bitch."

"We know you invited company," I said.

His eyes looked uncertain. "Fuck you." His hand inched towards his gun that was still lying beside him. Guttured, dying, in more pain than I could imagine, and he tried to go for his gun. I stepped on his hand, pinning it to the earth. Harder to do than normal with Edward hanging on me, but I managed. "Peter, you and Becca go up with Bernardo to the front of the cave."

Peter didn't argue. He just carried Becca past us, Bernardo trailing behind.

I pointed the gun barrel at Simon's head. I couldn't leave him behind because I didn't trust him at my back. Even this wounded, I wasn't willing to take the chance.

"I hope the monster guts you, Bitch."

"That's Ms. Bitch to you," I said and pulled the trigger. A short burst, but more shots echoed mine. I whirled, gun up, and found Peter standing over Amanda's body. He emptied the Firestar into her body while I watched. Olaf was just watching him do it. I looked for Bernardo and found him holding Becca near the cave mouth.

Edward started to slide to his knees. I knelt with him, trying to keep him upright. He whispered, "The kids, out, get them . . . out," and he fainted.

Olaf was there without me asking. He lifted Edward in his arms like a child. If the monster came now, we all had our hands full. Shit.

Peter had run out of bullets, but he was still squeezing the trigger, over and over and over. I went to him. "Peter, Peter, she's dead. You killed her. Ease down."

He didn't seem to hear me. I touched his hands, tried to lift the gun from him. He jerked away, violently, eyes wild. He kept dry firing into the woman's body. I shoved him back against the rock wall, hard, one arm across his throat, the other pinning his hands still wrapped around the Firestar. His eyes were

wide and frightened, but he looked at me. "Peter, she's dead. You can't kill her anymore dead than she already is."

His voice shook when he said, "I wanted her to hurt."

"She did hurt. Being torn apart is a bad way to die."

He shook his head. "It's not enough."

"No," I said, "it isn't enough, but you killed her, Peter. That's as good as revenge gets. Once you kill them, there isn't any more."

I took the Firestar out of his hands, and he let me. I tried to hug him, but he pushed me away, then walked away. The time for that kind of comfort was past, but there were other kinds of comfort. Some of them came from the barrel of a gun. There is some comfort in killing that which has hurt you, but it is cold comfort. It'll destroy things inside of you that the original pain wouldn't have harmed. Sometimes it's not a question of whether a piece of your soul is going to go missing, only which piece it's going to be.

Peter carried Becca. Olaf carried Edward. Bernardo and I took the lead. We searched the spring darkness with our guns, back and forth, back and forth. Nothing moved. There was just the sound of wind in the tall line of sage bushes that bordered the back of the cave. The air felt so good against my face, and I realized that I'd not really expected to get out, not alive. Pessimism, it wasn't like me.

Bernardo led the way back to circle the house. We'd try for Edward's car, but we wanted to make sure no one or no thing was waiting to eat us when we went for the car. Olaf went second, carrying a very still Edward. I was praying hard that he'd be okay, though strangely it felt odd to pray to God for Edward, as if I were praying in the wrong direction. Peter and Becca were just ahead of me. He stumbled as we headed into the thicker brush. He had to be tired, but I couldn't afford to carry Becca. I needed to have my hands free to fight.

I felt the prickling brush of magic. I called, "Guys, something's out here."

Everyone stopped and started searching the darkness. "What did you see?" Olaf asked.

"Nothing, but something out here is doing magic."

Olaf made a noise in his throat like he didn't believe me. Then the first wave of fear washed over us. So much fear that it closed the throat, sent the heart thundering, made the palms of your hand sweat. Becca started struggling violently in Peter's arms.

I took two steps to help Peter control her, but she struggled free, fell to the ground, and ran like a rabbit into the brush. Peter yelled, "Becca!" and went after her.

"Peter, Becca! Oh, shit!" I ran into the brush after them. What else could I do? I heard them just up ahead, crashing through the brush, Peter calling Becca's name. I had a sense of movement to my right, and I saw something. It was bigger than a man, and even by moonlight you could see it was different colors. I fired into it as it opened a huge razored mouth, but the claw kept coming towards me, as if the bullets were nothing. The closed claw slammed into my head. It knocked me off my feet, and I hit the ground hard. Darkness swirled across my vision, and when I could see again, the thing was right above

me. I kept my finger on the trigger, until it clicked empty. The monster never hesitated. It filled my vision with a face that was almost birdlike, and I had a moment to think it was pretty before it hit me again, and there was nothing but darkness.

Chapter 62

I WOKE INSTANTLY, my skin jumping with a rush of magic that left me gasping. My body strained, writhing as the power rode over and through my body in a burning surge that just kept growing. My hands and legs strained against the chains that held me down. Chains? I turned and stared at my wrists, head still thrashing, my body jerking as the power roared through me. My arms and legs jerked, not because I was struggling against the chains but as a reaction to the power.

The magic began to fade, leaving my breath coming in pants. One thing I knew. If didn't get my breathing under control, I was going to hyperventilate. Passing out again would be bad. Heaven knew what I'd wake up to a second time. I concentrated on my breathing, forcing myself to be calm, and take deep, even, normal breaths. It's hard to be totally panic-stricken when you're doing breathing exercises. It poured a false calm over my body, and my mind. But it let me think, which was good.

I was lying on my back, chained to a smooth stone surface. There was a curve of cave wall beside me, and a ceiling lost to sight in the darkness above. I'd have loved to believe that Bernardo and Olaf had rescued me and we were back in the cave entrance, but the chains sort of ruined that pleasant thought. This cave was much taller, and without looking it just felt bigger. Firelight bounced in orange shadows along the cave, like being in a ball of darkness and gold light.

I finally turned my head to the right and let myself see what was there, At first I thought it was Pinotl, Itzpapalotl's human servant, I had a few seconds of cursing myself for believing her when she said she didn't know about the monster, then I realized it wasn't him. It looked like him. Same square, chiseled face, dark, rich skin, and the black hair cut long and oddly square, but this man was narrow through the shoulders, thin, and there was no air of command to him. He was also wearing a pair of loose-fitting shorts instead of the nifty clothes that Pinotl wore.

There was a smooth rounded stone like the one at the Obsidian Butterfly. There was a body draped over that stone. Foreshortened legs and arms, short dark hair, and for a moment I thought it was Nicky Baco, then I saw the naked chest more clearly, and it was Paulina, Nicky's wife. There was a hole under her ribs like a great gaping mouth. They'd torn out her heart. The unknown man

stood there holding the heart in his hands, above his head like an offering. His eyes looked black in the uncertain light. He lowered his arms, walking towards me with the heart cupped in his hands. His hands were so thick with blood that it looked like he was wearing red gloves. There were four men standing at attention around the altar. They were wearing some sort of soft leather on their bodies, hoods up and covering them from head to foot almost. There was something wrong with what they were wearing, but my eyes couldn't make sense of it, and I had other more immediate problems than what people were wearing.

I was still wearing the Kevlar vest and all the rest of my clothes. If they meant to take my heart, they'd have taken the clothes. It was a very comforting thought as the man, the priest, walked towards me with the heart in his hands. He held the heart over my chest and began to chant in a language that sounded like Spanish, but wasn't.

Blood dripped from the heart, splatted on the vest. It made me jump. The calm of the breathing exercises was wearing off. I did not want him to touch me with that thing. It wasn't even logic, fear of some spell or magic. It was pure revulsion. I did not want to be touched by a heart that had just been torn out of someone's body. I've put my share of stakes through hearts. I've even cut a few out for burning, but somehow this was different. Maybe it was being chained and helpless, or maybe it was Paulina's body lying limp over the altar, looking like a broken doll. The only time I'd met her she'd been so strong, threatening me with a gun, but lots of people had done that. Edward used to do that all the time. Starting out a relationship on the end of a gun didn't mean you couldn't be friends down the road. Unless one of you died. No friendship now. No nothing for Paulina.

The man ended the chant and began to lower the heart towards me.

I strained against the chains though I knew it was useless, and I said, "Don't touch me with that." It sounded sure and strong, but if he understood English, I couldn't tell it because he just kept lowering his bloody hands, closer and closer. He laid the heart on my chest, and I was almost as grateful that the Kevlar kept me from feeling that thing next to my skin, as I'd been for the extra protection from bullets earlier.

The heart lay on my chest like so much meat. There was no magic to it. It was just dead. Then the heart took a breath, or that's what it looked like. The skin rose and fell. It sat on my chest, naked and attached to nothing and pulsed. I was suddenly aware of my own heartbeat. The moment I noticed my heartbeat, Paulina's heart stuttered, then began to beat in time with mine. And the moment the rhythms were shared, I could hear a second heart beat. Except that Paulina's heart had no blood to pump, no chest to resonate in. It should have been a pale sound compared to the real thing, but it was a solid pulsing beat. It was as if the sound reached through the vest, through my skin, my ribs, and pierced my heart. The pain was sharp and immediate, stealing my breath, bowing my spine.

"Hold her," the man yelled.

The men who'd been standing by the altar ran to me, strong hands pressing on my legs, pinning my shoulders. My spine tried to bow with the pain, and a third set of hands pressed down on my thighs, three of them pinning me to the stone, forcing me to ride the pain and not struggle.

Paulina's heart was beating faster and faster, speeding, speeding, towards some grand climax. My heart thundered against my ribs, as if it were trying to tear loose of the tissue. It was as if a fist were beating on the inside of my chest, trying to smash its way out. I couldn't breathe, as if all of my chest was caught up in the frantic race, and there was no time for anything else.

The pain was centered in my chest, but it spread down my arms, my legs, filled my head until I thought that it might not be my heart that exploded. It might be the top of my head.

I could feel the two hearts like lovers separated by a wall, tearing it down between them until they would be able to touch. There was a moment when I felt them touch, felt the thick wet sides of the two organs slide into each other. Maybe it was just the pain. Then the heart stopped like a person caught in mid-motion, and my heart stopped with it. For a breathless moment my heart sat in my body and did nothing, as if waiting. Then it gave one beat, then another, and I drew air into my lungs in a frantic rush, and as soon as I had air, I screamed. Then I lay there, still listening to my heart beat, feeling the pain begin to fade like the memory of a nightmare. Minutes later, the pain was gone. My body didn't even hurt. In fact, I felt energized, wonderful.

The heart on my chest had shriveled into a gray, used up piece of flesh. It wasn't recognizable as a heart, just a dry ball smaller than my palm. I blinked up and saw the face of the man holding my shoulders down. I'm sure he'd been looking down at me for a while, but I hadn't seen him or hadn't understood what I was seeing.

He wore a mask over his face. Only his lips, eyes, and ears showed through the thin covering. His neck was bare, then a ragged bow neck of the same material of the mask covered him. I think part of me knew what I was looking at, before the rest of me would accept it. It wasn't until I turned my head as far as I could to one side, and saw the hands that I knew what he was wearing. The empty hands bunched at his wrists like limp, fleshly lace. It was human skin. I'd finally found out what had happened to some of the skin the flayed ones had lost.

The eyes that stared out of that horrible thing were brown and very human. I looked down the line of my body and found that the other two men holding my legs wore the same thing, but the skins weren't all the same colors. One dark, two light. The chests had thick cord sewn across it where the breasts and nipples would have been, so there was no clue to whether the skin had been male or female.

The first man I'd seen stepped forward. "How do you feel?" His English was heavily accented but clear.

I just looked at him for a second. He had to be kidding. "How am I supposed to feel? I just woke up in a cave where you just performed a human

sacrifice." I glanced at the men still holding me down. "I'm being held down by men wearing flayed human skin suits. How the hell I am I supposed to feel?"

"I am asking after your bodily health. Nothing more," he said.

I started to say something else sarcastic, but stopped and really thought about his question. How did I feel? Actually, I felt good. I remembered that rush of energy and well-being that had spread over me when the spell finished. It was still there. I felt better than I'd felt in days. If it hadn't required human sacrifice, it would have been a great medical treatment.

"I feel okay."

"No pain in the head?"

"No."

"Good," he said. He motioned, and the skin guys moved away from me. They moved back to stand against the wall by the fourth man who hadn't been needed to hold me down. They stood there like good soldiers, waiting for their next orders.

I turned back to look at the other guy. Everyone in the room was scary, but at least he wasn't wearing someone else's skin. "What did you do to me?"

"We have saved your life. Our master's creature was overzealous. There was bleeding in your head. We needed you alive."

I thought about that. "You used Paulina's life force to heal me."

"Yes."

"I'm glad to be alive, honest." I looked past him at Paulina's body lying broken and forgotten. "But she didn't volunteer to trade her life for mine, did she?"

"Nicky Baco began to suspect what price he would have to pay for our master's blessing. She was a hostage to make sure he came to this our last meeting," the man said.

"Let me guess. He didn't show," I said.

"He no longer answers our master's call."

Apparently, Ramirez had taken my advice of having Leonora Evans do some sort of magical barrier around Nicky so he couldn't contact his master. Good to know it was working, but you try to do the right thing and it ends up getting someone else killed. Why is that always the way it works? But I admit that I was happier for me than sorry for Paulina. Not about her trading her life for mine, but if Nicky was being protected by magic, then he and the police were on their way. All I had to do was stall and keep them from doing whatever it was they had planned for me.

"So when Nicky didn't show up, you didn't need to keep her alive." My voice sounded calm, but better than that, I was calm. Not normal calm, but the cool distant calm that you either learn to do during the really bad stuff, or you run screaming. I'd done all the screaming I planned on doing tonight.

"Her life did not matter. Yours does."

"I'm glad to be alive, and don't take this wrong, but why do you give a damn if I live or die?"

"We need you," a male voice said from behind me. I had to arch my neck and crane my head backward to see the owner of that second voice. I didn't see

the man at first because he was surrounded by the flayed ones. I'd known that Edward was worried that they'd missed some bodies. He had no idea. There must have been twenty-five, thirty-five animated corpses standing behind me. They'd been standing so quietly, I hadn't heard them or sensed them. They stood there now like robots with the switch turned off, waiting for life to return. Zombies never got that still, never went that empty. At the end, when they started to rot and you had to put them back in the grave before they melted into little puddles, they were more alive than this. I realized in that instant that the bodies were raised, but the person inside that body wasn't raised. The master ate that which made them individuals. He ate that which made them more than so much muscle and skin. He didn't eat the souls because I'd seen one of them in a house where two flayed ones had been made. But he took something out of their bodies, some memory or remnant that I left in when I raised the dead. They stood like rocks carved of flesh, utterly empty. At least the ones in the hospital had pretended to still be alive. There was no pretense here.

My eyes finally found the man. He wore a steel helmet and breastplate like the history books are always showing the conquistadors wearing, but the rest of the outfit was straight out of a nightmare.

He wore a necklace of tongues, and they were all still fresh and pink as they'd just been cut out seconds ago. He wore a skirt of intestines that writhed and twisted like snakes, as if each thick glistening strand had an independent life of its own. His arms were bare, strong and muscled, and covered in the missing eyelids of the victims. As he moved close, the eyelids opened and closed. He came to stand beside me, next to the first man. The eyelids blinked at me and there were eye shaped holes underneath every lid that I saw. The holes held darkness and the cold light of stars.

I turned away because I was remembering Itzpapalot's starry eyes. I didn't want to fall into these eyes. At that second if you had given me a choice, I'd have taken the vampire in town to the thing that was standing in front of me.

After what I'd seen at the murder scene, I expected to feel evil emanating from him, but there was no evil. There was power like being next to a battery the size of the Chrysler building. The energy hummed along my skin, but it was neutral energy. Neither good nor bad in and of itself, the way a gun is neither good nor bad but can be turned to evil purposes.

I stared up the line of his body, and the tongues were moving as if still trying to scream. He took off the helmet and showed a slender, handsome face that reminded me of Bernardo's, not the pure Aztec ethnicity I'd been expecting. He had turquoise ear spools in his lobes, and they matched the blue green of his eyes. He smiled down at me, looking like a fresh-faced twenty-something. I could feel the weight of the ages in his gaze like some vast weight pressing down on me, as if just being this close made it hard to breathe.

He reached out to touch my face, and I jerked back from him. That one movement seemed to break his hold over me. I could move. I could breathe. I could think. I'd been on the receiving end of enough magical glamour to know it when I felt it. You're either a god, or you're not. He was not. And it wasn't just my monotheism showing. I'd felt the magic of monsters and preternatural

beasties of all sorts, and I knew one when I saw one. Power doesn't make you a deity. I don't know exactly what does, but power ain't it. Some spark of the divine was missing from the being that gazed down upon me. If he was just another monster, maybe we could deal.

"Who are you?" And I was happy that my voice was confident, normal.

"I am the Red Woman's Husband." He gazed down at me with eyes so patient, so kind. You think angels must have eyes like that.

"The Red Woman is the Aztec phrase for blood. What does it mean that you're blood's husband?"

"I am the body, and she is the life." He said it like it answered my question. It didn't.

Something wet and slimy touched my hand. I jerked back, but the chain didn't let me go far. The length of animated intestine followed my hand, nuzzling it like some obscene worm. I swallowed a scream, but I couldn't keep my pulse from speeding up.

He laughed at me.

It was a very ordinary laugh for a would-be god, but it was nicely condescending and maybe that's how would-be gods laughed. But it was a peculiarly masculine condescension, long gone out of style. The laugh says, "Silly little girl, don't you know I'm the big strong man, and you know nothing, and I know everything?" Or maybe I'm just too sensitive.

"Why intestines?" I asked.

The smile faded around the edges. His handsome face looked puzzled. "Are you making fun of me?" The intestine dropped away from my hand like a date that I'd rebuffed. Fine with me.

"No. I just wondered why intestines. You can obviously animate any body part. You can keep detached parts from decaying like the skins your men are wearing. With all that to choose from, why people's guts and not something else?" People love to talk about themselves. The bigger the ego, the more they enjoy it. I was hoping that the Red Woman's Husband was the same as everyone else, at least in this one thing.

"I wear the roots of their bodies so that all that see me will know that my enemies are empty shells and I have all that was theirs."

Ask a silly question. "Why the tongues?"

"So that the lies of my enemies will not be believed."

"Eyelids?"

"I will open the eyes of my enemies so that they may never again close their eyes to the truth."

He was answering questions so nicely that I decided to try for more. "How did you skin the people without using a tool of some kind?"

"Tlaloci, my priest, called the skin from their bodies."

"How?" I asked.

"My power," he said.

"Don't you mean Tlaloci's power?"

He frowned again. "All his power derives from me."

"Sure," I said.

"I am his master. He owes all to me."

"Sounds like you owe him."

"You do not know what you are saying." He was getting angry. Probably not what I wanted. I tried another more polite question.

"Why take the breasts and penises?"

"To feed my minion." He did nothing, but suddenly I felt the air in the cavern move, and it was as if the shadows themselves drew apart like a curtain revealing a tunnel about thirty feet from the foot of where I lay. Something crawled out of that tunnel. The first impression was of a brilliant iridescent green. The scales changed color at every turn of the light. First green, then blue, then blue and green all at once, then a pearl white glitter that I thought I must have imagined, until it turned its head and flashed a white underbelly. The green scales went closer to true blue as the color moved up towards the head, until the square snout was a clear pure blue the color of sky. There was a fringe of delicate feathers in a rainbow of colors around that face. It turned and stared at me, fanning the feathers around its scaled head into a display that would have been the envy of any peacock. Its eyes were round and huge, taking up most of its face like the eyes of a bird of prey. A pair of slender wings was folded along its back, rainbow colors of the fringe, but I knew without seeing that the underside of the wings would be white. It pushed forward on four legs. Counting the wings, it was a six-limbed animal.

It was a Quetzalcoatl Draconus Giganticus, or at least that was the last Latin classification I was aware of. Sometimes they were classed as a subspecies of dragons, sometimes as a subspecies of gargoyles, and sometimes they had their own group all to themselves. Whatever classification, the Giganticus was the biggest and supposedly extinct. The Spaniards had killed a lot of them to dishearten the natives to whom they were sacred, and because it was just the European thing to do. See a dragon, kill it. It was not a complex philosophy.

I'd only seen black and white photos, and the stuffed one in the Chicago Field Museum. The photos hadn't come close to doing it justice, and the stuffed one, well, maybe it was a bad taxidermy job.

It glided into the room in a shimmering roll of color and muscle. It was literally one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen. It was also probably what had been gutting people. It opened that sky-blue snout and yawned showing rows of saw-like teeth. The sound of its claws clattered over the stone floor like some nightmarish dog.

Red Woman's Husband lay his Spanish helmet on the stone by my legs and went to greet the creature. It lowered its head to be petted, very like a dog. He stroked it just above the eye ridges and it made a low, rolling sound, eyes closing to slits. It was purring.

He sent it away with a playful push against one muscular shoulder. I watched it vanish back through the tunnel like it wasn't real. "I thought they were extinct."

"My minion helped bring us to this place, then it slept a magic sleep, waiting for me to awake."

"I didn't know Quetzalcoatl could hibernate."

He frowned at me again and came to stand by my head. "I know what your word hibernate means, but it was a magic sleep, done by the last of my warrior priests. The priest sacrificed himself, putting all of us in an enchanted sleep, knowing that there was no one to aid him, and that he would die alone in this alien place long before I rose."

Enchanted sleep. Sounded like Sleeping Beauty. "That's true loyalty, sacrifice yourself for the better good."

"I'm so glad you agree. It will make what has to happen much easier."

Didn't like the sound of that. Maybe flattery wasn't the way to go. I'd try something more normal for me—sarcasm—and see if that led us away from the topic of my impending doom. "I don't owe you any loyalty. I am not one of your followers."

"Only because you do not understand," he said, and those smiling eyes gazed down at me with a look of almost perfect peace.

"That's what Jim Jones said just before he gave every one the Kool-Aid."

"I do not know this name, Jim Jones." Then he turned his head to one side, and it reminded me of Itzpapalotl when she listened to voices I could not hear. Now I realized that it might just be a way to access other people's memories. "Ah, I know who he is now." He looked down at me with those calm, beatific eyes. "But I am no madman. I am a god."

He was getting distracted, as if it mattered to him for me to believe he was a god. If he had to convince me that he was divine before he killed me, then I was safe. He could kill me, but he'd never convince me he was a god.

He frowned. "You do not believe me." He sounded surprised again. And I realized that for all his power, he seemed young. The ages raged through the eyes on his arms as though you could see back through to the beginning of creation, but he, himself, seemed young. Or maybe he just wasn't used to people who didn't drop down and worship him. If that's all you'd known in your entire existence, then anyone not worshipping might be a shock.

"I am a god," he repeated, and his voice had that condescending tone again.

"Whatever you say." But I made sure my doubt showed in my voice.

The frown deepened, and again I was reminded forcibly of a pouting child. A spoiled, pouting child. "You must believe that I am a god. I am the Red Woman's Husband. I am the body that will be revenged on those that destroyed my people."

"You mean the Spanish Conquistadors?"

"Yes," he said.

"There aren't a lot of conquistadors in New Mexico," I said.

"Their blood still runs in the veins of their children's children's children."

"No offense, but you didn't get those turquoise blue eyes from anyone local."

He frowned again, and little lines formed between his eyes. If he kept talking to me, he was going to get frown lines. "I am a god created by my

people's tears. I am the power that is left of the Aztecs, and I am the Spaniard's magic made flesh. We will use their own power to destroy them."

"Isn't it a little late to destroy them? About five hundred years too late."

"Gods do not reckon time as men do."

I believed that he believed what he was saying, but I also thought he was rationalizing. He'd have kicked the Spaniards' butts five hundred years ago if he'd been able to do it.

Maybe it showed on my face because he said, "I was a new god then, and I did not have the strength to defeat our enemies, so the Quetzalcoatl brought me here to wait until I grew strong enough for our purpose. I am ready to lead my army forward now."

"So you're saying that it took five hundred years for you to go from being a wee little god to a big bad god, the way soup needs to simmer for a really long time before it's soup?"

He laughed. "You think very strangely. I am sad that you will be dead soon. I would make you the first of my concubines, and the mother of gods, for children born of you would be great sorcerers, but sadly, I have need of your life."

We were back to killing me, and I didn't want to be there. His ego seemed pretty fragile for a deity. I'd see how fragile. "The offer doesn't sound very appealing, no offense."

He smiled down at me, fingers trailing along my arm. "That we will take your life is not an offer. It is a fact."

I gave him my best innocent eyes. "I thought you were offering to make me your concubine, the mother of gods?"

He frowned at me harder. "I did not offer you a chance to be my concubine."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry. I misunderstood you."

His fingers were still touching my arm, but they were still now, as if he'd forgotten he was touching me. "You would refuse my bed?" He sounded truly perplexed. Great.

"Yeah," I said.

"Is it your virtue you are protecting?"

"No, it's just your particular offer doesn't appeal to me."

He was really having trouble with the concept that I didn't find him attractive. He ran his fingers down my bare arm in a tickling brush. I just lay there and looked at him. I was giving him some of the best eye contact I'd given anyone this trip because if I looked anywhere else, I kept seeing severed body parts wiggling on their own. Hard to be tough as nails when you wanted to start screaming. He touched my face, and I let him this time. His fingers traced my face, delicately, gently. His eyes no longer looked peaceful. No, definitely disturbed.

He leaned into me as if he'd kiss me, and the eye lashes on his arms fluttered in butterfly kisses along my body. I gave a little shriek.

He drew back. "What is wrong?"

"Oh, I don't know. Severed eyelids fluttering against my skin, intestines that writhe like snakes around your waist, the necklace of tongues trying to lick me. Pick one."

"But that should not matter," he said. "You should see me as beautiful, desirable."

I did the best shrug I could with my hands chained higher than my shoulders.

"Sorry, but I just can't get past what you're wearing."

"Tlaloci," he said.

The man in shorts came forward, and dropped to one knee before him. "Yes, my lord."

"Why does she not see me as wonderful?"

"Apparently, the aura of your godhood does not work on her."

"Why not?" And there was anger now in his voice, in that once peaceful face.

"I do not know, my lord."

"You said she could replace Nicky Baco. You said she was a nauhuli as he was. You said she had been touched by my magic, and it was the scent of my magic that drew the Quetzalcoatl to her. But she lies under the touch of my hands and does not feel for me. That is not possible if my magic clings to her."

I thought, what if it's not his magic, but I didn't say it out loud. What if it was Itzpapalotl's? The being standing in front of me had nearly killed me from a distance. He'd roared over my mind and taken me, and I hadn't been able to stop him. Now, he was touching me, and evidently trying things on me, and it wasn't working. The only thing that had changed was Itzpapalotl's power filling me for awhile. Had that made the difference?

Tlaloci stood, head still bowed. "There must be powerful magic at work here, my lord. First Nicky Baco is lost to us, and now this one is closed to your vision."

"She must be open to my power or she cannot be the perfect sacrifice," Red Woman's Husband said.

"I know, my lord."

"You are the magician, Tlaloci. How can I undo this magic?"

The magician put some serious thought into it. Several minutes passed while he thought. I just lay there trying not to draw their attention back to me. Finally, Tlaloci looked up. "To believe in your vision, she must believe in you."

"How do I convince her to believe that I am a god if she cannot feel my power?"

It was a good question, and I waited patiently for Tlaloci to answer it. The longer he thought about it, the more delay time I was getting. Ramirez was coming. I had to believe that because my options were limited unless I could figure out a way to get them to untie me.

I could feel the pen still in my pocket with its hidden blade. I was armed, if I could get my hands free, and if steel could hurt him. Of course, there were the four helpers, and Tlaloci, and a small army of flayed ones. So even if the

god could die, I'd have to do something about everyone else. They'd probably be pissed if I killed their god. I just wasn't sure how to get out of this one.

If Ramirez didn't arrive with the cavalry, I was in deep shit. Edward wasn't out there looking for me this time. For the first time since I came to, I wondered was Edward alive. Please, God, let him be alive. But alive or not, Edward was out of the rescuing game for tonight. I admitted I needed help on this one, and the only hope I could count on was Ramirez and the police. He'd been late in the hospital. If he were late tonight, I probably wouldn't be around to complain.

Tlaloci motioned for his god to follow him a little away from me. I think they were whispering things they didn't want me to know. Why did it matter if I overheard them or not? What could they possibly be talking about that they needed to hide from me? They'd cheerfully told me they were going to kill me. It wasn't like they were trying to protect my feelings. So what was going on?

The Red Woman's Husband unfastened the necklace of tongues and handed it to the priest. He took off the steel breastplate and one of the skin guys came and took it from him, kneeling in front of him. He took off the skirt of intestines, and another skin guy hurried forward to take it. The "god" never asked them to help him, just sort of assumed that someone would be there to help. He was almost perfectly arrogant, but his ego was fragile, an arrogance that had never been tested in the outer world. He was like one of those fairy tale princesses that had been raised in an ivory tower with only people who told them how beautiful they were, how smart, how good, until the witch comes and lays her curse. Maybe I could be the witch, though truthfully I wouldn't have known a curse if it bit me on the butt. Maybe I could be the prince that comes and takes him away. At this point I wasn't picky.

The "god" was wearing a maxilatl like everyone at the Obsidian Butterfly had worn. But this one was black with a heavy fringe of golden thread hanging in front. He wore black sandals set with turquoise, which strangely I hadn't noticed when he was wearing all the severed body parts. Funny how you don't concentrate on the small details when you're scared.

He walked towards me, confidence showing in every step. The maxilatl left his lower body bare on the sides from waist to sandals. It was a nice length of thigh, but you know what they say. Pretty is as pretty does.

"Is this better?" he asked, his voice light, almost teasing, his eyes back to that peaceful contentment, as if things had always gone his way, and he didn't see why now should be different. Itzpapalotl had been arrogant, but not peaceful.

"Much better," I said. I thought about remarking on how much I liked seeing nearly naked men, but didn't want to take it to such an obviously sexual tone unless I ran out of other options.

He came to stand beside me again. The eyelids were still on his arms, blinking at me like the winking lights of fireflies, random, and alien.

"It's a big improvement," I said. "You can't do anything about the eyes on your arms, can you?"

He frowned again. "They are part of me."

"I see that," I said.

"But they are nothing to fear."

"If you say so."

"I want you to know me, Anita." It was the first time he'd used my name. I hadn't thought he knew it, until then. Of course, Paulina had known who I was. The Red Woman's Husband reached down to my right wrist, and he undid that little piece of metal that held the manacle closed.

The skinned man who was still standing on the other side of the stone took a step forward, hand on the knife at his belt. I froze, not sure if I was really going to be allowed to have my hand free.

The "god" lifted my hand free of the chain and laid his lips on the back of my hand. "Touch them. See that they are nothing to fear." It took me a second to figure out that "them" meant the eyes on his arms. I was relieved to realize he didn't mean anything below his waist, and so not happy that he meant all those eyes. I did not want to touch them. I wanted nothing to do with anything that had been carved off of a dead body, especially while that person had still been alive.

He held my wrist and tried to bring my hand over his arm, but I kept a tight fist. "Touch them, Anita, gently. They will not harm you." He began to pry my fingers open, and I couldn't fight him. I could have fought harder, maybe make him break a finger or two, to persuade me, but in the end I was going to lose this wrestling match, so I just let him spread my hand open. I didn't want anything broken if I could avoid it.

He guided my hand just above his arm, and the eyelids fluttered under my touch. I jumped every time one of them blinked, but the eyelids moving against my skin in a line of butterfly kisses wasn't as scary. The lids felt full, as if there was an eye behind them, and there wasn't. I'd seen that.

"What's inside them?" I asked.

"Everything," he said. Which told me nothing. "Explore them, Anita." He pressed one of my fingertips to the edge of an eye. Then he urged me to put the finger inside the eye.

I pushed my finger into that empty seeming eye, and there was a resistance like pushing against something thin and fleshy, then my finger was through and I could touch what was inside. Warm, a warmth that flowed through my hand, up my arm, and spread like a blanket over my body. I felt safe, warm. I stared up at him and wondered why I hadn't seen it before? He was so handsome, so kind, so ... My finger was cold, so cold that it hurt. It had that stinging pain that you get just before you lose all feeling in the limb, and frostbite settles in and spills over your body, and you fall into that last gentle sleep, never to wake.

I jerked my hand back, and blinked awake, with a gasp.

"What is wrong?" he asked, and leaned over me, touching my face.

I jerked away from him, cradling my hand against my chest, staring up at him, afraid. "You're cold inside."

He took a step back from me, and the surprise showed on his face. "You should feel safe, warm." He leaned over me, trying to get me to gaze into his blue-green eyes.

I shook my head. Feeling was coming back into my finger in a stinging rush, the way circulation comes back after frostbite. The throbbing ache helped me think, helped me avoid his gaze. "I'm not safe," I said, "and I'm not warm." I looked away from him, which put me gazing at the skin-clad guy. But truthfully even that was better than staring at the "god." Itzpapalotl's touch was helping me, but it had limits. If I fell into his eyes, wherever they might be, they'd just kill me, and I might go willingly, eagerly into that last dark.

"You are making this difficult, Anita."

I kept my gaze on the far wall. "Sorry that I'm ruining your night."

He stroked the curve of my face. I flinched as if he'd hurt me. I'd thought what I was trying to delay was my death. Now I realized that I was trying to delay falling into his power. They'd kill me after that, but I'd be gone before the knife fell. Had Paulina went like that, willingly, eager to please the "god?" I hoped so, for her sake. For mine, I wasn't so sure.

"I want you to believe that your death will be for a great purpose."

"Sorry, not buying swampland today."

I could almost feel his puzzlement like a play of energy along my skin, I'd felt anger, lust, fear dance along my skin from vampires and wereanimals, but I'd never felt puzzlement before. I hadn't felt his emotions before I touched that damned eye. He was sucking me down a piece at a time.

He grabbed my hand.

"No." I said it through gritted teeth. He could break my fingers this time, but I wasn't just opening up and touching him again. I couldn't just cooperate with him anymore, not even to buy time. I had to start fighting him now, or there'd be nothing left of me. I'd had vampires roll my mind before, but I'd never felt anything like him. Once he got a really good hold on my mind, I wasn't a hundred percent sure I'd come back. There are a lot of ways to die. Being killed is only one of the more obvious ones. If he rolled my mind and there was nothing left of who I was, then I was dead or would wish I was.

I flexed my arm, hugging it to my chest, straining my muscles to keep it there. He lifted the wrist and my whole upper body with it, but I held the arm, fingers closed into a fist.

"Do not make me hurt you, Anita."

"I'm not making you do anything. Whatever you do, it's your choice to do it, not mine."

He laid me back down, gently. "I could crush your hand." It sounded like a threat, but his voice was still gentle.

"I won't touch you again, not like that, not voluntarily."

"But lay your hand upon my chest, above my heart. That is not a hard thing, Anita."

"No."

"You are a very stubborn woman."

"You're not the first one to say it," I said.

"I will not force you."

The skinned man moved forward until he was directly against the stone, mirroring his "god." He drew an obsidian blade and bent over me. I tensed, but

I didn't say anything. I could not touch him again and promise I'd come out the other side. If I was going to die anyway, I'd die whole, not possessed by some would-be god.

But he didn't stab me. He slipped the tip of the blade under the shoulder of the Kevlar vest. Kevlar isn't meant to stop a stabbing motion, but it's not an easy thing to cut through, especially with a stone knife. The empty skin hand that decorated his wrist wobbled back and forth, back and forth, as he sawed. I stared past him at the far wall, but my peripheral vision just couldn't get rid of that flopping hand. I finally had to stare up at the ceiling, but it was just darkness. It's hard to stare into the dark when there are other things to look at, but I tried.

I almost asked them if they knew what Velcro was, but didn't. It would take them awhile to cut the vest off with an obsidian blade. Hell, I might not have to do anything else to delay them. It'd be morning by the time the obsidian cut through the material. Unfortunately, I wasn't the only one who figured that out.

The skin man put the blade back in his sheath and pulled a second knife out from a sheath behind his back, the way you'd carry a backup gun. When he raised it into the firelight, it glimmered silver, steel. With or without high silver content, it would still cut through the vest a lot quicker than the obsidian.

He slipped the tip under the shoulder seam of the vest. I finally had to say something. "You just planning to cut my heart out?"

"Your heart will remain in your chest where it belongs," the "god" said.

"Then why do you want the vest off?" I finally turned my head and looked at him, though not at any of his eyes.

"If you will not touch my chest with your hand, there are other parts of your body that can feel," he said.

It was almost enough to make me give him my hand, almost. I didn't trust what he might consider other parts of my body that could feel. But it would take time to get the vest off, and if I just gave up my hand, that wouldn't take any time at all. I needed the time.

The vest came off quicker than you'd think. It was not designed to stand up to a sawing blade. They pulled the pieces of the vest off me, tugging the last from under my back.

The Red Woman's Husband climbed up beside me. He knelt, staring down at me, and he wasn't staring at my face. He traced the outline of my bra with the tip of one finger. Trailing, oh, so lightly, along my skin. "What is this?" He traced under the bra back and forth, back and forth.

"Underwire," I said.

He traced the black lace at the top of the bra. "So many new things to learn."

"Glad you like it," I said. He didn't get the sarcasm. Maybe he was immune to it.

He did what I'd thought he'd do. He climbed on top of me. But he didn't get into a standard missionary position. He scooted lower until his chest was pressed against mine. With our height differences, that put his groin safely

below mine. So it wasn't rape that we were doing. Maybe it was just me that worried so much about that. But somehow the knowledge that it wasn't sex he was after scared me more. There were worse things he could take from me than sex, like my mind.

His chest pressed against mine, smooth, warm, very human. Nothing bad happened. Funny, that didn't slow the frantic beat of my heart, or make me look him in the eyes.

"Do you feel it?" he asked.

I just kept staring at the far wall of the cave. "I don't know what you mean?"

His chest pressed harder against me. "Do you feel my heart beating?"

It wasn't the question I'd been expecting, so I actually thought about it. I tried to feel the answering beat of his heart against me, but all I could feel was my own panicked pulse.

"Sorry, all I can feel is mine."

"And that is the problem," he said.

I actually looked up at him then, getting a brief glimpse of his face, leaning so close below mine, the startling glimpse of his blue-green eyes in that dark face. I looked back to the wall. "What do you mean?"

"My heart does not beat."

I tried to feel his heart then, tried to sense the pulse of his life through the warm flesh of his chest. Concentrating on it slowed my own heart. You aren't always aware of a man's heart beating against your body, but when they're lying chest to chest, you usually feel it. But his chest pressed quiet above mine. I moved my free hand slowly toward him. He raised up, supporting himself with his hands, so I could press my hand against his chest.

His skin was warm and smooth, almost perfect, but nothing beat under my hand. Either he had no heart, or it wasn't beating.

"I am only body. The Red Woman does not live in me. My heart is not a fit sacrifice without her touch."

That made me look back at him. I looked into his peaceful eyes.

"Sacrifice? You're going to sacrifice yourself?"

His eyes stayed gentle and hopeful. "I will be a sacrifice to the creator gods. They need to feed on the blood of a god as they did at the beginning of time."

I tried to read something in that peaceful handsome face. Some doubt, fear, anything I could understand.

"You're going to let your priest cut you up?"

"Yes, but I will be reborn."

"You're sure of that?" I said.

"My heart will be strong enough to beat outside my body, and when it is placed back within me, the old gods will return from the exile that your white Christ has cast them into." His face, more than his words, said that he did believe it.

I'd read enough of the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish to doubt that Christ had much to do with it, no matter how many things had been done in His

name. "Don't blame Jesus Christ for what the Spanish did to your people. Our God gave us free choice, and that means we can choose evil. I believe that that's what happened to the men who conquered your people."

He looked down at me, and he was puzzled again. "You believe that. I can tell you believe that."

"With all my heart," I said. "No pun intended."

He sat up, sitting across my waist. "Most of the people I have taken as offerings did not believe in much of anything. The ones who did believe, did not believe in your white Christ." He touched my face. "But you do."

"Yeah," I said.

"How can you believe in a god that would allow you to be brought to this place and sacrificed to a foreign god?"

"If you only believe when it's easy, you don't really believe," I said.

"Is it not ironic that you, a follower of the God that destroyed us, will be what allows me to come into my power. When I have taken your essence, I will be strong enough to make the precious liquid, and I will be free of this place at last."

"What do you mean, take my essence?" I'd stopped being afraid because we'd just been talking so long, or maybe I just can't sustain fear for that long. Eventually, if you don't kill me or hurt me, I stop being afraid.

"I will but kiss you and you will become as light and dry as the aged maize. You will feed me as the corn feeds men." He began to lie down beside me on my right side, near my free hand.

I was suddenly scared again. I hoped I was wrong, but I was pretty sure I'd already seen what he meant to do to me at the Obsidian Butterfly. "You mean you'll suck the life out of me and I'll end up looking like a dried mummy."

He stroked a finger down my cheek, his eyes sad now, regretful. "It will hurt a great deal, and I am sorry for that, but even your pain will go to strengthen me." He leaned his face towards mine. I had a free hand and a knife in my pocket, but if I went for it too soon and failed, I was out of options. Where the hell was Ramirez?

"You're going to torture me. Great," I said.

He drew back from me, just a little. "It is not torture. It is the way all my priests waited for my waking."

"Who brought your priests back?" I asked.

"I wakened Tlaloci, but I was weak and I had no more blood to give the others. Then before we could raise the others the man you call Riker disturbed our place of rest." He stared off into space, as if he were seeing it over again. "He found what you called the mummies of my priests. Many were torn apart by his men, searching for jewels inside them." Anger darkened his face, stole the peacefulness from his eyes. "The Quetzalcoatl was not yet awake or we would have killed them all. They took things that belonged to my priests. It forced me to find a different way to give them back their lives."

"The skins," I said.

He looked down at me. "Yes, there are ways to make them give life."

"So you hunted down the people who desecrated your ... sleeping place, and the people who bought the things that belonged to your people."

"Yes," he said.

I guess from a certain point of view it was fair. If you had no ability to feel mercy, then it was a dandy plan. "You killed and took the organs from the people who were gifted," I said.

"Gifted?" he made it a question.

"Witches, brujos."

"Ah, yes, I did not wish to leave them alive to hunt us before I came into my power." He was touching my face again, stroking it. I think he was getting back on track to give me his "kiss".

"What exactly does coming into your power mean?" I asked. As long as I could keep him talking, he wouldn't be killing me. I could think of questions all night long.

"I will be mortal and immortal."

I widened eyes at him. "What do you mean mortal?"

"Your blood will make me mortal. Your essence will make me immortal."

I frowned at him. "I don't understand what you mean."

He cupped my face in his hands like a lover. "How could you possibly understand the ways of gods." He held out his hand, and the skin-man handed him a long bone needle. Maybe I didn't know what he was going to do.

"What's that for?"

He held the needle, maybe four inches long, twirling it slowly between his fingers. "I will pierce your ear lobe and drink your blood. It will be a small pain."

"You keep saying you want me to believe in you, but you're the only one who never seems to be in pain. Your priests, the people who stole from you, all the sacrifices, everybody hurts but you."

He propped himself up on one elbow, his body snug against mine. "If my pain will convince you of my sincerity, then so be it." He jabbed the needle into his finger, deep, deep enough to touch bone. He drew the needle out slowly, making it hurt as much as he could. I waited for blood to come to the surface, but it didn't. He held the finger so I could see the hole the needle had left, but the hole was empty, no blood. As I watched, the wound closed like water smoothing, perfect once more. The knife wasn't going to do me any good, not against him.

"Does my pain make your pain less?" he asked.

"I'll let you know," I said.

He smiled, so patient, so kind. So full of it. He started moving the needle towards my left ear. I could have fought him with my free hand, but if all he was going to do was pierce my earlobe like I'd seen at the nightclub, then he could do that. I didn't like the idea, but I wasn't going to fight him. If I fought now, they might chain my hand back up. I wanted the free hand more than I wanted to keep him from sucking on my ear.

Truth is, I don't like needles, not just doctor needles, any of them. I have a phobia about small pointed things in my body. Knives don't seem to bother me,

but needles do. Go figure. It was a phobia. To keep from struggling, I finally had to close my eyes because otherwise I'd have fought. I just couldn't help it.

The pain was sharp and immediate. I gasped opening my eyes, watching his face lean over me. For a second I thought I'd blown it. I thought he was going straight to the kiss, then his mouth passed by my mouth. He turned my face to the right, gently, exposing the ear, and the long line of my neck. It reminded me of vampires, except that this mouth licked my ear, one quick movement. He made a small sigh, as he swallowed the first blood, then his mouth closed over my earlobe, mouth working at the wound, tongue coaxing blood from the wound. He pressed his body the length of mine, one hand cupping my turned head, the other playing down the line of my body. Maybe it was just blood, but I never stroked my steak while I was eating it.

The line of his jaw was pressed to my face. I could feel his mouth moving as he swallowed. I'd had vampires take blood without me being under their spell, so it had hurt. This didn't hurt nearly as much. It was more like an overzealous lover with an ear fetish. Disturbing, but not really painful. His hand moved from my face to slide inside my bra. That I didn't like.

"I thought you said you weren't offering sex."

He drew his hand out of my bra and drew back from my ear. His eyes were wide and unfocused and drowning in turquoise glow like the eyes of any vampire when its bloodlust is up. "Forgive me," he said, "but it has been so very long since I felt life in my body."

I thought I understood what he meant, but I was asking every question I could think of tonight. Anything to keep him talking. "What do you mean?"

He laughed and rolled on his side to prop himself up on his elbow again. He jabbed the needle into his finger again, and gasped. Blood welled up from the wound, crimson blood. He laughed again. "Your blood runs through my body, and I am mortal once more, with all the appetites of a mortal man."

"You need blood to have blood pressure," I said. "You've got your first hard on in centuries. I get it."

He looked down at me with drowning eyes. "You could have it." He moved so that his body was pressed against mine, and I could feel him pressed against my jeans, eager, and ready.

I started to say my usual, no, then stopped. If my choices were being raped or being killed, when I thought that help was on the way ... I debated, and I really don't know what I would have said, because another of the skin-men ran in from behind us where the silent flayed ones waited.

I heard the man's running footsteps and turned to watch him push his way through the flayed ones. He dropped to one knee in front of the Red Woman's Husband. "My lord, armed strangers are approaching. The little brujo is with them, leading them this way."

The Red Woman's Husband looked at him. "Kill them. Delay them. When I have come into my power, it will be too late."

The skin-men got weapons out of a chest and went running. I turned my head to watch the flayed ones trail after them. Only Tlaloci the priest stayed

behind. It was just the three of us. Ramirez was coming. The police were coming. Surely, I could delay a few more minutes.

Fingers touched my face, moving me to look at him. "You could have been the first woman in centuries for me, but there is no time." He began to lower his face towards me. "I am sorry that I must take you as an unwilling sacrifice because you have not harmed me or mine."

I slipped my hand into my pocket. Fingers closed on the pen. I turned my head to the side so he couldn't kiss me, but I was really looking to see where Tlaloci was in the room. He'd moved back to the altar. He'd thrown Paulina's body off to one side like so much garbage. He was cleaning the altar, preparing I think for his god's death.

The Red Woman's Husband stroked my face, trying to turn me gently towards him. He whispered, breath warm against my face. "I will wear your heart on the necklace of tongues, so that all my followers may remember your sacrifice for all eternity."

"How romantic," I said. I started easing the pen out of my pocket.

"Turn to me, Anita. Do not make me hurt you." His fingers closed on my chin and began to turn my face slowly towards his. I felt his strength in his fingers and knew he could crush my jaw with only a flexing of his hand. I couldn't keep him from turning my face up to him. I couldn't stop it, but I had the pen in my hand now. I had my finger on the button that would release the blade. I just had to make sure it was over his heart.

Gunfire sounded from outside the cave, and it sounded close as if the entrance wasn't that far away. Then there was a sound like a roaring, and I knew what it was because I'd heard it before. The police had brought flame-throwers or found some National Guard to join the party. I wondered whose idea it had been. It was a good one. I hoped they all burned.

I stared up at him, his fingers keeping my face looking at him. "Does your heart really beat for me?" I asked.

"My heart beats. Blood runs through this body. You have given me life, and now you will give me immortality."

The Red Woman's Husband leaned over me like Prince Charming about to bestow the kiss that would make everything all right again. His mouth hovered an inch above mine. The memory of how Seth's body had dried, died, was too vivid. I must have rushed to get the pen in position just above his heart. He pulled back a fraction of an inch, eyes questioning. I hit the button, and the blade took him through the heart.

His eyes flew wide, all that turquoise fire fading, leaving his eyes human looking. "What have you done?"

"You're just another kind of vampire. I kill vampires."

He rolled off the stone, fell to the floor. He held a hand out to Tlaloci. The priest rushed over to him. I didn't wait to see if there was a cure for the "god." I undid my left wrist and reached down for my ankles.

The Red Woman's Husband collapsed to his knees, and the priest collapsed with him. He was crying. "No, no, no." He pressed his hands around the hilt, trying to stop the blood from pouring out. His "god" fell into

convulsions on the floor. He tried to hold his hands over the wound, to staunch the blood.

I got my ankles freed and rolled off to the other side of the stone. Call it a hunch, but I thought that Tlaloci would be upset with me.

He rose to his feet, bloodstained hands held out in front of him. I'd never seen anyone look so horrified, so desolate, as if I had destroyed his world. And maybe I had.

He never said a word, just drew the obsidian blade at his waist and stalked towards me. But the rock I'd been chained to was the size of a large dining room table, and I kept it between him and me. I kept the distance between us even, and he couldn't catch me. The gunfire was coming closer. He must have heard it, too, because he suddenly rolled over the stone to slash at me with the knife. I ran away from the stone, out into the open, which was what he wanted.

I turned and faced him. He came for me in a crouch, knife held loose but firm, as if he knew what he was doing. I'd left the blade in the vampire. I faced him hands out from my body, not sure what to do, except not get cut. I thought of one thing. I screamed, "Ramirez!"

Tlaloci rushed me, blade slashing. I turned, feeling the rush of air as the blade passed. There were screams from the stairs, the sounds of in-close fighting. Tlaloci slashed at me like a madman. All I could do was keep backing up, trying to stay out of reach. I was bleeding from both arms, and one cut on my upper chest, when I realized he'd backed me up by the altar.

I tripped over Paulina's body about the second I started looking for it, to avoid it. I went down on my side, her body trapped under my legs. I kicked out at him without looking to see where he was, anything to keep him at a distance.

He grabbed my ankle, pinning my leg against his body. We stared at each other, and I saw my death in his face. He tossed the knife one-handed so that the grip changed from slashing, to a downward stab. He had my left leg pinned, but my right leg was still on the floor. I braced my upper body with my arms, leaned my shoulders downward and drew back my right leg. I lined up his kneecap. Tlaloci started the downward stroke. I kicked the downward edge of his kneecap with everything I had. I saw the kneecap slide sideways, dislocated. His leg crumbled, he cried out in pain, but the blade kept coming.

Tlaloci's head exploded in a shower of brains, and bone. The pieces rained down on me, and the body fell to one side, obsidian blade scraping along the stone floor as the hand convulsed around the hilt.

I stared across the cave and saw Olaf standing at the foot of the stone steps.

He was still standing in his shooting stance, one-handed, gun still pointed at where the priest had been standing. He blinked, and I watched the concentration leave his face, watched something close to human spill across his face. He started walking towards me, gun at his side. The other hand held a knife, bloody to the hilt.

I was wiping Tlaloci's brains off my face when Olaf came to stand in front of me. "I never thought I'd say this, but damn I'm glad to see you."

He actually smiled. "I saved your life."

That made me smile. "I know."

Ramirez came down the stairs with what looked like a SWAT team in full battle gear behind him. They spilled out to either side, nasty-looking guns pointed at every inch of the cavern. Ramirez just stood there, gun in hand, looking for something to shoot. National Guardsmen in flame-thrower gear came next, nozzle of the flame-thrower pointed up at the ceiling.

Olaf cleaned his knife on his pants, sheathed it, and offered me a hand. The hand was stained red, but I took it. His skin was sticky with blood, but I squeezed his hand and let him pull me to my feet.

Bernardo came into the room with more cops behind him. His cast was red with blood, the blade sticking out of it so dark with blood, it looked black. He said, "You're alive."

I nodded. "Thanks to Olaf."

He gave a small pressure to my hand, then let me go.

"I was late again," Ramirez said.

I shook my head. "Does it matter who saves the day, as long as it gets saved?"

The other cops were starting to relax as they realized there was no one to shoot.

"Is this all?" one of the black-decked cops asked.

I looked back at the far tunnel. "There's a Quetzalcoatl down that tunnel."

"A what?"

"A... dragon."

Even through the battle gear you could see them all exchange glances.

"Monster, if you like the word better, but it's still down there."

They got into ranks and went past me to the tunnel at a crouched run. They hesitated at the tunnel entrance, then slipped through one at a time. For once I let them go. I'd done my part for one night. Besides, they were a hell of a lot better armed than I was. One of them ordered Ramirez and some of the other more civvie looking policemen to escort the civilians to the surface.

Ramirez came to stand in front of me. "You're bleeding." He touched the cut on my arm.

I turned so he could see some of the other cuts. "Pick one."

Bernardo and the other cops that had been ordered to stay behind came to look at the two dead men. "Where's this Red Woman's Husband that the little creep kept talking about?" one of the cops asked.

I pointed at the body with the blade sticking out of its chest.

Two of the cops went to stand over the body. "He doesn't look much like a god."

"He was a vampire," I said.

That got everyone's attention. "What did you say?" Ramirez asked.

"Let's concentrate on the important details here, boys. We need to make sure that body doesn't get back up. Trust me. He is one powerful son of a bitch. We want him to stay dead."

A cop kicked the body, which rolled limply as only the true dead move, "Looks dead to me."

Watching the body roll limply made me jump, as if I expected him to sit up and say, just kidding, I'm not really dead. The body stayed still, but it hadn't done my nerves any good.

"We need to take the head and cut out his heart. Then we burn them separately and scatter the ashes over different bodies of water. Then we burn the body to ash, and scatter it over a third body of water."

"You've got to be kidding," one of the cops said.

"The flayed ones just fell down and stopped moving," Ramirez said. "Did you do that?"

"Probably when I put the knife through his heart."

"Bullets hadn't worked on any of them until the flayed one fell down, then the bullets killed everything."

"She did that?" the cop asked. "She made our bullets work?"

"Yes," Ramirez said, and probably he was right. Probably it had been me. Regardless, I wasn't going to raise any doubts. I wanted them to listen to me. I wanted to make sure that the 'god' stayed dead.

"How exactly do we chop off the head?" the same cop asked.

Olaf went to the chest that the men had gotten their weapons out of and lifted a large flat club with bits of obsidian embedded in it. He holstered his gun and walked to the body.

"Shit, that's one of those damn things they used on us," the cop said.

"Nicely ironic to use it on their god, don't you think?" Bernardo asked.

Olaf knelt beside the body.

"Hey, we didn't say you could do that," the cop said.

Olaf looked at Ramirez. "What do you say, Ramirez?"

"I say we do whatever Anita says."

Olaf whirled the club as if getting the feel for it. It also made the cops back up. He looked at me. "I'll take the head."

I pulled the knife out of Tlaloci's hand. He wasn't going to be needing it anymore. "I'll take the heart." I walked toward him, blade in hand. The cops kept backing away from us.

I stood over the vampire. Olaf knelt on the other side, looking up at me. "If I'd let you get killed, Edward would have thought I failed."

"Edward's alive then?"

"Yes."

A tightness left my shoulders that I hadn't even realized was there. "Thank God."

"I don't fail," Olaf said.

"I believe you," I said.

We stared at each other, and there was still something in his eyes that I couldn't read or understand, a step beyond whatever I'd become. I stared into his dark eyes and knew that here was a monster, not as powerful as the one that lay on the ground, but just as deadly in the right circumstances. And I owed him my life.

"You take the head first."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid if I take the knife out while the body's still intact that he'll sit up and start breathing again."

Olaf raised eyebrows at me. "You are not joking me?"

"I never joke about vampires," I said.

He gave me another long look. "You would have made a good man."

I took the compliment because that's what it was, maybe the best compliment he'd ever given a woman.

"Thank you," I said.

The SWAT team came back out of the far tunnel. "There's nothing down there. It's empty."

"Then it got away," I said. I looked at the body still lying there. "Take the head. I want out of this damn cave."

The SWAT team leader didn't like us cutting up the body. He and Ramirez went into a yelling match. While everyone was watching the argument, I nodded to Olaf and he beheaded the corpse in one blow. Blood gushed out onto the cave floor.

"What the fuck are you doing?" one of the SWAT cops asked, bringing his gun pointed at us.

"My job," I said. I put the tip of the blade under the ribs.

The policeman brought the gun up to his shoulder. "Get away from the body until the captain tells you it's okay to do it."

I kept the knife against the body. "Olaf."

"Yes."

"If he shoots me, kill him."

"My pleasure." The big man turned his eyes to the policeman, and there was something in that gaze that made the heavily armed man take a step back.

The captain in question said, "Stand down, Reynolds. She's a vamp executioner. Let her do her job."

I plunged the blade into the skin, and it slid home. I cut a hole just below his ribs and reached into the hole. It was tight and wet and slick, and it took two hands to get the heart out, one to cut it free of the connecting tissue, and one to hold onto it. I drew it from the chest, blood stained to my elbows.

I caught Ramirez and Bernardo both looking at me, with nearly identical looks on their faces. I didn't think either of them would be wanting a date any time soon. They'd always remember watching me cut a man's heart out, and that memory would stain anything else. With Bernardo, I didn't give a shit. With Ramirez, it hurt to see that look in his eyes.

A hand touched the heart. I stared at that hand, then looked up to meet Olaf's eyes. He wasn't repulsed. He stroked the heart, hands sliding over mine. I pulled away, and we looked at each other over the body we'd butchered. No, Olaf wasn't repulsed. The look in his eyes was that pure darkness that only fills a man's eyes in the most intimate of situations. He raised the severed head up by the hair and held it almost as if he'd let me kiss it. Then I realized he was holding it over the heart, like a matched pair.

I had to turn away from what I saw in his face. "Does anyone have a bag that I can carry this in?"

Someone finally found an empty equipment bag and let me spill the heart into it. The policeman told me I could keep the bag. He didn't want it back. No one offered Olaf a bag, and he never asked.

Chapter 63

THEY FOUND MY GUNS in the chest with the rest of the weapons, though the holsters were missing. I just couldn't keep a holster intact on this job. But I stuffed the guns down my jeans. The knives weren't in the chest. Ramirez drove me personally to a crematorium so that I could see the heart and head burned down to ash. When I had two little containers of ash, it was almost dawn. I fell asleep in the seat beside him, or he'd have had a fight about taking me to the hospital. But he insisted that the doctors check me out. Amazingly enough, none of the cuts were even deep enough for stitches. I wouldn't even have any new scars. Miraculous.

One of the men had given me a jacket that said FBI on it to cover my nearly naked upper body. Several of the uniforms and most of the hospital staff assumed I was a federal agent. I kept having to correct people, and I finally realized that the emergency room doctor thought my denial meant I had a concussion and didn't know who I was. The more I argued the more concerned he got. He ordered a series of head X-rays, and I couldn't talk him out of it.

I was actually sitting in a wheelchair waiting to be escorted to X-ray when Bernardo came up. He touched the FBI jacket. "You're moving up in the world."

"When the nurse comes back, he'll be taking me down to X-ray."

"You okay?"

"Just precautionary," I said.

"I just came back from checking on the invalids."

"Olaf said Edward would live."

"He will."

"How are the kids?"

"Peter is okay. They put Becca in a room. She's got a cast to her elbow."

I stared at his cast stained a dirty brown. "That thing is going to start stinking with all that blood dried into it."

"The doc wants me to get a new cast, but I wanted to check on everyone first."

"Where's Olaf?"

Bernardo shrugged. "I don't know. He disappeared once the monsters were all dead and Ramirez had you in his car. He said something about the job being done. I guess he went back under whatever rock Edward found him under."

I started to nod, then remembered something that Edward had said.
"Edward told you that you couldn't have a woman because he'd forbidden Olaf to have women, right?"

"Yeah, but the job's over, babe. I am headed for the first open bar."

I looked at him, nodding. "Maybe that's where Olaf is."

He frowned at me. "Olaf's at a bar?"

"No, he's out getting his ashes hauled, his way."

We both looked at each other, and there was a moment when horror dawned on Bernardo's face, and he whispered, "Oh, my god, he's out killing someone."

I shook my head. "If he's just out killing at random, there's no way to find him, but what if it's not random?"

"What do you mean?"

"Remember how he looked at Professor Dallas?"

Bernardo looked at me. "You don't think... I mean he wouldn't... oh, shit."

I got up out of the wheelchair and said, "I've got to tell Ramirez what we're thinking."

"You don't know he's there. You don't know he's doing anything wrong."

"Do you believe he just went home?" I asked.

Bernardo seemed to think about that for a second, then shook his head.

"Neither do I."

"He saved your life," Bernardo said.

"I know." We went to the elevator.

The elevator doors opened and Lieutenant Marks was standing there.
"Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

"Marks, I think that Professor Dallas is in danger." I got into the elevator.

Bernardo followed.

"You think I'd believe anything you say, witch?" He hit the button that kept the doors open.

"Hate me if you want, but don't let her die."

"Your pet FBI agent kept me out of the big raid."

I didn't know what he meant, but I was pretty sure who he meant.

"Whatever Bradley did, he did without me knowing, but that's not the point."

"I can make it the point."

"Did you hear that Dallas is in danger? Did you hear that part?" I asked.

"She's as corrupt as you are."

"So it's okay that she dies a horrible death," I said.

He just looked at me. I moved as if to go towards the buttons. Bernardo caught his clue. He hit Marks in the head with his cast. The man went down, and I hit the door closed button. The doors hushed closed as Bernardo lowered Marks to the floor.

"You want me to kill him?" Bernardo asked.

"No." But now if I went to Ramirez for help, Marks would think he'd been in on it. Shit. "Do you have Edward's car?"

"Yeah."

"How did Olaf drive off, then?"

Bernardo looked at me. "If he's really doing this, he'll steal a car and ditch it away from the murder scene. He won't chance using Edward's car."

"He'll go back to Edward's house for his goody bag," I said.

The doors opened on the floor that he'd parked on. We got out. "What do you mean goody bag?"

"If he's going to cut her up, then he'll want the tools he normally uses. Serial murderers are very anal when it comes to how the victims are treated. They spend a lot of time planning exactly what they'll do and how."

"So he's at Edward's?"

"How long has he been gone?"

"Three hours, maybe three and a half."

"No, he'll be at Dallas's, if that's where he is at all."

Bernardo opened the car, and we got in. I had to take the Browning out of my pants. The barrel's just too long for sitting down like that. I ended up holding it in my lap. I watched Bernardo drive with his cast-wrapped arm, "You need me to drive?"

"I'm fine. Just tell me where Dallas lives, and I'll drive us."

"Shit!"

He put the car in park and looked at me. "The police would know the address."

"When Marks wakes up, we'll be lucky to stay out of jail," I said.

"We don't even know that Olaf's at her house," he said.

"I got a better one. How to explain that we know he was a serial murderer and didn't warn the police sooner."

"Do you have Edward's cell phone?" I asked.

He didn't argue, just leaned across and opened the glove compartment. I got the phone out.

"Who you going to call?"

"Itzpapalotl. She'll know the address."

"She'll eat Olaf's face."

"Maybe, maybe not. Either way you better get us out of the parking area before Marks wakes up and starts screaming."

He drove us out of the parking lot and started slowly down the street. I dialed information, and the operator was happy to dial The Obsidian Butterfly for me. It was daylight. I knew better than to ask for Itzpapalotl herself, so I asked for Pinotl and told them it was an emergency and it was Anita Blake. I think it was my name that got me through, as if they'd been expecting the call.

Pinotl came on the line with his rich voice. "Anita, my mistress said you would call."

I was betting that she'd been wrong on the why, but... "Pinotl, I need the address for Professor Dallas's house."

Silence on the other end of the phone.

"She's in danger, Pinotl."

"Then we will take care of it."

"I'm going to have to call the police in on this, Pinotl. They'd shoot your werejaguars on sight."

"You are worried about our people?" he said.

"Give me the address, and I'll take care of it for you, Pinotl."

Silence except for his breathing.

"Tell your mistress, thanks for her help, Pinotl. I know I'm alive now because she helped me."

"You are not angry that she did not tell you all she knew?"

"She's a centuries old vampire. They can't help themselves sometimes."

"She is a goddess."

"We're just arguing semantics, Pinotl. We both know what she is. Please give me the address."

He gave it to me. I read the directions to Bernardo, and off we went.

Chapter 64

I CALLED THE POLICE on the way. I made it an anonymous call. Saying I'd heard screams. I hung up without giving my name. If Olaf wasn't there, then they'd scare the hell out of Dallas, and I'd apologize. I'd even pay for any busted locks.

"Why didn't you tell them the truth?" Bernardo asked.

"What? I think that some serial killer is there murdering her. And how do you know this, ma'am? Well, officer, you see it's like this. I've known he was a serial killer for days now, but our mutual friend Ted Forrester had forbidden him from attacking women while he was here helping us solve the mutilation murders. You've heard of the mutilation murders. Who is this? It's Anita Blake, the vampire executioner. And what does an executioner know about serial murderers? More than you'd think." I looked at Bernardo.

"All right, all right. They'd still be asking questions when we arrived at the house."

"This way they'll send an Albuquerque PD car there ASAP. They'll get there before we can even come close."

"I didn't think you even liked Dallas when we met her."

"It doesn't matter if I like her or not."

"Yes, it does," he said.

"If I don't like her, then we just let Olaf butcher her, is that it?"

"He saved your life. He saved mine. We don't owe this woman anything."

I looked at him, trying to read his face from just the profile. "Are you saying that you won't back me on this, Bernardo? Because if you're not on my side on this, then I need to know because if we go up against Olaf, and you hesitate, then you're going to get yourself killed, and maybe me."

"If I go in, I'll go in ready to kill him."

"If?" I said.

"I owe him my life, Anita. While we were at Riker's, we saved each other's lives. We counted on each other and knew the other one would be there. I don't owe this Dallas chick anything."

"Then stay in the car." A thought occurred to me. "Or are you saying that you're on his side, really on his side?" I had the Browning out in my hand already. I clicked the safety off, and he heard it. I saw him stiffen.

"Well, that's not fair. If I take my left hand off to pull a gun, then we wreck."

"I didn't like the way the conversation was going," I said.

"All I'm saying, Anita, is that if we can save Dallas and let Olaf get away we should let him go. It'd make things even between us all."

"If Dallas is unharmed, I'll think about it. That's the best I can do. But let me remind you if you plan on killing me to help Olaf that Edward is going to live. He'd hunt you both down, and you know it."

"Hey, I never said anything about pulling down on you."

"Just trying to test the limits of our misunderstanding, Bernardo, because trust me, you don't want me to misunderstand you."

"There's no misunderstanding," Bernardo said, and there was no teasing in his voice, just a dry seriousness that reminded me of Edward. "I think it's shitty to turn Olaf in to the cops."

"They'll already be there, Bernardo."

"If there's only two uniforms, we can help him get away."

"Are you talking about killing the policemen?"

"I didn't say that."

"Don't. Don't go there because not only will I not follow you, I'll bury you there."

"For two cops you don't even know."

"Yeah, for two cops I don't even know."

"Why?" he said.

I shook my head. "Bernardo, if you have to ask that, you wouldn't understand the answer."

He glanced at me. "Edward said that you were one of the best shooters he'd seen, quick to kill. He said you only had two faults. You got too up close and personal with the monsters, and you thought too much like an honest cop."

"An honest cop, I like that," I said.

"I've seen you, Anita. You're as much a killer as Olaf, or me. You're not a cop. You never were."

"Whatever I am, we are not killing the cops on sight. If Dallas is unhurt, we'll discuss letting Olaf go, but if he's hurt her, then he pays. If you don't like the plan, then give up your weapons and wait in the car. I'll go in alone."

Bernardo looked at me. "What's to keep me from lying to you, keeping my guns, and shooting you in the back?"

"You're more afraid of Edward than you are grateful to Olaf."

"You know that for a fact," he said.

"I know that Olaf has more rules of honor than you do. If you'd really felt all that damn grateful you'd have said something before I called the cops. Being protective of Olaf wasn't your first thought, or your second, or even your third."

"Edward said you were one of the most loyal people he'd ever met. So why aren't you protecting Olaf?"

"He preys on women, Bernardo. He preys on them not because he's paid to or owes them vengeance, but because that's what he does. He's like a vicious dog that keeps attacking people. Eventually, you have to put it down."

"You're going in there planning to kill him," Bernardo said.

"No, no I'm not. Remember, if I kill either of you, I'll either owe Edward another favor, or I'll have to draw a gun on him and finally find out which of us is better. I don't think I'll survive the latter, and I have not had a good time honoring Edward's favor. I got a glimpse of his other life at Riker's place. I don't want to be in another firefight. It's not my cup of tea."

"It's not anyone's cup of tea," Bernardo said. "You just get used to it."

"You don't get used to shit like that."

"Like you don't get used to cutting out people's hearts? You did that like an old pro."

I shrugged, "Practice makes perfect."

"This is the street," Bernardo said.

The street had that just past dawn silence. The cars still sat unmoved in their driveways, but there were people standing in their driveways peering out at the marked police car that was sitting in front of Dallas's house. One of the doors was open, filling the quiet neighborhood with the radio squawk. The lights rotated pale and underdone like a child's toy in the heavy morning light.

Professor Dallas's house was a small ranch with those faux adobe walls that everyone was so fond of here. In the earlier morning light it looked almost golden, as if it glowed. Bernardo parked by the road.

"Well?" I asked.

"I'm with you." But before we could draw guns, the two uniforms came out of the house with Dallas in a robe. We sat there staring at her, smiling at the policemen while they apologized for bothering her. She looked up, noticed us. She looked puzzled but waved at us.

"Anita, look at the mailbox," Bernardo said,

Our car was almost right in front of the mailbox. There was a white envelope pinned to the front of the mailbox with a knife. My first name was printed in block letters on the front of the envelope. No one had noticed it yet, but us.

Edward's car was tall enough to hide it from the neighbors. "Can you help me hide it from the cops?"

"My pleasure."

I got out of the car, leaving the Browning on the seat because I couldn't figure out a way to put it down my pants without the police noticing me doing it, and I didn't have any ID on me. I might be able to fake being a Fed, but then again maybe not. And it's it a federal offense to impersonate a federal agent. Bernardo and I had assaulted a police officer. We didn't need any more charges.

Bernardo pulled the knife out, making the movement look natural. The envelope dropped into my hand, and I walked up to the house hitting my thigh with the envelope, as if I'd carried it from the car.

Neither of the cops yelled, "Halt, thief!" so I kept moving. I didn't know what Bernardo had done with the knife. It had just vanished. "Hi, Dallas, what's up?"

"Someone made a prank phone call about screams coming from my house."

"Who'd do such a dastardly thing?" Bernardo asked.

I frowned at him.

He smiled at me, pleased with himself.

"Did you get a call, too?" she asked.

"I got it," Bernardo said. "They called Edward's cell phone, said you were in danger."

The uniform cops made the same mistake that the hospital staff had made. They introduced themselves by rank and name, and shook hands. I said, "Anita Blake. This is Bernardo Spotted-Horse."

"He's not a ..." the policeman looked uncomfortable as soon as he started to say it.

"No, I'm not a federal agent," Bernardo said. There was bitterness in his voice. "It's the hair," I said. "They've never seen a male agent with long hair."

"Sure, it was the hair."

The uniforms went off, leaving us at Dallas' doorstep in the morning light with her curious neighbors coming out in drips and drabs to see what was happening at an hour past dawn on the quiet street.

"Would you like to come inside? I already started coffee."

"Sure."

Bernardo looked at me, but followed me in.

The kitchen was small, square, and neat like one that wasn't used much. But it was cheerful in a blaze of morning sunlight. "What's really going on, Anita?"

I sat down at her table and opened the envelope with my name on it. It was written in block letters.

ANITA,

I KNEW THAT MOMENT IN THE CAVE THAT YOU WOULD THINK AS I DID. I FELT THAT YOU WOULD KNOW WHERE I WOULD GO TO HUNT. NOW HERE YOU ARE. I AM NEARBY.

That made me look up. "He says he's nearby."

Bernardo drew his gun. He stood and began to watch the windows.

I went back to the note.

I HAVE WATCHED YOU COME TO THE GOOD PROFESSOR'S RESCUE. I WATCHED YOU TAKE THE ENVELOPE, AND I KNOW

YOU ARE READING IT NOW. I BELITTLED EDWARD WHEN HE SPOKE OF SOUL MATES. I OWE HIM AN APOLOGY. WHEN I SAW YOU TAKE HIS HEART, SO PRACTICED, I KNEW THAT YOU WERE AS I AM. HOW MANY HAVE YOU KILLED? HOW MANY HEARTS HAVE YOU RIPPED OUT? HOW MANY HEADS HAVE YOU TAKEN? YOU'LL ARGUE WITH YOURSELF THAT YOU ARE NOT AS I AM. MAYBE YOU DON'T TAKE TROPHIES, BUT YOU STILL LIVE FOR THE KILL, ANITA. YOU WOULD WITHER AND DIE WITHOUT THE VIOLENCE. WHAT TRICK OF FATE HAS MADE YOU PHYSICALLY THE WOMAN I KILL OVER AND OVER AGAIN, AND YET PUT INSIDE THAT TINY BODY THE OTHER HALF OF MY SOUL? ARE MOST OF THE VAMPIRES YOU KILL MEN? DO YOU HAVE YOUR VICTIM PREFERENCE, ANITA?

I WOULD LOVE TO HUNT WITH YOU AT MY SIDE. I WOULD HUNT YOUR VICTIMS BECAUSE I KNOW YOU WILL NOT HUNT MINE. BUT WE WOULD STILL KILL TOGETHER AND CUT THE BODIES UP, AND THAT WOULD BE MORE THAN I EVER DREAMED OF SHARING WITH A WOMAN.

The note wasn't signed. Big surprise there, since I might have given it to the police.

"You look pale," Dallas said.

"What does the note say?" Bernardo asked.

I handed it to him. "I don't think he's out there to kill us or even her."

"Who are you talking about?" she asked.

I told her, and she laughed at me. "You know I'm a vampire executioner."

"Yes."

"I killed another vamp last night. One I think that Itzpapalotl wanted me to kill. She helped me do it. That's the heart that I took."

Bernardo read faster than I would have thought, "Jesus, Anita, Olaf has a crush on you."

"A crush," I said, "a crush, God, there's got to be another word for it."

Dallas asked, "Can I read it?"

"I think you should because he didn't wait just to catch a glimpse of me. He waited because if I hadn't shown up, he'd have come in here and butchered you."

She tried to laugh it off, but there must have been something in my face that choked the laughter and made her reach a shaking hand out for the letter. She read it and said, "Who is this?"

"Olaf," I said.

"But he was so nice."

Bernardo made a harsh sound.

"Trust me on this, Dallas. Olaf is not nice."

She looked from one to the other of us. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"He's a serial killer. I just don't think he's ever killed in this country."

"You should turn him in to the police," she said.

"I don't have any proof of what he's done."

"Besides," Bernardo said, "what if he was one of the vamps?"

"What do you mean?" Dallas asked.

"He means wouldn't you protect one of the vamps from the police because you'd know that the vamps would take care of it," I said.

"Well, yes, I guess."

"And we'll take care of this," Bernardo said.

She looked from one to the other of us, and for the first time she looked afraid.

"Will he be back?"

"For you, I don't think so," Bernardo said. He looked at me. "But I bet he'll find a reason to come to St. Louis."

I'd have liked to say he was wrong, but the cold tight feeling in my stomach agreed with Bernardo. I'd be seeing Olaf again. I just had to decide what I'd do when I met him. He hadn't done anything wrong on this trip. Not only couldn't I prove he was a serial killer, he hadn't done anything worse than I'd done this time round. Who was I to throw stones? Yet, yet, I hoped he stayed away from me. For more reasons than I wanted to admit, maybe. Maybe for the same reasons that I'd kill him if he came. Because maybe there was some truth to what he wrote. I had over fifty kills. What really separated me from people like Olaf? Motive, method? If those were the only differences, then Olaf was right, and I couldn't let him be right. I just could not accept that. Growing up to be Edward was a problem. Growing up to be Olaf was a nightmare.

Chapter EPILOGUE

MARKS TRIED TO PRESS assault charges, but Bernardo and I said we didn't know what he was talking about. Doctor Evans said that his injuries were inconsistent with being hit by a person. It wouldn't have worked except that Marks was in the doghouse about how he'd handled the case. He was in on the press conference where the public was assured that the danger was over, but Ramirez was standing up there beside him, along with Agent Bradford. And me. They put Ted and Bernardo up there, too. We didn't get to answer questions, but we got our picture in the papers. I'd have rather not, but I knew it would please Bert, my boss, and they did print it in several national papers that I was Anita Blake of Animators, Inc. Bert loved it.

Edward caught a secondary infection from something that had been smeared on the stake. He took a relapse, and I stayed. Donna and I took turns

sitting by his bed. Sitting by Becca's bed. It got to the point where the little girl cried when I left.

Peter spent a lot of time playing games with her, trying to get her to smile. But his eyes had that hollow look you get when you're not sleeping well. He wouldn't talk to me or Donna. The only thing he'd admitted to her was the beating. He hadn't told her about the rape. I didn't betray his secret. First, I wasn't sure she could handle another shock. Second, it wasn't my secret to tell. Donna actually rose to the occasion. She was like this incredible pillar of strength for the kids, for Ted, even though he couldn't hear her talking to him. She never once turned to me in tears. It was like this new person had risen from the ashes of the person I'd first met. It saved me having to hurt her.

Ten days after the accident, Edward was awake and talking. Out of danger. I could finally go home. When I told them I was finally going home, Donna hugged me tight and cried and said, "You have to tell the kids good-bye."

I assured her I would, and she left us alone, to say our good-byes.

I pulled the chair up to the bedside and studied his face. He was still pale, but he looked like Edward again. That cold bleakness was back in his eyes when no one but me was looking.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"It couldn't just be because you nearly died," I said.

"No," he said.

I smiled, but he didn't smile back.

"Bernardo came to see me, but Olaf never did," he said.

I realized then what he thought I'd waited around to tell him. "You think I killed Olaf, and I've been waiting for you to get healthy enough to give you the same choice you gave me after Harley died," I laughed. "Sweet Jesus, Edward."

"You didn't kill him." I watched him relax against his pillow, visibly relieved.

"No, I didn't kill him."

He managed a faint smile. "It wouldn't have been the same choice. But if you'd killed Olaf, you wouldn't have wanted to owe me another favor."

"You were afraid I'd press the point, make it the gunfight at the OK Corral?"

"Yes," he said.

"I thought you wanted to see which of us was better."

"I thought I was dying on the stairs. All I could think of was that Peter and Becca were going to die in there with me. Bernardo and Olaf were there, but you'd gone up the stairs and hadn't come back. When you came back around that corner, I knew you'd get the kids out. I knew you'd risk your life for theirs. Bernardo and Olaf would have tried, but the kids wouldn't have been their first priority. I knew they would be yours. When I passed out in the cave, I wasn't worried. I knew you'd see it right."

"What are you saying, Edward?"

"I'm saying if you had killed Olaf, I'd have given you a pass on it because Peter and Becca mean more to me than that."

I took Olaf's letter out of my back pocket and handed it to him. He read it while I watched his face. Nothing moved but his eyes. He had no reaction.

"He's a good man at your back, Anita."

"You're not suggesting I date Olaf?"

He almost laughed. "No, fuck no. Stay as far away from him as you can. If he comes to St. Louis, kill him. Don't wait for him to deserve it. Just do it."

"I thought he was your friend."

"Not friend. Business associate. It's not the same thing."

"I agree someone needs to kill Olaf, but why are you so adamant all of a sudden? You trusted him enough to bring him here to your town."

"Olaf has never had a girlfriend. He's had whores and he's had victims. Maybe it's true love, but I think if he shows up and finds that you won't be his little serial killer pin-up girl, that he'll turn violent. You don't want to know what he's like when he's violent, Anita. You really, really don't."

"You're scared he'll come after me."

"If he shows in town, call me."

I nodded. "I will." I had other questions. "Riker's house sprang a mysterious gas leak and blew to Kingdom Come. No survivors, no bodies, no evidence that we did shit, or that Riker and his men did shit. Was it Van Cleef?"

"Not him personally," Edward said.

"You know the next question," I said.

"I know," he said.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"I can't tell you, Anita. One of the conditions to leaving was to never talk about it with anyone. If I break that, they'll come after me."

"I wouldn't tell anyone."

He shook his head. "No, Anita, trust me on this one. Ignorance is bliss."

"That is incredibly frustrating," I said.

He smiled. "I know, and I'm sorry."

"No, you're not. You love keeping secrets."

"Not this one," he said. There was something close to sadness in his eyes, and for the first time I realized for sure that once there had been a kinder, gentler version of Edward. He hadn't been born this way. He'd been made like Frankenstein's monster.

"No answers, huh?"

"No," he said.

We stared at each other, but neither of us seemed impatient.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay, what?" he asked.

I shrugged. "You won't answer questions about your background, fine. Answer another one. Are you going to marry Donna?"

"If I say, yes, what will you do?"

I sighed. "I was willing to kill you to keep you away from them when I got here. But what is love, Edward? You're willing to give up your life for the kids. You'd do the same for Donna. She's convinced you're her dream man. It's a

good act. Becca told her what you did, what we did. Peter backed it. So in a way they all three know what you are, who you are. Donna's cool with it." I stopped talking.

"Was there an answer to my question in there somewhere?"

"I won't do anything, Edward. You're willing to die for them. If that's not love, it's so close I can't tell the difference."

He nodded. "Nice that I have your blessing."

"You don't," I said. "But I don't have room to throw stones at your personal life. So do whatever you want."

"I will," he said.

"Peter hasn't told Donna what happened to him. He needs therapy for it."

"Why didn't you tell her?"

"It's not my secret to tell. Besides, you're his would-be stepfather, and you know. I trust you to do the right thing by him, Edward. If he doesn't want Donna to know, you'll find a way around it."

"You're treating me like his father," Edward said.

"How much did you see of what Peter did to Amanda?"

"Enough," Edward said.

"He emptied the clip into her, Edward. He turned her face into spaghetti. The look in his face ..." I shook my head. "He's more your son than Donna's and has been since he blew away his father's killer when he was eight."

"You think he's like me?"

"Like us," I said, "like us. I don't know if you can rebuild someone that got that broken that early. I'm not a psychiatrist. Healing people's not my job."

"It's not mine either," he said.

"I never thought you missed the pieces of yourself that you gave up to be who and what you are, but when I see you with Donna and Becca and Peter, I see regret in you. You wonder what life might have been like if you hadn't met Van Cleef, or whoever the hell was first."

He looked at me, eyes cold "It took me a long time to understand what I saw in Donna, How did you know?"

I shrugged. "Maybe, the same thing I thought saw in Ramirez."

"It's not too late for you, Anita."

"It's too late for me to have the white picket fence, Edward. Maybe I can figure out something, but not that. It's too late for that."

"You think I'll fail with Donna," he said.

I shook my head. "I don't know. I just know it wouldn't work for me. I'm not the actor you are. Whoever I'm with has to know who I am, warts and all, or it won't work."

"You know which monster you're going to settle down with?"

"No, but I know I can't keep hiding from them. Hiding from them is like hiding from who I am. I'm not going to do that anymore."

"You think I'm running from myself by going with Donna."

"No, I think you always embraced the monster part of you. You're finding for the first time that not all of you is dead as you wanted it to be. Donna appeals to a part of you that you didn't know was left."

"Yes," he said. "And what do Richard and Jean-Claude represent for you?"

"I don't know, but it's time I found out."

He smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. "Good luck."

"The same to you," I said.

"We're going to need it," he said.

I'd have liked to argue, but he was right.

I did call Itzpapalotl before I left for home. She was disappointed that I didn't come in person, but not angry. I think she knew why I didn't want to shake hands again. She'd killed every minion of every rival vamp that crossed her path for fifty years, but me she hadn't harmed at hair on my head. I thought she wanted the secret to the triumvirate, and that had interested her, but that hadn't been what saved me. She'd set me up to kill the Red Woman's Husband. She'd given me the power to both attract him and withstand his charms. I'd been her bait and her weapon. Now the other god was dead, and I was leaving her territory before she decided that I'd outlived my usefulness.

She extended an invitation to my master. "We could have much to discuss, your master and I."

I told her I'd pass along the invitation. I will, but they'll be ice skating in hell before I bring Jean-Claude down to meet Itzpapalotl. She'd gobble him up. Maybe Edward's right. Maybe Richard and I would survive Jean-Claude's death. But surviving his death and surviving whatever Itzpapalotl would do to him are two very different things.

There are so many easier ways to kill Jean-Claude. Ways that would be less risky to Richard and me. I know that's what Edward wants me to do. Several of my friends are voting that way. But I get presidential veto, and I don't want him dead. I'm not sure what I do want, but I know I want him walking around so I can decide.

I'm going home, and I'm going to start by seeing all the friends I've neglected for the past few months. So Ronnie is dating Richard's best friend. So what? She and I can still be friends. Catherine's had two years of honeymooning. Time I stopped using that as an excuse not to see her. I think I'm just uncomfortable with how terribly happy she is with a man that I found ordinary and a little boring. But she glows around him. I haven't done much glowing lately around either of my two men.

I'm going to start seeing the werewolves in Richard's pack again, and Jean-Claude's vamps. First renew friendships, then if that works out okay, I'll see the boys. It's a cautious plan, nay cowardly, but it's the best I can do. Okay, it's the best I'm willing to do. Because the truth is that I am no closer to a solution to my love life than I was when I broke off with them over a year ago. The few times I fell off the celibacy wagon don't count because I was still trying to avoid them. I don't want to avoid them. I just want to know what exactly it is that I do want. Once I figure out what I want, who I want, the next question is can I have who I want or will the loser pull our little house down around us in bloody ruins. I would say it's the sixty-four thousand dollar question, but Richard and Jean-Claude are worth so much more than that to me. Maybe

Ramirez is right. Maybe if I truly loved one of them, the choice would be easy. Or maybe Ramirez doesn't know what the hell he's talking about.

Edward loves Donna and Peter and Becca. They're all seeing a therapist together, but I think Peter is still lying about what really happened. You can't get good therapy if you lie to your therapist. But I think Peter is counting on Edward to be his therapist. Scary thought, isn't it?

Edward loves Donna. Do I love Richard? Yes. Do I love Jean-Claude? Maybe. If it's really yes for Richard, and maybe for Jean-Claude, then why don't I have my answer? Because maybe, just maybe, there is no one right answer. I'm beginning to worry that whatever I decide, I will be left mourning the one that got away. Once, I'd been afraid if I chose Richard that Jean-Claude would kill him rather than share me, but strangely the vampire seems willing to share, and Richard isn't. Maybe Jean-Claude loves the power of the triumvirate more than he loves me, or maybe Richard is just jealous. I certainly wouldn't share either of them with another woman. Fair is fair. Which brings me back to the original question: who is the love of my life? Maybe I don't have one. Maybe it's not love at all. But if it's not love, then what is it? I wish I knew.

Narcissus in Chains

by

Laurell K. Hamilton

Book 10 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Chapter 1

JUNE HAD COME in like its usual hot, sweaty self, but a freak cold front had moved in during the night and the car radio had been full of the record low temperatures. It was only in the low sixties, not that cold, but after weeks of eighty- and ninety-plus, it felt downright frigid. My best friend, Ronnie Sims, and I were sitting in my Jeep with the windows down, letting the unseasonably cool air drift in on us. Ronnie had turned thirty tonight. We were talking about how she felt about the big 3-0 and other girl talk. Considering that she's a private detective and I raise the dead for a living it was pretty ordinary talk. Sex, guys, turning thirty, vampires, werewolves. You know, the usual.

We could have gone inside the house, but there is something about the intimacy of a car after dark that makes you want to linger. Or maybe it was the sweet smell of springlike air coming through the windows like the caress of some half-remembered lover.

"Okay, so he's a werewolf. No one's perfect," Ronnie said. "Date him, sleep with him, marry him. My vote's for Richard."

"I know you don't like Jean-Claude."

"Don't like him!" Her hands gripped the passenger-side door handle, squeezing it until I could see the tension in her shoulders. I think she was counting to ten.

"If I killed as easily as you do, I'd have killed that son of a bitch two years ago and your life would be a lot less complicated now."

That last was an understatement. But ... "I don't want him dead, Ronnie."

"He's a vampire, Anita. He is dead." She turned and looked at me in the dark. Her soft gray eyes and yellow hair had turned to silver and near white in the cold light of the stars. The shadows and bright reflected light left her face in bold relief, like some modern painting. But the look on her face was almost frightening. There was a fearful determination there.

If it had been me with that look on my face, I'd have warned me not to do anything stupid, like kill Jean-Claude. But Ronnie wasn't a shooter. She'd killed twice, both times to save my life. I owed her. But she wasn't a person who could hunt someone down in cold blood and kill him. Not even a vampire. I knew this about her, so I didn't have to caution her. "I used to think I knew what dead was or wasn't, Ronnie." I shook my head. "The line isn't so clear-cut."

"He seduced you," she said.

I looked away from her angry face and stared at the foil-wrapped swan in my lap. Deirdorfs and Hart, where we'd had dinner, got creative with their doggy bags: foil-wrapped animals. I couldn't argue with Ronnie, and I was getting tired of trying.

Finally, I said, "Every lover seduces you, Ronnie, that's the way it works."

She slammed her hands so hard onto the dashboard it startled me and must have hurt her. "Damn it, Anita, it's not the same."

I was starting to get angry, and I didn't want to be angry, not with Ronnie. I had taken her out to dinner to make her feel better, not to fight. Louis Fane, her steady boyfriend, was out of town at a conference, and she was bummed about that, and about turning thirty. So I'd tried to make her feel better, and she seemed determined to make me feel worse.

"Look, I haven't seen either Jean-Claude or Richard for six months. I'm not dating either of them, so we can skip the lecture on vampire ethics."

"Now that's an oxymoron," she said.

"What is?" I asked.

"Vampire ethics," she said.

I frowned at her. "That's not fair, Ronnie."

"You are a vampire executioner, Anita. You are the one who taught me that they aren't just people with fangs. They are monsters."

I'd had enough. I opened the car door and slid to the edge of the seat.

Ronnie grabbed my shoulder. "Anita, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please don't be mad."

I didn't turn around. I sat there with my feet hanging out the door, the cool air creeping into the closer warmth of the car.

"Then drop it, Ronnie. I mean drop it."

She leaned over and gave me a quick hug from behind. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business who you sleep with."

I leaned into the hug for a moment. "That's right, it's not." Then I pulled away and got out of the car. My high heels crunched on the gravel of my driveway. Ronnie had wanted us to dress up, so we had. It was her birthday. It

wasn't until after dinner that I'd realized her diabolical scheme. She'd had me wear heels and a nice little black skirt outfit. The top was actually, gasp, a well-fitted halter top. Or would that be backless evening wear? However pricey it was, it was still a very short skirt and a halter top. Ronnie had helped me pick the outfit out about a week ago. I should have known her innocent "oh, let's just both dress up" was a ruse. There had been other dresses that covered more skin and had longer hemlines, but none that camouflaged the belly-band holster that cut across my lower waist. I'd actually taken the holster along with us on the shopping trip, just to be sure. Ronnie thought I was being paranoid, but I don't go anywhere after dark unarmed. Period.

The skirt was just roomy enough and black enough to hide the fact that I wore the belly band and a Firestar 9mm. The top was heavy enough material, what there was of it, that you really couldn't see the handle of the gun under the cloth. All I had to do was lift the bottom of the top and the gun was right there, ready to be drawn. It was the most user-friendly dressy outfit I'd ever owned. Made me wish they made it in a different color so I could have two of them.

Ronnie's plan had been to go to a club on her birthday. A dance club. Eek. I never went to clubs. I did not dance. But I went in with her. Yes, she got me out on the floor, mainly because her dancing alone was attracting too much unwanted male attention. At least with both of us dancing together the would-be Casanovas stayed at a distance. Though saying I danced was inaccurate. I stood there and sort of swayed. Ronnie danced. She danced like it was her last night on Earth and she had to put every muscle to good use. It was spectacular, and a little frightening. There was something almost desperate to it, as if Ronnie felt the cold hand of time creeping up faster and faster. Or maybe that was just me projecting my own insecurities. I'd turned twenty-six early in the year, and, frankly, at the rate I was going, I probably wouldn't have to worry about hitting thirty. Death cures all ills. Well, most of them.

There had been one man who had attached himself to me instead of Ronnie. I didn't understand why. She was a tall leggy blond, dancing like she was having sex with the music. But he offered me drinks. I don't drink. He tried to slow dance. I refused. I finally had to be rude. Ronnie told me to dance with him, at least he was human. I told her that birthday guilt only went so far, and she'd used hers up.

The last thing on God's green earth that I needed was another man in my life. I didn't have a clue what to do with the two I had already. The fact that they were, respectively, a Master Vampire and an Ulfric, werewolf king, was only part of the problem. That fact alone should let you know just how deep a hole I was digging. Or would that be, already have dug? Yeah, already dug. I was about halfway to China and still throwing dirt up in the air.

I'd been celibate for six months. So, as far as I knew, had they. Everyone was waiting for me to make up my mind. Waiting for me to choose, or decide, something, anything.

I'd been a rock for half a year, because I'd stayed away from them. I hadn't seen them, in the flesh anyway. I had returned no phone calls. I had run for the hills at the first hint of cologne. Why such drastic measures? Frankly, because

almost every time I saw them, I fell off the chastity wagon. They both had my libido, but I was trying to decide who had my heart. I still didn't know. The only thing I had decided was that it was time to stop hiding. I had to see them and figure out what we were all going to do. I'd decided two weeks ago that I needed to see them. It was the day that I refilled my birth-control pill prescription, and started taking it again. The very last thing I needed was a surprise pregnancy. That the first thing I thought of when I thought of Richard and Jean-Claude was to go back on birth control tells you something about the effect they had on me.

You needed to be on the pill for at least a month to be safe, or as safe as you ever got. Four more weeks, five to be sure, then I'd call. Maybe.

I heard Ronnie's heels running on the gravel. "Anita, Anita, wait, don't be angry."

The thing was, I wasn't angry with her. I was angry with me. Angry that after all these months I still couldn't decide between the two men. I stopped walking and waited for her, huddled in my little black skirt outfit, the little foil swan in my hands. The night had turned cool enough to make me wish I'd worn a jacket. When Ronnie caught up with me I started walking again.

"I'm not mad, Ronnie, just tired. Tired of you, my family, Dolph, Zerbrowski, everyone being so damned judgmental." My heels hit the sidewalk with sharp clacks. Jean-Claude had once said he could tell if I was angry just by the sound of my heels on the floor. "Watch your step. You're wearing higher heels than I am." Ronnie was five feet eight, which meant with heels she was nearly six feet.

I was wearing two-inch heels, which put me at five five. I get a much better workout when Ronnie and I jog together than she does.

The phone was ringing as I juggled the key and the foil-wrapped leftovers. Ronnie took the leftovers, and I shoved the door open with my shoulder. I was running across the floor in my high heels before I remembered that I was on vacation. Which meant whatever emergency was calling at 2:05 in the morning was not my problem, not for another two weeks at least. But old habits die hard, and I was at the phone before I remembered. I actually let the machine pick up while I stood there, heart pounding. I was planning on ignoring it, but ... but I still stood ready to grab the receiver just in case.

Loud, booming music, and a man's voice. I didn't recognize the music, but I recognized the voice. "Anita, it's Gregory. Nathaniel's in trouble."

Gregory was one of the wereleopards I'd inherited when I killed their alpha, their leader. As a human, I wasn't really up to the job, but until I found a replacement, even I was better than nothing. Wereanimals without a dominant to protect them were anyone's meat, and if someone moved in and slaughtered them, it would sort of be my fault. So I acted as their protector, but the job was more complicated than I'd ever dreamed. Nathaniel was the problem. All the others were rebuilding their lives since their old leader had been killed, but not Nathaniel. He'd had a hard life: abused, raped, pimped out, and topped. Topped meant he'd been someone's slave--as in sex and pain. He was one of the few

true submissives I'd ever met, though, admittedly, my pool of acquaintance was limited.

I cursed softly and picked up the phone. "I'm here, Gregory, what's happened now?" Even to me, my voice sounded tired and half-angry.

"If I had anyone else to call, Anita, I'd call them, but you're it." He sounded tired and angry, too. Great.

"Where's Elizabeth? She was supposed to be riding herd on Nathaniel tonight." I'd finally agreed that Nathaniel could start going out to the dominance and submission clubs if he was accompanied by Elizabeth and at least one other wereleopard. Tonight it had been Gregory riding shotgun, but without Elizabeth, Gregory wasn't dominant enough to keep Nathaniel safe. A normal submissive would have been safe in one of the clubs with someone there to simply say, "no thanks, we'll pass." But Nathaniel was one of those rare subs who are almost incapable of saying no, and there had been hints made that his idea of pain and sex could be very extreme. Which meant that he might say yes to things that were very, very bad for him. Wereanimals can take a lot of injury and not be permanently damaged, but there is a limit. A healthy bottom will say *stop* when he's had too much or he feels something bad happening, but Nathaniel wasn't that healthy. So he had keepers with him to make sure no one really bad got ahold of him. But it was more than that. A good dominant trusts his sub to say *when* before the damage is too great. The dom trusts the sub to know his own body and have enough self-preservation to call out before he is in past what his body can take. Nathaniel did not come with that safety feature, which meant a dominant with the best of intentions could end up hurting him badly before realizing Nathaniel wouldn't help himself.

I actually had accompanied Nathaniel a few times. As his Nimir-ra it was sort of my job to interview prospective ... keepers. I'd gone prepared for the clubs to be one of the lower circles of hell and had been pleasantly shocked. I'd had more trouble with sexual propositions in a normal bar on a Saturday night. In the clubs everyone was very careful not to impose on you or to be seen as pushy. It was a small community, and if you got a reputation for being obnoxious, you could find yourself blacklisted, with no one to play with. I'd found the people in the scene were polite, and once you made it clear you were not there to play, no one bothered you, except tourists. Tourists were posers, people not really into the scene, who liked to dress up and frequent the clubs. They didn't know the rules, and hadn't bothered to ask. They probably thought a woman who would come to a place like this would do anything. I'd persuaded them differently. But I'd had to stop going with Nathaniel. The other wereleopards said I gave off so much dominant vibe that no dominant would ever approach Nathaniel while I was with him. Though we'd had offers for menage a trois of every description. I felt like I needed a button that said, "No, I don't want to have a bondage three-way with you, thanks for asking, though."

Elizabeth had supposedly been dominant, but not too much to take Nathaniel out and try to pick him up a ... date.

"Elizabeth left," Gregory said.

"Without Nathaniel?" I made it a question.

"Yes."

"Well, that just fries my bacon," I said.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm angry with Elizabeth."

"It gets better," he said.

"How much better can it be, Gregory? You all assured me that these clubs were safe. A little bondage, a little light slap and tickle. You all convinced me that I couldn't keep Nathaniel away from it indefinitely. You said that they had ways to monitor the area so no one could possibly get hurt. That's what you and Zane and Cherry told me. Hell, I've seen it myself. There are safety monitors everywhere, it's safer than some dates I've had, so what could have possibly gone wrong?"

"We couldn't have anticipated this," he said.

"Just get to the end of the story, Gregory, the foreplay is getting tedious."

There was silence for longer than there should have been, just the overly loud music. "Gregory, are you still there?"

"Gregory is indisposed," a man's voice said.

"Who is this?"

"I am Marco, if that helps you, though I doubt that it does." His voice was cultured--American, but upper crusty.

"New in town are you?" I asked.

"Something like that," he said.

"Welcome to town. Make sure you go up in the Arch while you're here, it's a nice view. But what has your recent arrival in St. Louis got to do with me and mine?"

"We didn't realize it was your pet we had at first. He wasn't the one we were hunting for, but now that we have him, we're keeping him."

"You can't 'keep' him," I said.

"Come down and take him away from us, if you can." That strangely smooth voice made the threat all the more effective. There was no anger, nothing personal. It sounded like business, and I had no clue what it was about.

"Put Gregory back on," I said.

"I don't think so. He's enjoying some personal time with my friends right now."

"How do I know he's still alive?" My voice was as unemotional as his. I wasn't feeling anything yet; it was too sudden, too unexpected, like coming in on the middle of a movie.

"No one's dead, yet," the man said.

"How do I know that?"

He was quiet for a second, then, "What sort of people are you used to dealing with, that you would ask if we've killed him first thing?"

"It's been a rough year. Now put Gregory on the phone, because until I know he's alive, and he tells me the others are, this negotiation is stalled."

"How do you know we are negotiating?" Marco asked.

"Call it a hunch."

"My, you are direct."

"You have no idea how direct I can be, Marco. Put Gregory on the phone."

There was the music-filled silence, and more music, but no voices.

"Gregory, Gregory, are you there? Is anyone there?" Shit, I thought.

"I'm afraid that your kitty-cat won't squawl for us. A point of pride, I think."

"Put the receiver to his ear and let me talk to him."

"As you wish."

More of the loud music. I spoke as if I was sure that Gregory was listening. "Gregory, I need to know you're alive. I need to know that Nathaniel and everyone else is alive. Talk to me, Gregory."

His voice came squeezed tight, as if he were gritting his teeth. "Yesss."

"Yes, what, they're all alive?"

"Yesss."

"What are they doing to you?"

He screamed into the phone, and the sound raised the hairs on my neck and danced down my arms in goosebumps. The sound stopped abruptly.

"Gregory, Gregory!" I was yelling against the techno-beat of the music, but no one was answering.

Marco came back on the line. "They are all alive, if not quite well. The one they call Nathaniel is a lovely young man, all that long auburn hair and the most extraordinary violet eyes. So pretty, it would be a shame to spoil all that beauty. Of course, this one is lovely too, blond, blue-eyed. Someone told me that they both work as strippers? Is that true?"

I wasn't numb anymore, I was scared, and angry, and I still had not a clue to why this was happening. My voice came out almost even, almost calm.

"Yeah, it's true. You're new in town, Marco, so you don't know me. But trust me, you don't want to do this."

"Perhaps not, but my alpha does."

Ah, shapeshifter politics. I hated shapeshifter politics. "Why? The wereleopards are no threat to anyone."

"Ours is not to reason why, ours is but to do and die."

A literate kidnapper, refreshing. "What do you want, Marco?"

"My alpha wants you to come down and rescue your cats, if you can."

"What club are you at?"

"Narcissus in Chains." And he hung up.

Chapter 2

"DAMN IT!"

"What's happened?" Ronnie asked. I'd almost forgotten her. She didn't belong in this part of my life, but there she was, leaning against the kitchen cabinets, searching my face, looking worried.

"I'll take care of it."

She gripped my arm. "You gave me this speech about wanting your friends back, about not wanting to push us all away. Did you mean it, or was it just talk?"

I took a deep breath and let it out. I told her what the other side of the conversation had been.

"And you don't have any clue what this is about?" she asked.

"No, I don't."

"That's odd. Usually stuff like this builds up, it doesn't just drop out of the blue."

I nodded. "I know."

"Star 69 will ring back whatever number just called you."

"What good will that do?"

"It will let you know if they're really at this club, or whether it's just a trap for you."

"Not just another pretty face, are you?" I said.

She smiled. "I'm a trained detective. We know about these things." The humor didn't quite reach her eyes, but she was trying.

I dialed, and the phone rang for what seemed forever, then another male voice answered, "Yeah."

"Is this Narcissus in Chains?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"I need to speak with Gregory?"

"Don't know any Gregory," he said.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"This is a freaking pay phone, lady. I just picked up." Then he hung up, too. It seemed to be my night for it.

"They called from a pay phone at the club," I said.

"Well, at least you know where they are," Ronnie said.

"Do you know where the club is?" I asked.

Ronnie shook her head. "Not my kind of scene."

"Mine either." In fact the only card-carrying dominance and submission players that I knew personally were all at the club waiting to be saved.

Who did I know that might know where the club was, and something about its reputation? I couldn't trust what the wereleopards had told me about it being a safe place. Obviously, they'd been wrong.

One name sprang to mind. The only one I knew to call that might know where Narcissus in Chains was, and what kind of trouble I'd be in if I went inside. Jean-Claude. Since I was dealing with shapeshifter politics it might have made sense to call Richard, with him being a werewolf and all. But the shapeshifters were a very clannish lot. One type of animal rarely crossed boundaries to help another. Frustrating, but true. The exception was the treaty between the werewolves and the wererats, but everyone else was left to fend,

and squabble, and bleed, among themselves. Oh, if some small group got out of hand and attracted too much unwanted police attention, the wolves and rats would discipline them, but short of that, no one seemed to want to interfere with each other. That was one of the reasons I was still stuck baby-sitting the wereleopards.

Also, Richard didn't know any more about the D and S subculture than I did, maybe less. If you're wanting to ask questions about the sexual fringe, Jean-Claude is definitely your guy. He may not participate, but he seems to know who's doing what, and to whom, and where. Or I hoped he did. If it had just been my life at stake, I probably wouldn't have called either of the boys, but if I got killed doing this, that left no one to rescue Nathaniel and the rest. Unacceptable.

Ronnie had kicked off her high heels. "I didn't bring my gun, but I'm sure you have a spare."

I shook my head. "You're not going."

Anger makes her gray eyes the color of storm clouds. "The hell I'm not."

"Ronnie, these are shapeshifters, and you're human."

"So are you," she said.

"Because of Jean-Claude's vampire marks, I'm a little more than that. I can take damage that would kill you."

"You can't go in there alone," she said. Her arms were crossed under her breasts, her face set in angry, stubborn lines.

"I don't plan on going in alone."

"It's because I'm not a shooter, isn't it?"

"You don't kill easily, Ronnie, no shame in that, but I can't take you into a gang of shapeshifters unless I know that you'll shoot to kill if you have to." I gripped her upper arms. She stayed stiff and angry under my touch. "It would kill a piece of me to lose you, Ronnie. It would kill a bigger piece to know that you died because of some shit of mine. You can't hesitate with these people. You can't treat them like they're human. If you do, you die."

She was shaking her head. "Call the police."

I stepped away from her. "No."

"Damn it, Anita, damn it!"

"Ronnie, there are rules, and one of those rules is you don't take pack or pard business to the police." The main reason for that rule was that the police tended to frown on fights for dominance that ended with dead bodies on the ground, but no need to tell Ronnie that.

"It's a stupid rule," she said.

"Maybe, but it's still the way business is done with the shifters, no matter what flavor they are."

She sat down at the small two-seater breakfast table, on its little raised platform. "Who's going to be your backup then? Richard doesn't kill any easier than I do."

That was half true, but I let it slide. "No, I want someone at my back tonight who will do what needs doing, no flinching."

Her eyes were dark, dark with anger. "Jean-Claude." She made his name a curse.

I nodded.

"Are you sure he didn't plan this to get you back into his life, excuse me, death?"

"He knows me too well to screw with my people. He knows what I'd do if he hurt them."

Puzzlement flowed through the anger, softening her eyes, her face. "I hate him, but I know you love him. Could you really kill him? Could you really stare down the barrel of a gun and pull the trigger on him?"

I just looked at her, and I knew without a mirror that my eyes had grown distant, cold. It's hard for brown eyes to be cold, but I'd been managing it lately.

Something very like fear slid behind her eyes. I don't know if she was afraid for me, or of me. I preferred the first to the last. "You could do it. Jesus, Anita. You've known Jean-Claude longer than I've known Louie. I could never hurt Louie, no matter what he did."

I shrugged. "It would destroy me to do it, I think. It's not like I'd live happily ever after, if I survived at all. There's a very real chance that the vampire marks would drag me down to the grave with him."

"Another good reason not to kill him," she said.

"If he's behind the scream that Gregory gave over the phone, then he'll need better reasons to keep breathing than love, or lust, or my possible death."

"I don't understand that, Anita. I don't understand that at all."

"I know," I said. And I thought to myself it was one of the reasons Ronnie and I hadn't been seeing as much of each other as we once had. I got tired of explaining myself to her. No, of justifying myself to her.

You're my friend, my best friend, I thought. But I don't understand you anymore.

"Ronnie, I can't arm wrestle shapeshifters and vampires. I will lose a fair fight. The only way I survive, the only way my leopards survive, is because the other shifters fear me. They fear my threat. I'm only as good as my threat, Ronnie."

"So you'll go down there and kill them."

"I didn't say that."

"But you will."

"I'll try to avoid it," I said.

She tucked her knees up, wrapping her arms around those long legs. She'd managed to get a tiny prick in one of the hose; the hole was shiny with clear nail polish. She'd carried the polish in her purse for just such emergencies. I'd carried a gun and hadn't even taken a purse.

"If you get arrested, call, and I'll bail you out."

I shook my head. "If I get caught wasting three or more people in a public area, there won't be any bail tonight. The police probably won't even finish questioning me until long past dawn."

"How can you be so calm about this?" she asked.

I was beginning to remember why Ronnie and I had started drifting apart. I'd had almost the exact conversation with Richard once when an assassin had come to town to kill me. I gave the same answer. "Having hysterics won't help anything, Ronnie."

"But you're not angry about it."

"Oh, I am angry," I said.

She shook her head. "No, I mean you're not outraged that this is happening. You don't seem surprised, not like ..." She shrugged. "Not like you should be."

"You mean not like you would be." I held up a hand before she could answer. "I don't have time to debate moral philosophy, Ronnie." I picked up the phone. "I'm going to call Jean-Claude."

"I keep urging you to dump the vampire and marry Richard, but maybe there's more than one reason why you can't let him go."

I dialed the number for Circus of the Damned from memory, and Ronnie just kept talking to my back. "Maybe you're not willing to give up a lover who's colder than you are."

The phone was ringing. "There are clean sheets on the guest bed, Ronnie. Sorry I won't be able to share girl talk tonight." I kept my back to her.

I heard her stand in a crinkle of skirts and knew when she walked out. I kept my back facing the room until I knew she was gone. It wouldn't do either of us any good to let her see me cry.

Chapter 3

JEAN-CLAUDE WASN'T AT the Circus of the Damned. The voice on the other end of the phone at the Circus didn't recognize me and wouldn't believe I was Anita Blake, Jean-Claude's sometimes sweetie. So I'd been reduced to calling his other businesses. I'd tried Guilty Pleasures, his strip club, but he wasn't there. I tried Danse Macabre, his newest enterprise, but I was beginning to wonder if Jean-Claude had simply told everyone that he wasn't in if I called.

The thought bothered me a lot. I'd worried that after so long Richard might finally tell me to go to hell, that he'd had enough of my indecision. It had never occurred to me that Jean-Claude might not wait. If I was so unsure how I felt about him, why was my stomach squeezed tight with a growing sense of loss? The feeling had nothing to do with the wereleopards and their problems. It had everything to do with me and the fact that I suddenly felt lost. But it turned out he was at Danse Macabre, and he took my call. I had a moment for my stomach to unclench and my breath to ease out, then he was on the phone, and I was struggling to keep my metaphysical shields in place.

I hated metaphysics. Preternatural biology is still biology, metaphysics is magic, and I'm still not comfortable with it. For six months when I wasn't working, I was meditating, studying with a very wise psychic named Marianne, learning ritual magic, so I could control my God-given abilities. And so I could block the marks that bound me to Richard and Jean-Claude. An aura is like your personal protection, your personal energy. When it's healthy it keeps you safe like skin, but you get a hole in it, and infection can get inside. My aura had two holes in it, one for each of the men. I suspected that their auras had holes in them, too. Which put us all at risk. I'd blocked up my holes. Then only a few weeks ago, I'd come up against a nasty creature, a would-be god, a new category, even for me. It had been powerful enough to strip all my careful work away, leaving me raw and open again. Only the intervention of a local witch had saved me from being eaten from the aura down. I didn't have six more months of celibacy, meditation, and patience in me. The holes were there, and the only way to fill them was with Jean-Claude and Richard. That's what Marianne said, and I trusted her in a way that I trusted few others.

Jean-Claude's voice hit me over the phone like a velvet slap. My breath caught in my throat, and I could do nothing but feel the flow of his voice, the presence of him, like something alive, flowing over my skin. His voice has always been one of Jean-Claude's best things, but this was ridiculous. This was over the phone. How could I possibly see him in person and maintain my shields, let alone my composure?

"I know you are there, *ma petite*. Did you call merely to hear the sound of my voice?"

That was closer to the truth than was comfortable. "No, no." I still couldn't gather my thoughts. I was like an athlete who had let her training go. I just couldn't lift the same amount of weight, and there was weight to wading through Jean-Claude's power.

When I still didn't say anything, he spoke again. "*Ma petite*, to what do I owe this honor? Why have you deigned to call me?" His voice was bland, but there was a hint of something in it. Reproach perhaps.

I guess I had it coming. I rallied the troops and tried to sound like an intelligent human being, not always one of my best things. "It's been six months ..."

"I am aware of that, *ma petite*."

He was being condescending. I hated that. It made me a little angry. The anger helped clear my head a little. "If you'll stop interrupting, I'll tell you why I called."

"My heart is all aflutter with anticipation."

I wanted to hang up. He was being an asshole, and part of me thought I might deserve the treatment, which made me even angrier. I'm always angriest when I think I'm in the wrong. I'd been a coward for months, and I was still a coward. I was afraid to be close to him, afraid of what I'd do. Damn it, Anita, get ahold of yourself. "Sarcasm is my department," I said.

"And what is my department?"

"I'm about to ask you for a favor," I said.

"Really?" He said it as if he might not grant it.

"Please, Jean-Claude, I'm asking for help. I don't do that often."

"That is certainly true. What would you have of me, *ma petite*? You know that you have but to ask, and it will be yours. No matter how angry I may be with you."

I let that comment go, because I didn't know what to do about it. "Do you know a club called Narcissus in Chains?"

He was quiet for a second or two. "*Oui*."

"Can you give me directions and meet me there?"

"Do you know what sort of a club this place is?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure?"

"It's a bondage club, I know."

"Unless the last six months has changed you greatly, *ma petite*, that is not one of your preferences."

"Not mine, no."

"Your wereleopards are misbehaving again?"

"Something like that." I told him what had happened.

"I do not know this Marco."

"I didn't figure you did."

"But you did think that I knew where the club was?"

"I was hoping."

"I will meet you there with some of my people. Or will you allow only me to ride to your rescue?" He sounded amused now, which was better than angry, I guess.

"Bring who you need."

"You trust my judgment?"

"In this, yeah."

"But not in all things," he said softly.

"I don't trust anyone in all things, Jean-Claude."

He sighed. "So young to be so ... jaded."

"I'm cynical, not jaded."

"And the difference is what, *ma petite*?"

"You're jaded."

He laughed then, the sound caressing me like the brush of a hand. It made things low in my body clench. "Ah," he said, "that explains all the differences."

"Just give me directions, please." I added the "please" to speed things along.

"They will not harm your wereleopards too greatly, I think. The club is run by shapeshifters, and they will smell too much blood and take matters into their own hands. It is one of the reasons Narcissus in Chains is no-man's-land, a neutral place for the fringe of our groups. Your leopards were right, it is usually a very safe place."

"Well, Gregory wasn't screaming because he felt safe."

"Perhaps not, but I know the owner. Narcissus would be very angry if someone became overzealous in his club."

"Narcissus, I don't know the name. Well, I know the Greek mythology stuff, but I don't recognize it as local."

"I would not expect you to. He does not often leave his club. But I will call him, and he will patrol your cats for you. He will not rescue them, but he will make sure no further damage is done."

"You trust Narcissus to do this?"

"*Oui.*"

Jean-Claude had his faults, but if he trusted someone, he was usually right. "Okay. And thank you."

"You are most welcome." He drew a breath, then said quietly, "Would you have called if you had not needed my help? Would you ever have called?"

I'd been dreading this question from either Jean-Claude or Richard. But I finally had an answer "I'll answer your question as best I can, but call it a hunch, it may be a long conversation. I need to know my people are safe before we start dissecting our relationship."

"Relationship? Is that what we have?" His voice was very dry.

"Jean-Claude."

"No, no, *ma petite*, I will call Narcissus now and save your cats but only if you promise that when I call back we will finish this conversation."

"Promise."

"Your word," he said.

"Yes."

"Very well, *ma petite*, until we speak again." He hung up.

I hung up the phone and stood there. Was it cowardly to want to call someone else, anyone else, so the phone would be busy and we wouldn't have to have our little talk? Yeah, it was cowardly, but tempting. I hated talking about my personal life, especially to the people most intimately involved in it. I had just about enough time to change out of the skirt outfit when the phone rang. I jumped and answered it with my pulse in my throat. I was really dreading this conversation.

"Hello," I said.

"Narcissus will see to your cats' safety. Now, where were we?" He was silent for a heartbeat. "Oh, yes, would you ever have called if you had not needed my help?"

"The woman I'm studying with ..."

"Marianne," he said.

"Yes, Marianne. Anyway, she says that I can't keep blocking the holes in my aura. That the only way to be safe from preternatural creepy-crawlies is to fill the holes with what they were meant to hold."

Silence on the other end of the phone. Silence for so long that I said, "Jean-Claude, you still there?"

"I am here."

"You don't sound happy about this."

"Do you know what you are saying, Anita?" It was always a bad sign when he used my real name.

"I think so."

"I want this very clear between us, *ma petite*. I do not want you coming back to me later, crying that you did not understand how tightly this would bind us. If you allow Richard and me to truly fill the marks upon your ... body, we will share our auras. Our energy. Our magic."

"We're already doing that, Jean-Claude."

"In part, *ma petite*, but those are side effects of the marks. This will be a willing, knowledgeable joining. Once done, I do not think it can be undone without great damage to all of us."

It was my turn to sigh. "How many vampire challenges to your authority have there been while I've been off meditating?"

"A few," he said, voice cautious.

"More than a few I'd bet, because they sensed that your defenses are not complete. You had trouble backing them down without killing them, didn't you?"

"Let us say that I am glad that there were no serious challengers over the last year."

"You'd have lost without Richard and me to back you up, and you couldn't shield yourself without us there to touch. That worked when I was in town with you. Touching, being with each other helped us plug in to each other's power. It offset the problem."

"*Oui*," he said, softly.

"I didn't know, Jean-Claude. I'm not sure it would have made a difference, but I didn't know. God, Richard must be desperate--he doesn't kill like we do. His bluff is all that keeps the werewolves from tearing each other apart, and with two gaping holes in his most intimate defenses ..." I let my voice trail off, but I still remembered the cold horror I'd felt when I realized how much I'd endangered all of us.

"Richard has had difficulties, *ma petite*. But we each have only one chink in our armor, the one that only you can heal. He was driven to merge his energies with mine. As you say, his bluff is very important to him."

"I didn't know, and I'm sorry for that. All I've been thinking about was how scared I was of being overwhelmed by the two of you. Marianne told me the truth when she thought I was ready to hear it."

"And are you done being frightened of us, *ma petite*?" His voice was careful when he asked, as if he were carrying a very full cup of very hot liquid up a long and narrow staircase.

I shook my head, realized he couldn't see it, and said, "I'm not brave. I'm pretty much terrified. Terrified that if I do this, there is no going back, that maybe I'm fooling myself about a choice. Maybe there is no choice and hasn't been for a long time. But however we end up arranging the bedrooms, I can't let us all go around with gaping metaphysical wounds. Too many things will sense the weakness and exploit it."

"Like the creature you met in New Mexico," he said, voice still as cautious as I'd ever heard it.

"Yeah," I said.

"Are you saying that tonight you will agree to letting us merge the marks, that we will at last close these, as you so colorfully put it, wounds?"

"If it doesn't endanger my leopards, yeah. We need to do it as soon as possible. I'd hate to make the big decision and then have one of us get killed before we could batten down the hatches."

I heard him sigh, as if some great tension had left him. "You do not know how long I have waited for you to understand all this."

"You could have told me."

"You would not have believed me. You would have thought it was another trick to bind you closer to me."

"You're right, I wouldn't have believed you."

"Will Richard be meeting us at the club, as well?"

I was quiet for a heartbeat. "No, I'm not going to call him."

"Why ever not? It is a shapeshifter difficulty more than a vampire one."

"You know why not."

"You fear he will be too squeamish to allow you to do what needs doing to save your leopards."

"Yeah."

"Perhaps," Jean-Claude said.

"You aren't going to tell me to call him?"

"Why would I ask you to invite my chief rival for your affections to this little tete-a-tete? That would be foolish. I am many things, but foolish is not one of them."

That was certainly true. "Okay, give me directions, and I'll meet you and your people at the club."

"First, *ma petite*, what are you wearing?"

"Excuse me?"

"Clothes, *ma petite*, what clothes are you wearing?"

"Is this a joke? Because I don't have time ..."

"It is not an idle question, *ma petite*. The sooner you answer, the sooner we can all leave."

I wanted to argue, but if Jean-Claude said he had a point he probably did. I told him what I was wearing.

"You surprise me, *ma petite*. With a little effort it should do nicely."

"What effort?"

"I suggest you add boots to your ensemble. The ones I purchased for you would do very well."

"I am not wearing five-inch spikes anywhere, Jean-Claude. I'd break an ankle."

"I planned on you wearing those boots just for me, *ma petite*. I was thinking of the other boots with the milder heels that I bought when you were so very angry about the others."

Oh. "Why do I have to change shoes?"

"Because, delicate flower that you are, you have the eyes of a policeman, and so it would be better if you wore leather boots instead of high heels. It would be better if you remember that you are trying to move through the club

as quickly and smoothly as possible. No one will help you find your leopards if they think you are an outsider, especially a policeman."

"Nobody ever mistakes me for a cop."

"No, but they begin to mistake you for something that smells of guns and death. Look harmless tonight, *ma petite*, until it is time to be dangerous."

"I thought this friend of yours, this Narcissus, would just escort us in."

"He is not my friend, and I told you the club is neutral ground. Narcissus will see that no great harm comes to your cats, but that is all. He will not let you come barging in to his world like the proverbial bull in the china shop. That, he will not allow, nor will he allow us to bring in a small army of our own. He is the leader of the werehyenas, and they are the only army allowed inside the club. There is no Ulfric, or Master of the City, within its walls. You have only the dominance you bring with you and your body to see you through."

"I'll have a gun," I said.

"But a gun will not get you into the upper rooms."

"What will?"

"Trust me, I will find a way."

I didn't like the sound of that at all. "Why is it that most of the time whenever I ask you for help, it's never a case where we can just run in and start shooting?"

"And why is it, *ma petite*, that when you do not invite me that it is almost always a case where you run in and shoot everything that moves?"

"Point taken," I said.

"What are your priorities for the night?" he asked.

I knew what he meant. "I want the wereleopards safe."

"And if they have been harmed?"

"I want vengeance."

"More than their safety?"

"No, safety first, vengeance is a luxury."

"Good. And if one, or more, is dead?"

"I don't want any of us going to jail, but eventually if not tonight, another night, they die." I listened to myself say it, and knew that I meant it.

"There is no mercy in you, *ma petite*."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"No, it is merely an observation."

I stood there, holding the phone, waiting to be shocked at what I was proposing. But I wasn't. I said, "I don't want to kill anyone if I don't have to."

"That is not true, *ma petite*."

"Fine, if they've killed my people, I want them dead. But I decided in New Mexico that I didn't want to be a sociopath, so I'm trying to act as if I'm not. So let's try to keep the body count low tonight, okay?"

"As you wish," he said. Then he added, "Do you really think that you can change the nature of what you are merely by wishing it?"

"Are you asking if I can stop being a sociopath, since I already am one?"

A moment of silence, then, "I think that is what I'm asking."

"I don't know, but if I don't pull myself back from the brink soon, Jean-Claude, there won't be any going back."

"I hear fear in your voice, *ma petite*."

"Yeah, you do."

"What do you fear?"

"I fear that by giving in to you and Richard that I'll lose myself. I fear that by not giving in to you and Richard I'll lose one of you. I fear that I'll get us killed because I'm thinking too much. I fear that I'm already a sociopath and there is no going back. Ronnie said that one of the reasons that I can't give you up and just settle down with Richard is that I can't give up a boyfriend who's colder than I am."

"I am sorry, *ma petite*." I wasn't sure exactly what he was apologizing for, but I accepted it anyway.

"Me, too. Give me directions to the club, I'll meet you there."

He gave me directions, and I read them back to him. We hung up. Neither of us said good-bye. Once upon a time we'd have ended the conversation with *je t'aime*, I love you. Once upon a time.

Chapter 4

THE CLUB WAS over the river on the Illinois side, along with most of the other questionable clubs. Vampire-run businesses got a grandfather clause to operate in St. Louis proper, but the rest of the human-run clubs--and lycanthropes still counted legally as human--had to go into Illinois to avoid pesky zoning problems. Some of the zoning problems weren't even on the books, weren't even laws at all. But it was strange how many problems the bureaucrats could find when they didn't want a club in their fair city. If the vampires weren't such a big draw for tourists, the bureaucrats'd have probably found a way to get rid of them, too.

I finally found parking about two blocks from the club. It meant a walk to the club in an area of town that most women wouldn't want to be alone in after dark. Of course, most women wouldn't be armed. A gun doesn't cure all ills, but it's a start. I also had a knife sheath around each calf, very high up, so that the hilts came up on the side of my knees. I wasn't really comfortable that way, but I couldn't think of any other place to put knives so I could get to them easily. There was a very good chance I'd have bruises on my knees after tonight. Oh, well. I also had a black belt in Judo, and was making progress in Kenpo, a type of karate, one with fewer power moves and more moves using balance. I was as prepared as I could get for the wilds of the big city.

Of course, I usually don't walk around looking like bait. My skirt was so short that even with boots that came up to mid-thigh there was a good inch

between the hem and the top of the boots. I'd put a jacket on for the drive, but had left it in the car because I didn't want to be carrying it around all night. I'd been in just enough clubs, whatever flavor they were, to know that inside it would be hot. So the goosebumps that traveled over my bare back and arms weren't from fear, but from the damp, chill air. I forced myself not to rub my arms as I walked and to at least look like I wasn't cold or uncomfortable. Actually the boots only had two-inch heels, and they were comfortable to walk in. Not as comfortable as my Nikes, but then, what is? But for dress shoes, the boots weren't bad. If I could have left the knives home, they'd have been peachy.

There was one other bit of protection that I'd added. Metaphysical shields come in different varieties. You can shield yourself with almost anything: metal, rock, plants, fire, water, wind, earth, etc. ... Everyone has different shields because it's a very individual choice. It has to work for your own personal mindset. You can have two psychics both using stone, but the shields won't be the same. Some people simply visualize rock, the thought of it, its essence, and that's sufficient. If something tries to attack them, they are safe behind the thought of rock. Another psychic might see a stone wall, like a garden wall around an old house, and that would do the same thing. For me, the shield had to be a tower. All shields are like bubbles that surround you completely, just like circles of power. I'd always understood this when I raised the dead, but for shielding I needed to see it in my head. So I imagined a stone tower, completely enclosed, no windows, no chinks, smooth and dark inside with only what I allowed in or out. Talking about shielding always made me feel like I was having a psychotic break and sharing my delusions. But it worked, and when I didn't shield, things tried to hurt me. It had only been in the last two weeks that Marianne had discovered that I hadn't really understood shielding at all. I'd thought it was just a matter of how powerful your aura was and how you could reinforce it. She said the only reason I'd been able to get by with that for as long as I had was that I was simply that powerful. But the shielding goes *outside* the aura like a wall around a castle, an extra defense. The innermost defense is a healthy aura. Hopefully by the end of the night I'd have one of those.

I turned the corner and found a line of people that stretched down the block. Great, just what I needed. I didn't stop at the end of the line, I kept walking towards the door, hoping I'd think of something to tell the doorman when I got there. I didn't have time to wait through all this. I was about halfway up the line when a figure pushed out of the crowd and called my name.

It took me a second to recognize Jason. First, he'd cut his baby-fine blond hair short, businessman short. Second, he was wearing a sheer silver mesh shirt and a pair of pants that seemed mostly made of the same stuff. Only a thin line of solid silver ran over his groin. The outfit was so eye-catching that it took me a moment to realize just how sheer the cloth was. What I was really seeing wasn't the silver, but Jason's skin through a veil of glitter. The outfit, which left precious little to the imagination, ended in calf-high gray boots.

I had to make myself look at his face, because I was still shaking my head over the outfit. The outfit didn't look comfortable, but of course, Jason rarely complained about his clothes. He was like Jean-Claude's little dress-up werewolf, as well as morning snack. Sometimes bodyguard and sometimes a fetch-and-carry boy. Who else could Jean-Claude get to stand out in the cold, nearly naked?

Jason's eyes looked bigger, bluer somehow, without all the hair to distract your eye. His face looked older with the shorter hair, the bone structure cleaner, and I realized that Jason was perilously close to that line between cute and handsome. He'd been nineteen when we met. Twenty-two looked better on him. But the outfit--there was nothing to do but grin at the outfit.

He was grinning at me, too. I think we were both happy to see each other. In leaving Richard and Jean-Claude I'd left their people behind, too. Jason was Richard's pack member, and Jean-Claude's lap wolf.

"You look like a pornographic space man. If you were wearing street clothes, you might have gotten a hug," I said.

His smile flashed even wider. "I guess I'm dressed for punishment. Jean-Claude told me to wait for you and take you in. My hand's already got a stamp on it so we can just go straight inside."

"A little cold for the clothes, isn't it?"

"Why do you think I was standing deep in the crowd?" He offered me his arm. "May I escort you inside, my lady?"

I took his arm with my left hand. Jason put his free hand on top of mine, doing a double hold. If that was the worst teasing he did tonight, then he'd grown up some. The silver cloth was rougher than it looked, scratchy where it rubbed against my arm.

As Jason led me up the steps, I had to look behind him. The cloth that covered his groin was only a thin thong at the back, leaving nothing but a fine glitter over his butt. The shirt was not attached to the pants, so as he moved I got glimpses of his stomach. In fact the shirt was loose enough through the shoulders that when he took my arm the shirt pulled to one side, revealing his smooth, pale shoulder.

The music hit me at the door like a giant's slap. It was almost a wall we had to move through. I hadn't expected Narcissus in Chains to be a dance club. But except for the patrons' clothing being more exotic and running high to leather, it looked like a lot of other clubs. The place was large, dimly lit, dark in the corners, with too many people pushed into too small a space, moving their bodies frantically to music that was way too loud.

My hand tightened just a touch on Jason's arm, because truthfully I always feel a little overwhelmed by places like this. At least for the first few minutes. It's like I need a depth chamber between the outside world and the inside world, a moment to breath deep and adjust. But these clubs are not designed to give you time. They just bombard you with sensory overload and figure you'll survive.

Speaking of sensory overload, Jean-Claude was standing near the wall just to one side of the dance floor. His long black hair fell in soft curls around his

shoulders, nearly to his waist. I didn't remember his hair being that long. He had his head turned away from me, watching the dancers, so I couldn't really see his face, but it gave me time to look at the rest of him. He was dressed in a black vinyl shirt that looked poured on. It left his arms bare, and I realized I'd never seen him in anything that bared his arms before. His skin looked unbelievably white against the shiny black vinyl, almost as if it glowed with some inner light. I knew it didn't, though it could. Jean-Claude would never be so declassé as to show such power in a public place. His pants were made of the same shiny vinyl, making the long lines of his body look like they had been dipped into liquid patent leather. Vinyl boots came up just over his knees, gleaming as if they'd been spit polished. Everything about him gleamed, the dark glow of his clothes, the shining whiteness of his skin. Then abruptly he turned as if he felt me gazing at him.

Staring full into his face, even from across a room, made me catch my breath. He was beautiful. That heartrending beauty that was masculine but treaded the line between what was male and what was female. Not exactly androgynous, but close to it.

But as he moved towards me, the movement was utterly male, graceful as if he heard music in his head that he quietly danced to. But the walk, the movement of his shoulders--women did not move like that.

Jason patted my hand.

I jumped, staring at him.

He put his mouth close enough to my ear to whisper-shout above the music, "Breathe, Anita, remember to breathe."

I blushed, because that was how Jean-Claude affected me--like I was fourteen and was having the crush of my life. Jason tightened his grip on me, as if he thought I might make a run for it. Not a bad idea. I looked back, and saw that Jean-Claude was very near. The first time I saw the blue-green roil of the Caribbean, I cried, because it was so beautiful. Jean-Claude made me feel like that, like I should weep at his beauty. It was like being offered an original da Vinci, not just to hang on your wall and admire, but to roll around on top of. It seemed wrong. Yet I stood there, clutching Jason's arm, my heart hammering so hard I almost couldn't hear the music. I was scared, but it wasn't knife-in-the-dark scared, it was rabbit-in-the-headlights scared. I was caught, as I usually was with Jean-Claude, between two disparate instincts. Part of me wanted to run to him, to close the distance and climb his body and pull it around me. The other part wanted to run screaming into the night and pray he didn't follow.

He stood in front of me, but made no move to touch me, to close that last small space. He seemed as unwilling to touch me as I was to touch him. Was he afraid of me? Or did he sense my own fear and fear he might scare me off? We stood there simply staring at each other. His eyes were still the same dark, dark blue, with a wealth of black lashes lacing them.

Jason kissed my cheek, lightly, like you'd kiss your sister. It still made me jump. "I'm feeling like a third wheel. You two play nice." And he pulled away from me, leaving Jean-Claude and me staring at each other.

I don't know what we would have said, because three men joined us before we could decide. The shortest of the three was only about five feet seven, and he was wearing more makeup on his pale triangular face than I was. The makeup was well done, but he wasn't trying to look like a woman. His black hair was cut very short, though you could tell that it would be curly if it was long. He was wearing a black lace dress, long-sleeved, fitted at the waist, showing a slender but muscular chest. The skirt spilled out around him, almost June Cleaverish, and his stockings were black, with a very delicate spiderweb pattern. He wore open-toed sandals with spike heels, and both his toenails and his fingernails were painted black. He looked ... lovely. But what made the outfit was the sense of power in him. It hung around him like an expensive perfume, and I knew he was an alpha something.

Jean-Claude spoke first. "This is Narcissus, owner of this establishment."

Narcissus held out his hand. I was momentarily confused about whether I was supposed to shake the hand or kiss it. If he'd been trying to pass for a woman, I'd have known the kiss would have been appropriate, but he wasn't. He wasn't so much cross-dressing as just dressing the way he wanted. I shook his hand. The grip was strong, but not too strong. He didn't try and test my strength, which some lycanthropes will do. He was secure, was Narcissus.

The two men behind him loomed over all of us, each well over six feet. One had a wide, muscular chest that was left mostly bare through a complicated crisscross of black leather straps. He had blond hair, cut very short on the sides and gelled into short spikes on top. His eyes were pale, and the look in them was not friendly. The second man was slimmer, built more like a professional basketball player than a weightlifter. But the arms that showed from the leather vest were corded with muscle all the same. His skin was almost as dark as the leather he was wearing. All these two needed were a couple of tattoos apiece, and they would have screamed badass.

Narcissus said, "This is Ulysses and Ajax." Ajax was the blond, and Ulysses was the oh-so brunette.

"Greek myths, nice naming convention," I said.

Narcissus blinked large dark eyes at me. Either he didn't think I was funny, or he simply didn't care. The music stopped abruptly. We were suddenly standing in a great roaring silence, and it was shocking. Narcissus spoke at a level where I could hear him, but people nearby couldn't. He'd known the music would stop. "I know your reputation, Ms. Blake. I must have the gun."

I glanced at Jean-Claude.

"I did not tell him."

"Come, Ms. Blake, I can smell the gun, even over ..." He sniffed the air, head tilted back just a little, "your Oscar de la Renta."

"I went to a different oil for cleaning, one with less odor," I said.

"It's not the oil. The gun is new, I can smell the ... metal, like you would smell a new car."

Oh. "Did Jean-Claude explain the situation to you?"

Narcissus nodded. "Yes, but we do not play favorites in dominance struggles between different groups. We are neutral territory, and if we are to

remain so, then no guns. If it is any comfort, we didn't let the ones who have your cats bring guns into the club either."

I widened my eyes at that. "Most shapeshifters don't carry guns."

"No, they do not." Narcissus's handsome face told me nothing. He was neither upset nor concerned. It was all just business to him--like Marco's voice on the phone.

I turned back to Jean-Claude. "I'm not getting into the club with my gun, am I?"

"I fear not, *ma petite*."

I sighed and turned back to the waiting--what had Jean-Claude called them-- werehyenas. They were the first I'd met, as far as I knew. There was no clue from looking at them what they became when the moon was full. "I'll give it up, but I'm not happy about this."

"That is not my problem," Narcissus said.

I met his eyes and felt my face slip into that look that could make a good cop flinch--my monster peeking out. Ulysses and Ajax started to move in front of Narcissus, but he waved them back. "Ms. Blake will behave herself. Won't you, Ms. Blake?"

I nodded, but said, "If my people get hurt because I don't have a gun, I can make it your problem."

"*Ma petite*," Jean-Claude said, his voice warning me.

I shook my head. "I know, I know, they're like Switzerland, neutral. Personally, I think neutral is just another way of saving your own ass at the expense of someone else's."

Narcissus took a step closer, until only a few inches separated us. His otherworldly energy danced along my skin, and as had happened in New Mexico with a very different wereanimal, it called that piece of Richard's beast that seemed to live inside me. It brought that power in a rush down my skin, to jump the distance between us, and mingle with Narcissus's power. It startled me. I hadn't thought it could happen with shields in place. Marianne had said that my abilities lay with the dead, and that was why I couldn't control Richard's power as easily as I could Jean-Claude's. But I should have been able to shield against a stranger. It scared me a little that I couldn't.

It had been wereleopards and werejaguars in New Mexico. They had mistaken me for another lycanthrope. Narcissus made the same mistake. I saw his eyes widen, then narrow. He glanced at Jean-Claude, and he laughed. "Everyone says you're human, Anita." He raised a hand and caressed the air just above my face, touching the swirl of energy. "I think you should come out of the closet before someone gets hurt."

"I never said I was human, Narcissus. But I'm not a shapeshifter either."

He rubbed his hand along the front of his dress, as if trying to get the feeling of my power off his skin. "Then what are you?"

"If things go badly tonight, you'll find out."

His eyes narrowed again. "If you cannot protect your people without guns, then you should step down as their Nimir-Ra and let someone else have the job."

"I've got an interview set up day after tomorrow with a potential Nimir-Raj."

He looked genuinely surprised. "You know that you don't have the power to rule them?"

I nodded. "Oh, yeah, I'm only temporary until I can find someone else. If the rest of you weren't so damn species conscious, I'd have farmed them out to another group. But no one wants to play with an animal that isn't the same as them."

"It is our way, it has always been our way."

And I knew the "our" didn't mean just werehyenas but all the shifters. "Yeah, well it sucks."

He smiled then. "I don't know whether I like you, Anita, but you are different, and I always appreciate that. Now give up the gun like a good little girl, and you can enter my territory." He held his hand out.

I stared at the hand. I didn't want to give up my gun. What I'd told Ronnie was true. I couldn't arm wrestle them, and I would lose a fair fight. The gun was my equalizer. I had the two knives, but frankly, they were for emergencies.

"It is your choice, *ma petite*."

"If it will help you make the choice," Narcissus said, "I have put two of my own personal guards in the room with your leopards. I have forbidden the others from causing further harm to your people until you arrive. Until you enter the upper room where they're waiting, nothing more will happen that they don't want to happen." Knowing Nathaniel, that wasn't as comforting as it could have been.

If anyone would understand the problem, it would be someone who ran a club like this. "Nathaniel is one of those bottoms that will ask for more punishment than he can survive. He has no stopping point, no ability to keep himself safe. Do you understand?"

Narcissus's eyes widened just a touch. "Then what was he doing here without a top of his own?"

"I sent him out with one that was supposed to watch over him tonight. But Gregory said that Elizabeth deserted Nathaniel early in the evening."

"Is she one of your leopards, too?"

I nodded.

"She's defying you."

"I know. The fact that Nathaniel suffers for it doesn't seem to bother her."

He studied my face. "I don't see anger in you about this."

"If I was angry at everything Elizabeth did to piss me off, I'd never be anything else." Truthfully, I was just tired. Tired of having to rescue the pack from one emergency after another. Tired of Elizabeth being up in my face and not taking care of the others, even though she was supposedly dominant to them. I'd avoided punishing her, because I couldn't beat her up, which was what she needed. The only thing I could do was shoot her. I'd been trying to avoid that, but she just may have pushed me far enough that I was out of options. I'd see what actual damage had been done. If anyone died because of her, then she would follow. I hated the fact that I didn't care whether I killed her. I'd known

her off and on for over a year. I should have cared, but I didn't. I didn't like her, and she'd been asking for it for as long as I'd known her. My life would be simpler if she were dead. But there had to be a better reason to kill someone than that. Didn't there?

"Some advice," Narcissus said. "All dominance challenges, especially from your own people, must be handled quickly, or the problem will spread."

"Thanks. Actually, I knew that."

"Still she defies you."

"I've been trying to avoid killing her."

We looked at each other very quietly, and he gave a small nod. "Your gun, please."

I sighed and raised the front of my shirt, though the material was stiff enough that I had to roll it back to expose the butt of the gun. I lifted the gun out and checked the safety out of habit, though I knew it was on.

Narcissus took the gun. The two bodyguards had moved, blocking the crowd's view of us. I doubted most people knew what we'd just done. Narcissus smiled as I rolled my shirt back into place over the now-empty holster.

"Truthfully, if I didn't know who you were and what your reputation was, I wouldn't have smelled the gun, because I wouldn't have been trying to. Your outfit doesn't look like it could hide a gun this big."

"Paranoia is the mother of invention," I said.

He gave a small bow of his head. "Now enter and enjoy the delights, and the terrors, of my world." With that rather cryptic phrase, he and his bodyguards moved through the crowd, taking my gun with them.

Jean-Claude trailed his fingers down my arm, and that one small movement turned me towards him, my skin shivering. Tonight was complicated enough without this level of sexual tension.

"Your cats are well until you enter the upper room. I suggest we do the mark now, first."

"Why?" I asked, my pulse suddenly in my throat.

"Let us go to our table, and I will explain." He moved off through the crowd, without touching me further. I followed and couldn't stop myself from watching the way the vinyl fit him from behind. I loved watching him walk, whether he was coming or going--a double threat.

The tables were small, and there weren't many of them crowded against the walls. But they'd cleared the dance floor so they could set up for some sort of show or demonstration. Men and women dressed in leather were setting up a framework of metal with lots of leather straps. I was reeally hoping to be elsewhere before the show started.

Jean-Claude took me to one side before we got to the table that Jason and three complete strangers were gathered around. He stepped in so close to me that a hard thought would have made our bodies touch. I pressed myself against the wall and tried not to breathe. He put his mouth against my ear and spoke so low what came out was merely the soft sound of his breath against my skin. "We will all be safer when the marks are married, but there are other ... benefits to it. I have many lesser vampires that I have brought into my territory in the

last few months, *ma petite*. Without you at my side, I dared not bring in greater powers, for fear that I could not hold them. Once the marks are married between us, you will be able to sense those vampires that are mine. The exception, as always, is a Master Vampire. They can hide their allegiances better than the rest. The marriage of marks will also let my people know who you are, and what will happen to them if they overstep their bounds with you."

I spoke, lips barely moving, lower than he had spoken, because he could still hear me. "You've had to be very careful, haven't you?"

He rested his cheek against my face for a moment. "It has been a delicate dance to choreograph."

I had gone into this evening with my metaphysical shield tight in place. Marianne had taught me that with my aura ruptured, the other shielding was of paramount importance. I shielded with stone tonight, perfect, seamless stone. Nothing could get in, or out, without my permission. Except Narcissus's power had already danced inside my shields. I was afraid that touching Jean-Claude would be enough to shatter the stone, but it wasn't. I wasn't even aware of the shielding, unless I really concentrated. It could stay in place even when I slept. Only when you were attacked did you have to concentrate, if you were good at shielding. I'd spent a week at the beginning of the month in Tennessee with Marianne, working on nothing but this. I wasn't great at it, but I wasn't bad either.

My shields were in place. My emotions were drowning in Jean-Claude, but my psyche wasn't, which meant that Marianne was right. I could hold the dead outside my shield easier than the living. This gave me the courage to do a little more. I leaned my face against Jean-Claude's, and nothing happened. Oh, the feel of his skin against mine sent a thrill through my body, but my shields never wavered. I felt some tension that I hadn't even known was there ease out of me. I wanted him to hold me. It wasn't just sex. If that was all it was, I could have been rid of him long ago. He must have felt it, too, because his hands rested lightly on my bare arms. When I didn't protest, his hands caressed my skin, and that small movement brought my breath to a sigh.

I leaned into him, wrapping my arms around his waist, pressing the lines of our bodies together. I rested my head on his chest, and I could hear his heart beating. It didn't always beat, but tonight it did. We held each other, and it was nearly chaste, just a renewal of the fact that we were touching again. I'd worked on the metaphysical stuff so I could do this and not lose myself. It had been worth the effort.

He pulled back first, enough to look into my face. "We can marry the marks here, or find somewhere more private." He wasn't whispering as much as before. Apparently he didn't care now if others knew what we were doing.

"I'm not clear on what marrying the marks means."

"I thought your Marianne had explained it to you."

"She said we'll fit together like puzzle pieces and there'll be a release of power when it happens. But she also said that the manner in which it is done is individual to the participants."

"You sound as if you are quoting."

"I am."

He frowned, and even that small movement was somehow fascinating. "I do not want you to be unpleasantly surprised, *ma petite*. I am striving for honesty, since you value it so highly. I have never done this with anyone, but most things are sexual between us, whether we will or no, so it is likely this will be, too."

"I can't leave the leopards here long enough to grab a hotel room, Jean-Claude."

"They will not be harmed. Until you go upstairs, they will be safe."

I shook my head and pulled away from him. "I'm sorry, but I am not leaving here without them. If you want to do this afterwards, that's fine with me, but the leopards are priority. They're waiting for me to rescue them. I can't go off and have what amounts to metaphysical sex while they're afraid and bleeding somewhere."

"No, it cannot wait. I want us to have this done before the fight begins. I do not like that your gun is gone."

"Will this marriage of the marks give me more ... abilities?"

"Yes."

"And you, what do you get out of it?" I was standing against the wall now, not touching him.

"My own defenses will be strong once more, and I will gain power, as well. You know that."

"Are there any surprises connected with this that I should know about?"

"As I said, I have never done this with anyone, nor have I seen it done. It will be as much a surprise to me as to you."

I stared up into his lovely eyes and wished I believed that.

"I see the distrust in your eyes, *ma petite*. But it is not me that you do not trust. It is your power. Nothing ever goes as it should with you, *ma petite*, because you are like no power come before you. You are wild magic, untamed. You throw the best of plans to the wind."

"I've been learning control, Jean-Claude."

"I hope it is enough."

"You're scaring me."

He sighed. "And that was the last thing I wished to do."

I shook my head. "Look, Jean-Claude, I know everyone keeps saying my people are fine, but I want to see for myself, so let's just get this done."

"This should be something special and mystical, *ma petite*."

I looked around the club. "Then we need a different setting."

"I agree, but the setting was your choosing, not mine."

"But you're the one insisting on it having to be right now before all the fireworks start."

"True." He sighed and held out his hand to me. "Come, let us at least go to our table."

I actually thought about refusing his hand. Funny how quickly I could go from wanting to jump his bones to wanting to be rid of him. Of course, it wasn't exactly him, but more the complications that came with him. The mystical stuff

between us was never simple. He said that was my fault, and maybe it was. Jean-Claude was a pretty standard Master Vampire, and Richard, a pretty standard Ulfric. They were both wonderfully powerful, but there was nothing too terribly extraordinary in their powers. Well, there was one thing about Jean-Claude. He could gain power by feeding off sexual energy. In another century he'd have been called an incubus. It's rare even for a Master Vamp to have a secondary way to gain power outside of blood. So it was impressive, sort of. The only other masters I'd met who could feed off of something other than blood had fed on terror. And of the two, I preferred lust. At least no one had to bleed for it. Usually. But I was the wild card, the one whose powers seemed to fit nothing but legends of necromancers long dead. Legends so old that no one believed they could be true, until I came along. Sad, but true.

The table had cleared out while we were whispering. Now just Jason and one other man were there. The man was dressed in brown leather, from what I could see of his pants to the zipped-front, sleeveless shirt he was wearing. He was also wearing one of those hoods that left your mouth, part of your nose, and your eyes bare, but covered the rest of your face. Frankly, I found the hoods creepy, but hey, it wasn't my bread that was being buttered. As long as he didn't try anything with me, we were cool. It wasn't until he looked up into my face that I recognized those pale, pale blue eyes--the startling ice blue eyes of a Siberian Husky. No human I'd ever met had eyes like that.

"Asher," I said.

He smiled then, and I recognized the curve of his lips. I knew why he'd worn the hood. It wasn't sexual preference, or at least I didn't think so. It was to hide the scars. Once, about two hundred years ago, some well-meaning church officials had tried to burn the devil out of Asher. They'd done it with holy water. Holy water is like acid on vampire flesh. He'd once been, in his own way, as breathtaking as Jean-Claude. Now half his face was a melted ruin, half his chest, most of the one thigh I'd seen. What I'd seen of the rest of him was perfect, as perfect as the day he died. And the parts I hadn't seen, I wasn't sure I wanted to know about. Through Jean-Claude's marks I had memories of Asher before. I knew what his body looked like in smooth perfection--every inch of it. Asher and his human servant, Julianna, had been part of a menage a trois with Jean-Claude for about twenty years. She'd been burned as a witch, and Jean-Claude had only been able to save Asher after the damage had been done.

The events were over two hundred years old, yet they both still mourned Julianna, and each other. Asher was now Jean-Claude's second in command, but they were not lovers. And they were uneasy friends, because there was still too much left unspoken between them. Asher still blamed Jean-Claude for failing them, and Jean-Claude had a hard time arguing with that, because deep down he still blamed himself, too.

I leaned down and gave Asher a quick kiss on the leather cheek. "What did you do with all your long hair? Please tell me you haven't cut it."

He raised my hand to his mouth and laid a gentle kiss on it. "It is braided, and longer than ever."

"I can hardly wait to see it," I said. "Thanks for coming."

"I would move all of hell to reach your side, you know that."

"You French guys do talk pretty," I said. He laughed softly.

Jason interrupted. "I think the show is about to start." I turned and watched a woman being led towards the framework that had been erected. She was wearing a robe, and I really didn't want to see what was under it.

"Whatever we're going to do, let's do it and go get the leopards."

"You don't want to see the show?" Jason asked. His eyes were all innocent, but his smile was teasing.

I just frowned at him. But his eyes looked behind me, and I knew someone Jason didn't like was coming towards us. I turned to find Ajax standing there. He ignored me and spoke to Jean-Claude. "You have fifteen minutes, then the show starts."

Jean-Claude nodded. "Tell Narcissus I appreciate the notice."

Ajax gave a small head bow, much like his master had done before, then walked off through the tables.

"What was all that about?" I asked.

"It would be considered rude to do something magical during someone else's performance. I told Narcissus that we would be calling some ... power."

I must have looked as suspicious as I felt. "You are beginning to piss me off with this cloak-and-dagger magic act."

"You are a necromancer, and I am the Master Vampire of this city. Do you really believe that we can merge our powers and not have every undead in this room, and more, notice it? I do not know if the shapeshifters will be able to feel it, but it is likely, since we are also both bound to a werewolf. Everything nonhuman in this club will feel something. I don't know how much, or exactly what, but something, *ma petite*. Narcissus would have taken it as a grave insult if we had interrupted this performance without warning him."

"I don't mean to rush you," Asher said, "but you will use up your time in talking if you are not quick about it."

Jean-Claude looked at him, and the look was not entirely friendly. What was happening between them that Jean-Claude would give such a look to Asher?

Jean-Claude held his hand out to me. I hesitated a second, then slid my hand into his and he led me to the wall near the table. "Now what?" I asked.

Now you must drop your shields, *ma petite*, that so-strong barrier you have erected between me and your aura."

I just stared at him. "I don't want to do that."

"I would not ask if it were not necessary, *ma petite*. But even if I were able to do it, neither of us would enjoy me breaking down your shielding. We cannot merge our auras if my aura cannot touch yours."

I was suddenly scared. Really seriously scared. I didn't know what would happen if I dropped the shields with him right there. In times of crisis our auras flared together forming a unique whole. I didn't want to do this. I am a control freak, and everything about Jean-Claude ate at the part of me that most needed control.

"I'm not sure I can do this."

He sighed. "It is your choice. I will not force it, but I fear the consequences, *ma petite*. I do fear them."

Marianne had given me the lecture, and it was really too late to get cold feet. I could either move forward with this, or eventually one of us would die. Probably me. Part of my job was going up against preternatural monsters-- things with enough magic to sense a hole in my defenses. Before I'd ever been able to sense auras, or at least before I knew that I was doing it, my aura had been intact. With my own natural talent, that had been enough. But lately I seemed to be running up against bigger, badder monsters. Eventually, I would lose. That, I might have been able to live with, sort of. But costing Jean-Claude or Richard their lives? That I couldn't handle. I knew all the reasons I should do this, and still I stood there gazing up at Jean-Claude, my heart beating in my throat, my shields tight in place. The front part of my brain knew this needed doing. The back part of my brain wasn't so sure.

"Once I drop my shield, then what?"

"We touch," he said.

I took a deep breath in and blew it out as if I were about to run a race. Then I dropped my shields. It wasn't like tearing down the stone walls; it was like absorbing them back into my psyche. The tower was just suddenly not there, and Jean-Claude's power crashed over me. It wasn't only that I felt the sexual attraction in full force, I could feel his heartbeat in my head. I could taste his skin in my mouth. I knew he'd fed tonight, though intellectually I'd known that when I heard his heart beating. Now, I could feel that he was well fed and full of someone else's blood.

His hand moved towards me, and I flattened against the wall. The hand kept moving, and I pulled away from it. I moved away because more than anything in the world at that moment I wanted him to touch me. I wanted to feel his hand against my bare skin. I wanted to rip the vinyl from his body and watch him, pale and perfect above me. The image was so clear that I closed my eyes against it, as if that would help.

I felt him in front of me, knew he was leaning close. I ducked under his arm and was suddenly standing by the table, leaving him near the wall. I kept backing up, and he kept watching me. Someone touched me, and I screamed.

Asher was holding my arm, gazing up at me with those pale eyes of his. I could feel him, too, feel the weight of his age, the heft of his power in my head. That was my power, but I realized in shielding so strongly from Jean-Claude I'd also cut myself off from some of my own powers. Shielding was a tricky thing. I guess I still didn't have the hang of it.

Jean-Claude moved away from the wall, holding one slender hand out to me. I backed up, Asher's hand sliding over my arm as I pulled away. I was shaking my head back and forth, back and forth.

Jean-Claude walked slowly towards me. His eyes had gone drowning blue, the pupil swallowed by his own power. I knew with a sudden clarity that it wasn't his power or lust that had called his eyes, it was mine. He could feel how my body tightened, moistened, as he moved towards me. It wasn't him I didn't trust. It was me.

I took one step backwards and fell on the small step leading down to the dance floor. Someone caught me before I hit the floor, strong arms around my waist, pressing me against the bare skin of a very masculine chest. I could feel that without looking. I was held effortlessly, feet dangling, and I knew those arms, the feel of that chest, the smell of his skin this close. I craned my head backwards and found myself staring at Richard.

Chapter 5

I STOPPED BREATHING. To be suddenly inches away from him after all this time was too much. He leaned that painfully handsome face over mine, and the thick waves of his brown hair fell against my skin. His mouth hovered over mine, and I think I would have said, *no*, or moved, but two things happened at once. He tightened his one-armed hold around my waist, a movement that was almost painful. Then his newly free hand gripped my chin, held my face. The touch of his hands, the strength in them made me hesitate. One moment I was staring into his deep brown eyes, the next, his face was too close and he was kissing me.

I don't know what I expected, a chaste kiss, I think. It wasn't chaste. He kissed me hard enough to bruise, hard enough to force my mouth open, then he crawled inside, and I could feel the muscles in his mouth, his jaw, his neck working as he held me, explored me, possessed me. I should have been angry, pissed, but I wasn't. If he hadn't held me immobile I'd have turned in his arms, pressed the front of my body against his. But all I could do was taste his mouth, feel his lips, try to drink him down my throat, as if he were the finest of wines and I was dying of thirst.

He finally drew back from me, enough for me to see his face. I stared breathlessly at him, as if my eyes were hungry for the sight of those perfect cheekbones, the dimple that softened an utterly masculine face. There was nothing feminine about Richard. He was the ultimate male in so many ways. The electric lights caught strands of gold and copper, like metallic wire through the deep brown of his hair.

He lowered me slowly to the ground from his height of six one. His shoulders were broad, chest deep, waist tight and narrow, stomach flat, with a fine line of dark hair running down the middle of it and vanishing into the black vinyl pants he was wearing. More black vinyl! I was sensing a theme here, but my gaze traveled down his body just the same. Tracing the narrow hips, lingering where I shouldn't have been, noticing things I wished I hadn't, because we were in public, and I wasn't planning on seeing him naked tonight. Knee-high leather boots completed his outfit. The only things he was wearing

on his upper body were leather and metal-studded "bracelets" and a matching collar.

A hand touched my back, and I jumped and whirled around, turning so I could face them both, because I knew who was behind me. Jean-Claude stood there, eyes having bled back to normal.

I finally found my voice. "You called him."

"We had an arrangement that whoever you called first would contact the other."

"You should have told me," I said.

Jean-Claude put his hands on his hips. "I am not taking the blame for this. He wished to be a surprise, against my wishes."

I looked at Richard. "Is that true?"

Richard nodded. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Because if I'd played fair I still wouldn't have gotten a kiss. I couldn't stand the thought of seeing you tonight and not touching you."

It wasn't so much his words as the look in his eyes, the heat in his face, that made me blush.

"I have played you fair tonight, *ma petite*, and yet I am punished, rather than rewarded." Jean-Claude held out his hand to me. "Shall we begin with a kiss?"

I was suddenly aware that we were standing on the dance floor near the metal framework and the waiting "actors." We had the audience's attention, and I didn't want that. I realized something I hadn't with the stone shield in place. Almost everyone in the room was a shapeshifter. I could feel their energy like the brush of warm electric fur, and they could feel ours.

I nodded. I suddenly wanted the privacy that Jean-Claude had offered earlier. But staring from Jean-Claude to Richard, I realized I didn't trust myself alone with them. If we had a room to ourselves I couldn't guarantee that the sex would be merely metaphysical. Admitting that even to myself was embarrassing. As uncomfortable as it was to do what we had to do in public, it was still better than in private. Here I knew I'd say stop, anywhere else I just wasn't sure. I wasn't thinking about the wereleopards. I was thinking about how large and bare my skin felt. Shit.

"A kiss, why not?"

"We can get a room," Richard said, voice low.

I shook my head. "No, no rooms."

He reached out as if to touch me, and one look was enough to make his hand drop. "You don't trust us."

"Or me," I said, softly.

Jean-Claude held out his hand to me. "Come, *ma petite*, we delay their show."

I stared at his hand for a space of heartbeats, then took it. I expected him to pull me in against his body, but he didn't. He stopped with the width of a handspan between us. I looked a question at him, and he touched my face, gently, tentatively, fingers hovering on either side of my face, like hesitant

butterflies, as if he were afraid to touch me. He lowered his face towards me, as his fingertips found my skin. His hands slid on either side of my face, cupping it like something delicate and breakable.

I'd never felt him so tentative around me, so unsure. Even as his lips hovered over mine I wondered if he was doing it this way on purpose to contrast with Richard's forcefulness. Then his lips touched mine, and I stopped thinking. It was the barest of brushes, his mouth over mine. Then, softly, he kissed me. I kissed him back, being as tentative as he, my hands raising, covering his hands as they cradled my face. He'd thrown that surprisingly long black hair over one shoulder so that the right side of his face was bare to the lights and the hair didn't get in the way of the kiss. I ran one hand down the side of his jaw, tracing the shape of his face, ever so gently, as we kissed. He shuddered under that light brush of my hand, and the feel of him trembling under my hand brought a soft sound from low in my throat. Jean-Claude's mouth pressed against mine hard enough that I could feel the press of his fangs against my lip. I opened my mouth and let him inside me, ran my tongue between the delicate points. I'd learned how to French kiss a vampire, but it was a hazardous pleasure, one to be done with care, and I was out of practice.

In slipping my tongue between his fangs, I nicked myself. It was a quick, sharp pain, and Jean-Claude made a soft guttural sound, a heartbeat before I tasted blood.

His hands were suddenly at my back, pulling me against his body. The kiss never stopped, and the urgency of it grew, until it was as if he were feeding from my mouth, trying to drink me down.

I might have pulled away, I might not have, but the moment the front of our bodies touched, it was too late. There was no going back, no saying no, nothing but sensation. I felt that cool, shimmering wind that was his aura touch mine. For one trembling moment we were pressed together, our energy breathing against each other like the sides of two great beasts. Then the boundaries that held our auras in place gave way. Think of it as if you were making love and suddenly your skin slid away, spilling you against your partner, into your partner, giving you an intimacy that was never imagined, never planned, never wanted.

I screamed, and he echoed me. I felt us begin to fall to the floor, but Richard caught us, cradled us against his body, laid us gently on the floor. The power did not leap across to him, and I didn't know why.

Jean-Claude's body was on top of mine, pinning me to the floor, his groin pressed over mine. He drove his hips in against me, forcing my legs apart around the slick covering of his legs. I wanted him inside me, wanted him to ride me while the power rode us.

He struggled up on his arms, leaning up and away from me, forcing his lower body tighter against mine. And the power built in a skin-tingling rush, building, building, like that shining edge of orgasm when you can feel it growing large and overwhelming but can't quite reach it.

I saw Richard leaning over me like a dark shadow against the haze of the lights. I think I tried to say, *no, don't*, but no sound came. He kissed me, and the

power flared, but still he wasn't part of it. He kissed my cheek, my chin, my neck, working lower, and I suddenly knew what he was doing. He was kissing his way down to the hole over my heart chakra, my energy center. Jean-Claude had already covered the one at my base, my groin. Richard's chest stretched above me, smooth, firm, so temptingly close, and I raised my mouth to his skin, so that as he kissed down my body he drew his naked chest across my tongue. I licked a wet line down his body. He buried his mouth inside the halter top and touched over my heart, and my mouth found his heart at the same moment.

The power didn't just build, it exploded. It was like lying at ground zero of a nuclear explosion, the shock waves shooting out, out, out into the room, while we melted together in the center. For one shining moment I felt both of them inside me, through me, as if they were wind, pure power, pouring through me, through us. Richard's electric warmth buzzed over us; Jean-Claude's cool power poured over and through like a chill wind; and I was something large and growing, holding the warmth of the living and the cold of the dead. I was both and neither. We were all and none.

I don't know if I passed out or if I just lost time for some metaphysical reason. All I remembered was that I was suddenly lying on the floor with Richard collapsed beside me, pinning one of my arms, his body curled around my chest and head, his legs touching down the other side of my body. Jean-Claude was collapsed on top of me, his body pressing the length of mine, with his head to one side resting on Richard's leg. They both had their eyes closed, their breath coming in ragged pants, just like mine.

It took me two tries to say a breathless, "Get off me."

Jean-Claude rolled to one side without ever opening his eyes. The fall of his body forced Richard's legs to move a little farther out, so that Jean-Claude and I both lay in the semicircle of Richard's body.

The room was so quiet I thought we were the only ones left in it. As if all the others had fled in terror of what we'd done. Then the room thundered in applause and howling and other animal noises that I didn't have words for. The noise was deafening, beating against my body in waves as if I had nerves in places where I'd never had nerves before.

Asher was suddenly standing over us. He knelt beside me, touching the pulse in my neck. "Blink if you can hear me, Anita."

I blinked.

"Can you speak?"

"Yes."

He nodded and touched Jean-Claude next, stroking a hand down his cheek. Jean-Claude opened his eyes at the touch. He gave a smile that seemed to mean more to Asher than to me, because it made Asher laugh. The laugh was a very masculine one, as if they'd shared some dirty joke that I didn't understand. Asher crawled around me until he was kneeling by Richard's head. He lifted a handful of thick hair so he could see Richard's face clearly. Richard blinked at him, but didn't seem to be focusing.

Asher bent low over Richard, and I heard him say, "Can you hear me, *mon ami*?"

Richard swallowed, coughed, and said, "Yes."

"*Bon, bon.*"

It took me two tries but I had a smart-aleck comment, and I was going to make it. "Now, everyone who can stand, raise their hands." None of us moved. I felt distant, floating, my body too heavy to move. Or maybe my mind was too overwhelmed to make it move.

"Have no fears, *ma cherie*, we will attend you." Asher stood, and it was as if it were a signal. Figures moved out of the crowd. I recognized three of them. Jamil's waist length cornrows looked right at home with his black leather outfit. He was Richard's lead enforcer, or Skoff. Shang-Da didn't look comfortable in black leather, but the six-foot-plus Chinese never looked comfortable outside of nice dress clothes with polished wing tips. Shang-Da was the other enforcer for the pack, the Hati. Sylvie knelt beside me, looking splendid in vinyl, her short brown hair touched with burgundy highlights. Though it looked good, I knew she was conservative enough that it was probably a temporary color. She sold insurance when she wasn't being Richard's second in command, his Freki, and insurance salespeople didn't have hair the color of a good red wine.

She smiled at me, wearing more makeup than I'd ever seen her in. It looked great, but it didn't really look like Sylvie. For the first time I thought how pretty she was, and that she was almost as delicate-looking as me.

"I owed you a rescue," she said. Once upon a time a bunch of nasty vampires had come to town to teach Jean-Claude, Richard, and me a lesson. They'd taken prisoners along the way. Sylvie had been one of them. I'd gotten her out, and I'd kept my promise to see everyone who touched her dead. She did the actual killing, but I delivered them up to her for punishment. She kept a few bones as souvenirs. Sylvie would never complain that I was too violent. Maybe she could be my new best friend.

The werewolves took up positions around us, facing outward like good bodyguards. None of them were as physically imposing as Narcissus's bodyguards had been, but I'd seen the wolves fight, and muscles aren't everything. Skill counts, and a certain level of ruthlessness.

Two vampires came to stand with Asher and the wolves. I didn't recognize either of them. The woman was Asian, with shining black hair that fell barely to her shoulders. The hair was nearly the same color and brilliance as the vinyl cat suit that clung to nearly every inch of her body. The suit made sure you were aware of her high, tight breasts, her tiny waist, the swell of her shapely hips. She gave me an unfriendly look with her dark eyes, before she turned her back on me and stood, hands at her side, waiting. Waiting for what, I wasn't sure.

The second vampire was male, not much taller than the woman, with thick brown hair that had been shaved close to his head, except for a layer left on top that came about halfway to his eyes, shining and straight. He gazed down on me with a smile, eyes the color of new pennies, as if his brown eyes held just a trace of blood in them.

He turned his attention outward, arms crossed over the black leather of his chest. They too faced outward like good bodyguards, letting the crowd know

that even though we couldn't stand up, we weren't helpless. Comforting, I guess.

Jason crawled in between their legs, head hanging down, as if he were almost too tired to move. He raised his blue eyes to me, and the look was almost as unfocused as I felt.

He gave a pale version of his usual grin and said, "Was it good for you?"

I was feeling better enough to try and sit up, but failed. Jean-Claude said, "Lie a little longer, *ma petite*."

Since I had no choice, I did what he suggested. I lay staring up at the dark, distant ceiling with its rows of lights. They'd turned off most of them, so that the club was nearly dark. Like the soft gloom that comes when you close the drapes during the day.

I felt Jason lay down on the other side of me, head resting on my thigh. Not long ago I'd have made him move, but I'd spent my time away learning how to be comfortable being close with the wereleopards. It had made me more tolerant of everyone, apparently. "Why are *you* tired?"

He rolled his head up to look at me without raising it from my leg, one hand curving over my calf as if to keep his balance. "You spill sex and magic through the whole club and you ask why I'm tired? You are such a tease."

I frowned at him. "One more comment like that and you'll have to move."

He snuggled his head on my hose. "I can see that your underwear matches."

"Get off of me, Jason."

He slid to the floor without being told twice. He could never leave well enough alone, our Jason. He always had to get the last joke, the last comment, that one bit too many. I worried that someday with someone else that little quirk might get him hurt, or worse.

Richard propped himself up on one elbow, moving slowly as if he wasn't sure everything was working. "I don't know if that felt better than anything else we've ever done, or worse."

"It feels like a combination of a hangover and mild flu to me," I said.

"And yet it feels good," Jean-Claude said.

I finally got upright and found that they both had a hand at my back to support me, as if their movements had been simultaneous.

I actually leaned in against their hands, rather than telling them to move. One, I was still shaky; two, I just didn't find the physical contact unpleasant. All these months of trying to forge the wereleopards into a cohesive, friendly unit, and it was me that had learned to be cohesive and friendly. Me that had learned that not every helping hand is a threat to my independence. Me that had learned that not every offer of physical closeness is a trap or a lie.

Richard sat up first, slowly, keeping his hand on my back. Then Jean-Claude sat up, keeping his hand very still against me. I felt them exchange glances. This was the moment that I usually pulled away. We'd have some fantastic sex, metaphysical or otherwise, and that was my cue to close down, hide. We were in public, all the more reason to do it.

I didn't pull away. Richard's arm slid cautiously up my back, over my shoulders. Jean-Claude's arm moved lower around my waist. They both pulled me into the curve of their bodies as if they were some huge, warm vinyl-covered chair with a pulse.

Some say that that moment during sex when you both have an orgasm your auras drop, you blend your energies, yourselves together. You share so much more than just your body during sex, it's one of the reasons you should be careful who you do it with. Just sitting there on the floor with them was like that. I could feel their energies moving through me, like a low-level current, a distant hum. In time I was pretty sure it would become white noise--something you can ignore, like psychic shielding when you no longer have to concentrate on it. But now it was like we would always walk, move, through that dreamy afterglow where you were still connected, still not quite back in your own skin. I didn't push them away, because I didn't want to. Pushing them away would have been redundant. We didn't need to touch to breach the barriers anymore. And that should have scared me more than anything else, but it didn't.

Narcissus walked out into the middle of the floor and a soft light fell upon him, growing ever so gradually brighter. "Well, my friends, we have had a treat tonight, have we not?"

More applause, screams, and animal noises filled the dimness. Narcissus held up his hands until the crowd fell quiet. "I think we have had our climax for the night." A smattering of laughter at that. "We will save our show until tomorrow, for to do less would be to dishonor what we have been offered here tonight."

The woman, who was still standing to the back of the dance floor in her robe, said, "I can't compete with that."

Narcissus blew her a kiss. "It is not a competition, sweet Miranda, it is that we all have our gifts. Some are merely more rare than others." He turned and stared at us as he said the last. His eyes were pale and oddly colored, and it took me a second or two to realize that Narcissus's eyes had bled to his beast. Hyena eyes, I guess, though truthfully, I didn't know what hyena eyes looked like. I just knew they weren't human eyes.

He knelt beside us, smoothing his dress down in an automatic and strangely odd gesture that I'd never seen a man make before. Of course, he was also the first man I'd ever seen in a dress. There was probably a cause and effect.

Narcissus lowered his voice. "I would love to speak with you in private about this."

"Of course," Jean-Claude said, "but first we have other business."

Narcissus leaned in close, lowering his voice until it was necessary to lean forward to hear him. "As I have two of my guards waiting with her leopards so no harm will come, there is time to talk. Or should I say, *your* leopards, for surely now, what belongs to one, belongs to all." He had leaned so far over that his cheek nearly touched Jean-Claude on one side and my face on the other.

"No," I said, "the leopards are mine."

"Really," Narcissus said. He turned his face that fraction of an inch and brushed his lips against mine. It might have been an accident, but I doubted it. "You don't share everything, then?"

I moved my face just far enough away so we weren't touching. "No."

"So good to know," he whispered. He leaned forward and pressed his mouth to Jean-Claude's lips. I was startled, frozen for a second wondering exactly what to do.

Jean-Claude knew exactly what to do. He put one finger in the man's chest and pushed, not with muscle, but with power. The power of the marks, the power that we had all just moments before solidified. Jean-Claude drew on it as if he'd done it a thousand times before, effortlessly, gracefully, commandingly.

Narcissus was pushed back from him by a rush of invisible power that I could feel tugging on my body. And I knew that most of the people in the room could feel it, as well. Narcissus stayed crouched on the floor, staring at Jean-Claude, staring at all of us. The look on his face was angry, but there was more hunger in it than rage, a hunger denied.

"We need to talk in private," Narcissus insisted.

Jean-Claude nodded. "That would be best, I think."

There was a weight of things left unsaid in that short exchange. I felt Richard's puzzlement mirror my own, before I turned my head to glance back at him. The movement put our faces close enough so that we could almost have kissed. I could tell just by the expression in his eyes that he didn't know what was going on. And he seemed to know that I could tell, because he didn't bother to shrug or make any outward acknowledgment. It wasn't telepathy, though to an outsider it might look that way. It was more extreme empathy, as if I could read every nuance on his face, the smallest change, and know what it meant.

I was still pressed in the circle of Richard's and Jean-Claude's arms, a strange amount of bare skin touching all of us--my back, Richard's chest and stomach, Jean-Claude's arm. There was something incredibly right about the touching, the closeness. I felt Jean-Claude's attention turn, before I moved my head to meet his eyes.

The look in those drowning eyes held worlds of things unsaid, unasked, all so tremblingly close. Because for once he didn't see in my eyes the barriers that kept all those words trapped. It had to be the marriage of the marks affecting me, but that night I think he could have asked me anything, anything, and I wasn't sure I'd say no.

What he finally said was, "Shall we retire to privacy to discuss business with Narcissus?" His voice had its usual smoothness. Only his eyes held uncertainty and a need so large he almost had no words for it. We'd all waited so long for my surrender. I knew that the phrasing wasn't mine. It sounded more like something Jean-Claude would think, but with Richard also pressed against my body I wasn't really sure who was thinking it. I only knew it hadn't been me.

Even before the marks had merged I'd had moments like this. Moments when their thoughts invaded mine, overrode mine. The images had been the worst--nightmare flashes of feeding on the warm bodies of animals, of drinking

blood from people I didn't know. It had been this mingling, this loss of self, that had terrified me, sent me running for anything that would keep me whole--keep me myself. Tonight, that just didn't seem important. Definitely an aftereffect of the metaphysical union of marks. But knowing what it was didn't make it go away. It was a dangerous night.

Jean-Claude said, "*Ma petite*, are you well? I am feeling much better, energized in fact. Are you still ill?"

I shook my head. "No, I feel fine." Fine didn't really cover it. Energized was a good word for it, but there were others. How long could it take to rescue the wereleopards from yet another disaster? The night wasn't young, dawn would come, and I wanted to be alone with them before that. I realized with a jolt that ran all the way down my body, that tonight was it. If we could get some privacy and not be interrupted, all things would suddenly be possible.

Richard and Jean-Claude both stood up, in a boneless movement of grace for the vampire and pure energy for the werewolf. I gazed at them as they stood above me, and I was suddenly eager to have the other business done with. I wasn't as worried about the leopards as I should have been, and that did bother me. Whatever this effect was, it was distracting me from more important things. Saving the leopards was why I'd come. It was the first time I'd really thought of them in a while.

I shook my head trying to clear it of sex and magic and the weight of possibilities in Richard's eyes. Jean-Claude's eyes were more cautious, but I'd taught him caution where I was concerned.

I held my hands up to both of them. I never asked for help to stand unless I was bleeding or something was broken. The two of them exchanged glances, then they held their hands out to me, again in perfect unison, like choreographed dancers who knew what the other would do.

They could feel my desire, but that had always been there; it told them nothing. I took their hands and let them lift me up. They were both still looking unsure, almost suspicious, as if they were waiting for me to recoil from them and run screaming from the intimacy of it all. I had to smile. "If we can get everyone all tucked in safe and sound before dawn, all things will be possible."

They exchanged another look between them. Jean-Claude made a small movement, as if encouraging Richard. It was a tiny, almost-push with his head, as if to say, *Go ahead, ask*. Normally, seeing them plot behind my back pissed me off, but not that night.

"Do you mean ..." Richard let the thought trail off.

I nodded, and Richard's hand tightened on mine. Jean-Claude's hand was strangely quiet in mine. "You do realize, *ma petite*, that this new ..." he hesitated, "willingness, may be a by-product of joining the marks tonight. I don't wish you to accuse us later of trickery."

"I know what it is, and I don't care." I should have, but I didn't. It was like being drunk, or drugged, and even thinking that made no difference.

I was looking at Jean-Claude, and I saw him let out the breath he'd been holding. I felt Richard do the same. It was as if a great weight had been taken

from both of them. And I knew that I was that burden. I'd try not to be a burden from now on. "Let's get this over with and go get the leopards," I said.

Jean-Claude raised my hand to his mouth, brushing the knuckles across his lips. "And be gone from this place."

I nodded. "And be gone from this place," I said.

Chapter 6

I'D BEEN COMPLAINING to Jean-Claude for years that his decorating scheme was too monochromatic, but one look at Narcissus's bedroom and I knew I owed Jean-Claude an apology. The room was done in black, and I mean black. The walls, the hardwood floor, the drawn drapes against one wall, the bed. The only color in the room was the silver chains and the silver-colored implements hanging from the wall. The color of the steel seemed to accentuate the blackness rather than relieve it. Chains dangled from the ceiling above the huge bed. It was bigger than king-sized. The only term that came to mind was orgy-sized. The bed was four-postered, with the largest, heaviest, darkest wood I'd ever seen. More chains dangled from the four posts, set in heavy permanent rings. If I'd been on a date, I'd have turned and run for it. But this wasn't a date, and in we all trooped.

My understanding about most people who were into D and S was that their bedrooms were separate from their "dungeons." Nearby perhaps, but not the same room. You needed somewhere to go to actually sleep. Maybe Narcissus just never rested from the fun and games.

There was a door in the opposite wall, and the drapes were drawn over the middle of one wall. Maybe his real bed was behind door number two or the drapes. I hoped so.

The only chair in the room had straps attached to it, so Narcissus offered us the bed to sit on. I don't know if I would have sat down or not, but first Jean-Claude, then Richard did. Jean-Claude settled against the black bedspread as he did everything, with grace, settling his body against the pillows as if he felt utterly comfortable. But it was Richard who surprised me. I expected to see in him some of the discomfort I felt about the room, but he didn't seem in the least uncomfortable. In fact, I realized for the first time that the heavy leather cuffs at his wrists and the collar at his throat had metal hooks in them, so they could be attached to chains or a leash. He'd probably worn them so he could blend into the club scene, as I'd worn the boots. But ... but I could feel that he was calm about the room and everything in it. I wasn't.

I looked at Jean-Claude and Richard and knew I'd decided to sleep with both of them tonight, however we arranged it. But seeing them on the bed in the middle of all this, watching them at home in it, made me wonder about my

decision. It made me think that maybe, after all this time, I still didn't know what I was getting myself into.

Asher was wandering the room looking at the things on the wall. I couldn't read him like I could read the others, but he, too, seemed unruffled, and I didn't think it was an act. Narcissus had swept into the room with Ajax at his back. He'd agreed to leave everyone else in the hallway, or downstairs, in exchange for us leaving our extra wolves outside the room. I guess for true privacy you did need less than a double digit worth of people in a room.

Richard held his hand out to me. "It's okay, Anita. Nothing in this room can hurt you without your permission, and you're not going to give that." That wasn't exactly the comforting comment I'd wanted, but I guess it was the truth. I used to believe that truth was good, but I'd begun to realize that it is neither good, nor bad. It's just the truth. Life had been simpler when I believed in black-and-white absolutes.

I took his hand and let him draw me to the bed, between Jean-Claude and himself. Well, Narcissus had already made a play for Jean-Claude, so I guess we needed to make the hands-off point. But it still bothered me that Richard put me between them, not simply beside him. The warm, fuzzy feeling I'd had from the marriage of the marks seemed to be receding at an alarming rate. Magic does that sometimes.

I felt stiff and uncomfortable on the black bed between my two men. "What is wrong, *ma petite*? You are suddenly very tense."

I looked at Jean-Claude, raising my eyebrows. "Am I the only one here that doesn't like this room?"

"Jean-Claude liked this room very much, once," Narcissus said.

I turned and looked at the werehyena as he paced the room in his stocking feet. "What do you mean?" I asked.

Jean-Claude answered, "Once, I submitted to unwanted advances because I was told to do so. But those days are past."

I stared at him, and he wouldn't meet my gaze. His eyes were all for Narcissus, as the other man paced around the bed.

"I don't remember you being unwilling," Narcissus said. He leaned against the far post of the bed.

"I learned long ago to make a virtue of necessity," Jean-Claude said. "Besides, Nikolaos, the old Master of the City, sent me to you. You remember now she was, Narcissus. Refusal of an order was not allowed."

I'd had the horror of meeting Nikolaos personally. She had been very, very scary.

"So I was an unpleasant duty." He sounded angry.

Jean-Claude shook his head. "Your body is pleasant, Narcissus. What you like doing with your lovers, if they can take the damage, is not ..." Jean-Claude looked down as if searching for the right word, then raised his midnight blue eyes to Narcissus, and I saw the effect that his gaze had on the shapeshifter. Narcissus looked like he'd been hit between the eyes with a hammer--a handsome, charming hammer.

"Is not *what*?" Narcissus asked, his voice hoarse.

"Is not to my taste," Jean-Claude said. "Besides, I must not have pleased you very much, for you did not do what my late master wished you to do."

I was the reason that Nikolaos was the *late* Master of the City. She'd been trying to kill me, and I'd gotten lucky. She was dead, I wasn't. And now Jean-Claude got to be Master of the City. I hadn't planned that. How much of it Jean-Claude had planned was still up for debate. It is not just prejudice on my part that makes me trust him less than Richard.

Narcissus put one knee on the bed, one hand still around the bedpost. "You pleased me very much." The look on his face was too intimate. They should have been alone for this conversation. But, then again, watching the way Narcissus looked at Jean-Claude, maybe that wouldn't have been such a great idea. From Jean-Claude all I sensed was a desire to soothe any injured feelings. But I was betting if I could peek inside Narcissus's head I'd find a different kind of desire.

"Nikolaos thought I failed her and punished me for it."

"I could not ally myself with her--not even for you as my permanent toy."

Jean-Claude raised an eyebrow at that. "I do not remember that being part of the deal."

"When I first told her no, she sweetened the offer." Narcissus crawled onto the bed. He stayed crouched on all fours, as if he were expecting someone to come up behind him.

"In what way did she sweeten the offer?"

Narcissus started to crawl across the bed, slowly, his knees catching on the hem of his dress as he moved. "She offered you to me for always, to do with as I wished."

A thrill of terror ran through me from my toes to the top of my head. It took me a second to realize it wasn't my fear. Richard and I both turned to Jean-Claude. His face showed nothing. It was his usual polite, attractive, almost bored mask. But we could both feel the cold, screaming terror in his mind at the thought of how close he'd come to being Narcissus's permanent ... guest.

It filled him with a fear that was larger than the shapeshifter. Images flashed through my mind, memories. Chained on my stomach on rough wood, the sound of a whip going back, the shock of it biting into my skin, and the knowledge that it was only the first blow. The wave of utter despair that followed that memory left me blinking back tears. I had a confused image of being tied to a wall, with a hand rotted to green pus caressing my body. Then the images stopped abruptly, like someone had thrown a switch. But the body the hand had been traveling down had been male. They were Jean-Claude's memories, not mine. He'd been projecting his memories on me and when he realized it, he'd blocked it.

I looked at him and couldn't keep the horror out of my eyes. My hair hid my face from Narcissus, and I was glad because I couldn't be blasé about what I'd just seen. Jean-Claude didn't look at me but kept his eyes on Narcissus. I was trying not to cry, and Jean-Claude's face betrayed nothing.

Jean-Claude hadn't been remembering Narcissus's abuse, but others, many, countless others. It wasn't the pain I carried away from the memories, but the

despair. The thought that I ... no, he. He had not owned his own body. He had never been a prostitute, or rather, he had never traded sex for money. But for power, the whim of whoever was his current master, and strangely for safety, he had traded sex for centuries. I'd known that, but I'd pictured him as the seducer. What I'd just seen had nothing to do with seduction.

A small sound came from Richard, and I turned to him. His eyes were shiny with unshed tears, and he had the same look of numb horror that I felt on my own face. We looked at each other for a long frozen moment, then a tear trickled down his face a second before a hot line of tears eased down my own.

He reached for my hand and I took it. And we both turned to Jean-Claude. He was still watching, even talking, though I hadn't heard any of it, with Narcissus. The other man had crawled all the way across that huge bed to be within touching distance of us all. But it wasn't *us all* that he wanted to touch.

"Sweet, sweet, Jean-Claude, I thought I had forgotten you, but seeing you tonight on the floor with the two of them made me remember." He reached out towards Jean-Claude, and Richard grabbed his wrist.

"Don't touch him. Don't ever touch him again."

Narcissus looked from Jean-Claude to Richard and finally back to Richard. "Such possessiveness, it must be true love." I had a ringside seat and watched the muscles in Richard's hands and forearm tense as he squeezed that dainty wrist.

Narcissus laughed, voice shaky, but not with pain. "Such strength, such passion, would he crush my wrist just for trying to touch your hair?" His voice held amusement and what I finally realized was excitement. Richard touching him, threatening him, hurting him ... He was enjoying it.

I felt Richard realize it too, but he didn't let go. Instead he jerked the other man off balance until he fell against his body. Narcissus made a small surprised sound. Richard kept one hand on his wrist, and he put the other to the man's neck. Not squeezing, just there, large and dark against Narcissus's pale skin.

The bodyguard, Ajax, had moved away from the wall, and Asher had moved to meet him. Things could go very bad, very quickly here. It was usually me that lost my temper and made things worse, not Richard.

Narcissus had to sense rather than see the movement, because Richard had him facing away from the rest of the room. "It's alright, Ajax, it's alright. Richard is not hurting me." Then Richard did something that made Narcissus's breath stop in his throat and come out harsh. "You may crush my wrist, if it's foreplay, but if it's not, then my people will kill you, all of you." His words were reasonable, his tone was not. You could hear the pain in his voice, but there was also anticipation, as if whichever way Richard answered, it would excite him.

Jean-Claude spoke. "Do not give him an excuse to have us at his mercy, *mon ami*. We are in his territory tonight, his guests. We owe him a guest's duty to his host, as long as he does not forfeit that right."

I wasn't a hundred percent sure what a guest's duties to his host were, but I was willing to bet that crushing their limbs wasn't among them. I touched

Richard's shoulder, and he jumped. Narcissus made a small protesting sound, as if Richard had involuntarily tightened his grip.

"Jean-Claude's right, Richard."

"Anita counsels you to temperance, Richard, and she is one of the least temperate people I have ever known." Jean-Claude moved forward, laying his hand on Richard's other shoulder, so we both touched him. "Besides, *mon ami*, hurting this one will not undo the harm already done. No drop of blood less will have been spilt; no pound of flesh less will have been lost; no humiliation will have been stopped. It is over, memories cannot harm us."

For the first time I wondered if Richard and I had gotten the same memories in that flash of shared insight. What I'd seen had been horrible, but it hadn't affected me like it had him. Maybe it was a guy thing. Maybe a white, Anglo-Saxon, upper-middle-class male like Richard would take memories of being abused and raped harder than I would. I was a woman. I knew things like that could happen to me. Maybe he had never thought they could happen to him.

Richard spoke low, his voice fallen to a rolling growl, as if his beast lurked just behind that handsome throat. "Never touch him again, Narcissus, or we'll finish this." Then Richard slowly, carefully, slid his hands away from Narcissus. I expected him to scoot away, clutching his injured wrist, but I underestimated him, or maybe overestimated him.

Narcissus did cradle his wrist, but he stayed pressed against Richard's body. "You've torn ligaments in my wrist. They take longer to heal than bone."

"I know," Richard said softly. The level of anger in those two words made me flinch.

"With a thought I can tell my men to leave her wereleopards to the mercy of their captors."

Richard glanced at Jean-Claude, who nodded. "Narcissus can contact his ... men mind-to-mind."

Richard put his hands on Narcissus's shoulders, to push him away I thought, but Narcissus said, "You've revoked your safe passage by injuring me against my will."

Richard froze, and I could see the tension in his back, feel the sudden uncertainty.

"What is he talking about?" I asked. I wasn't even sure who I was asking.

"Narcissus has a small army of werehyenas within this building and on the surrounding buildings as guards," Jean-Claude said.

"If the werehyenas are so powerful, then why doesn't everyone talk about them in the same breath with the wolves and the rats?" I asked.

"Because Narcissus prefers to be the power behind the throne, *ma petite*. It means that the other shapeshifters are constantly currying his favor with gifts."

"Like Nikolaos used you," I said.

He nodded.

I looked at Richard. "What have you been giving him?"

Richard eased away from Narcissus. "Nothing."

Narcissus turned on the bed, still cradling his wrist. "That's about to change."

"I don't think so," Richard said.

"Marcus and Raina had an arrangement with me. They and the rats dictated that my hyenas could never rise above fifty in number. To make this happen they used gifts, not threats."

"The threat was always there," Richard said. "War between you, us, and the rats, with you on the losing side."

Narcissus shrugged. "Perhaps, but have you not wondered what I've been doing since Marcus died and you took over? I wondered when the gifts would start arriving, but instead all gifts stopped, even the ones I'd begun to count on." He looked at me then. "Some of those gifts were yours to give, Nimir-Ra."

I must have looked as confused as I felt, because Jean-Claude said, "The wereleopards."

"Yes, Gabriel, their old alpha, was a dear, dear friend of mine," Narcissus said.

Since I'd killed Gabriel, I didn't like the way the conversation was going. "You mean that Gabriel gave some of the wereleopards to you?"

Narcissus's smile made me shiver. "All of them have spent time in my care, except Nathaniel." His smile faded. "I assumed Gabriel kept Nathaniel to himself because he was his personal favorite, but now that you've told me what Nathaniel is, I know that wasn't it." Narcissus leaned forward on his knees. "Gabriel was afraid to give me Nathaniel, afraid of what we might do together."

I swallowed hard. "You covered your reaction really well when I told you."

"I'm an accomplished liar, Anita. Best remember that." He looked up at Richard. "How long has it been since Marcus's death, a little over a year? When the gifts stopped coming, I assumed the pact was at an end."

"What are you saying?" Richard asked.

"There are over four hundred werehyenas now, some new, some recruited from out of state. But we rival the wererats and werewolves now. You will have to negotiate with us as equals instead of peons."

Richard said, "What do you ..."

Jean-Claude interrupted. "Let us come to terms." I felt the fear that was behind his calm words, and so did Richard. You did not ask a sexual sadist what he wanted. You offered what you were willing to give up.

Narcissus looked at Richard. "Are they Jean-Claude's wolves now, Richard? Do you share your kingship?" The tone was mocking.

"I am Ulfric, and I will set the terms, no one else." But his voice was cautious, the temper slowed. I'd never seen Richard like this, and I wasn't sure I liked the change. He was reacting more like me. As I thought of it, I wondered ... I channeled some of his beast, some of Jean-Claude's hunger, what did they gain from me?

"You know what I want," Narcissus said.

"You would be wise not to ask for it," Jean-Claude said.

"If I cannot have you, Jean-Claude, then perhaps to watch the three of you make love on my bed would be enough to wash this insult clean between us."

Richard and I said together, "No."

He looked at us, and there was something unpleasant in his eyes. "Then give me Nathaniel."

"No," I said.

"For one evening."

"No."

"For an hour," he said.

I shook my head.

"One of the other leopards?"

"I won't give you any of my people."

He looked at Richard. "And you, Ulfric, will you give me one of your wolves?"

"You know the answer, Narcissus," Richard said.

"Then what would you offer me, Ulfric?"

"Name something I'm willing to give."

Narcissus smiled, and I had a sense of Ajax and Asher circling each other as they felt the tension rising. "I want to be included in the conferences that run the shapeshifter community in this town."

Richard nodded. "Fine. Rafael and I thought you had no interest in politics, or you would already have been asked."

"The rat king does not know my heart, nor do the wolves."

Richard stood. "Anita needs to go to her people."

Narcissus smiled and shook his head. "Oh, no, Ulfric, it is not that easy."

Richard frowned. "You're to be included in decision making. That's what you wanted."

"But I still want gifts."

"No gifts pass between the rats and the wolves. We are allies. If you wish to be an ally then there will be no gifts, except that we will come to your aid when you need us."

Narcissus shook his head again. "I do not wish to be allies, to be dragged into every squabble between animals that do not concern me. No, Ulfric, you mistake me. I wish to be included in the conferences that set policy. But I do not wish to tie myself to anyone and be dragged into a war that is not of my own making."

"Then what are you asking?" Richard said.

"Gifts."

"Bribes, you mean," Richard said.

Narcissus shrugged. "Call it what you will."

"No," Richard said.

I felt Jean-Claude tense a moment before Richard said it. "*Mon ami* ..."

"No," Richard said and turned to Jean-Claude. "Even if he could kill us all, which I doubt, my wolves, your vampires, they would rain down on this club and take it apart brick by brick. He won't risk that. Narcissus is a cautious

leader. I learned from watching him deal with Marcus. He puts his own safety and comfort above all else."

"The comfort and safety of my people above all else," Narcissus said. He looked at me. "What of you, Nimir-Ra, how confident do you feel? Do you think if I had my people kill your kittens that the werewolves and vampires would lift a finger to avenge them?"

"You forget, Narcissus, she's also my lupa, my mate. The wolves will defend who she tells them to defend."

"Ah, yes, the human lupa, the human leopard queen. But not really human, is she?"

I met his gaze and said, "I need to go collect my leopards. Thanks for the hospitality." I pushed to my feet and stood beside Richard.

Narcissus looked at Jean-Claude, who still lounged on the bed. "Are they really such children?" he asked him.

Jean-Claude gave a graceful shrug. "They are not like us Narcissus. They still believe in right and wrong. And rules."

"Then let me teach them a new rule." He stared up at us, still kneeling on the bed, still wearing the black lace dress, and suddenly his power burst out before him in lines of heat. It slammed into my body like a giant hand, nearly staggering me. Richard reached out to steady me, and the moment we touched, his beast jumped between us, in a rush of warmth that raced through my body in goosebumps and shivers. Richard's body shuddered, and I felt his breath, our breath, catch. That otherworldly power curled between us, and for the first time I realized that the power came both ways. I'd thought what was inside me was an echo of Richard's beast, but it was more than that. Maybe it would have been different if I hadn't separated myself from him for so long. But now the power that had once been his was mine. The warmth spilled between us like two streams converging into a river, two scalding hot streams that spilled into a river that boiled over my skin. It was so hot that I half expected my skin to peel away and reveal the beast underneath.

"If she shifts, then my men are free to enter this fight." Narcissus's voice was shocking. I think I'd forgotten he was there, forgotten everything but the hot, hot power flowing between Richard and me. Narcissus's face began to grow longer. It was like watching sticks move behind clay.

Richard ran his hand just in front of my body, caressing the power that flowed off of my skin. There was a look of soft wonderment on his face. "She won't shift. You have my word," Richard said.

"Good enough. You always keep your word. I may be a sadist and a masochist, but I am still Oba of this clan." His voice had become a strange high-pitched growl. "You have insulted me and, through me, all that is mine." Claws slid out from his small fingers until he raised curved paws, not hands at all.

Jean-Claude came to stand beside us. "Come, *ma petite*, let them have room to maneuver." He touched my hand, and that scalding power poured from my skin to his. He collapsed to his knees, hand still pressed against my skin, as if the heat had welded it in place.

I knelt by him, and his gaze raised, drowning blue, the pupil lost in a rush of power, but not his power. He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. He stared at me, and, judging by the look on his face, he felt lost, overwhelmed.

"What's wrong?" Asher asked from across the room, still facing Ajax.

"I'm not sure," I said.

"He seems in pain," Narcissus said. It made me glance up at him. Except for his face and hands, he was still in human form. The really powerful alphas could do that, partial changes.

"The power spills over him," Richard said, and his voice held that edge of growl. His throat was hidden behind the leather collar, but I knew if I could see it, that the skin would be smooth and perfect. His voice could howl from his mouth like a dog's without any change in his appearance.

"But he is a vampire," Narcissus said. "The power of the wolves should be closed to him."

"The wolf is his animal to call," Richard said.

I looked into Jean-Claude's face from inches away, watched him struggle through the hot, scalding power and knew why he wasn't dealing well with it. This was primal energy, the life and beat of the earth under our feet, the rush of wind in the trees, the stuff of life. And Jean-Claude for all that he walked and talked and flirted wasn't alive.

Richard knelt beside us, and Jean-Claude let out a low moan, half-collapsing against me. "Jean-Claude!"

Richard rolled him over into his arms, and Jean-Claude's spine bowed, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Narcissus was above us on the bed. "What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know," Richard said.

I put a hand on Jean-Claude's throat. The pulse wasn't just racing, it was beating like a caged thing. I tried to use the ability I had to sense vampires, but all I could feel was the heat of the beast. There was nothing cold or dead in the circle of our arms.

"Lay him on the floor, Richard."

He looked at me.

"Do it!"

He laid Jean-Claude gently on the floor, hand still touching his shoulder.

"Move away from him." I did what I asked of Richard, standing and moving around the vampire, pushing Richard back with my body until Jean-Claude lay alone beside the bed.

Narcissus's body had re-formed, until he was the graceful man we'd met downstairs. He'd moved off the bed without being told, but moved around so he could still watch.

Jean-Claude rolled slowly onto his side, and moved his head to stare at us. He licked his lips and tried twice before he could speak. "What have you done to me?"

Richard and I still stood in a cocoon of heat. His hands brushed my arms, and I shuddered against him. His arms locked around my waist, and the more of

our bodies that touched the more heat rose around us, until I thought the very air should tremble like the heat of a summer's day off a tar road.

"Shared Richard's power with you," I said.

"No," Jean-Claude said, and he rose slowly to sit, propped heavily on his arms. "Not just Richard, but you, *ma petite*, you. Richard and I have shared much, but it never did this. You are the bridge between the two worlds."

Asher spoke. "She bridges life and death."

Jean-Claude looked up at him sharply, a harsh look on his face.

"*Exactement.*"

Narcissus spoke. "I knew Marcus and Raina could share their power, their beasts, but Anita is not a werewolf. You should not be able to share your beast with each other, wolf to leopard."

"I'm not a wereleopard," I said.

"Me thinks the lady doth protest too much," Narcissus said.

"Or wereanimal to vampire," Asher said.

I looked at Asher. "Don't you start."

He smiled at me. "I know that you are not a true shapeshifter, but your ... magic has changed because of the addition of Richard. There is something about you, that if I did not know better, I would say you were indeed one of them."

"Richard said the wolf is Jean-Claude's animal to call," Narcissus said.

"That doesn't explain this," Asher said. He knelt by Jean-Claude, reaching towards him.

Jean-Claude caught his hand before it could touch his face, and Asher jerked back. "You're hot to the touch. Not just warm, hot."

"It is like the rush after we feed, but more ... more alive." He gazed up at us, and his eyes were still drowning blue. "Go save your leopards, *ma petite*, and let us retire before dawn. I want to see how hot," he took a deep breath, and I knew he was drawing in the scent of us, "this power will grow."

"It is all very impressive," Narcissus said, "but I will have my pound of flesh."

"You're beginning to get on my nerves," I said.

He smiled. "Be that as it may, I still have a right to ask for the insult to be avenged."

I looked at Richard. He nodded. I sighed. "You know it's usually me that gets us into this kind of trouble."

"We're not in trouble yet," Richard said. "Narcissus is grandstanding. Why do you think I didn't change?" He stared at the smaller man.

Narcissus smiled. "And here I thought you were just decorative muscle standing behind Marcus."

"You won't fight unless you run out of options, Narcissus, so no more games." There was a coldness in Richard's voice, a firmness that could not be crossed or reasoned with. Again it echoed me more than him. Just how tough had the last few months been on him and his wolves? There are only a few things that will harden you this fast. Death of those close to you; police work; or combat where people are actually dying around you. In civilian life, Richard

was a junior high science teacher, so it wasn't police work. I think someone would have mentioned if he'd lost family members. That left combat. How many challengers had he fought? How many had he killed? Who had died?

I shook my head to clear away the thoughts. One problem at a time. "You can't have any of us, or our people, Narcissus. You're not going to start a war over the refusal, so where does that leave us?"

"I will take my men out of the room with your cats, Anita. I will do that." He came to stand in front of me, his back to the bedpost, one hand playing with the chains attached to it, making the metal jingle. "The ... people that have them are not terribly creative, but they have a certain raw talent for pain." He stared at me with human eyes again.

"What do you want, Narcissus?" Richard said.

He wrapped the chain around one wrist over and over. "Something worth having, Richard, someone worth having."

Asher said, "Do you merely want someone to dominate, or are you interested in being dominated?"

Narcissus looked back at him. "Why?"

"Answer the question truthfully, Narcissus," Jean-Claude said. "You may find it worthwhile."

Narcissus looked from one vampire to the other, then back to Asher, standing there in his brown leather outfit. "I prefer to dominate, but with the right person I'll allow myself to be topped."

Asher walked towards us, making his tall, slender body sway. "I'll top you."

"You do not have to do this," Jean-Claude said.

"Don't do it, Asher," I said.

"We'll find another way," Richard said.

Asher looked at us with those pale, pale blue eyes. "I thought you'd be happy, Jean-Claude. I've finally agreed to take a lover. Isn't that what you wanted me to do?" His voice was mild, but the mockery came through just the same, the bitterness.

"I have offered you nearly all in my power, and you have refused all. Why him? Why now?" Jean-Claude got to his knees, and I offered him a hand up, not a hundred percent sure that I should.

He looked at the offered hand.

"If you think it's safe," I said.

He wrapped his hand around mine, and the power flowed in a burning rush down my hand over his, down his arm, and I felt it hit his heart like a blow. He closed his eyes, swayed for a second, then looked at me. "It was unexpected the first time." He started to stand, and Richard went to his other side, so that we held him between us.

"I don't know if this is good for you, or not," I said.

"You fill me with life, *ma petite*. You and Richard. How can it be bad?"

I didn't say the obvious, but I thought it really hard. If you could fill the walking dead with life, should you? And if you did, what would happen to that walking dead? So much of what we were doing between us magically had

never been done before, or only once before. Unfortunately we'd had to kill the other triumvirate that consisted of a vamp, a werewolf, and a necromancer. They'd been trying to kill us, but still, they might have been able to answer questions that no one else could have answered. Now we were just swinging in the dark, hoping we didn't hurt each other.

"Look at you, Jean-Claude, between them like a candle with two wicks. You will burn yourself up," Asher said.

"That is my concern."

"Yes, and what I do is mine. You ask, 'Why him?' 'Why now?' First, you need me. Which of the three of you would be willing to do this?" Asher moved around Narcissus as if he weren't there, eyes on Jean-Claude, on us. "Oh, I know that you could have topped him. You can do it when you want, and make a virtue of necessity, but he's had you beneath him, and nothing less will satisfy him now." He stood close enough that the energy swirled outward, over him like a lip of hot ocean water. His breath came out in a shuddering sigh. "*Mon Dieu!*" He stepped back until his legs touched the bed, then he sat down on the black sheets. His brown leather didn't match as well as the rest of us had.

"Such power, Jean-Claude, and yet none of you wishes to pay the price for Richard's temper tantrum. But I will pay that price."

"You know my rule, Asher. I never ask of others what I'm not willing to do myself," I said.

He looked at me curiously, face unreadable behind the mask, except for his eyes. "Are you volunteering?"

I shook my head. "No. But you don't have to do this. We will find another way."

"And what if I want to do it?" he asked.

I looked at him for a second, then shrugged. "I don't know what to say to that."

"It disturbs you that I might want to do this, doesn't it?" His eyes were intense.

"Yes," I said.

That intense gaze moved past me to Jean-Claude. "It bothers him, too. He wonders if I am ruined and all that is left for me is pain."

"You once told me that everything worked. That you were scarred, but ... functional," I said.

He blinked and looked at me. "Did I? Well, a man does not like to admit such things to a pretty woman. Or to a handsome man." He looked up at us, but the only person he was really looking at was Jean-Claude. "I will pay the toll for our handsome Monsieur Zeeman's display of strength. But I will not be the whipping boy. Not this time."

Not ever again, hung heavy in the air, unsaid, but there all the same. Asher had had two hundred years of being at the mercy of the people who had given Jean-Claude the memories that Richard and I had flashed on. Two centuries more of that kind of care and torment. When Asher had first come to us he'd been cruel occasionally. I thought we'd cured him of it. But watching the look in his eyes now, I knew we hadn't.

"And do you know the best part of all?" Asher asked.

Jean-Claude just shook his head.

"It will cause you pain to think of me with Narcissus. And even after I am with him, he will still not answer the question you have been wanting, so desperately, to have answered."

Jean-Claude stiffened, hand tightening on mine. I felt him slam his own shields into place, keeping us out of what he was thinking, feeling, at that moment. The warm, roiling power between us began to dissipate. Jean-Claude had made himself part of our circuit. Now he was shutting us down, though I didn't think it was on purpose. He just couldn't shield himself from us and keep the flow going.

His voice came out calm, his usual bored, yet cultured, tone, "How can you be so sure that he will not talk?"

"I can be sure of what I do. And I will not give him the answer you want."

"What answer?" I asked. "What are you guys talking about?"

The two vampires looked at each other. "Ask Jean-Claude," Asher said.

I looked at Jean-Claude, but he was staring at Asher. In a way, the rest of us were superfluous, an audience for a show that didn't need one.

"You're being petty, Asher," Richard said.

The vampire's gaze moved to the man on my other side, and the anger in those eyes made the blue spill across the pupils in a frosted gleam. He looked blind. "Have I not earned the right to be petty, Richard?"

Richard shook his head. "Just tell him the truth."

"There are three people in his power that I would strip for, that I would allow to touch me, and answer that so important question." He stood in one graceful movement, like a liquid puppet on strings. He stepped close enough for the power to spill around him, bringing his breath shuddering from his lips. The power recognized him, flared stronger, as if he could act as our third, if we weren't careful. Did the power just need a vampire, and not specifically Jean-Claude? Richard shut down his side of the power, clanging a shield in place that made me think of metal, strong and solid, uncompromising.

Asher caressed the air just above Richard's arm and had to step away, rubbing his hands on his arms. "The power fades." He shook himself like a dog coming out of water. "If you would say *yes*, his torment could end."

I frowned at them both, not sure I was following the conversation, not sure I wanted to.

Asher turned those pale, drowning eyes to me. "Or, our fair Anita." He was already shaking his head. "But no, I know better than to ask. I have enjoyed shocking our so heterosexual Richard by my overtures. But Anita is not so easily teased." He came to stand in front of Jean-Claude. "And, of course, if he wanted the answer badly enough he could do it himself."

Jean-Claude's face was at its most arrogant. Its most hidden. "You know why I do not."

Asher moved back to stand in front of me. "He refuses my bed, because he fears that you would ... what is the American word ... dump him, if you knew he were sleeping with a man. Would you?"

I had to swallow before I could answer. "Yeah."

Asher smiled, but not like he was happy, more like it had been a predictable answer. "Then I will pleasure myself here with Narcissus, and Jean-Claude will still not know if I stay because I have become a lover of such things, or because this type of love is all that is left for me."

"I haven't agreed to this," Narcissus said. "Before I take second--no *fourth* choice--let me see what I'm buying."

Asher stood, turning so that his left side was towards the werehyena. He unzipped the mask and lifted it over his head. We were standing enough to one side so that I could see that perfect profile. His golden hair--and I mean golden--was braided along the back of his head so that nothing interfered with the view. I was used to looking at Asher through a film of hair. Without it, the lines of his face were like sculpture, something so smooth and lovely that you wanted to touch it, trace the movement of it with your hands, layer it with kisses. Even after the little show he'd put on, he was still beautiful. Nothing seemed to change that when I looked at Asher.

"Very nice," Narcissus said, "very, very nice, but I have many beautiful men at my beck and call. Perhaps not as beautiful, but still ..."

Asher turned to face the man. Whatever Narcissus was about to say died in his throat. The right side of Asher's face looked like melted candle wax. The scars didn't start until well away from the midline of his face. It was as if his torturers all those centuries ago had wanted him to have enough left to remember the perfection he'd once been. His eyes were still golden-lashed, his nose perfect, his mouth full and kissable, but the rest ... The rest was scarred. Not ruined, not spoiled, but scarred.

I remembered Asher's smooth perfection, the feel of that perfect body rubbing against mine. Not my memories. I had never seen Asher nude. I had never touched him that way. But Jean-Claude had about two hundred years ago. It made it impossible for me to look at Asher with unprejudiced eyes, because I remembered being in love with him, in fact, was still a little in love with him. Which meant that Jean-Claude was still a little in love with him. My personal life just can't get more complicated.

Narcissus drew a shuddering breath and said in a voice gone hoarse, eyes wide, "Oh, my."

Asher threw the hood on the bed and began to unzip the front of the leather shirt, very slowly. I'd seen his chest before and knew that it was much worse than his face. The right side of his chest was carved with deep runnels, the skin hard to the touch. The left side, like his face, still had that angelic beauty that had attracted the vampires to him long ago.

When the zipper was halfway down his body, baring his chest and upper stomach, Narcissus had to sit down on the bed as if his legs wouldn't hold him.

"I think, Narcissus," Jean-Claude said, "that after tonight you will owe us a favor." His voice was empty when he said it, devoid of anything. It was the voice he used when he was at his most careful, or his most pained.

Asher asked in a careful voice that didn't quite match the striptease he was doing, "What level of pain does Narcissus enjoy straight--how do you say--out of the box?"

"Rough," Jean-Claude said. "He can control his desire and not step outside the bounds of his submissive, but if he is to be topped, then rough, very rough. You do not need a warming up period for this one." Jean-Claude's voice was still empty.

Asher looked down at Narcissus. "Is that true? Do you like to start out with a ... bang?" That last word was slow, seductive. One word, and it held worlds of promise within it.

Narcissus nodded slowly. "You can start with blood, if you've the balls for it."

"Most people have to work up to that for it to be pleasurable," Asher said.

"I don't," Narcissus said.

Asher finished unzipping and lowered the shirt off his arms, held it in his hands for a moment, then struck out with a movement so quick it was only an after-image blur. He slapped Narcissus across the face with the heavy zipper once, twice, three times, until blood showed at the corner of his mouth and his eyes looked unfocused.

I was so startled by all of it that I think I forgot to breathe. All I could do was stare. Jean-Claude had gone very still between Richard and me. It wasn't the utter stillness that he was capable of, that all the old masters were capable of, and I realized why. He couldn't sink into that black stillness of death with the lingering touch of the "life" we'd pumped through him.

Narcissus used the tip of his tongue to taste the blood on his mouth. "I am an accomplished liar, but I always give fair trade." He was suddenly more serious than he had been, as if the flippant tease was just a mask and underneath was a more solemn, thinking person. When he looked up, there was a person in his eyes that I knew was dangerous. The flirt was real, too, but it was partially camouflage to make everyone underestimate him. Looking into his eyes, I knew that to underestimate him would be a very bad thing.

He turned those newly serious eyes to Asher. "For this, I will owe you a favor, but only one favor, not three."

Asher reached up and undid his hair, letting the heavy sparkling waves fall around his face. He stared down at the smaller man, and I couldn't see the look he gave, but whatever it was, it made Narcissus look like a drowning man. "I am only worth one favor?" Asher said. "I think not."

Narcissus had to swallow twice before he could speak. "Perhaps more." He turned and looked at us, and his eyes were still raw, real. "Go, save your wereleopards, whoever they belong to. But know this, the ones inside are new to our community. They do not know our rules, and their own rules seem harsh by comparison."

"You warn us, Narcissus, thank you," Jean-Claude said.

"I think that this one would not like it if you were hurt, no matter how angry he is with you, Jean-Claude. I am about to let him bind me to this bed, or the wall, and do to me whatever he wishes."

"Whatever I wish?" Asher asked.

Narcissus's gaze flicked back to him. "No, not whatever, but until I use the safety word, yes." There was something almost childlike in the way he said the last, as if he were already thinking of what was to come, and not really concentrating on us.

"Safety word?" I asked.

Narcissus gazed at me. "If the pain grows too much, or if something is proposed that the slave does not want to do, you use the word agreed upon. Once the word is spoken the master must stop."

"But you'll be tied up, you won't be able to make him stop."

Narcissus's eyes were drowning, drowning in things that I didn't understand, and didn't want to. "It is both the trust and the element of uncertainty that makes the event, Anita."

"You trust that he'll stop when you say stop, but you like the thought that he might not stop, that he might just keep going," Richard said.

It made me stare at him, but I caught Narcissus's nod.

"Am I the only one in this room that doesn't understand how this game is played?"

"Remember, Anita," Richard said, "I was a virgin until Raina got me. She was my first lover, and her tastes ran ... to the exotic."

Narcissus laughed then. "A virgin in Raina's hands, what a frightening image. Even I wouldn't let her top me, because you could see it in her eyes."

"See what?" I asked.

"That she had no stopping point."

Having almost been a star in one of her little bedroom dramas, saved only by the fact that I'd killed her first, I had to agree.

"Raina liked it better if you didn't want to do it," Richard said. "She was a sexual sadist, not a dominant. It took me a long time to realize how big a difference there is between the two."

I looked at his face, but he was safe behind his shields, I couldn't read him. He and Jean-Claude had more practice at shielding than I did. But, frankly, I didn't want to know what was behind the lost look on Richard's face. I realized with a start that I had Jean-Claude's memories but not Richard's. It had never occurred to me to ask why that was. But later, later. Right now I wanted to be out of this room. "I want out of here."

Jean-Claude pulled gently away from both of us to stand on his own. "Yes, the night is running out, and we have much to do."

I didn't look at him, or Richard. I'd pretty much promised that if dawn stayed at bay we'd have sex tonight. But somehow staring at Asher's naked back, with Narcissus gazing up at him with a look somewhere between adoration and terror, I just wasn't in the mood anymore.

Chapter 7

THE UPPER HALLWAY stretched white and empty. There was a silver wallpaper border high up on the wall; more silver ran in thin lines down the walls, an opulent yet tasteful display. It looked like the hallway of some upscale hotel. I didn't know if it was camouflage or if Narcissus just liked it that way. After downstairs' black techno-punk and Narcissus's own Marquis de Sade bedroom, it was almost startling, as if we'd stepped from some dark nightmare into a quieter, more peaceful dream.

We were the ones who looked out of place. All of us in black, too much skin showing. Jamil paced up the stairs on point, his muscular upper body showing in tantalizing glimpses through a series of black leather straps. The pants fit his narrow hips like a second skin, and I'd learned long ago from watching Jean-Claude undress that you didn't get that smooth line if there was underwear between the skin and the pants. He turned, his waist-length cornrows flaring out around him. He was a contrast in darkness, the black of the leather, the dark, dark brown of his skin. He moved like a shadow in that white hallway.

Faust went next. He was the new male vampire I'd met downstairs. In the better light, his hair was obviously tinted burgundy, like a shade of red gone wrong, but somehow it suited him. His leather pants were covered in more zippers than seemed necessary to get them on and off, and his black shirt had a zipper up the front. It reminded me of Asher's shirt, except for the color. I tried not to think too much about what Asher might be doing right this moment. I still didn't know if Asher was pimping himself out for us or whether he truly wanted to be with Narcissus. I was more comfortable with the idea of self-sacrifice.

I brought up the middle with the two women behind me. Sylvie still didn't look like herself to me. The black skirt was so short that whoever was in back of her couldn't help but get a flash of whatever was under the skirt. The hose climbed her legs all the way up, making them look long and shapely, though she was only three inches taller than me. She was also wearing three-inch black spikes, which may have added to the illusion of long legs. Her leather top showed a very discreet line of flesh from neck to waist where a belt cinched in her tiny waist. Her breasts seemed to stay magically on either side of the line of skin, as if they were held in place by something more than a bra.

She smiled up at me, but her eyes had already bled to that pale wolfish color. They didn't match the careful makeup and the short, curly brown hair.

Meng Die brought up the rear. Where her pale flesh showed around the vinyl cat suit, colorless body glitter sparkled. There was a touch of glitter at the corner of each up-tilted eye, complementing pale eyeshadow and dramatic eyeliner. She was smaller than me, more delicate of bone, smaller of breast, more slender of waist, like a dainty bird. But the look she gave me was more vulture than canary. She didn't like me, and I didn't know why. But Jean-Claude had assured me she'd do the job. Jean-Claude had a lot of faults, but if

he trusted Meng Die to keep me safe, then she'd do it. He was never careless with me, not in that way.

Faust just seemed to be amused as hell about it all. Everything made him smile, pleasantly. Most vampires went for arrogance to mask how they felt. He seemed to use mild amusement. Of course, maybe Faust was just a happy guy, and I was being too cynical.

Why weren't Jean-Claude and Richard with me? Because the wereleopards were mine. If I took other dominants with me, it would be seen as weakness. I was planning to interview other alphas to take over the wereleopards, but until I found someone to do that, I was all they had. If people began thinking I was weak, the leopards would be marked as anyone's meat. It wouldn't just be out-of-town shapeshifters that were trying to take them away from me, it would be every shapeshifter in town. It was funny how many shifters could be assholes unless you were strong enough to stop them.

I had to save the leopards, not Richard, not Jean-Claude, me. But I had to stay alive to do that, so I did take backup. I'm stubborn, not stupid. Though I know a few people who might argue that.

Each white door had a silver number on its surface. Again like a very discreet hotel. We were looking for room nine. There was absolutely no sound from behind the doors. The only noises I heard were the distant thud of the music downstairs and the faint whisper of leather and vinyl--our body movements. I'd never been so aware of how loud small noises could be. Maybe it was the eerie silence of the hallway, or maybe I'd gained something new from the marriage of the marks. Better hearing wouldn't be a bad thing, would it? So many of the "gifts" from the vampire marks tended to be double-edged swords, at best.

I shook off the gloomy thoughts and walked with my foursome of bodyguards down the carpeted hallway. I was trusting them to give their lives for mine. That's what a bodyguard does. Jamil had taken two shotgun blasts for me last summer. It hadn't been silver shot, so he'd healed, but he hadn't known that when he put himself between the gun barrel and me. Sylvie owed me one, and a woman her size doesn't get to be second in the pack hierarchy without being one tough werewolf. I didn't really trust the vampires to give up their undead lives for me. It's been my experience that the longer something semi-immortal lives, the more tightly it hugs its existence. So I counted on the wolves, and knew I could work around the vampires. It didn't matter that Jean-Claude trusted them. It mattered that I didn't. I'd have preferred to just bring along more werewolves, except if I showed up with nothing but wolves at my back, it would be like saying that I couldn't do this without Richard's pack. Not true. Or not completely true. We'd see how deep the shit was once we opened the door.

Room nine was nearly at the end of the long hallway. The building had been a warehouse, and the upstairs had simply been divided into long hallways with huge rooms scattered along them. Jamil was standing to one side of the door. Faust was standing in front of it. Not smart.

I stood to the other side of the door and said, "Faust, the werehyenas had to take guns off these guys."

The vampire raised an arched eyebrow at me.

"They may not have found all the guns," I said.

He still looked at me.

I sighed. Over a hundred years of "life," power enough to be a master vamp, and he was still an amateur. "It would be bad to be standing in the center of the door when a shotgun blast went off on the other side."

He blinked, and a little of that humor leaked away, showing that arrogance that most vamps acquire. "I think Narcissus would have found a shotgun."

I leaned my shoulder against the wall and smiled at him. "Do you know what a cop-killer is?"

He raised both eyebrows at me. "A person who kills policemen."

"No, it's a type of ammunition designed to go through body armor. The cops have no defense against it. You can carry armor-piercing bullets in handguns, Faust. I used the shotgun as an example, but it could be so many things. And they would all take out your heart, most of your spine, or all of your head, depending on where the shooter was aiming."

"Get out of the fucking doorway," Meng Die said.

He turned and looked at her, and it was not a friendly look. "You are not my master."

"Nor you mine," she said.

"Children," I said. They both looked at me. Great. "Faust if you're not going to be helpful then go back downstairs."

"What did I do?"

I glanced at Meng Die, shrugged, and said, "Get out of the fucking doorway."

I could see his shoulders tighten, but he gave a graceful bow at odds with the burgundy hair and leather. "As Jean-Claude's lady wishes, so shall it be." He stepped to the side closest to me. Sylvie moved up close to me, not exactly between us, but close. It made me feel better. Bossing around vampires was always chancy. You never knew when they'd try to boss back. I really, really wanted my gun back.

"What now?" Jamil asked. He was watching the vampires like he wasn't any happier with their company than I was. All good bodyguards are paranoid. It goes with the job.

"I guess we knock." I kept my body well to the side, extended just enough arm to get the job done, and gave three solid knocks. If they shot through the door, they'd probably miss me. But no one shot through the door. In fact, nothing happened. We waited for a few moments, but patience has never been my best thing. I started to knock again, but Jamil stopped me and said, "May I?"

I nodded.

He knocked hard and loud enough to shake the door. It was a solid door. If the door didn't open this time, they were deliberately ignoring us.

The door opened, revealing a brown-haired man as muscled as Ajax, but taller. What did Narcissus do, recruit from all the weight-lifting gyms in town? He frowned at us. "Yeah?"

"I'm Nimir-Ra for the wereleopards. I think you've been waiting for me."

"About fucking time," he said. He opened the door wide, pushing it flush against the wall, putting his back to it, arms crossed across his chest. His arms apparently weren't as muscular as they looked, if he could cross his arms that way. But he did demonstrate that there was no one hiding behind the door.

Good to know.

The room was white -- white floor, white ceiling, white walls -- like a room carved of hard snow. There were blades on the walls -- knives, swords, daggers, tiny glittering blades, swords the length of a tall man. The bodyguard by the door said, "Welcome to the room of swords." It sounded formal, like he was supposed to say it.

From the door I couldn't see anyone. I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and walked inside. Jamil followed a step behind at my shoulder, Faust was at my other side. Sylvie and Meng Die brought up the rear.

A figure stepped into the middle of the room. At first glance I thought it was a man, but on second glance, not exactly. He was man-sized, almost six feet, broad shouldered, muscular, but what I'd thought was a golden tan was golden tan fur, very thin and fine. Covering the whole body. The face was almost human, though the bone structure was a little odd. A wide face, a liplless mouth that was almost a round muzzle. The eyes were a dark orange gold with an edge of blue in them, as if they, like the body, were only partly through their change. It was as if his body had frozen, stopping just short of attaining human form. I'd never seen anything like it. Pale skin showed in patches on his bare chest and stomach. I couldn't tell if the dark gold hair and edge of beard that encircled his face was actually hair or what was left of a mane. The longer I stared at him, the more like a lion he looked, until I couldn't see the man I'd thought I'd seen for the light coating of beast that covered him.

He gave a snarling smile. "Do you like what you see?"

"I've never seen anything like you," I said, nice, calm, even empty.

He didn't like that, my lack of reaction. His smile vanished and became only a snarl of very sharp, very white teeth.

"Welcome, Nimir-Ra, I am Marco, we have been waiting for you." He made a sweeping gesture to either side with his clawed human hands. I glanced around at the "we". They were small to medium-sized men with short black hair and dark skin. Most groups, prides, packs, whatever, were mixed ethnically. But there was a sameness to these dark men, almost a family look about them. Two on either side wore hooded cloaks, with the hoods thrown back, the wide cloaks spread like curtains. I glimpsed blond hair behind the blackness to the left. I couldn't see Nathaniel's hair over the blackness but I knew he had to be on the right.

There was blood on the white floor, pooling into a little depression in the concrete. A drain was in the middle so they could hose the floor down when they were finished. There was another guard in the far corner who looked very

unhappy to be there. Three women that I did not know were chained to the wall on either side of the door. Two blonds on the right side, a brunette on the left. They weren't wereleopards, or at least none that were mine.

"Let me see my people," I said.

"Will you not greet us formally?" Marco asked.

"You're not the alpha anything, Marco. You get your head lion in here and I'll greet him, but you, I don't have to greet."

Marco gave a small bow, the gaze of those odd tawny eyes never leaving my face. It was the way you bow in martial arts when you're afraid the other person will hit you if you glance away.

Jamil had moved up beside me, not ahead of me, but close enough that our shoulders brushed. I didn't tell him to move back. He'd saved my life once, I'd let him do his job.

"Then greet me, Nimir-Ra." It was another male voice. He stepped out from behind the cloaks to the left. As he stepped out, the cloaks dropped and I could see Gregory clearly.

He was turned towards the wall, nude except for his pants that had been peeled down to his lower thighs, his boots still on. Chains held his wrists above his head, his legs were wide apart. His curling blond hair fell just below his shoulders. His body was slender but muscled, butt tight. You have to take care of your body if you're going to strip professionally. There was no mark on his body that I could see, but blood had spattered on the floor in front of him, below him, pooling, dark, drying. They hadn't cut anything on his back. My stomach clenched tight, my breath squeezing down in my throat.

"Gregory," I said, softly.

"He's gagged," said the man. I finally dragged my gaze away from Gregory, and the sight of the other man, the alpha, made me stare.

He wasn't a lion man, he was a snake man. His head was wider than my shoulders, covered in olive green scales with large black spots. One arm was bare, and it looked very human except for the scales and the hands that ended in twisted claws that would have made any predator proud. He turned his head to look at me with one large copper gold eye. A heavy black stripe stretched back from the corner of his eye to his temple. His movements were vaguely birdlike. Other black-cloaked figures stepped away from the walls, dropping hoods to show themselves scaled, with the same stripes near metallic eyes and hands with curling claws.

My people fanned out around me, two going to either side. "Who are you?"

"I am Coronus of the Black Water Clan, though I doubt that will mean anything to you."

"Marco mentioned you were new in town. I'm Anita Blake, Nimir-Ra of the Blooddrinkers Clan. By what right do you harm my people?" What I wanted to do was start screaming, but there are rules. I couldn't be furry, or scaly, but I could follow the rules.

Coronus walked to the wall and stood next to the brunette chained to it. She made small panicked sounds as he reached for her. Sylvie moved a little

closer to him, to the girl, as if she was waiting for an excuse. Coronus traced a finger down the girl's cheek, the barest of touches, yet she closed her eyes and shivered.

"I came here seeking swanmanes, and I found three of them. They had already tied up the male. We thought it was their leader, their swanking, or we would not have harmed him. By the time we found we had the wrong animal, it was late in the game."

I glanced at the cloaks still held firmly in place, the impassive faces of the men as impossible to read as if they'd already become snakes. I noticed that one of the figures had breasts. It was nearly naked where they showed above a scoop neck T-shirt. I could see the chains reaching for the ceiling and down to the floor. There was more blood, a lot more blood, on that side.

"Let me see Nathaniel."

"Would you not like to see your blond leopard up close and personal first?"

I started to ask why. I didn't like the fact that he seemed reluctant for me to see Nathaniel. "You want me to see Gregory first?"

The man seemed to think about it, head to one side. The movement looked animal-like, yet not exactly snakelike. "Up close and personal, yes, yes, I do."

I didn't like the way he kept saying personal, but I let it go. "Then you've made a request of me, Coronus. If I do it, I can make one of you." Sometimes the rules are helpful. Rarely, but sometimes.

"What would you have of me?"

"I want him unchained."

"He was easily taken once by my people. I see no reason why not. Go, gaze upon him, touch him, then we will unchain him."

Jamil stayed at my side as I walked towards Gregory. My gut was tight. What had they done to him? I could still remember the scream over the phone. A glance from Jamil cleared the snake people away. They stood as far away as the room would allow them to, on either side. I had to step over the chains on the floor and under the ones that held Gregory's wrists up. I came around to look in his blue eyes. A black ball gag was stuffed in his mouth, the string tucked under his hair so it hadn't been visible from the back. His eyes were wide, panicked. His face was untouched, and my gaze followed down the line of his body almost against my will, as if I knew what I'd find. His groin was a red ruin, healing, covered in dried blood. They'd ripped him up. If he'd been human he'd have been ruined. I wasn't a hundred percent sure that he wasn't anyway. I had to close my eyes for a second. The room felt hot.

Jamil had let out a hissing breath when he saw what they'd done to Gregory, and his energy burned over my skin, fed by anger and horror. Strong emotions make shapeshifters leak all over you. My voice came out in a squeezed whisper, "Will he heal?"

Jamil had to come closer to inspect the wound. He touched it reluctantly, and Gregory writhed in pain at the gentlest of touches. "I think so, if they allow him to change form soon."

I tried to pull the gag out of Gregory's mouth and couldn't. It was too tight. I broke the leather string that held it in place and threw it on the floor.

Gregory took a sobbing breath and said, "Anita, I thought you weren't coming." His blue eyes glistened with unshed tears.

We were almost the same size, so I could touch my forehead to his, hands on either side of his face. I couldn't stand to see the tears in his eyes, and I couldn't afford to cry in front of the bad guys. "I'll always come for you Gregory, always." Seeing him like this, I meant it. I needed to find a real wereleopard to protect them. But how was I going to give them away like stray puppies to some stranger? But that was a problem for another night.

"Unchain him," I said.

Jamil moved to the manacles and seemed to know just how they worked. No key was needed. Great. Gregory sagged as soon as the first chain went, and I caught him, holding him under the arms. But when the second wrist restraint opened, his body fell against my leg and he screamed. Jamil undid the last ankle chain, and I lowered Gregory to the ground as gently as I could. I was stroking his hair, his upper body cradled in my arms, across my lap, when I had a sense of movement to either side.

Jamil couldn't guard both sides at the same time. The knives in my boots were trapped under Gregory's body. It was beautifully timed. I rolled over Gregory's body, and felt the cloak rush over me, as talons slashed where I'd been. I went for the boot knife, but never had a chance. I saw the clawed hand coming for me. Everything slowed down, like images caught in crystal so that you see every detail. I seemed to have all the time in the world to draw the knife, or to try and dodge the slashing talons, yet a part of my brain was screaming that there was no time. I threw myself back onto the floor, felt the air rush over me as the snake man stumbled, so sure of its target that it hadn't been prepared for me to move. The rest was instinct. I foot-swept the snake, and it was suddenly on its back. I got a knife in my right hand, but the snake was on its feet, kicking upward like it had springs in its spine.

I felt more than saw something large and dark leap through the air over me, landing behind me. My attention was diverted for a fraction of a second, but that was enough. The one in front darted in, a movement so fast my eyes couldn't follow it. I put my left arm out, taking the blow, as my right tried to stab forward. My left arm went numb like it had been hit with a baseball bat. I could have stabbed into the stomach, but I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and threw myself on my side on the floor as the second claw swept over me. I slashed at the legs and opened a gash even through the boots. The snake screamed and limped away.

The second snake came for me, claws outstretched. I didn't have time to get off the floor or anything else. I held the knife ready, my left arm only partially useable, and watched the thing fall on me like an iridescent nightmare. A smaller black blur hit it from the side, and they both crashed into the wall. It was Meng Die. The claws ripped into her pale flesh as I watched.

I didn't have time to see more, because Coronus loomed up over me, blood dripping from his neck and shoulder, his shirt shredded. Sylvie was behind him, struggling with Marco, trying to get past him to follow Coronus. Her lovely

hands had turned into claws, though the rest of her was still human. The really powerful shapeshifters could do that--partially change at will.

Jamil was in the far corner, fighting with two of the snake men. Gregory was flowing with fur, changing shape, helpless until he was finished. I didn't have time to look at the other half of the room. Coronus was almost on me, and I was out of time. I did the only thing I could think of. I up-ended the knife and threw it at him. I didn't wait to see if it would hit. I was already moving towards the nearest wall and the collection of blades. I had my hand on the hilt of a sword when Coronus slashed my back open. I fell to my knees screaming, but my right hand stayed on the sword, and I jerked it from the wall brackets as I fell. I turned, putting my left side to him. He sliced open my left shoulder, but it didn't hurt like my back had. Either the wound was deeper, or I was losing the feeling in that arm. I used the seconds I had--the ones he used to cut me--and it didn't hurt to turn the sword in my right hand and plunge it backwards, behind me without turning to see where he was. It was as if I could feel him behind me, as if I knew just where he stood. I felt the blade bite into flesh. I shoved upward, coming to my feet with the force of the blow, shoving the blade backwards, inwards, through him, as hard as I could. I had never done anything like that before, but the movement felt like old memory. And I knew it wasn't my memory. It wasn't my body that remembered now to turn the sword as I turned my body to do extra damage, scrambling internal organs as I drew the blade out, and raised it over the kneeling figure. I raised the sword one-handed. This I knew how to do. I'd been taking heads off of bodies for years. The blade was on its downward stroke when he screamed, "Enough!" I didn't stop or even hesitate.

It was Jamil who launched himself into me, over the man's bowed head. He pinned me to the wall, one hand on my wrist, while I fought him. "Anita, Anita!"

I looked up at him, and it was as if I was just realizing who he was, or what he was doing. I'd known, but only in theory, my body had been about to take the snake man's head. My body relaxed in Jamil's grip, but he didn't let me go.

"Talk to me, Anita."

"I'm alright."

"He gives. We win. You get your leopards." His hand went to my hand where it still gripped the sword. "Ease down, you won."

I tried to keep the sword, but Jamil wasn't happy until I let him take it. Then he moved slowly away from me, and I was left looking down at Coronus still kneeling on the floor, holding his claws against the blood that was flowing from his side. He looked up at me and coughed, a little blood touching his lips. He licked it off. "You nicked a lung."

"It's not silver. You'll heal."

He laughed, but it seemed to hurt him. "We'll all heal," he said.

"You better hope Gregory heals," I said.

His black eyes flicked up to me, and there was something in that look that I didn't like. "What is it, Coronus, what puts such unease in your eyes?" I went

to my knees in front of him. My left arm hung nearly useless at my side, but it wasn't numb anymore. A deep burning pain was working its way from the wounds at my shoulder and lower back. I purposefully didn't look at them. I could feel the blood flowing down my skin in tickling lines. I kept my gaze on Coronus's eyes.

He met my eyes for a minute while Jamil loomed over us, then Coronus's gaze did a small slide to his right. I followed his look and saw Nathaniel across the wide room for the first time clearly. The world swam in streams of color, and I would have fallen to the floor if my right arm hadn't caught me. It was partly from blood loss and shock, but not all of it was from the wounds. I could hear Coronus speaking through the dizziness and the nausea.

His words were tripping over each other. "Remember that it was the hyenas who made us stop. They who decreed that nothing else was to be done until your arrival. We would never have been so cruel unless we intended to kill him."

My vision cleared, and all I could do was stare. Nathaniel was nude, hanging from his wrists, ankles chained like Gregory's had been. But Nathaniel was facing the room. Knives bisected each tricep. Smaller blades had been forced through each hand so he couldn't close his fingers around them. Thin knives had been forced through the bulk of the muscles just above each of his collarbones. Then the swords began.

Sword blades stuck out just below his collarbones. The blades gleamed silver, sprinkled with drying blood. Unlike the knives, the swords had been shoved in from behind so you couldn't see the hilts.

A wide curved sword stuck out of Nathaniel's right side, through the meat of his body. There were more, too big to be knives, too small to be swords, bisecting his thighs, his calves.

I was on my feet and didn't even remember standing up. I was walking towards him, my left arm hanging down, blood spilling from my fingers. The thing that I hadn't expected when I saw the damage was his eyes. Those lilac eyes of his were open, staring at me, full of things that I didn't want to understand. A gag filled his mouth, cut across that long auburn hair. He watched me with wide eyes as I walked to him.

I stood in front of Nathaniel and tried to get the gag out of his mouth, but I couldn't do it one-handed. Faust was there, breaking the thong, helping me take it out gently. I touched Nathaniel's mouth, trying to stop him from making any noise. I looked down the length of his body. All the blood! All the blood drying, stiff and tacky against his skin. I couldn't not look at the blades, and from inches away I saw something that couldn't be true. I lowered my hand from his mouth towards the sword blade that protruded from his upper chest. I touched the dried blood, rubbed at it with my fingertips. Nathaniel made a small moan. I didn't stop, I had to be sure. I cleared the blood enough to see, enough to feel that his skin had closed around the blades. In the two hours it had taken me to get to this room, his body had reknit itself with the blades inside of him.

I dropped to my knees as if I'd been hit between the eyes. I tried to say something, but no sound came out. Jamil was there, kneeling beside me. I grabbed a handful of the leather straps across his chest. There was fresh blood on him, wounds in his arms and chest.

I finally managed to say, "How, how do we ... fix this?"

He looked up at Nathaniel. "We pull the blades out."

I shook my head. "Help me up." The blood loss and the sheer horror were catching up with me. I felt sick, dizzy. Jamil helped me stand in front of Nathaniel. "Do you understand what we're going to have to do?"

Nathaniel looked at me with those purple eyes of his. "Yes," he said, softly, almost no sound at all.

I gripped the knife that was in his quadricep, hand wrapping around the hilt. My lower lip was trembling, and my eyes felt hot. I stared into his eyes, no flinching, no looking away. I took a deep breath, and I pulled it out. His eyes dosed, his head thrust backwards, breath coming out in a hissing rush. The flesh clung to the blade. It wasn't like taking a knife out of a roast. The flesh hugged the blade as if it had grown around it.

The bloody knife fell from my hand, making a sharp sound on the cement floor. Nathaniel screamed. Jamil was behind him, and one of the swords was missing from Nathaniel's upper chest. The other sword sucked back through his body as I watched. Nathaniel screamed again. Blood welled from the wound and I turned away. I looked back at Coronus still crouched on the floor, two of his people crowded around him. Something in the look on my face must have frightened him, because his eyes widened, and I saw something like human fear cross his reptilian face.

"We would have taken the blades out, but the hyenas ordered us not to touch either of them again until you arrived."

I looked across the room at the guard that was closest to Nathaniel. The one that had looked unhappy to be there. He flinched under my gaze. "I was following orders."

"Is that an excuse or a defense?"

"We don't owe you an excuse," the other guard said, the tall brown-haired one that had let us into the room. He was standing by the closed door. He was arrogant, defiant, and I could taste his fear like candy on my tongue. He was afraid of what I'd do.

Gregory came to stand near me in half-leopard, half-man form. I'd never seen him like this, all spotted fur, taller than his human form, more muscled. His genitalia hung large and healed between his legs.

One of the snake men was on the floor, dragging its legs behind it. Its spine was broken, but it would heal. Another scream tore from behind me, from Nathaniel's throat. Another snake man was huddled against the far wall beside the chained brunette. Its arm was almost torn from its socket. Sylvie's dress was in shreds, baring her breasts to the world. She didn't seem to care, her hands still curled into claws, pale wolf eyes staring back at me.

"Take your leopards," Coronus said, "and go in peace."

Another scream came on the end of his words. "Peace," I said. I felt strangely numb, like part of me was folding away. I couldn't stand in this room and listen to Nathaniel's screams, and feel. Not and stay sane. A quietness that I sunk into when I killed spilled over me, and it felt so much better. There are worse things than emptiness.

"Who are the women?"

"Swanmanes," he said. "No concern of yours, Nimir-Ra."

I looked at him and felt a smile curl my lips. I knew it was an unpleasant smile. "What happens to them when we leave?"

"They'll heal," he said. "We don't want them dead."

My smile widened, I couldn't help it. I laughed, but it was a bad sound, even to me. "You expect me to leave them to your mercy?"

"They are swans not leopards. Why should you care?"

Nathaniel's voice came thick, and when I turned I saw tears sliding down his face. "Don't leave them. Please, don't leave them here."

Jamil pulled another blade out. Only three to go. Nathaniel didn't scream this time, just closed his eyes and shivered. "Please, Anita, they would never have come here if I hadn't asked them."

I looked at the three women, chained naked to the walls, gagged, surrounded by dozens of clean, unused blades. They watched me with wide eyes, their breath coming in quick shallow pants. Their fear slid down my throat as if it were wine and I could drink it down, deep and cool. Fear, like wine, goes good with food. And I knew just by looking that they were food. They were swans, not predators. They were not us. I was channeling Richard now. I was being a smorgasbord of the boys tonight, of their thoughts and feelings. But there was one thing that was my own. Rage. Not the hot rage that the wolves used when they killed. This was something colder and more sure of itself. It was a rage that had nothing to do with blood and everything to do with ... death. I wanted them all dead for what they'd done to Nathaniel and Gregory. I wanted them dead. By the rules, I couldn't have them dead, but I'd do what I could. I'd cheat them of their other victims. I would not, could not, leave the three women here like this. I could not do it. Simple as that.

"Don't worry, Nathaniel, we won't leave them behind."

"You have no right to them," Coronus said.

Gregory growled at him. I touched Gregory's furred arm. "It's alright." I looked at Coronus surrounded by his snakes. "If I were you I wouldn't tell me what I have a right to. If I were you, I'd shut the fuck up and let us walk out of here with everyone we came for."

"No, they are ours until their swan king rescues them."

"Hey, he's not here, but I am, and I say to you, Coronus of the Black Water Clan, that I will take the swanmanes with me. I will not leave them behind."

"Why? Why do you care?"

"Why? Partly because I just don't like you. Partly because I want you dead and I can't do that tonight according to lycanthrope law. So I'll cheat you of your prize. That will have to suffice. But don't ever, ever get in my way again,

because I will kill you, Coronus. I will kill you. In fact, I'd enjoy killing you." I realized that was true. I often killed cold, but there was something in me tonight that wanted him dead. Revenge maybe. I didn't question it, I just let it show in my eyes. I let the shapeshifter see it, because I knew he'd understand it. He wasn't human; he knew death when it looked at him.

He did know. I saw the knowledge in his eyes, tasted that fresh spurt of fear like a chemical rush. He looked suddenly tired. "I would give them up if I could, but I cannot. I must have something to show for this night's activities. I was hoping it would be the swans and the leopards, but if I cannot have one, I must have the other."

"Why do you care about either the swans or the leopards?" I asked. "They are nothing to you, you cannot make them part of your tribe."

His eyes shut down, unreadable. But that flash of fear grew, swelling in a rich odor of sweat and bitterness. He was very afraid. And it wasn't of me, not exactly, but of something that would happen if he didn't keep the swans. But what?

"I must keep them, Anita Blake."

"Tell me why?"

"I cannot." The fear was leaving him. Until that moment I never knew that resignation had a scent, but I could smell the quiet bitterness of defeat on him. It flared through me in a fierce wave, and I knew we'd won.

He shook his head. "I cannot give the swans up."

"You've already lost them. I can smell the defeat on you."

He bowed his head. "I would give them up if I could, but please, believe me, I cannot give them to you. I cannot."

"Cannot, or will not?" I asked.

He smiled, and it was bitter like the odor from his skin. "Cannot." Even his voice held reluctance, as if he wanted to just say yes, but couldn't.

"Do what's best for your people, Coronus, walk away from this." I knew in some indefinable way that we would win. My will to win was greater than his. We would carry this night in victory. Some of the snakes would die, because their leader had lost his nerve. Without his strength of will to buoy them, they could not win. They didn't want to be here. I looked at each of them, and in turn, they scented the air as I stared at them. Defeat hung over them like smoke; they had no will to win. They didn't want to be here. So why were they here? Their alpha, their leader, was here, and his will was theirs. So why were they all weak, as if something was missing inside their group, something that made them weak?

I realized with a start that this was what everyone had sensed from the leopards before I came to them ... this smell of weakness and defeat. Nathaniel was weak. But now my will was his, and I was not weak. I turned to stare into his face, his eyes, and I saw through all the pain, the torture, that he was not hopeless. When I first met him, Nathaniel had had the most hopeless eyes I'd ever seen. But he knew I'd come. He'd known with an absolute certainty that I would not leave him here like this. Gregory could doubt, because he thought

with that part of him that was human. But Nathaniel trusted me with something that had nothing to do with logic, and everything to do with truth.

I turned back to Coronus. "Run away from this, Coronus, or some of you won't see dawn."

He sighed heavily. "So be it." And then he did what he shouldn't have done. Something that had no logic to it, from a nonhuman point of view. He was going to lose, and he knew it. Yet he did a very human thing. He attacked us anyway. Only humans waste energy like that when they've been given an out.

The two snakes guarding Coronus suddenly launched themselves at me, and I was too close. I'd been so sure with my new werewolf senses that they wouldn't fight us. I'd been careless. I'd forgotten that in the end we're only half animal. And that human half will fuck you every time.

They came in a blur of speed too fast for me to do anything but start for the other boot knife. I knew I'd never reach it. Gregory leaped in a butter-colored streak, taking one snake out in midair, rolling on the floor. But the other one was on me, claws slashing down before I hit the ground with it riding me. I was already going numb; it didn't hurt. The claws ripped at my stomach, diving through the cloth of my shirt to the flesh underneath. I felt it digging for my heart. I raised my right hand to try and grab the wrist, but it felt like I was moving in slow motion. My hand seemed to weigh a thousand pounds, and distantly I knew I was hurt, badly hurt. Something bad had happened in that first blur of claws.

Gregory was suddenly there, pale fur caught between the multicolored snakes. He fell on top of me, with one of the things on top of him ripping him up. He never tried to defend himself; he clawed at the one riding me, tore it away from me, and the three of them fought on top of me. There was a moment when Gregory's eyes and that snarling mouth were inches from mine. We were pressed as close as lovers, and I knew that the claws in me were his. He'd fallen against me, been pushed into my flesh. Then other hands were pulling us all apart. I had a glimpse of Jamil's face, saw his lips move, but there was no sound. Then blackness swirled over my vision and ate everything but a dim, dim spot of light. Then even that vanished, and there was nothing but the dark.

Chapter 8

I DREAMED I was running, being chased through the woods at night. I could hear them coming closer, closer, and I knew that what chased me wasn't human. Then I fell to the ground and I was running on four feet. I chased the pale thing that fled before me. The soft thing that had no claws, no teeth, and smelled wonderfully of fear. It fell, and its scream was shrill, it hurt my ears,

and excited me. My fangs sank into flesh and did not stop until they tore meat. Blood poured scalding hot down my throat, and the dream faded.

I was in Narcissus's bedroom on the black bed. Jean-Claude was tied, standing between the posts at the end of the bed. His chest was bare, covered in claw marks, blood running down his skin. I crawled across the bed towards him, and I wasn't afraid, because all I could smell was the sweet copper scent of blood. He stared at me with eyes gone solid, drowning blue. "Kiss me, *ma petite*."

I rose on my knees, my mouth hovering over his lips. He moved towards me, but I stayed out of reach of those kissable lips. I moved my mouth lower, until it was just above his chest and the fresh wounds that decorated his skin. "Yes, *ma petite*, yes," he sighed.

I pressed my mouth to his chest and drank. I woke, eyes staring, heart thudding. It was Richard above me. He still had the leather collar on. I tried to raise my arms, to hold him, but my left arm was taped to a board. There was an I.V. in my arm. I looked at the darkened room and knew I wasn't in a hospital. I raised my right arm to touch his face, but it was heavy, too heavy to lift. Darkness spilled over my eyes like warm water rushing in, as my fingertips brushed his skin.

I heard his voice. "Rest, Anita, rest." I think he kissed me, gentry, then there was nothing.

I was wading in water to my waist, clear, icy water. I knew I had to get out of the water or I'd die, the cold would steal me away. I could see the shore, dead trees, and snow. I ran for those distant trees, struggling in the icy water. Then my feet went out from under me, and I fell into a deep hole. The water closed over my face, and the shock of the cold hit me like a giant fist. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. The light faded through the clear, shining water. I began to drift down, down into the cold dark water. I should have been scared, I wasn't. I was so tired, so tired.

Pale hands reached for me, coming from the light. The sleeve of the white shirt billowed around his arm, and I moved my hand towards him. Jean-Claude's hand wrapped around mine, and he pulled me towards the light.

I was back in the dark room, but my skin was wet, and I was cold, so cold. Jean-Claude was cradling me in his lap. He was still wearing the vinyl outfit. Then I remembered the fight. I'd been hurt. Jean-Claude leaned over and kissed my forehead, laying his face against mine. His skin was as cold as I felt -- like ice pressed against me. The shivering was worse; my body danced in small involuntary movements.

"Cold," I said.

"I know, *ma petite*, we are both cold."

I frowned at him, because I didn't understand. He was looking at someone else in the room. "I have brought her back, but I cannot give her the warmth she needs to survive."

I managed to turn my head enough to look around the room. Richard was standing there with Jamil and Shang-Da and Gregory. Richard came to the bed;

his hand touched my face. It was hot against my skin. It was too much, and I tried to move away from his hand.

"Anita, can you hear me?"

My teeth were chattering so hard, I could hardly get it out, but finally I said, "Yes."

"You've got a high fever, a very high fever. They put you in a shallow ice bath to bring it down. But your body reacted like a shapeshifter's. The low temperature while so much damage was healing almost killed you."

I frowned at him and finally managed to say, "Don't understand." The involuntary jerks were getting stronger, strong enough that it hurt the wounds. I was waking up enough to feel how very hurt I was. Things hurt that I didn't remember getting injured. My muscles ached.

"You need the high temperature to heal, just like we do."

I didn't understand who the "we" was. "Who ..." and a spasm shook my body, tore a scream from my mouth. My body fell into convulsions and pain smashed through me. If I could have breathed, I'd have screamed more. My vision began to disappear in large gray patches.

"Get the doctor!" Richard's voice.

"You know what must be done, *mon ami*."

"If this works, then I've lost her."

My vision cleared for a few seconds. Richard was stripping out of the tight pants. It was the last thing I saw before the gray swept up over my eyes and sucked me down.

Chapter 9

I THOUGHT I dreamed, but I wasn't sure. There were faces in the dark, some of them I knew, some of them I didn't. Cherry with her short blond hair, her face free of makeup, making her look years younger than either of us were. Gregory touching my face. Jamil resting beside me, curled like a dark dream. I drifted in and out, from face to face, body to body, because I could feel their bodies pressed against mine. Naked skin against naked skin. It wasn't sexual, or not overtly so. I woke, if I woke, enough to know it was Richard's arms wrapped around me, my body fitting like a spoon against his, his thick hair spilled across my eyes. I slept, knowing I was safe.

I woke slowly, in a cocoon of body heat and that prickling rush of lycanthrope energy. I tried to roll over and found the press of flesh kept me pinned on my side. I opened my eyes. The room was dark, with a small light near the wall like a child's night-light. My night vision was good enough to be able to see color by it. A man I didn't know was curled against the front of my body. His face was pressed into my shoulder just above my breasts, his breath

hot against my skin. Normally, it would have been my cue to panic and run for the hills, but I just didn't feel like panicking. I felt warm and safe, and more ... right than I'd felt in a long time, as if I were wearing a favorite pair of flannel jammies, wrapped in my favorite quilt. It was that kind of comfort, that kind of peacefulness. Even the sight of the arm around my waist from behind didn't disturb me. Maybe Dr. Lillian had slipped me some medicine that made everything feel okay. All I know was that I didn't want to move. It was like when you first wake in the morning and there's nowhere you have to be, nothing you have to do, and you can float in that half-awake, half-asleep, warm-nest-of-blankets feeling.

The arm around my waist was muscled, definitely masculine, but small, not just the hand, but the whole arm. The skin was tanned and looked darker than it should have against the paleness of my skin. I relaxed against the warm bulk of the body, where it lay spooned against mine. The fact that I was okay sleeping in a three-way naked sandwich, with me in the middle, told me beyond a doubt that I was on some kind of drug. I'd woken up wearing a lot more clothes, and been a whole lot more embarrassed.

I assumed they were both werewolves. It was a big pack, and I didn't know everyone on sight. I was bathed in their energy, as if hot invisible water flowed around the three of us. I remembered being hurt, the claws digging under my sternum. My gaze traveled down my own body and found a ragged circle of pinkish scar tissue where the snake had dug for my heart. There was a dull ache, but the scar was already pink and shiny, flat to my skin. How long had I been out?

I kept waiting for the panic to wash over me, the embarrassment. When it didn't, I looked at the first man, truly looking at him this time. He had rich brown curls cut short in the back, but long on top, so the curls tickled my skin as he made a small movement in his sleep. He was tanned so darkly that his skin almost matched his hair. The one eyebrow I could see had a tiny ring piercing it. One of his knees pinned my lower leg, one hand lay limply on my bare thigh. I think it was his leg being raised and a turn of his hips that saved me from seeing the whole show. What little modesty I had left was grateful. Whatever had kept me comfortable was beginning to wear off. Maybe I was simply waking up.

The rest of his front was pressed so close to me I couldn't see any details. The line of his back and buttocks was smooth, flawless. No tan lines. Nude sunbathing? The body looked young--early twenties--if that. He was taller than me--who wasn't?--but not by much. Five seven, maybe less. He stirred, the hand on my thigh flexing as if he dreamed, then suddenly I knew he was awake. A tension ran through his body that hadn't been there seconds before. I was suddenly wide awake, my heart thudding. I had about two seconds to wonder what the hell you say to someone you've never met when you wake up naked in bed beside him. He opened the eye I could see and moved his face enough to blink two solid brown eyes at me.

He gave a slow lazy smile, still half asleep. "I've never seen you awake before."

I said the only thing that came to mind. "I don't remember seeing you at all before. Who are you?"

"Caleb. I'm Caleb."

I nodded and started to sit up. I was getting out of this bed. The comforting warmth was still there, but my embarrassment was stronger. I just wasn't cool enough to keep talking to a strange, naked man, while I was naked, too. Nope, just not sophisticated enough for this one.

The arm around my waist tightened, holding me against the second man, and the bed. Caleb's knee on my leg got heavier, sliding farther between mine. I could suddenly feel parts of his body that I couldn't see. I think I'd have rather seen the whole show than had it pressed against my very upper thigh. Alright, groin, just not the right part to make me start hurting him, not yet. The hand that had been lying on my thigh was suddenly gripping it. It made my pulse speed up. It was too close to being trapped.

"Everybody be calm," I said, "but I need to get up and out of this bed now."

The body behind me moved. Even though I wasn't able to see it, I knew he was propped on one elbow, and the arm around my waist tightened. I was suddenly pressed very firmly against his body, and I knew several things. One, he was about my height, because he spooned perfectly against me; two, he was slender, muscular, and very happy to be pressed to my body. Eeek! I turned towards him like I was looking back at a noise in the dark at a horror movie--slowly, half-dreading. His face rose over my shoulder, long hair spilling to one side of his face in a thick mass that was so sleep-tousled I couldn't tell if it was waves or curls, only that it was a dark rich brown, darker than the first man's, almost brunette. His face was too triangular, almost too delicate, crossing that line into androgyny, the nose perky, a little less than perfect, his mouth wide, bottom lip thick and pouting. It was a sensual face. But it was the eyes that made the face, or ruined it. My first thought was that his eyes were yellow. But there was a thick ring of gray green around the pupil; the overall effect was a deep golden yellow-green set in a tanned face. They weren't human eyes, and don't ask me how I knew, but they weren't wolf eyes either.

I scrambled out from between them. My left arm protested the use, but it didn't hurt enough to outweigh my embarrassment. It wasn't a graceful exit, but at least I was standing at the foot of the bed staring down at the two men instead of sandwiched between them. Screw graceful, I wanted some clothes.

"Don't be afraid, Anita. We don't mean you any harm," the second man said.

I was trying to keep an eye on them and still search the dimly lit room for clothes. I didn't see any. The only cloth in the room seemed to be the sheet, and they were lying on that. I had a horrible urge to cover myself, but two hands weren't going to get the job done, and standing there with my hands cupped over my groin seemed somehow more embarrassing than just standing there. I suddenly didn't know what to do with my hands. My left arm ached in a line from my shoulder nearly to my wrist, a tracery of pink, flat scars down my flesh. "Who are you?" My voice came out a little breathy.

"I'm Micah Callahan." His voice was calm, ordinary, as he lay on his side completely naked. No one does comfortable nudity like a shapeshifter. His shoulders were narrow, everything about him slender, almost feminine. But muscles showed under his skin even at rest, lean muscle, not bulk. You knew at a glance he was strong, but if he were wearing clothes, you might not see it. There were other things you wouldn't see if he had his clothes on. And although the rest of him was slender, small, graceful in a way that women are graceful, parts of him were definitely not small, not slender. It seemed incongruous with the rest of him. As if mother nature had tried to make up for the feminine appearance by overcompensating in other areas. Noticing just how overcompensated he was brought heat in a rush up my face, and I glanced away, tried to both keep an eye on them in case they got off the bed and not look at them at the same time. It's hard to look and not to look, but I managed.

"This is Caleb," he said.

Caleb rolled onto his back and stretched like a big cat, making sure that, if I hadn't noticed already, he was naked, too. I had noticed. What looked like a tiny silver dumbbell pierced his belly button. That I hadn't seen. "We already introduced ourselves," Caleb said, that one innocent sentence sounding anything but innocent. Something in the tone he used, an inflection, while he rolled around on his back and waved himself at me, made the words obscene. I was willing to bet I wasn't going to like Caleb.

"Great, nice to meet you both." I still couldn't figure out what to do with my hands. "What are you doing here?"

"Sleeping with you," Caleb said.

The blush that had been almost gone flamed back to life. He laughed. Micah didn't. Point for him.

In fact, Micah sat up, bending a knee to cover himself, which earned him even more points. Caleb stayed on his back, flaunting himself. "There's a robe in the corner there," Micah said.

I glanced back where he was looking, and sure enough there was a robe. It was my robe, a deep, rich burgundy, with satin edgings, very masculine, like a long Victorian smoking jacket. When I lifted it up, there was a weight in one deep pocket. I had to fight the urge to turn my back to slip the robe on. They'd already seen the whole show. It wasn't like I could express my modesty now. When I had the robe belted in place, I slipped my hands into the pockets and my right hand closed around my derringer. Or at least I assumed it was mine; it was my robe. The only person I knew who'd think to leave a gun for me was Edward, and he, as far as I knew, was out of state. But someone had thought of it, and I was very glad. I had clothes and a weapon, life was good.

"Hi, Micah Callahan, nice to meet you. But the name doesn't tell me who you are."

"I am Nimir-Raj for the Maneater Clan," Micah said.

I blinked at him, trying to digest that little tidbit. I wasn't embarrassed anymore. Surprised, working on angry, maybe. "I am Nimir-Ra of the Blood-drinkers Clan, and I don't remember inviting you into my territory, Mr. Callahan."

"You didn't."

"Then what the hell are you doing here without my permission?" The first edge of anger threaded through my voice, and I was happy to hear it. Being angry made everything else easier to handle, even talking to two naked strangers.

"Elizabeth invited me," he said.

The anger rushed through me like a warm wind, and it touched that edge of beast that I'd thought was Richard's. I'd learned at the club however many nights ago it was that it was a permanent resident inside me now. Richard's beast, or mine, it flared through my body and raised above my skin like a sheen of invisible sweat. The men reacted to the power. Caleb sat up, his gaze suddenly intent on me, no teasing now. Micah sniffed at the air, nostril's flaring, his tongue running around the edge of his lips as if he could taste it against his skin.

Strong emotions always make the power worse, and I was so angry. I already owed Elizabeth for abandoning Nathaniel at the club. But now ... she'd finally done something that I could not let slide.

Part of me was almost relieved, because things would be easier with Elizabeth dead. A tiny part of me was hoping not to have to kill her, but I just couldn't see how to avoid it anymore.

It must have shown on my face, because Callahan said, "I didn't know that her pard had a Nimir-Ra when I came here. She was their old alpha's second. It was within her rights to audition a new alpha for her pard."

"She just forgot to mention that the pard already had a Nimir-Ra, is that it?" I asked.

"That's it," he said.

"Really," I said, making sure the sarcasm was thick.

He stood beside the bed. I managed to keep the eye contact pure, but it was harder than it should have been. "I did not know until three nights ago when Cherry knocked on Elizabeth's door and asked her to come help heal you that you even existed."

"Bullshit," I said.

"I swear it," he said.

My hand closed around the derringer, felt its comforting weight. I had a moment to wonder what ammo it was loaded with; .38 or .22. I hoped it was .38, it had more stopping power. My left arm gave a twinge like the muscle was trying to jump apart. Tension, or had I permanently injured myself? I'd worry about it later, when I wasn't staring at two wereleopards that might, or might not, be my buddies. "You say you really didn't know about me before you hit town. Great, but why are you still here?"

"When I found out that Elizabeth had lied to me, I came here and tried to help, to make up for entering your territory without your permission. All my leopards took a turn in your bed, helping you heal."

"Bully for you."

He held his empty hands out towards me, palms up. A nice traditional gesture to show that you are unarmed and harmless. Yeah, right. "What can I

do to make this right between us, Anita? I don't want war between our pards, and I have learned that you are interviewing alphas to take your place with your leopards. I'm a Nimir-Raj. Do you know how rare that is among the wereleopards? The best you're probably going to find elsewhere is a leopard *lionne*, a protector but not a true king."

"You applying for the job?"

He started walking towards me, and the room wasn't that big. "I'd be honored if you'd consider me for the job."

I tried to hold up my left hand, but the arm spasmed too badly to complete the gesture. But Micah got the idea; he stopped moving. "Let's start by you staying over there. I've had about as much up close and personal with the two of you as I can handle."

He just stood there, hands still in that open see-I-mean-no-harm position. "We caught you off guard, I understand."

I doubted he understood, but it was polite for him to pretend. I'd never met a shapeshifter that had a problem sleeping in a big naked pile, like puppies. Of course, I'd never met a brand-new one, yet. Surely, there was a learning curve for this sort of comfort level.

My left arm was twitching badly enough that I took my right hand off the gun, out of my pocket, and tried to calm the involuntary movements.

"You're hurt," he said.

Every jump of muscle sent sharp little pains through my arm. "Getting clawed up will do that to you."

"I can make it feel better."

I rolled eyes at him. "I bet you say that to all the girls."

He didn't even look embarrassed. "I told you, I am a Nimir-Raj. I can call flesh."

I must have looked as blank as I felt, because he explained. "I can heal wounds with my touch."

I just looked at him.

"What would it take to convince you that I'm telling the truth?" he asked.

"How about someone I know to vouch for you?"

"Easily done," he said, and a second later the door opened.

It was another stranger. The man was around six feet, broad shouldered, muscled, well built, and since he was nude, I knew for a fact that every inch of him was well proportioned. At least he wasn't erect. That was refreshing. He was pale, the first of the new ones without a tan. White hair with generous streaks of gray fell around his shoulders. He had a gray mustache and one of those tiny Vandyke beards. The hair was a clue that he was over fifty, probably. But what I could see of him didn't look old, or weak. He looked more like a lifer mercenary that would cut your heart out and take it back to someone in a box, for the right amount of money. A ragged scar nearly bisected his chest and stomach, curving in a vicious half-moon around his belly button and sinking towards his groin. The scar was white and looked old. Either he'd gotten the injury before he became a shapeshifter or--or I didn't know. Shapeshifters could

scar, but it was rare; you almost had to do something wrong to the wound to get a scar that bad.

"I don't know him," I said.

"Anita Blake, this is Merle."

It was only after the introductions that Merle's eyes flicked to me. His eyes looked human, some pale gray color. His gaze went back to his Nimir-Raj's face almost immediately, like an obedient dog that wants to watch its master's face.

"Hi, Merle."

He nodded his head.

"Let her people in the room."

Merle shifted, and I knew instantly that he didn't want to do it. "Some, but not all?" he made it a question.

Micah looked at me.

"Why not all?" I asked.

Merle turned those pale eyes to me, and the look in them made me want to squirm. He stared at me as if he could see through to the other side and read everything in between. I knew it wasn't true, but it was a good stare. I managed not to flinch.

"Tell her," Micah said.

"Too many people in too small a room. I can't guarantee Micah's safety in a crowd of strangers."

"You must be his Skoll," I said.

His lips curled back in disgust--I think. "We are not wolves. We do not use their words."

"Fine, to my knowledge there's no equivalent word among the leopards, but you're still Micah's chief bodyguard, right?"

He stared at me, then gave a small nod.

"Okay. Do you really see my people as a threat to Micah?"

"It is my job to see them as a threat."

He had a point. "Fine. How many are you comfortable letting into the room?"

He blinked, that harsh gaze, shielded for a moment, his eyes uncertain. "You're not going to argue about it?" Again he made the statement into a question with the lilt of his voice.

"Why should I?"

"Most alphas will argue so they don't appear weak," he said.

I had to smile. "I'm not that insecure."

That made him smile. "Yes, those that hoard their power are often insecure."

"That's been my experience," I said.

He nodded again, face thoughtful. "Two."

"Fine."

"Do you have a preference who the two shall be?"

I shrugged. "Cherry and whoever else." I put Cherry in because she seemed to give the best after-action reports. Clearheaded was our Cherry, if not

necessarily who you'd want at your back in a fight. But I needed information, not battle skills.

Merle gave me a slight bow, then his gaze flicked back to Micah, still standing by the bed. Micah waved him off. The big man opened the door and spoke quietly. Cherry was the first one through the door. She was tall and slender with well-formed breasts that led the eye to a very long waist, a swell of hips, and proof that she was indeed a natural blond. Wasn't anybody wearing clothes today?

Frankly, it was just nice to see another woman. Normally, I don't mind being the only girl, I do that a lot with the police, but nudity always makes me relieved to see another person without a penis.

She smiled when she saw me, relief so large in her eyes, her face, that it was almost embarrassing. She hugged me, and I let her, but I pulled away first. She touched my face as if she couldn't really believe her eyes.

"How do you feel?"

I shrugged, and the small movement tightened the muscles in my left arm until I had to press it against my body to keep it from jumping around. I spoke through the pain, teeth gritted a little. "Arm's giving me trouble, but other than that, I'm okay."

Cherry touched the arm, running her hand lightly over the sleeve of the robe. "The muscles are tightening up from the rapid healing. It will be alright in a few days."

"Am I not going to have the use of my left arm for a few days?"

"The spasms will come and go. Massage helps. Hot compresses may help. There must have been some severe muscle damage for this much spasming." Did I mention that Cherry was a nurse when she wasn't turning furry?

"I can give you the use of your arm today," Micah said.

We both turned and looked at him. "How?" Cherry asked.

"I can call flesh," he said again.

The look on her face said she knew what that meant, and she was impressed. And a second later, she looked doubtful, suspicious. That was my girl. Though truthfully, Cherry had had a hard enough life before I met her that she'd come with an overly active suspicion. I really couldn't take credit for it.

I was trying to remember what "calling the flesh" meant, when Nathaniel stepped through the door. The last time I'd seen him he'd been pierced with blades, his flesh grown around the steel. Now he was perfect--not even a scar.

I must have looked as pleased, and as astonished, as I felt, because he grinned at me. He did a little turn so I could see that back and front he was healed. I touched his upper chest where I'd pulled out one of the blades. The skin was smooth as if I'd only dreamed the knife. "I know you guys heal almost anything, but I never get over the surprise."

"Eventually, you'll get used to it," Merle said. There was something in his voice that made me look at him. Cherry's and Nathaniel's smiles faded. They looked suddenly serious.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Cherry and Nathaniel exchanged glances, but it was Micah who spoke. "May I fix your arm?"

I turned to tell him to go to hell until I knew what was happening, but my left arm chose that moment to curl up from fingertips to shoulder, one massive, painful, charley horse that bent my knees. Only Cherry catching me kept me standing. My hand looked like that of a strychnine victim, the fingers convulsed, clawlike. It felt like my arm was trying to tear itself apart from the inside out. Cherry was supporting almost all my weight as I tried not to scream.

"Let him fix your arm, Anita, if he can," she said.

The muscles in my arm relaxed by painful inches, until the urge to scream was only a small voice in my head. My voice came out breathy from the strain, but it was clear, no whimpering. "What is calling flesh again?" I was leaning so heavily on Cherry that it was only politeness that kept her from picking me up in her arms. She was holding all my weight.

Micah came to stand by us. Merle hovered behind him like an overly anxious nursemaid. "I can heal damage in my pard with my body," Micah said.

I glanced up at Cherry and saw Nathaniel standing beside her. They both nodded at the same time, as if they'd heard my unasked question. "I've never seen a Nimir-Raj that could call flesh, but I've heard of it," Cherry said. "It is possible."

"You don't sound like you believe him," I said.

She gave a faint smile that left her eyes tired. "I don't believe in much of anyone." She smiled then. "Except you."

I stood, still leaning on her arm, but almost standing on my own. I squeezed her arm with my right hand, trying to put into my eyes what I was feeling. "I'll always do my best for you, Cherry."

She smiled again, and her eyes lightened a little, though that edge of cynicism never quite left them. "I know that."

"We all know that," Nathaniel said.

I smiled at him. I said the prayer I'd been saying since I inherited the wereleopards: Dear God, don't let me fail them.

I kept a tight grip on Cherry's arm, but turned to Micah. "Why is my arm the only thing that's hurting?"

"You don't hurt anywhere else?" he asked.

I started to say no, then had to think about it. "I ache, but nothing like the arm. Nothing else hurts like it does."

He nodded as if that meant something to him. "Your body and our energy healed the life-threatening injuries first, and the smaller ones like the marks on your back."

"I didn't think healing energy could be that selective," I said.

"It can when directed," he said.

"Who directed it?"

His eyes locked with mine. "I did."

I glanced at Cherry, and she nodded. "He is a Nimir-Raj. He was the dominant for us all. Him and Merle."

I glanced at the big man. "Do I owe you guys a thank-you?"

Merle shook his head. "You owe us nothing."

"Nothing," Micah said. "We were the ones who entered your territory without your permission. It was our transgression, not yours."

I looked at them both. "Okay, now what?"

"Can you stand unaided?"

I wasn't really sure, so I let go of Cherry in stages and found that I could stand on my own. Great. "Yeah, I guess I can."

"I need to touch the injuries to heal them."

"I know, I know, bare skin is best for healing among lycanthropes."

He gave a small frown. "Yes, it is."

I used my right hand to slide the robe off my left shoulder. I realized that it didn't bare enough of my arm. I started to wiggle my left arm out of the sleeve, and another spasm hit me. It was Micah who caught me this time as my arm tried to tear itself off my body and my hand gripped something that I could neither see nor feel. It wasn't just that it hurt. It was unnerving, like I had lost total control of my arm.

Micah whispered, "Scream, there's no shame in it."

I just shook my head, afraid to open my mouth, afraid I would scream. He lowered me to the floor. His hands going to the robe's sash. The spasm relaxed in stages again, leaving me gasping on the floor while he bared most of my left side. Once he'd revealed my left arm and shoulder, he pulled the robe back over me, covering everything I cared about, except for my left breast. I appreciated the gesture. Since I was now lying on the ground staring up at him, I also appreciated that he was no longer erect. That was somehow less threatening.

He was on his knees, tracing his fingers just above the skin of my arm. Except he wasn't touching my skin, he was touching that otherworldly energy that spilled off of my skin. His energy flowed from his hand and mingled with mine in a dance of electricity that sent goosebumps down my skin. For the first time I thought to ask, "Is this going to hurt?"

"No, it shouldn't."

I heard masculine laughter. I was looking up at all the men in the room except for one. I turned my head to see Caleb still sitting on the bed.

"Is there a joke I'm not getting?"

"Ignore him," Merle said.

I looked up at their so-serious eyes, while Caleb's laughter played background music. "Are you sure there isn't something you want to tell me about the calling of flesh?"

Micah shook his head, sending the tangle of curls sliding around his face. I realized that no one had turned on a light. We were still moving in the twilight of the night-light. "Can someone turn on a light?"

There was a flurry of eye flicks, one to the other, to the other, like they were playing hot potato with the glance. "What's wrong?"

"Why do you think anything is wrong?" Micah said.

"Don't fuck with me, I saw the glances. Why can't we turn on the lights?"

"You may be photosensitive because of the rapid healing," Cherry said.

I looked at her and could feel the suspicion on my face. "That's what all those looks were about?" I said.

"We're worried about how your body is ... reacting to the injuries." She knelt beside me on the side opposite Micah. She stroked my hair like you'd pet a dog to soothe it. "We're worried about you."

"I got that." It was hard to be suspicious with her vibrating sincerity at me. I finally had to smile. "I guess we can do without the lights until after he heals me."

She smiled, and this time it did reach her eyes. "Good."

"You might want to give us some room here," Micah said. "Otherwise the energy can spread."

Cherry gave me a last touch then stood and moved back, taking Nathaniel with her. Micah stared up at Merle. "You, too."

Merle frowned, but he moved across the room with the others. They all ended up by the bed with Caleb. Strangely, I'd come as far across the room as I could get from the bed without leaving the room. Totally unconscious on my part, honest.

Micah stayed kneeling, but leaned back on the balls of his feet, hands open on his thighs, eyes closed, and I felt him open himself. His energy swirled over me like a thread of hot air that closed my throat, made it hard to breathe. He opened those alien eyes and looked at me, face slack, as if he were meditating or dreaming.

I expected him to lay hands on me, but his hands stayed on his thighs. He leaned his upper body towards my shoulder.

I put my right hand on his arm, and the moment I touched him, his beast curled through me. It was almost as if some great invisible cat were sliding in and out of my body, the way they'll entwine themselves around your legs, except this cat went places that not even a lover should be touching. It froze my words in my throat, and from the look on Micah's face, I could tell he was feeling it too. He looked as shell-shocked as I felt. But he continued to lean into me. My hand stayed on his arm, but it didn't stop him, and I couldn't think well enough to question him. His lips brushed my neck where the scars began, and it brought my breath in a shaky sigh. He pressed his mouth to my neck and forced that swirling, living power into me. It made me squirm, but it didn't hurt. In fact it felt so good that I pushed him backwards.

My voice squeezed out, faint, almost a whisper. "Wait a minute. What's with the mouth? I thought you were going to lay hands on me?"

"I said I could heal with my body," he said. The power stretched between us like taffy pulled between the hot sticky fingers of children. It was like if we touched we would melt into each other.

I dragged my hand away from him, and it was like my hand was moving through something--something real and almost solid. My voice was steady, and even I was impressed. "I thought that meant hands."

"If I'd meant hands, I would have said so." He lowered his face towards me, moving through the power, and it felt like waves in water when someone

swims towards you. I grabbed a handful of those tangled curls. "Define body for me."

He smiled, and it was at the same time gentle, condescending, and somehow sad. He stayed kneeling over me, his face close enough to kiss, my hand in his hair, the power pulsing around us, building into something large. "Mouth, tongue, some hands, but it is body, my hands alone won't be enough. I am told that you can heal with your body, as well."

I took my hand out of his hair and tried to get some distance between us, but he didn't move back, so it didn't really work. Truth was I could heal with sex, or something so close to it that you didn't want to do it in public.

"Sort of," I said. I looked across the room, past Micah's head and found Cherry. "Is calling flesh like what I do when I call munin?" Munin were sort of the ancestral memories of the werewolves. Except that they were actually more like ghosts, the spirits of the dead. You could gain their knowledge, their skills, and their bad habits if you had the ability to channel them. I was a necromancer--all the dead liked me. The munin that liked me best of all was Raina, the wolf pack's old lupa. I'd been the one who killed her--to keep her from killing me--and she delighted in the fact that she could take me over. I'd gained the power to control Raina when I accepted her, warts and all. When I called her, I didn't fight her anymore. We'd worked out a sort of truce. But calling munin for healing was almost always sexual for me, because it had been sexual for Raina.

"It's not sexual," Cherry said. "Sensual, but not sexual."

I trusted Cherry's judgment on that. "Okay then, do it."

Micah looked at me, those strange yellow-green eyes so terribly close.

"Do it," I said.

He gave that wistful, sad, condescending smile again, like he was laughing at both of us, and crying for us, too. Unnerving, that smile. Then he lowered his mouth to my neck and the first of the scars. The first kiss was gentle against my throat; he breathed power against my skin, and it was suddenly hard to breathe. But the power hovered above my skin like cloth. Then the tip of his tongue slid along my skin, licking a hot, wet line down my neck. The power followed the line of that heat, sinking under my skin as he licked me. But it was when his mouth pressed over my skin, sealing him against me, sucking me into his mouth, between his teeth, that I felt the power shoved into me, forced into the scars. He literally breathed, bit, ate, the healing into me. I made small helpless movements. I couldn't help it. We all have our erogenous zones in addition to the normal ones, places where if we're touched our bodies react whether we want them to, or not. My neck and shoulders are two of my spots.

He leaned back, far enough from my neck to whisper, "Are you alright?" His breath was so hot against my skin.

I nodded, my face turned away from him.

He took me at my word, pressing his mouth back to my neck. There were no preliminaries this time; he bit me, hard enough that I gasped. My stomach knotted, twisting me onto my side, pulling me away from him.

"Anita, what's wrong?"

"My stomach," I said.

He slid the robe open, passing his hand over my stomach. "There was no wound here."

Another wave of pain tore through my gut, bending me over double, to writhe on the floor. The need tore through me like something alive trying to rip its way out from inside my body.

Micah was there, smoothing my hair back from my face, that power that was building between us rolling through my body like a cat wading through me. He bundled me into his arms, his lap, pressed my face against his chest. "Get the doctor."

His chest was smooth, warm. I could hear his heartbeat, feel it against my cheek. I could smell blood under his skin like some exotic candy that would melt on my tongue and glide down my throat. I worked my way up his body until I could see the big pulse in his neck. I watched that pulse like a man dying of thirst; my throat burned with the need, my lips dry, cracked from want of it. I had to feed. I knew in that instant that it wasn't my thought.

I stretched out that part of me that Jean-Claude claimed and found him. Found him sitting in a windowless cell. He looked up as if he could see me standing in front of him. He whispered, "*Ma petite*," and I knew where he was. I didn't know why, but I knew where. He was in the St. Louis city jail, in the rooms reserved for things that cannot stand the light of day. I stared into his eyes and watched them fill with blue fire, until they cast their own light in the dim cell.

He reached out towards me, as if we could touch, and it was Micah's power, Micah's beast rolling through my body that tore me away from Jean-Claude.

I opened my eyes to find my arms around Micah, my face pressed to his shoulder, my mouth very close to the long warmth of his neck. There was movement in the room, and I knew distantly that someone had run to get a doctor, but what I needed a doctor couldn't give me.

Micah's skin smelled clean, young. It was like I could tell just by scent how old he was. The blood was like icing spread just under the tenderness of his flesh; and the part of me that thought of Micah as meat wasn't Jean-Claude, it was Richard.

I didn't know how to put the need into words. Micah turned his face, looked into my eyes, and I felt something inside me open; some door that I hadn't even known existed swung wide. A wind blew through the door, a wind made of darkness and the stillness of the grave. A wind that held an edge of electric warmth like the rub of fur across bare skin. A wind that tasted of both my men. But I was the center, the thing that could hold both of them inside and not break. Life and death, lust and love.

"What are you?" Micah asked, his voice a surprised whisper.

I'd always thought that vampires took their victims--stole their will with their eyes and took them like magical rape. But in that instant I knew it was more complex than that, and more simple. I saw with Jean-Claude's eyes, his power. I stared into Micah's face from inches away, and I saw, felt, his own

need. Lust was there, a horribly unsatisfied lust, and I knew it had been a long time for Micah. But underneath that was a greater need, a need for power and the shelter that power could provide. It was like I could smell his needs, roll them on my tongue. I stared into his yellow-green eyes in that so-human face, and Jean-Claude gave me the keys to Micah's soul.

"I am power, Nimir-Raj. Enough power to warm you on the coldest of nights." Power flowed off his skin like a scalding wind. That hot wind mingled with the power inside me, twisting together until it drove like a knife deep inside me. It tore a gasp from my throat, and Micah echoed it. The power turned into something gentler, something that caressed instead of stabbed, something that you would wait your whole life to have. I saw the sensation flow over Micah's face, knew that he felt it, too.

A wind stirred the edge of his hair. And the wind was moving between us like the point where cold and heat meet and form something larger than either can form alone, something huge and whirling, a wind so strong it can level houses and drive straw through telephone poles.

His arms tightened around me. "I am Nimir-Raj, mind games don't work on me."

I got to my knees still in the circle of his arms, and pressed my body down the front of his. We were almost exactly the same height, the eye contact was terribly intimate. The power pressed around us like a giant hand squeezing us together. His body responded, and he was large again, so hard pressed to my groin and stomach. This was my cue to be embarrassed, to panic, but I didn't. I knew that Jean-Claude fed off of lust as well as blood, but I'd never really understood what that meant until that moment when Micah's flesh touched mine. It wasn't just the naked press of him, hard and firm against my body, that made me shudder against him, it was the need in his body. I felt his hunger quiver through his flesh, as if I could read parts of him that were too primitive for words, needs that had nothing to do with language, and everything to do with naked flesh.

He closed his eyes, and a soft moan escaped him.

"What I offer isn't illusion, Nimir-Raj, it's real."

He shook his head. "Sex isn't enough."

"I'm not offering sex, not now," Even as I said it, I pressed my body against his. His entire body shuddered against me, and a sound very like a whimper crawled out of his throat.

"I'm offering a taste of power, Nimir-Raj, a small taste of all I can offer you." In my head I knew it was a lie, but in my heart I knew it was true. I could offer him power and flesh, the two things he wanted, needed, above all else. It was perfect bait, and it was wrong. I started to back down, to try and cram the power down, but Jean-Claude fought me. He thrust his power into me like an echo of his body, riding me. It was too late for me to feed as humans feed and give him back his strength. He'd avoided me for nights, because I was weak. I had grown strong again, and he had grown weak, and we had enemies in town. We could not afford weakness. All this, I knew in a heartbeat, his mind to

mine. And it was that seed of doubt--could we afford to be weak?--that made me unable to shut him out.

"What do you want in return?" Micah asked it in a whisper that held an edge of desperation, as if we both knew that whatever I asked, he would do it.

"I want to drink the warm rush of your body, to have you fill my mouth with that hot liquid that beats just below here," and I rubbed my lips across his neck. The scent of blood so near the surface made my stomach twist, but we were close, so close, mustn't rush it, mustn't scare him. We were like fishermen. We had our net, all we needed was for the fish to stop fighting us and lay still.

My lips hovered over his neck as he spoke. "Show me you have enough power to make it worth my while, and I'll give you any body fluid you want."

I swept his hair to one side, and it slid back. I balled my hand into a fist of his curls to keep it out of the way, and even that movement brought a sound from his throat. I bared the long smooth line of his neck. He moved his head to one side as if he knew what I wanted now. I could see the big pulse in his neck, beating against his skin like something small and separate from him, something alive that I had to make free.

I licked my tongue across that throbbing skin. I meant to be gentle, I meant many things, but his skin was slick and flawless against my mouth; the smell of him intoxicated me like the sweetest perfume. His pulse throbbed against my mouth, and I sank my teeth around that frantic movement. I ate at his skin, dug my teeth into the flesh underneath, and into his power, his beast.

I felt my beast rise through my body, like some great shape rising from the ocean depths, a leviathan that grew and grew, swelling up inside me until my skin couldn't hold it, then it touched his beast, and it stopped, hovering in black water, hovering in my body like some huge thing. The two powers floated in that dark water, brushing huge, sleek sides down the length of their bodies, our bodies. It was a sensation like velvet rubbing inside me, except this velvet had muscles, flesh, and was hard even where it was soft. The imagery that kept flowing through my mind was of some great cat rubbing itself inside me, rolling through me, but bigger than that. I'd seen Richard's beast move through his eyes like some great shape half-seen in water, and it felt that large, that overwhelming. I drank Micah's power down but not just through my mouth and down my throat. Everywhere I touched him, I fed. I could feel his heart beating against my naked breasts. I could feel the blood rushing through his body, feel every inch of him pressed against me. Feel his need, his desire, and I ate at him. I fed at his neck as if his pulse were the center of some filled cake, as if once I gnawed away the flesh I would have something unutterably sweet. I drew blood, and with the first touch of sweet metallic flavor in my mouth, all pretense, all prettiness was wiped away, drowned in the scent of fresh blood, the taste of torn flesh, the feel of meat and blood in my mouth. The feel of his hands pressing my body against his, my legs wrapped around his waist, riding him. I was aware like some distant call that he wasn't inside me, that he was still pressed between our bodies, so hard, so ready that he quivered against my stomach. His breath came fast and faster. Someone was making small animal noises, and it was me.

Micah's fingernails dug into my body, an instant before he poured over me in a scalding wave, noises too primitive for words, and not loud enough for screams coming from his mouth.

I felt Jean-Claude down that long metaphysical cord that bonded us together. I felt him grow quiet and well fed, sated. I drew my mouth away from Micah's torn throat, putting my cheek against his bare shoulder, my legs and arms still wrapped around him. His arms still holding me tight. I was covered in fluid, my breasts thick with it. It ran down my body in heavy liquid lines, curling over my stomach, tracing down to my thighs.

He knelt there supporting both our weights, while our breathing quieted, and the massive pulse of our bodies subsided into silence. And in that silence there was nothing but the feel of his flesh, the raw scent of sex, and in the distance, the satisfaction of the vampire.

Chapter 10

THE SHOWER WAS one of those group ones, like you'd find in a health club. But I was the only one in it. I'd cleaned off, scrubbed myself thoroughly, but I felt like Lady MacBeth screaming "out, out, damned spot!" Like I'd never really be clean again. I sat on the tiles under the hot, beating water, hugging my knees. I hadn't planned on crying, but I was. Slow tears that felt cool compared to the water pounding my body. I wasn't sure why I was crying. My mind was blank. Usually when I try to be blank, I can't, but just then, there was nothing but the water, the heat, the smooth tiles, and the little voice in my head that kept running round and round like a hamster on a wheel. I couldn't hear what the voice was saying--I think I didn't want to. All I knew was that it was screaming.

A noise behind me made me turn. It was Cherry, still naked. None of the leopards ever dressed unless I made them. I turned my head away from her. I didn't want her to see me cry. I was her Nimir-Ra, her rock. Rocks did not cry.

I knew she was standing over me, could feel it, even before the water's rhythm changed. She knelt over me, the water sluicing around her, leaving me shivering in the sudden touch of the cool, waterless air. I kept my face turned away from her. She touched my water-soaked hair. When I didn't protest she hugged me, arms going slowly around me, as if she expected me to complain.

I stayed stiff in her arms, with her body wrapped around me. She just held me, head pressed to the top of mine, her body sheltering me from the water, leaving me colder, even as her body stretched like heat against my wet skin. I leaned into her by painful inches until finally I let her hold me. I cried, and Cherry held me.

The crying never grew, or got loud. It remained slow tears while Cherry held me, and I let her. Finally, there were no more tears, just the sound of the water, the heat, the feel of Cherry's body around mine. There was comfort in the touch of flesh that went beyond sex. I pulled away, and she drew back. I stood and turned the water off. The silence was sudden and complete. I could feel the press of the night outside. Even without a window, I knew it was the wee hours of morning--maybe two, or even three. It would be dawn in a few short hours. I needed to know why Jean-Claude was in jail. Everything else could wait. We had enemies in town, and I needed to know who they were, what they wanted. After that I'd think about what had just happened, but not yet, not yet. Avoidance is one of my best things.

Cherry handed me a towel and kept one for herself. I wound the towel around my hair and retrieved a second towel for my body. We dried off in silence, no eye contact. It wasn't shower protocol; girls aren't as hung up about that as guys. I just didn't want to talk about what had happened. Not yet.

I wrapped the oversized towel securely around my body, and asked, "Why is Jean-Claude in jail?"

"For murdering you," she said.

I stared at her for a few seconds, and when I could talk, I said, "Pass that by me again. Slowly."

"Someone got pictures of Jean-Claude carrying you out of the club. You were covered in blood, Anita. He was covered in your blood." She shrugged, drying off a spot she'd missed on one long leg.

"But I'm alive," I said. It sounded almost silly saying it.

"And how would you explain that in less than a week you were healed of wounds that should have killed you?" She straightened, slinging the towel over one shoulder, not bothering to cover even an inch of her body.

"I don't want him in jail for something he didn't do," I said.

"If you go tonight, the police will want to know how you healed yourself. What are you going to tell them?" Her eyes were very direct. So direct it made me want to squirm.

"You're treating me like a lycanthrope who hasn't come out of the closet yet. I'm not a shapeshifter, Cherry."

She dropped her gaze then, wouldn't meet my eyes. It reminded me of the looks they'd all given each other in the room where I woke up. I touched her chin, having to reach up to do it. "What aren't you guys telling me?"

A man's voice came from outside the showers. "Can I please come in and clean off?" It was Micah. I'd planned on running for the hills the next time I saw him, but there was something in Cherry's eyes that kept me frozen. She was scared. And there was something else, something I couldn't quite read.

I yelled back, "Just a minute!" Then I continued, "Cherry, tell me. Whatever it is, just tell me."

She shook her head. She was afraid, but of what? "Are you afraid of me?" I couldn't keep the surprise out of my voice.

She nodded, looking down again, avoiding my gaze.

"I would never hurt you, any of you."

"For this you might," she whispered.

I grabbed her arm. "Cherry, damn it, talk to me."

She opened her mouth, closed it, and turned towards the door a second before Micah Callahan walked through, as if she'd heard him before I had. He was still naked. I expected to be embarrassed, but I wasn't. I was beginning to have the proverbial bad feeling about whatever it was that Cherry didn't want to tell me.

Micah had combed his hair. It was definitely curls, not waves. The curls were tight, but not small. The color was that shade of dark, dark brown -- almost black -- that comes to people who start out white blond as children, then darken. The curls fell to just below his shoulders, and, following the line of hair, my eyes found his chest. I quickly moved them up so I could concentrate on his face. Eye contact. That was the ticket. I was getting back to the embarrassment.

"I told you we'd be out in a minute." My voice sounded grumpy, and I was glad. The fact that I was sort of clutching the towel to my body was purely coincidental.

"I heard you," he said. His face, voice, were neutral. Not as neutral as a vampire's can become. They are the champs of blank expression. But Micah was trying.

"Then wait outside until we're finished," I said.

"Cherry is afraid of you," he said.

I frowned at him, then at her. "Why, for God's sake?"

Cherry looked at him, and he gave a small nod. She moved away from me towards the door. She didn't leave the room, but she got as far away from me as she could.

"What in hell is going on?" I asked.

Micah was standing about four feet away, close, but not too close. I could see his eyes better now, and they were so not human. I knew at a glance that they didn't belong in his face. "She's afraid you'll kill the messenger," he said, voice soft.

"Look, all this tap dancing is getting old. Just tell me."

He nodded, winced as if it hurt. "The doctors seem to think that you've been infected with lycanthropy."

I shook my head. "Serpentine lycanthropy isn't really lycanthropy. It's not a disease that I can catch. You either are cursed by a witch into snake form, or it's inherited like a swanmane." That made me think of the three women I'd last seen chained to a wall in the room of swords. "By the way, what happened to the swanmanes in the club?"

Micah frowned. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Without warning, Nathaniel entered the shower. I was beginning to feel positively overdressed in my towel. "We rescued them."

"The snake leader changed his mind after I got hurt?"

"He changed it after Sylvie and Jamil nearly killed him."

Ah. "So they're okay," I said.

He nodded, but his face stayed serious, his eyes gentle, like someone who's about to tell you really bad news.

"Don't you start, too. I cannot catch serpentine shit. It doesn't work that way."

"Gregory isn't into serpentine shit," he said, the voice as gentle as his eyes. I blinked at him. "What are you talking about?"

Nathaniel started to come farther into the room, but Cherry caught his arm, kept him near the door for a quick getaway--I think. Zane appeared in the doorway behind them. He was still the six-feet, pale, overly thin, but muscular guy I'd met when he was trashing a hospital emergency room. But he'd dyed his hair to an iridescent pale green, cut short, spiked. The fact that he was fully dressed actually looked odd to me. Of course, it was Zane's version of street clothes that ran to leather, no shirt, and vests.

I looked at the three of them in the doorway. They were so solemn. I remembered Gregory falling into me during the fight. His claws piercing me. "I've been cut up a lot worse by a wereleopard, and I didn't catch it," I said.

"Dr. Lillian thinks it may be because the wound was a deep piercing wound, instead of a surface cut," Cherry said, in a voice that was almost shaky. She was scared, scared of how I'd take the news, or scared of something else, but what?

"I am not going to be Nimir-Ra for real, guys. I can't catch lycanthropy. If I could ... I've already been cut up enough ... I'd have turned furry already."

The three of them just looked at me with wide eyes. I turned from them to Micah. His face was still neutral, careful, but there was a shadow in his eyes of ... pity. Pity? I did not do pity, not as the object of it, anyway.

"You're serious," I said.

"You're exhibiting all the secondary symptoms," he said. "Rapid healing to the point that your muscles cramp. A temperature hot enough to boil the brain of a human. Yet when they lowered your temperature you nearly died. You needed to bake in the warmth, the heat of your pard to heal. That's how we healed you. It wouldn't have worked if you weren't one of us."

I shook my head. "I don't believe you."

"That's okay," he said, "you've got two weeks until the full moon. You won't change for the first time until then. You've got time."

"Time for what?" I asked.

"Time to mourn," he said.

I turned away from the compassion in his eyes, the pity. Shit. I still didn't believe it. "How about a blood test? That should prove it one way or the other."

Cherry answered, "Wolf lycanthropy shows up in the bloodstream anywhere from twenty-four to forty-eight hours, sometimes seventy-two. Leopard lycanthropy, most of the big cat lycanthropies, take anywhere from seventy-two hours to over eight days to show up in the bloodstream. A blood test won't prove anything yet."

I stared at them, trying to wrap my mind around it, and it just wouldn't wrap. I shook my head. "I can't deal with this right now."

"You're going to have to deal with it," Micah said.

I shook my head. "Tonight, I have to get Jean-Claude out of jail. I have to show the police he didn't murder me."

"Your pard told me that you wouldn't want to be outted. That you wouldn't want your police friends to know."

"I am not a wereleopard," I said. It sounded stubborn even to me.

Micah smiled, gently, and that pissed me off. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Like a poor little deluded girl. There are things you don't understand about me, about where my power comes from."

"You mean the vampire marks," he said.

I looked past him to the three wereleopards in the doorway. Something on my face made them all flinch. "So nice to know that we're just one big happy family with no secrets."

"I was in on the discussions with the doctors on whether your rapid healing could be merely a side effect of the vampire marks," he said.

"Of course it is," I said. But the first thread of doubt was worming its way through my stomach.

"If it will make you feel better," he said.

I stared into that compassionate face and felt anger wash over me in a line of heat, and with the anger came that trembling energy. Richard's beast ... or mine? I let myself think the thought all the way through for the first time. Was it my beast that I'd felt with Micah? Was that why I hadn't gotten a sense of where Richard was, and what he was doing? I'd thought of him several times during all the hoopla, but had never felt the mark between us open completely. I'd assumed it was Richard's energy, because it was lycanthrope energy. But what if it hadn't been? What if it had been mine?

Someone touched my arm, and I jumped. It was Micah, his fingers barely touching my arm. "You look pale. Do you need to sit down?"

I took a step back and nearly stumbled. He had to grab my arm to keep me from falling on the slick, wet tile. I wanted to jerk away from him, but I was dizzy as if the world wasn't quite solid. He eased me to the floor.

"Put your head between your knees."

I sat Indian fashion on the floor, the wall to my back, my head bent over my folded legs while I waited for the light-headedness to pass. I never fainted. Not just from shock--occasionally from blood loss--but never from shock.

When I could think again, I raised up slowly. Micah was kneeling beside me, all attentive and compassionate, and I hated him. I laid my towel-wrapped head back against the wall, closed my eyes.

"Where are Elizabeth and Gregory?"

"Elizabeth wouldn't come to help," Micah said.

I opened my eyes at that, turning just my head to meet his eyes. "She give a reason for that?"

"She hates you," he said, simply.

"Yeah, she loved Gabriel, their old alpha, and I killed him. Hard to be friends after that."

"That's not why she hates you," he said.

I searched his face. "What do you mean?"

"She hates that you're a better alpha as a human than she is as a wereleopard. You make her feel weak."

"She is weak," I said.

He smiled, and it had humor in it this time. "Yes, she is."

"Where's Gregory?"

"Are you going to punish him for contaminating you?" Micah asked.

I glanced back at the other three waiting in the door, silent. I realized suddenly what the group dynamics meant. They were treating Micah as their Nimir-Raj, letting him deal with me, like calling in the husband when the wife had one too many drinks. I didn't like that much. But if I concentrated just on the moment, the question at hand, no speculation, no looking for the future, maybe I'd survive.

"If Gregory hadn't interfered I'd be dead right now. They would have clawed out my heart. It was an accident that he fell into me during the fight." I was watching Micah's face, but I felt the relief sweep through the others, felt it from yards away. I glanced up at them, and it showed in the lines of their bodies.

"So where is he? Where's Gregory?"

The three of them did that hot-potato eye-flick game again. "Did he refuse to come help save me like Elizabeth?"

"No, of course not," Cherry said. But she didn't explain, didn't add to it.

I looked at Nathaniel. He met my gaze, no flinching, but I didn't like what I saw in his eyes. There was more bad news to come, you could smell it in the air.

I turned to Micah. "Fine, you tell me."

"When your Ulfric found out that Gregory had made you their Nimir-Ra in truth, he ..." Micah spread his hands.

"He freaked." Zane said it.

I glanced at all of them. "What do you mean, he freaked?"

"He took Gregory," Cherry said.

"What do you mean, he took Gregory?"

"He treated Gregory as an enemy of the pack," Micah said.

I looked at him. "Go on."

"If you had been their lupa in truth, if someone injured you it is within the Ulfric's rights to declare them an enemy of the pack, a criminal."

I kept staring into those yellow green eyes. "What exactly does that mean?"

"It means that the wolves have your leopard, and they will pass judgment on him for injuring you."

"No way, I mean, even if I am turning into a wereleopard, which I'm not. It doesn't hurt me. I mean, I'm just going to be a shapeshifter like them now."

"Not like them," Micah said, "like us."

I tried to read his face, but I just didn't know him well enough yet. "You have a point, make it."

"You can't be the wolves' lupa and the leopard's Nimir-Ra."

"I've been both for a long time."

We shook his head, and again he winced as if his neck hurt. "No, you were a human dating the Ulfric, who declared you lupa. You were a human that was taking care of the wereleopards until you could find a true alpha leopard to take over the job. Now, you're truly Nimir-Ra, and the pack won't accept you as one of them."

"Are you saying Richard dumped me because I'm going to be a wereleopard?"

"No, I'm saying that the pack won't accept you as his lupa." Micah glanced down, then up. I could see him trying to put his thoughts into words. "My understanding of what's been happening with your local wolves is that Ulfric has taken them from a monarchy where his word was law, to a democracy where the majority rules. He gets a decisive vote, but not the last word."

I nodded. It sounded like what Richard had wanted for the pack. "It sounds like something he'd do. I've sort of been out of touch for the last few months."

"He has succeeded too well. The vote went against him, against you. The pack will not accept you as lupa when you're wereleopard and not werewolf."

I looked past him at the others. "Is that true?"

They all nodded. "I'm so sorry, Anita," Cherry said.

I shook my head, trying to concentrate and not succeeding. "Alright, fine, fine. Richard can't make me lupa. I never wanted to be lupa, just his girlfriend. Fuck the wolves. But what have they done with Gregory?"

"Richard went ape-shit when he found out what Gregory had done," Zane said. "He thought Gregory had done it on purpose, because we were all afraid to lose you as our Nimir-Ra."

"He accused Gregory of doing it on purpose?" I asked.

Zane nodded. "Oh, yeah, then they took him."

"They, who?"

"Tamil, Sylvie, others." He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Didn't anyone try and argue with him about this?"

"Sylvie tried to tell him it wasn't right, that you wouldn't like it. He hit her, told her never to argue with him again, that he was Ulfric, not her."

"Shit."

"Do not blame your leopards for not fighting the wolves," Micah said. "They are sorely outnumbered."

"They'd get their asses kicked, I know that. Besides, it's my job to deal with Richard, not theirs."

"Because you are their Nimir-Ra," he said.

"Because I am his girlfriend, sort of."

"Of course," he said.

I waved a hand at him. "Look, I can't deal with all of this right now, so I'm just going to concentrate on the important stuff, I mean the immediately important stuff. Where is Gregory, and how do I get him back?"

Micah smiled. "Very practical."

I looked at him and felt my eyes go cold. "You have no idea how practical I can be."

His eyes did change, but it wasn't fear in them, it was more interest, like my reaction intrigued him. "The situation is complex because you are the lupa that was injured. In effect, you must persuade yourself that Gregory meant no harm."

"That's too easy," I said. "I know he meant no harm. So why do I get the feeling that I can't just call Richard up and say, 'Hey, I'm coming to get Gregory'?"

"Because you must convince not just Richard, but the entire pack, that you have the right to Gregory."

"What do you mean 'right to Gregory'? He's my leopard. He's mine, not theirs."

Micah smiled, lowering long lashes over his eyes, as if he didn't want me to read his expression at that moment. "The Ulfric declared Gregory rogue for, in effect, killing their lupa."

"I'm alive, what ... ?"

Micah held up a finger, and I let him finish. "You are dead to the pack -- as their lupa. In effect, being a leopard makes you dead to them. You may share Richard's bed again, but you will never be their lupa again. They voted on it, and Richard has destroyed his own power structure to the point where he can't force a vote on them."

"You're saying that he is Ulfric but he doesn't really rule them," I said.

Micah seemed to think about that for a second, or two, then started to nod, stopped in mid-motion. "Yes, in fact, very well put."

"Thanks." A thought came to me, and I gripped his arm. "They aren't going to kill Gregory, are they?" Something passed over his face that tightened my grip on his arm. "They haven't killed him?"

"No," Micah said.

I let go of his arm and leaned back against the wall. "What are they doing to him, or what are they planning to do to him?"

"The penalty for killing the lupa is death in any pack. But the circumstances are strange enough that I think you will be allowed a chance to win him back."

"Win him back, how?" I asked.

"For that, you'll need to ask the Ulfric."

"I'll do that." I looked past him. "Someone get my cell phone out of my Jeep." Nathaniel went for the door without another word.

"What are you going to do?" Micah asked.

"I'm going to make sure that Gregory isn't being hurt. If he's okay for tonight, I'll go get Jean-Claude out of jail. If Gregory is in danger, then I get him out first."

"Priorities," he said, softly.

"Damn straight."

He smiled again. "I am very impressed. You've had several shocks in a very short space of time, yet you are clearheaded, and moving forward to solve the problems one at a time."

"I can only solve one problem at a time," I said.

"Most people let themselves be distracted."

"I'm not most people."

He gave that small smile again, shielding his eyes with his long lashes.

"I've noticed."

Something about the way he said it made me suddenly aware that he was nude and I was wearing nothing but a towel. It was time to get on my feet and get dressed. I stood, pushing away his offer of help. "I'm fine, Micah, thanks anyway." I looked past him at Cherry and Zane still standing in the doorway "Do I have any clothes here?"

Cherry nodded. "Nathaniel brought your stuff from home. I'll go get it." She moved through the door.

"Weapons, too," I called after her.

She poked her head back around the doorway. "I know." That left just Zane standing in the doorway. "Do you have a job for me?"

"Not right now."

He flashed me a smile wide enough to show that he had dainty fangs upper and lower--kitty-cat fangs. Zane had spent a little too much time in animal form to come all the way back. "I'll go help Cherry then." He paused at the doorway. "I'm really glad you didn't die."

"Me too."

He grinned and left.

That left me alone with Micah. I looked into his yellow-green eyes and knew that they were also a sign that he'd spent too much time in animal form. We hadn't kissed, so I didn't know if he had dainty fangs like Zane. I hoped not, and wasn't sure why I cared.

"Do you mind if I start cleaning up?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Help yourself. I'm going to go look for my clothes." But Nathaniel came around the door with my cell phone.

I looked at the slim black phone. I'd only had it a few months. I'd tried not to buy one. If you had a cell phone and a beeper you were never truly free of the office. Of course, I was on vacation. Though, so far, it hadn't been all that relaxing.

I popped the phone open and dialed Richard's number from memory. There was no answer, just his machine. I left a message, then knew what I was going to do. I had to know what was happening with Gregory. I thought about Richard, the feel of his arms, the scent of his neck, the brush of his hair, and that prickling rush of energy rolled over my skin. I reached down the mark that bound me to Richard and found him standing on a podium. He was arguing with someone, but I couldn't see who. I never got as clear a visual through Richard as I did through Jean-Claude. Richard turned as if he could see me standing behind him, then he thrust me out, throwing up a shield so solid I couldn't feel him on the other side.

Nathaniel was holding my arm, steadying me. "Are you alright?"

I nodded. Being thrust out like that was always disorienting. Richard knew that. Fuck. "I'm okay." I pulled away from Nathaniel and had to call information for the number for The Lunatic Cafe. Richard was in the meeting

room in the back of the restaurant. Raina had owned the restaurant, and according to pack law, it could have belonged to me, if I hadn't used a gun to kill her. It had to be mano-a-mano, hand-to-hand, or claws, or at least a knife before all that was hers would be mine. Possessions anyway. You can't get anyone's power by killing them. It just doesn't work that way. And anyway, who would want it to? Guns were considered cheating, so I didn't inherit all of Raina's stuff.

Richard picked up on the second ring, as if he'd been expecting the call.

"Richard, it's Anita."

"I know." His voice was angry, closed, and tight.

"We need to talk."

"I'm in the middle of something here, Anita."

Fine, if he wanted to play it brusque and hostile, I'd play. "Where's Gregory?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Why?"

"Because, you might try and rescue him, and you're not lupa anymore. The pack would defend itself, and I don't want you shooting holes in my wolves."

"You leave my leopards alone, and I'll leave your wolves alone."

"Anita, it's not that simple."

"I got the explanation, Richard. You freaked when you found out Gregory may have infected me with leopard juice. You had your enforcers grab him, and you've charged him with killing your lupa. Which is just stupid, I'm not dead."

"Do you know what the pack is voting on right now, right this minute?"

"Not a clue."

"Whether I will be picking another lupa from the pack before the next full moon."

"I guess you'll need one," I said, and even hearing myself acknowledge it made my stomach clench.

"A lover, Anita, they're wanting to force me to pick a lover from the pack."

"You mean we can't date now?"

"That's the vote."

"Stephen, one of your wolves, and Vivian, one of my leopards, are living together. No one seems to care about that."

"Stephen is one of the least of us. They wouldn't tolerate cross-species dating for a dominant. And they certainly won't tolerate it for their Ulfric."

"Human is good enough to fuck, but not leopard," I said.

"We are human, Anita. But we aren't cats, we're wolves."

"So you won't be dating me, or anything, now?"

"Not if I want to stay Ulfric."

"What happens to the triumvirate?"

"I don't know."

"You're going to give me up just like that." I was suddenly cold, my stomach like a hard frozen knot.

"You've been out of my life for over half a year. How do I know that something else won't scare you off again?"

"I planned on dating you both, Richard, on being with you both." I realized as soon as I said it that I meant it. I'd made a decision and hadn't realized it.

"What about a week from now, or a month, or even a year? What will scare you off next time?"

"I don't plan on running anymore, Richard."

"Nice to know." I could feel his anger like something hot and touchable over the phone. Either his shield was leaking, or he'd lowered it.

"You don't want to be with me anymore?" My voice was soft, hurt, and I hated it. Hated it.

"I want to be with you, you know that. You drive me crazy, but I still want you."

"But you'll still give me up," I said. My voice was a little stronger, but not much. Richard was dumping me. Fine, it was his prerogative. I was a pain in the ass, I knew that. But my chest ached with it, damn it.

"I don't want to, Anita, but I'll do what I have to do. You taught me that."

My eyes were hot. I'd taught him that. Great. If we were really going to break up for good, then I would not cry or beg. I would not be weak. My voice came out more solid, more sure of itself. My stomach was still in cold knots, but it didn't show in my voice. The effort that it took to just sound normal over the phone made my chest tight. "You're Ulfric, wolf king. Your word is law in the pack."

"I've worked hard to make sure that everyone has an equal voice, Anita. I can't pull rank now. It would undo everything I've tried to change."

"Ideals are great in theory, Richard, but they don't work too well in real life."

"I disagree," he said. His anger was already leaking away. He just sounded tired.

"I'm not going to argue things we've been arguing since we met. I'm going to concentrate on the things I can change. And no matter how much we want to, we can't change each other, Richard. We are what we are." My voice was uncertain again, full of some of the emotion I was feeling. "So, is Gregory okay?"

"He's okay."

"I want him back, you know that."

"I know that." His anger was making a comeback.

"Now that I'm not lupa, not pack, how do I get him back?"

"You have to come to the lupanar tomorrow night and petition for him."

"What do you mean, 'petition for him?' "

"You have to prove yourself worthy. There'll be some kind of test."

"Like multiple choice, essay, what?"

"I don't know yet. We're ... voting on it."

"Fuck, Richard, there's a reason why we have a representative democracy in this country, not a pure one. Pure one person, one vote, just doesn't work well. You can't decide anything that way."

"They're deciding, Anita. You're just not liking the way it's going."

"How could you take Gregory? How could you do that?"

"As soon as I realized what had happened, I knew that the pack would vote you out. Most of them weren't happy with you even before. You weren't pack, and they didn't like that. The fact that you've avoided them--all of them--for six months didn't help."

"I had to get my shit together before I could come back, Richard."

"And while you were getting your shit together, mine was falling apart."

"I'm sorry, Richard, I am. But I didn't know."

"Tomorrow night at the lupanar, about an hour after dark. You can bring all your wereleopards and any other shapeshifters that are your allies. If it were me, as Ulfric, I'd bring the wererats."

"I'm not lupa anymore, so they aren't my allies, are they?"

"No," he said, and the anger was gone again. Richard never could hold a grudge for long.

"What happens if I don't win Gregory back?"

He didn't answer me, just the sound of his breathing on the phone.

"Richard, what happens to Gregory?"

"He'll be judged by the pack."

"And?"

"If he's convicted of killing our lupa, it's a death sentence."

"But I'm right here, Richard. I'm not dead. You can't kill Gregory for killing me, when he didn't do it."

"I delayed the judgment until you were well enough to attend. It was the best I could do."

"You know, Richard, sometimes it's good to be king. A king gets to pardon whomever he wants, a king gets to fuck whomever he wants."

"I know that."

"Then be king, Richard, really be king. Be their Ulfric, not their president."

"I'm doing what I think best for them all."

"Richard, you can't do this."

"It's already done."

"Richard, if I fail your little test, I will not let you execute Gregory. Do you understand me?"

"You won't be allowed to bring guns into the lupanar, just knives." His voice had gone very careful.

"I remember the rule. But Richard, are you listening to me? Are you understanding me?"

"If we try to execute Gregory tomorrow night, you'll fight us, I understand. But understand this, Anita, your leopards are no match for us, not even with Micah and his pard. We outnumber you five to one, maybe more."

"It doesn't matter, Richard. I can't stand by and watch Gregory die, not for something stupid like this."

"Will you try to save one of your cats and risk losing them all? Do you really want to see what would happen if they tried to fight their way out of the lupanar, through the pack? I wouldn't want to see it."

"This is ... damn it, Richard, don't put me in a corner, you won't like it."

"Is that a threat?"

"Richard ..." I had to stop in mid-sentence and count slowly under my breath. But counting to ten wasn't going to do it, maybe a billion. "Richard," my voice came out calmer, "I will save Gregory, whatever it takes. I will not let the wolves slaughter my leopards, whatever that takes. You lost your temper and took one of my leopards. You made your pack a freaking democracy, where you don't even have presidential veto. Are you really going to compound the mistakes by starting a war between your pack and my pard?"

"I still think that everyone having a voice is a good idea."

"It's a great idea, but it's not working, is it?" He was quiet again. "Richard, don't do this."

"It's out of my hands. I'm sorry, Anita, you don't know how sorry."

"Richard, you won't really let them execute Gregory. I mean, not really."

Silence again.

"Richard, talk to me."

"I'll do what I can, but I've lost the vote on it. I can't change that."

"Can you really stand by and watch him die for something he didn't do?"

"How do you know he didn't infect you on purpose?"

"I was there. He fell on top of me with two of the snake things riding him. It was an accident. He kept them from cutting out my heart. He saved my life, Richard, and this is damn poor payment."

"He couldn't have turned his claws aside at the last minute?" Richard asked.

"No, it all happened too fast."

He laughed, but it was bitter. "You've been around us so long, and you still don't understand what we are. I could turn aside in less than a blink of an eye. Gregory isn't slower than I am. As a leopard he's quicker, more agile."

"Are you saying he did this on purpose?"

"I'm saying that he had a fraction of a second to decide what he'd do, and he decided to keep you as their Nimir-Ra. He made the choice to take you from me."

"And you're going to make him pay for that. Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"With his life?"

He sighed. "I don't want him dead, Anita. But when I first found out what he'd done, I wanted to kill him myself. I wanted it so badly I didn't trust myself around him, so I had him taken somewhere safe until I could cool down. But Jacob got wind of it, and forced a vote."

"Who's Jacob?"

"My new Geri, third in charge behind Sylvie."

"I've never heard of him before."

"He's new."

"Damn, third in line, and he's new. He's either a very good fighter, or a very vicious one, to win that many fights in less than half a year."

"He's good, and he's vicious."

"Is he ambitious?" I asked.

"Why?"

"If Jacob hadn't forced a vote, would you have given Gregory back to me?"

He remained quiet so long, that I finally asked, "You still there?"

"I'm here. Yes, I would have given him back to you. I can't kill him for what he's done."

"So Jacob set in motion something that's stripped you of a powerful ally--me---and forced you to declare war on another group--the wereleopards. He's been a busy boy."

"He's just doing what he thinks is right."

"Jesus, Richard, how can you still be this naive?"

"You think he wants my job?"

"You know he wants your job. I can hear it in your voice."

"If I'm not strong enough to hold the pack, then it's Jacob's prerogative to challenge me. But he's got to defeat Sylvie first, and she's as good as he is-- and as vicious."

"How big is Jacob?"

"My size, not as muscled."

"Sylvie is good, but she's five six, and slender, and a woman. And as much as I hate to say it, that makes a difference. Pound for pound you guys have the upper body strength on us. If the skill is equal, a larger person will beat a smaller one."

"Don't underestimate Sylvie," he said.

"Don't overestimate her, either. She's my friend, too, and I don't want her dead just because you're not willing to take care of business."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means until he defeats Sylvie and becomes Freki, your second in command, you can kill him outside of a challenge. You can have him executed."

"And if Marcus had thought that about me, I'd be dead now."

"And Marcus would be alive, Richard. You're not helping your case."

"We aren't animals, Anita, we're people. And I can't just kill him because I think he's after my job."

"You don't just stand down as Ulfric, Richard, you fight to the death for it. I know theoretically if you both agree, it doesn't have to be death. But I've been asking around, and no werewolf I've talked to can remember a fight for Ulfric that wasn't to the death. He's not after your job, Richard, he's after your life."

"I can't control what Jacob does, only what I do."

I was beginning to remember why Richard and I didn't make a go of it as a couple. Oh, there had been a lot of reasons. I'd seen him eat Marcus, and that had made me run away. Then we got back together, and the marks were

overwhelming. But there were other reasons. Reasons that made me feel tired and older than Richard, even though he was actually two years older than me. "You're being stupid, Richard."

"It's not really any of your business, Anita. You're not my lupa anymore."

"If you die, the marks may drag Jean-Claude and me down to die with you, so that sort of makes it my business."

"And you don't risk your life every time you go hunting vampires or preternatural creatures with the police? You almost died in New Mexico less than a month ago. You risked all of us."

"I was trying to save people's lives, Richard. You're trying to remake a political system. Ideology is great in a classroom or a debate, but it's flesh and blood that counts, Richard. It's life and death we're talking about here, not some outdated ideal you have in your head about what a better world you can make for the pack."

"If ideals mean nothing, Anita, then we are just animals."

"Richard, if Gregory dies for this, then *I* will kill Jacob, and anyone else who gets in my way. I'll destroy your lupanar and salt the ground, so help me. You explain to Jacob, and anyone else that needs convincing, that if they fuck with me, they will die."

"You can't fight the entire pack, Anita. Not and win."

"If you think the only thing I care about is winning, then you don't know me at all. I will save Gregory because I said I would."

"If you fail the tests, you can't save him."

"What sort of tests are we talking about?"

"Ones that only a shapeshifter could pass."

"Richard, Richard ..." I wanted to scream and rant at him, but I was suddenly more tired than angry, more discouraged than enraged. "Mark me on this, Richard, if I fail to save Gregory, then I will remake heaven into hell to avenge him. You explain that to Jacob, make sure he understands."

"Tell him yourself." There was silence and the sound of movement. Then a man's voice came on, a voice that I'd never heard before. The voice was pleasant, young, but not too young.

"Hello, I'm Jacob, I've heard a lot about you." His voice made it plain that he hadn't liked what he'd heard.

"Look, Jacob, we don't know each other, but I cannot allow you to kill Gregory for something he didn't do."

"The only way you can stop us is by winning him back."

"Richard explained that I'd have to pass a test to get Gregory back. He also said if I failed that you'd execute Gregory."

"It's pack law."

"Jacob, you don't want to make me your enemy."

"You are Nimir-Ra of a small leopard pard. We are the Thronnos Rokke Clan. We are the lukoi, and you are nothing to us."

"Yeah, I'm coming tomorrow night as Nimir-Ra of the Blooddrinker's Pard. But I'm Anita Blake. Ask the vampires and other shapeshifters around

town about me. See what they say. You don't want to fuck with me, Jacob, you really don't."

"I've already asked around. I know your reputation."

"Then why are you pushing this?"

"That's my business," he said.

"Fine, you want to do this, we can do this. If you cause Gregory's death through voting or werewolf politics, I will bury you."

"If you can," he said. "You're a brand-new shapeshifter. You won't even change form until the full moon, and that's weeks away. You are no match for me."

"You say that like I'm going to offer to fight you one-on-one. I'm not. If Gregory dies, you die. Simple as that."

"If you shoot me, it won't reinstate you into the pack. If you could possibly win one-on-one against me, then maybe they'd vote you back to lupa. But if you just shoot me, you'll never be lupa again."

"I'm going to say this nice and slow, Jacob, so we understand each other. I don't give a shit about being lupa. I care about my friends, and the people I've promised to protect. Gregory is one of those people. If he dies, you die."

"I'm not going to kill him, Anita. I just made sure there was a vote about it."

"Do you like John Wayne movies, Jacob?"

He was quiet for a heartbeat. "I guess, I mean, what does that have to do with anything?"

"Your fault, my fault, nobody's fault, if Gregory dies, you die."

"Am I supposed to get the movie reference?" he asked. He sounded angry now.

"I guess not, but the point is this. I will blame you personally if anything happens to Gregory, for any reason. If he comes to harm, so will you. If he bleeds, so do you. If he dies ..."

"I get the idea. But I don't have a deciding vote on this issue. I'm just one vote."

"Then you better think of something, Jacob. Because I give you my word that I mean everything I say."

"I heard that about you." He was quiet, and we stood on either end of the phone in silence, until he said, "What about Richard?"

"What about him?"

"If something happens to him what will you do?"

"If I tell you that I'll kill you if you kill him, that undercuts his authority as Ulfric. But I'll say this much, if you defeat him, then it better be a fair fight in a challenge circle. If you cheat in any way, no matter how small, I'll kill you." I wanted so badly to just give Richard blanket protection, but I couldn't. It would weaken his position, and his position was weak enough already.

"But if it's fair, you'll stay out of it?"

I leaned against the wall and tried to think. "I'll be honest, Jacob, I love Richard. I don't always understand him, or even agree with him, but I love him. I'm ready to kill you over someone who has never been my lover or even a

good friend. So, yeah, you kill Richard, and I'm really, really going to want to kill you."

"But you won't," he said.

I didn't like how persistent he was about the issue. It made me nervous. "I'll make you a deal, you don't challenge Richard for Ulfric until after the next full moon, then whatever happens, as long as it's fair, I'll stay out of it."

"What if it's sooner?" he asked.

"Then I am going to rain all over your parade."

"You're undercutting Richard's authority," he said.

"No, Jacob, no I'm not. I wouldn't be killing you because I was lupa or any werewolf stuff. I'd be killing you because I am just that vindictive. Give me a few weeks until after the full moon, and you're in the clear on this one, if you've got the cajones to finish the job."

"You think Richard will kill me, instead?"

"He killed the last Ulfric, Jacob. That's how he got the job."

"If I don't agree to this, you'll just shoot me?"

"From a nice, safe distance, oh, yeah."

"I can promise that I won't challenge Richard until after the full moon, but I can't promise that the vote won't go against Gregory. He was one that Raina, the old lupa, used to help punish some members of the pack. There's more than one woman here that he helped rape."

"I know."

"Then how can you defend him?"

"He did what his old alpha told him to do, and what Raina, the wicked bitch of the west, told him to do. Gregory isn't a dominant, he's lesser, and he does what he's told, like a good submissive shapeshifter. Ever since I took over as his alpha, he's refused to rape and torture. As soon as he had a choice, he stopped doing it. Ask Sylvie. Gregory let himself be tortured instead of helping to rape her."

"She told the story to the pack."

"You don't sound impressed."

"It's not me you have to impress, Anita, it's the others."

"Help me figure out a way to impress them, Jacob."

"Are you serious? You want me to help you save the leopard?"

"Yeah."

"That's ridiculous. I'm Geri of Thronnos Rokke clan. I don't have to help a wereleopard that even you admit isn't a dominant."

"Don't go all class conscious on me, Jacob. Remember the early part of our conversation, the part about you dying? I blame you for the mess. And you will help me clean it up, or I will splatter your brains all over the walls."

"You can't bring guns into the lupanar."

I laughed, and even to me it was an unsettling sound, creepy even. "You going to spend the rest of your life inside the lupanar?"

"Jesus," he said, voice soft, "you're talking about assassinating me."

I laughed again. A small voice in my head was screaming at me, telling me I was being a very good sociopath. But Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm

wasn't going to cut it with Jacob. Maybe later I could afford to be soft. "I think we finally understand each other, Jacob. Here's my cell phone number. You call me before tomorrow night with a plan."

"What if I can't come up with one?"

"Not my problem."

"You'll kill me even if I try and save him--really try and save your leopard, but fail. You'll still kill me."

"Yes."

"You cold bitch."

"Sticks and stones will break your bones, but failure will get you killed. Call me Jacob, make it soon." I hung up the phone.

Chapter 11

"I SEE WHAT you mean about you being practical," Micah said. He was standing quietly watching me, face carefully neutral, but he couldn't quite keep everything off his face. He was pleased. Pleased with me, I think.

"You not going to run screaming because I'm a bloodthirsty sociopath?"

He smiled, and again his long lashes came down over his eyes. "I don't think you're a sociopath, Anita. I think you do what needs doing to protect your pard." He raised that yellow-green gaze to me. "I find that admirable, not something to criticize."

I sighed. "Good that someone approves."

He smiled, and it was that mixture of condescension, happiness, and sorrow, that I'd seen before. A complex smile, that. "The Ulfric means well."

"You know what they say about good intentions, Micah. If he's determined to take himself to hell, fine. But he has no right to drag the rest of us along with him."

"I agree."

It made me tired that Micah agreed with me. I wasn't in love with him. Why couldn't it be Richard who agreed with me? Of course, there was someone else. I needed to get to Jean-Claude while it was still dark.

"I had to put off the shower, first to be a gentleman, and let you go first, then so the noise wouldn't interrupt your phone call. I need to get clean now, if you don't mind."

"I'll give you some privacy." I turned towards the door.

"It wasn't privacy I was asking for, just explaining why I was turning the water on during our conversation." he said.

That turned me around at the door. "What conversation?"

He turned on the shower, testing the water with his hand, adjusting the heat, talking over his shoulder. "I've never felt another Nimir-Ra with the kind of power you put off. It was amazing."

"Glad you enjoyed it, but I've really got to go."

He turned to face me, stepping back into the water, throwing his head back for a second to wet his hair. The water hit his neck and he let out a hissing breath, bending over at the shoulders like it really hurt.

I went back into the room. "Are you alright?"

He nodded and stopped in mid-motion. "I will be."

I was close enough that when he raised his head I could see the water beaded on his face, clinging in thick drops to his lashes. I stood to one side, getting sprayed with just the faintest mist of the water. I got my first good look at the side of his neck. "Shit." I reached through the water to touch his face, turned him slowly so I could see the bite.

He had a perfect imprint of my teeth in the right side of his neck. The wound was still seeping blood, so the circle of toothmarks was filled with crimson. The tanned flesh of his neck was already bruising, dark colors swirling to the surface of his skin.

"God, Micah, I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, it is a love bite."

I dropped my hand from his face. "Yeah, right, it looks like I tried to eat your throat out." I frowned. "Why hasn't it started healing?"

"Wounds made by the teeth and claws of another lycanthrope heal slower than most, not as slow as silver, but slower than say, steel."

"I am sorry."

"And I said, don't be sorry."

"The last Ulfric I bit like this--and it wasn't nearly this bad, I didn't even break the skin--he considered it an insult. He said, it meant I considered myself higher in the pack than he was."

"We are not wolves. To the pard a wound on the neck from a Nimir-Ra is a sign that the sex was good."

That made me blush.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you, just to explain that you don't owe me an apology. I enjoyed it."

I blushed harder.

"Together we could do great things for our pard."

I shook my head. "We won't know for sure that I'm going to be Nimir-Ra for a few days. Let's take it slow until then."

"If you want to." His gaze was too direct, and I was suddenly aware that he was nude in a shower. I was getting better at ignoring, or at least not being bothered, around nudity. But there were moments when you had to be aware of it, when the look in the other person's eyes made you aware of it.

"I want to," I said.

He turned his back, lowering his head so the water beat on his shoulders, back, lower things. The spray widened as he moved through it, splattering on

my face, shoulders, arms, legs, across the towel. It was time for me to leave, past time.

I was at the door again when he called after me. "Anita."

I turned back.

He was standing facing me, rubbing liquid soap from one of the wall dispensers on his body. He was doing his arms as I turned around, lathering his chest as he talked. "If you want us to go with you tomorrow, we would be honored."

"I can't let you drag your pard into our mess."

His hands slid downward, trailing white suds over his stomach, his hips, then slid between his legs, working the soap over himself. I knew from my own experience of getting the stuff off me that you had to scrub more where it had touched you, but his hands stayed, until he was slick, thick with bubbles, and partially erect by the time his hands slid to his thighs.

My mouth was dry, and I realized we hadn't said anything in several minutes. I'd just been watching him spread soap on himself. The thought brought heat in a rush up my face. Micah continued to soap his legs slowly, taking more time with each movement than he needed to. He was definitely doing it for my benefit. I needed to leave.

"If you are my Nimir-Ra, then your mess is my mess," he said, head still bent over his legs, face hidden from me, so that all I could see was the line of his body as he stood in the aisle, away from the water so the soap wouldn't rub off.

I had to clear my throat to say, "I don't want to pick out curtains, Micah."

"The power between us is enough that I'll agree to any arrangement you want." He stood up then, stretching his arm back to soap his shoulders. It made him stretch the front of his body in a long line, and I was painfully aware of him. I turned, really meaning to go out the door this time.

"Anita," he said.

I stopped in the doorway, but this time I didn't turn around. "What?" I sounded grumpy.

"It's alright to be attracted to me. You can't help yourself."

That made me laugh, a good normal laugh. "Oh, you don't have a high opinion of yourself, do you?" But I stayed facing away from him.

"It's not a high opinion of myself. You are a Nimir-Ra, and I am the first Nimir-Raj that you've ever met. Our power, our beasts are attracted to each other. We're meant to be attracted to each other."

I turned then, slowly, trying for eye contact and failing. He was turned away with the back of his body facing me. He was still spreading soap over his shoulders. The suds slid slowly down his skin towards his slim waist.

"We don't know yet that I'm a were-anything." My voice was breathy.

He managed to reach his entire back, his arms moving effortlessly over his skin, hands smoothing over the tightness of his buttocks. "You feel the call of my body, as I feel yours."

My pulse was beating way too hard. "You're an attractive man, naked, covered in soap. I'm human, so sue me."

He turned around, still soaped and slick. And he was huge.

My mouth went dry. My body tightened so hard and so suddenly, it almost hurt. It deepened my breathing, made me have to swallow my pulse.

"You're *not* human, that's the difference. That's why you keep looking even when you don't want to." He walked towards me, slowly, moving like all leopards could move when they wanted to. Like he had muscles in places that humans didn't. He glided towards me like some great, slinking cat, his nude body glistening with suds and water, his hair plastered in ringlets to his shoulders, around his face. Those huge yellow green eyes suddenly looked perfectly at home in his face.

"You don't understand yet how rare it is for two lycanthropes to share their beasts as we did." He was almost in front of me now. "They flowed in and out of our bodies." He stood there, not touching, not yet. "They were like two great cats, rubbing their furred sides against each other." He ran his hands slick with soap up my bare arms as he said it. I had to close my eyes. He was describing exactly how it had felt, as if he had read my mind, or had felt exactly the same thing.

His hands slid up my arms to my shoulders, to my neck, spreading slick and wet across my skin. His soapy hands cupped my face, and I felt his face moving towards mine before his lips touched me. The kiss was gentle, his body carefully not touching me.

He slid his fingers into the edge of the towel, gripping the cloth, pulling me forward. It made me open my eyes. It took a few steps to realize he was leading me towards the water.

"You'll need to wash the soap off," he said.

I was shaking my head, and finally stopped moving with him. He kept pulling on the towel and it unwrapped, starting to slide down my body. I grabbed it, holding it just below my suddenly bare breasts.

"No," I said, my voice strangled, but I repeated it. "No."

He stepped into me, pressing the slick hardness of him against my lower hand and arm. He tried to uncurl my fingers from the towel, and I held on for dear life. "Touch me, Anita, cup me in your hands."

"No."

"I know you want to. I can smell it," and he moved his face above my skin, drawing his breath in and out against my wet skin. "I can feel it." He rubbed his hands up my arms again, over my shoulders, down towards my breasts, but stopped without touching them. "I can taste it." He licked a slow line along the edge of my cheek. I shivered and wanted to step back, but it was like I was frozen in place. I couldn't move.

I found my voice, shaky, but mine. My hands clutched to my body, because I knew if I touched him we were in trouble. "This isn't like me, Micah. I'm not like this. You're a stranger. I don't do strangers."

"I'm not a stranger. I'm your Nimir-Raj, and you are my Nimir-Ra. We could never be strangers."

He kissed his way down my face to my neck, biting gently at me, and it made my knees weak. He came back up to my lips, and when he kissed me I

could taste the soap from my skin. The feel of him pressed against the front of my body, close enough that if I opened my hand I'd be able to hold him, was overwhelming. I realized it was more than just sex. I wanted to feed off of him again, not with my teeth but with my body. I wanted to drink in the energy of him through my skin, my bare skin pressed to his. I wanted it so badly. His hands slid over my breasts, covering them in soap, making them slick, the nipples already tight and hard. My arms slid around his waist, using the pressure of our bodies to keep the towel in place. He moved against my body, and his chest was so slick, so smooth rubbing against my breasts.

He began to walk backwards with his arms locked behind me, moving us back towards the water. My hands moved over the slick hardness of his back, sliding dangerously lower. It was as if I wanted to press every inch of myself to him, to roll his body around me like a sheet and drink him in through the pores of my skin.

I opened that link with Jean-Claude and found him sitting, waiting, patient. I called for help, and distantly I heard his voice in my head. "It is all I can do, *ma petite*, to control my own appetites, you must control your own."

"What's happening to me?" Even as I asked, Micah moved his body that fraction away that allowed the towel to slide down, and when he quickly moved back, he was pressed against my groin and stomach, and it was *deja vu* enough to draw a small sound out of my throat.

Jean-Claude looked up, and I knew that he saw what was happening with Micah, that with a thought he could feel what was happening, as if it were his hands sliding down the slick, soaped skin. My hand slid over the thick hardness of Micah. He half-collapsed against me, as I caressed him, and I knew that it hadn't been my idea to touch him. Jean-Claude had wanted to know what it felt like. He drew away enough for me to move my hand, but the damage had been done. Micah dragged me into the water, surer now than ever that I would say yes.

Jean-Claude's voice in my head. "You can feed off his lust, but the price for that is that you will crave his lust, his sex. It is the double-edged sword of being incubus. The sword edge I have walked for centuries."

"Help me!"

"I cannot. You must ride this thing yourself. And you will either conquer it, or be conquered. You felt what happened when I interfered just now. Because I have denied myself feeding through my body. I knew you would not approve, so I denied myself. And being inside your body while you touch him, while you feed, would be my undoing. I crave you more than you will ever crave the man in your arms. I have wanted to take your body in the way that only I could take it. To feed from your sex, not from a vein. But I knew that would frighten you more than blood."

Micah turned me towards the wall, putting my hands up against the tile, pressing his body against my back. Jean-Claude's voice was soft in my head, more intimate than Micah's touch. "I did not know you would gain this demon from me, *ma petite*, and nothing I can say will convince you of that. I know that. I await you here, until you have wrestled the demon, whatever the

outcome." And he shielded from me, hid himself away so he would not feel what was happening, left me alone to make my choice, if I was still capable of choosing.

I found I did have a voice and said, "Micah, stop, please stop."

Micah licked the back of my neck, and I shuddered, pressed against the wet wall.

"Please, Micah, I'm not on birth control." A clear thought at last.

He bit softly at the back of my neck. "I had myself fixed two years ago. You're safe with me, Anita."

"Please, Micah, please don't."

He bit harder, just this side of drawing blood, and my body went passive, calm. It was as if he'd hit a switch I didn't know I had. When he pressed himself inside me, he was slick, and I knew that sometime when I'd been paying attention to Jean-Claude inside my head, he'd spread more soap on himself, allowing that thick hardness to slide more easily inside me.

He pinned me to the wall and slid inside me, one tight inch at a time. It wasn't that he was long so much as he was wide--wide enough that it was just this side of pain to have him work himself inside me, even with the soap.

He pushed until most of him was inside me, and there was a stopping point. Then he began to draw himself out, slowly, so slowly. Then in again, slowly, still having to push himself, to work to make room for himself inside me. I stood pinned against the wall, passive, unmoving. It wasn't like me. I moved during sex. But I didn't want to move, didn't want to stop, and there was no thinking, just the feel of him moving in and out of me. I wasn't as tight now, and the soap had given way to my own wetness, so that he began to move more smoothly in and out of me. He was gentle, but he was so big that even gentle was almost overwhelming. He came to the end of my body before the full shaft of him was inside me. I could feel him bumping against my cervix at the end of each stroke. Most women find having their cervix bumped painful, but some women find it pleasurable. His size was intimidating, but when I realized it didn't hurt, in fact that it felt wonderful, a part of me that was still sane, still keeping track of some safety measures, relaxed and shut down. My last measure of control went away. I didn't want sex. That was just a means to an end. I wanted to feed. I wanted to eat his lust, drink his heat, bathe in his energy. The thought brought a sound low in my throat.

Micah braced himself against the wall, his body pinning mine completely, and began to find a rhythm, still gentle, but quicker. He was being so careful of me, and I didn't want him careful.

I heard a voice that didn't quite sound like mine. "Harder."

His voice came out squeezed tight. "It will hurt if I do it harder."

"Try me."

"No."

"Micah, please, just do it, please. If it hurts I'll tell you. Please." He'd been less controlled in the other room, and I realized why. He truly was afraid of hurting me because he was inside me. When he was just rubbing himself on my body, he hadn't had to worry about damaging me. Now he did. It gave him an

edge of control that kept me from feeding. He was a Nimir-Raj, and he had enough power to keep me out. Unless he let down his guard. To do that he had to lose more control than this.

Even as I thought it, a part of me was swimming to the surface. I could think again, at least a little. I didn't want to do this. I didn't want to feed off of him. It was wrong, in so many ways it was wrong. I started to say, "Micah, stop, I can't do this." I got as far as, "Micah ..." and he took me at my word. He thrust into me so hard and fast it tore a scream from my throat and brought that new part of me that was Jean-Claude's hunger in a raging wave of heat that rode my body and spilled out my mouth.

He'd stopped. "Are you alright?"

"Don't stop. Don't stop!"

He never asked again. He drove himself inside me so fast and hard that it left me gasping, unable to catch my breath. Small, helpless noises fell from my lips, spaced with the words, "Oh, God, yes, yes, Micah!" Every time he thrust as far as he could, smashing himself inside me, it rode that fine line between overwhelming pleasure and pain. And just as the pleasure began to turn to pain, he'd withdraw, and I'd be able to breathe again. Then he'd thrust himself inside me again, and it would start all over.

It felt like he filled me up as if I were a cup, until there was nothing inside me but the feel of his body, the feel of his flesh pounding into mine. It was tight, thick, like he'd plugged a hole with his body, and would never let it go. That sense of fullness inside me grew, grew, and spilled over me, through me, inside me, and tore out of my mouth in ragged, frantic screams, as my body spasmed around him. And it was only then that his control slipped away, letting me know that he had still been gentle. His control went when he did, and I drank him into me, through his chest pressed to my back, his hips thrusting against my butt. I drank him in, as he exploded inside me. I fed on him, drew him inside every pore of my skin, until it was as if our skins gave way and we spilled into each other, became for one shining moment one thing, one beast. And I could feel his beast inside mine, as if they were coupling within our bodies as our human shells merged. In that moment, I didn't doubt that I was truly his Nimir-Ra.

When we were finished and had slid to the floor, him still inside me, his arms hugging me to the front of his body, I started to cry. He was afraid he'd hurt me, but that wasn't it. I couldn't explain the tears to him, because I didn't want to say it out loud. But I knew. I'd tried not to be one of the monsters for so long, and now, in one fell swoop I was them, both of them. You couldn't be a bloodsucking vampire and be a lycanthrope at the same time. They canceled each other out as a disease or a curse. But I had felt my beast curl around Micah's. I had felt it like an embryo in a safe warm place, waiting. And I had fed off of him as surely as any vampire. I'd always thought I'd have to drink blood to be one of them. But I had been wrong, wrong about so many things. I let Micah hold me. I felt his heart pounding against my back and wept.

Chapter 12

NATHANIEL DROVE BECAUSE I was too shaky to concentrate. I was functioning, moving forward, solving the problems one at a time, but it was as if the very ground I walked on, the air I breathed was precarious and new. As if everything had changed, because I had changed. I knew better. I knew that no matter how bad you feel, or what horrible thing happens to you, that the world just keeps on going. That the rest of the world doesn't even realize that the monsters are eating your heart. A long time ago it use to bother me that I could be in such confusion, such pain, and the world just didn't give a shit. The world, the creation as a whole, is designed to move forward, to keep on keeping on without any one individual person. It feels damned impersonal, and it is. But, then, if the world stopped rotating just because one of us was having a bad day, we'd all be floating out in space.

So I huddled in the passenger seat of my Jeep in the late darkness and knew that only I had changed. But it was just such a big change that it felt like the world should have changed its orbit, just a little.

June was back to its normal hot, sticky self. Nathaniel wore a ribbed tank top and silky jogging shorts. He'd tied his nearly ankle-length hair in a loose braid that curled on the seat beside his thigh. He'd found that if he let his hair fall onto the floorboard, sometimes it tangled around the pedals. He had to watch the gear shift between the seats, too. I'd never had hair that long.

Nathaniel had only had his driver's license for a few months, even though he was twenty. Gabriel, their old alpha, had not encouraged them to be independent. I sort of demanded it of them, as far as they were able. At first Nathaniel had been lost when I started to demand that he decide things for himself, but lately, he'd been doing better. It made me hopeful, and I needed some hope right now.

He'd picked out the clothes that he'd brought to the makeshift hospital for me. Black jeans, royal blue scoop neck T-shirt, a black bra that fit low enough to accommodate the low neckline, matching undies, black jogging socks, black Nikes, a short-sleeved black shirt to cover the shoulder rig with the Browning Hi-Power. People kept urging me to go shopping for a new main gun. They were probably right. There was probably something out there that would fit my hand better than the Browning. But I'd been putting it off. The Browning was like a piece of me. I felt incomplete without it, like I was missing a hand. It was going to take something more than a smaller grip to convince me to switch guns. So, for now, it was still me and the Browning.

Nathaniel had also brought my wrist sheaths and the matching silver knives. I was going to leave them in the car since the shirt was short-sleeved. They were a little too aggressive to wear into the police station. I had just replaced the back sheath I had ruined in New Mexico. It had been a special

order, and it had cost mucho extra dinero to get a rush job on it, but it had been worth it. There really wasn't anywhere else on my body that I could carry a blade that large and still be able to sit down, without the hilt showing.

We drove in silence. Nathaniel hadn't even turned the radio on, which he liked to do. He rarely moved in silence if he could have music for background. But tonight he let the silence seep into the Jeep.

I finally asked a question I'd been wanting an answer for. "Who put the derringer in my robe pocket?" The derringer was in the glove compartment.

"I did."

"Thanks."

"The two things that you always do first is get dressed and get armed." His smile flashed in an instant of street light. "I'm not sure which is your highest priority."

I had to smile. "I'm not sure either."

"How are you doing?" His voice was very careful when he asked it, quiet in the rushing silence of the car.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay." He was one of the few people that would actually take me at my word and not press. If I told Nathaniel I didn't want to talk, we didn't talk. The silence between us was no longer strained. In fact, silence with Nathaniel was one of the most relaxing sounds of my day.

Nathaniel parked the Jeep and we got out. I had my executioner's license with me, and most people knew me on sight. It occurred to me that they thought I was dead. As we walked towards the door, I realized I should probably have called ahead and given them a heads up, but it was too late now. I was a yard from the door. I wasn't using the cell phone now.

I was a familiar enough sight that I could usually just wave as I went past the desk, but tonight the officer's eyes got big as he waved me on to the left so I didn't have to go through the metal detector. But he was picking up a phone as he did it. I was betting he was calling ahead. You don't see people rise from the dead every night. Well, I guess *I* do, but most cops don't.

I was up the stairs leading to RPIT's headquarters when Detective Clive Perry opened the door and started down the stairs. He was slender, handsome, African-American, and the most unfailingly polite person I'd ever met. He actually missed the step and had to catch himself on the railing. Even then he leaned against the wall like his legs weren't working quite right. He looked shocked--no, scared.

"Anita." His voice was breathy. It was probably the second time in all the years we'd known each other that he had used my first name. It was usually Ms. Blake.

I responded in kind, smiling. "Clive, it's good to see you."

His eyes flicked from me to Nathaniel, then back to me. "You're supposed to be ..." He straightened on the stairs. "I mean, we heard ..." I watched him visibly try to rally. By the time we reached the step he was on, he looked almost normal. But his next question wasn't normal. "Did you die?"

I smiled, then felt the smile fade as I stared into his eyes. He was serious. I guess I did raise the dead for a living, so the question wasn't as ridiculous as it sounded, but I was realizing that some of his shock wasn't just from seeing me walking around. It was from his fear of what I was now. He thought I was the walking dead. In some ways he was closer to the mark than was comfortable, in others he was so far off.

"No, Clive, I didn't die."

He nodded, but there was a tightness around his eyes that made me wonder, if I tried to touch his arm, would he flinch? I didn't want to find out, so Nathaniel and I just walked past him, leaving him alone on the stairs.

I pushed into the squad room with its crowded desks and the busy clatter of people. RPIT had some of its busiest hours after three A.M. The noise died gradually like fading water rings, going out into the room, until I moved in silence between the desks and the staring faces. Nathaniel stayed at my back, moving like an attractive shadow.

I finally said, loud enough to carry through the room, "The rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated." And the room exploded into noise. I was suddenly surrounded by men, and a few women, hugging me, slapping me on the back, pumping my hand. Smiling faces, relieved eyes. No one else showed the reservations that Clive Perry had shown on the stairs, and it made me wonder about his religious background, or his metaphysical one. He wasn't a sensitive, but that didn't mean he hadn't grown up around people who were.

It was Zerbrowski who picked me completely off the ground in a huge bear hug. He's only five eight, and not that big, but he spun me around the room, finally putting me down, laughing and a little unsteady on my feet. "Damn, Anita, damn, I thought we were never going to see you come through that door again." He pushed a tangle of dark curls that were beginning to streak with gray from his forehead. He needed a haircut, but then he usually did. His clothes were the usual mismatch, as if he'd chosen his tie and shirt in the dark. He dressed like he was either color-blind or didn't give a shit. I was betting on the latter.

"It's good to see you, too. I hear you're actually holding someone on suspicion of having killed me."

His smile faded around the edges. "Yeah, Count Dracula's in a cell."

"Can you get him out, because as you see, I am very much alive."

Zerbrowski's eyes narrowed. "I saw the pictures, Anita. You were covered in blood."

I shrugged.

His eyes became cool, suspicious cop eyes. "It's been what, four nights? You're looking positively spry for suffering that much blood loss."

I could feel my own face grow neutral, distant, as cool and unreadable as any cop's. "Can you get Jean-Claude out and ready to go? I'd like to take him home before it gets light."

"Dolph's going to want to talk to you before you leave."

"I thought he might. Can you please start processing Jean-Claude while I talk to Dolph?"

"You going to take him to your house?"

"I'm going to drop him off at his place, not that it's any of your business. You're my friend, Zerbrowski, not my dad."

"I've never wanted to be your dad, Anita. That's Dolph's delusion, not mine."

I sighed. "Yeah." I looked up at Zerbrowski. "Will you please get Jean-Claude ready to go?"

He looked at me for a second or two, then nodded. "Okay." He looked past me to Nathaniel, who had moved to the side of the room to let the great reunion take place. "Who's that?"

"Nathaniel, a friend."

He looked back at me. "A little young, isn't he?"

"He's only six years younger than I am, Zerbrowski, but he drove me tonight, so I wouldn't have to."

His eyes looked worried. "You okay?"

"A little shaky, but it'll pass."

He touched my face, staring into my eyes, trying to read them, I think. "I'd like to know what the hell is going on with you."

I met his gaze, face, eyes blank. "So would I."

That seemed to surprise him, because he blinked and dropped his hand. "I'll get Count Dracula out of hock, you go talk to Dolph."

My shoulders hunched a little, and I had to concentrate to square them. I was not looking forward to talking with Dolph. Zerbrowski went to get Jean-Claude, and I left Nathaniel talking to a nice-enough seeming police woman and went to Dolph's office.

He was standing in the doorway like a small mountain. He's six eight and built like a pro wrestler. His dark hair was cut very short, leaving his ears stranded and bare. His suit looked pressed, tie neatly knotted. He'd probably already been on the job for nearly an eight-hour shift, but he still looked fresh out of the box.

His eyes were very careful when they looked at me. "I'm glad you're alive."

"Thanks, me, too."

He waved a hand and walked me down the hallway away from the office, away from the desks, towards the interrogation rooms. I guess he wanted privacy. Privacy that even the glass windows of his office wouldn't give him. It made my stomach tight and a little trickle of fear go through me. I wasn't afraid of Dolph the way I was afraid of a rogue shapeshifter or a vamp I had to kill. He wouldn't hurt me physically. But I was afraid of the tight set of his shoulders, the cautious, cold look of his eyes when he glanced back to make sure I was following.

I could feel how angry he was, almost like the energy off a shapeshifter. What had I done to deserve such rage?

Dolph held the door for me, and I squeezed past his bulk. "Have a seat," he said, as he closed the door behind us.

"I'll stand, thanks. I want to get Jean-Claude out of here before dawn."

"I heard you weren't dating him anymore," Dolph said.

"He's being held without charge on suspicion of killing me. I'm not dead so I'd like to get him out of here."

Dolph just looked at me, eyes as cold and unreadable as if he were looking at a witness--no a suspect--that he didn't like much.

"Jean-Claude has a damn fine lawyer. How'd you keep him for over seventy-two hours without a charge?" I asked.

"You're a city treasure. I told everyone he'd killed you, and they helped me lose him for a while."

"Damn, Dolph, you're lucky some overzealous officer didn't put him in a cell with a window."

"Yeah, too bad."

I just stared at him not even sure what to say. "I'm alive, Dolph. He didn't hurt me."

"Who did?"

It was my turn to give him cool cop eyes.

He walked up to me, towering over me. He wasn't trying to intimidate me with his height; he knew that didn't work anyway. He was just that big. He touched my chin, tried to turn my face to the side. I jerked away.

"You've got scars on your neck that you didn't have a week ago. They're all shiny and nearly healed. How?"

"Would you believe I'm not sure?"

"No."

"Suit yourself."

"Let me see the scars."

I swept my hair to one side and let him trace one large finger down the healed wounds.

"I want to see the rest of the wounds."

"Don't we need a female officer in here for this?"

"Do you really want anyone else to see them?"

He had a point. "Why do you want to see, Dolph?"

"I can't force you to show me, but I need to see them."

"Why?"

"I don't know," he said, and his voice showed strain for the first time.

I shed the outer shirt and laid it on the table. I held my left arm out to him, pushing the sleeve of the T-shirt up.

He traced his finger over the marks. "What is it about your left arm? Its always where you get hit the most."

"I think it's because I'm right-handed. I'll let them chew on my left arm, while I grab a weapon with my right."

"Did you kill what did this to you?"

"No."

He looked at me, and the anger showed for a second. "I wish I believed you."

"Me, too, especially since I'm telling the truth."

"Who, or what, did this to you, Anita?"

I shook my head. "It's been taken care of."

"Damn it, Anita, how can I trust you when you won't talk to me?"

I shrugged.

"Is the arm all of it?"

"Almost."

"I want to see all of it."

There were a lot of men in my life that I'd have accused of just wanting to get my shirt off, but Dolph wasn't one of them. There'd never been that kind of tension between us. I stared at him, hoping he'd back down, but he didn't. I should have known he wouldn't.

I worked the shirt out of my pants and exposed my bra. I had to raise the edge of the underwire to show the round hole--now scar--over my heart.

He touched it like he had all the others, shaking his head. "It's like something tried to scoop your heart out." He raised his eyes to my face. "How the hell did you heal it, Anita?"

"Can I get dressed?"

There was a knock at the door, and Zerbrowski entered without waiting to be asked, while I was still struggling to get my breasts back behind the underwire. His eyes widened. "Am I interrupting?"

"We're finished," I said.

"Gee, and I thought Dolph would have more staying power."

We both glared at him. He grinned. "Count Dracula is processed and ready to go."

"His name is Jean-Claude."

"Whatever you say."

I had to bend over and rearrange my breasts so the bra would fit right again. Those underwires hurt if they ride up. They both watched me do it, and I stubbornly wouldn't turn away. Zerbrowski watched because he was a cheerful lech, Dolph, because he was angry.

"Would you take a blood test?" he asked.

"No."

"We can get a court order."

"On what grounds? I haven't done anything wrong, Dolph, except show up here not dead. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were disappointed."

"I'm glad you're alive," he said.

"But sorry you can't bust Jean-Claude's ass. Is that it?"

He looked away. I'd finally hit on it. "That's it, isn't it? You're sorry that you can't arrest Jean-Claude--get him executed. He didn't kill me, Dolph. Why do you want him dead?"

"He's already dead, Anita. He just doesn't know enough to lie down."

"Is that a threat?"

Dolph made a low exasperated sound. "He's a walking corpse, Anita."

"I know what Jean-Claude is, Dolph, probably better than you do."

"So I keep hearing," he said.

"What, you're angry because I'm dating him? You are not my father, I can date who--or what--I want to date."

"How can you let him touch you?" And the anger was there again, rage.

"You want him dead because he's been my lover?" I couldn't keep the surprise out of my voice.

He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"You're not jealous of me, Dolph, I know that for a fact. It just bothers you that he's not human, is that it?"

"He's a vampire, Anita." He met my gaze then. "How can you fuck a corpse?"

The level of animosity was too personal, too intimate. And then it hit me. "What woman in your life is fucking the undead, Dolph?"

He took a step towards me, his entire body trembling, his huge hands balled into fists. The rage rushed up his face in a near purple wave. He spoke through gritted teeth. "Get out!"

I wanted to say something to make it better, but there was nothing to say. I moved carefully past him, keeping my eyes on him, afraid he'd make a grab for me. But he just stood there regaining control of himself. Zerbrowski walked me out and closed the door behind us.

If I'd been with another woman, we'd have talked about what just happened. If I'd been with a lot of men in a different line of work, we'd have talked about it. But Zerbrowski was a cop. And that meant you didn't talk about the personal stuff. If you accidentally learned something truly painful, truly private, you left it the fuck alone--unless the man involved wanted to talk about it. Besides, I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to know that Dolph's wife was cheating on him with a corpse. He had two sons, no daughters, so who else could it be?

Zerbrowski walked me through the squad room in silence. A man turned as we entered the room. He was tall, dark-haired, with gray starting at the temples. The clean, strong lines of his face were beginning to soften around the edges, but it was still a handsome face in a manly man, Marlboro sort of way. He looked vaguely familiar. But it wasn't until he turned his head, exposing the claw scars on the side of his neck, that I recognized him. Orlando King had been one of the premiere bounty hunters in the country until a rogue shapeshifter had nearly killed him. The stories could never agree on what animal did it; some said wolf, others bear or leopard. The story had grown in the telling until I doubt anyone but King himself knew the truth. King and the shapeshifters that had nearly killed him, if they hadn't all died in the attempt, that is. He had a rep that he never lost a bounty, never stopped until his creature was dead. He earned good money lecturing across the country and in other countries. For his finale he'd take his shirt off and show his scars. It smacked a little too much of circus sideshow for my taste, but, hey, it wasn't my body. He also did some consulting with the police.

"Anita Blake, this is Orlando King," Zerbrowski said. "We brought him in to help convict Count Dracula of your murder."

I glared at Zerbrowski, who only smiled wider. He'd keep calling Jean-Claude by his pet names until it stopped getting a rise out of me. The quicker I ignored it the better.

"Ms. Blake," Orlando King said in the deep rolling voice that I remembered from his lectures, "so good to see you alive."

"It's good to be alive, Mr. King. Last I heard you were lecturing on the West Coast. I hope you didn't interrupt your tour to come solve my murder."

He shrugged, and there was something about the way he moved his shoulders that made him seem taller, broader than he was. "There are so few of us that truly pit ourselves against the monsters, how could I not come?"

"I'm flattered," I said. "I've heard you lecture."

"You came up and spoke to me afterwards," he said.

"I'm flattered again. You must meet thousands of people a year."

He smiled and touched my left arm, ever so lightly. "But not many with scars to rival mine. And none half so pretty in this line of business."

"Thanks." He was at least two generations removed from me, so I figured his complimenting me wasn't so much flirting as habit.

Zerbrowski was grinning at me, and his grin said he didn't think King was simply being polite. I shrugged and ignored it. I've found that if you pretend not to notice that a man is flirting with you, most of them will eventually grow tired and stop.

"It's good to meet you again, Ms. Blake. Especially alive. But I know that you must be in a hurry if you're going to rescue your vampire boyfriend before dawn." There was the faintest hesitation before the word boyfriend. I studied his face and found it neutral. There was no condemnation, nothing but a smile and goodwill. After Dolph's little fit, it was kind of nice.

"Thank you for understanding."

"I'd love a chance to talk to you before I leave town," he said.

Again, I wondered if he was flirting, and I said the only thing I could think of. "Compare notes, you mean?"

"Exactly," he said.

I just did not understand my effect on men. I wasn't that attractive--or maybe I just couldn't see it. We shook hands, and he didn't hold my hand any longer than necessary, didn't squeeze it, or any of those funky things men do when they're interested. Maybe I was just getting paranoid where men were concerned.

Zerbrowski led me through the sea of desks to fetch Nathaniel. The police woman, Detective Jessica Arnet, one of the newest members of the squad, was still entertaining Nathaniel at her desk. She was gazing into his lilac eyes as if there was some hypnotic power in them. There wasn't, but Nathaniel was a good listener. That's rare enough in men for it to be a bigger selling point than an attractive body.

"Come on, Nathaniel, we've got to go."

He stood instantly but tossed a smile towards Detective Arnet that made her eyes sparkle. Nathaniel's real-life job was as a stripper, so he flirted instinctively. He seemed both aware and unaware of his effect on women. When he concentrated, he understood what he was doing. But when he simply walked into a room and heads turned, he was oblivious.

I touched his arm. "Say good-bye to the nice detectives. We've got to hurry."

He said, "Good-bye, nice detectives." I gave him a small push towards the doors.

Zerbrowski followed us out. I think if Nathaniel hadn't been with us he'd have asked more questions. But he'd never met Nathaniel and wasn't sure of him. So we moved in silence to the Prisoner Processing, where Jean-Claude was sitting on one of the three chairs. Normally the processing area was full of people coming in, going out, and since it's the size of a walk-in closet, that makes it seem crowded. The two vending machines took up room, but except for the prisoner processing clerk--the new name since turnkey fell out of fashion--behind his little barred bankteller window, the place was deserted. But it was 3:30 in the morning.

Jean-Claude rose when he saw me; his white shirt was stained, torn on one sleeve. He didn't look like he'd been beaten, or hurt. But he was usually a fanatic about his clothes. Only something drastic would have changed that. A struggle perhaps?

I did not run to him, but I did wrap my arms around him, press my ear to his chest, hold on to him as if he were the last solid thing in the world. He stroked my hair and murmured to me in French. I understood enough to know he was glad to see me and that he thought I looked beautiful. But beyond that it was just pretty noise.

It wasn't until I felt Zerbrowski behind me that I pulled away, but when Jean-Claude's hand found mine, I welcomed it.

Zerbrowski was looking at me as if he'd never seen me before. "What?" It came out hostile.

"I've never seen you be that ... soft with anyone before."

It startled me. "You've seen me kiss Richard before."

He nodded. "That was lust. This is ..." He shook his head, glancing up at Jean-Claude, then back to me. "He makes you feel safe."

I realized with a jolt that he was right. "You're smarter than you look, Zerbrowski."

"Katie reads self-help books to me. I just look at the pictures." He touched my right hand. "I'll talk to Dolph."

"I don't think it's going to help," I said.

He shrugged. "If Orlando King can have a conversion experience where the monsters are concerned, anybody can."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Have you ever read, or seen, any of his interviews before his accident?" Zerbrowski made little quote marks with his fingers when he said accident.

"No. That was before I was interested in the topic, I think."

He frowned at me. "I keep forgetting, you were still in diapers then."

I just shook my head. "So tell me."

"King was one of the shining lights behind trying to get lycanthropes declared nonhuman, so they could be executed just for existing, without a trial. Then he got cut up, and, lo and behold, he mellowed."

"Nearly dying will do that to you, Zerbrowski."

He grinned at me. "It didn't make me a better man." I'd held my hands over his stomach, kept his insides from spilling out, while we waited for an ambulance. It had happened just before Christmas about two years ago.

Zerbrowski live and well had been all I put on my list to Santa that year.

"If Katie couldn't make you a better man, then nothing could," I said.

He grinned wider, then his face sobered. "I'll talk to the boss for you, see if I can get him to mellow without a near-death experience."

I looked up into his serious face. "Just because you saw me hug Jean-Claude?"

"Yeah."

I gave Zerbrowski a quick hug. "Thank you."

He pushed me back towards Jean-Claude. "Better get him under wraps before dawn." He looked past me to the vampire. "Take care of her."

Jean-Claude gave a small bow from his neck. "I will take care of her as much as she allows it."

Zerbrowski laughed. "Oh, he does know you."

We left with Zerbrowski laughing, the clerk staring, and the night growing soft around us. Dawn was coming, and I had so many questions. Nathaniel drove. Jean-Claude and I rode in back.

Chapter 13

I BUCKLED MY seat belt out of habit, but Jean-Claude stayed pressed to my side, arm around my shoulders. I'd started to shake and couldn't seem to stop. It was as if I'd been waiting for him so I could finally fall apart. I didn't cry, just let him hold me while I shook.

"It is alright, *ma petite*. We are both safe now."

I shook my head against the stained front of his shirt. "It's not that."

He touched my face, raised it to look at him in the soft-lighted darkness of the car. "Then what is it?"

"I had sex with Micah." I watched his face, waited for the anger, jealousy, something to flash through his eyes. What I saw was sympathy, and I didn't understand it.

"You are like a vampire newly risen. Even those of us who will be masters cannot fight our hunger the first night, or the first few nights. It is overwhelming. It is why many vampires feed on their nearest kin when they first rise. It is who they are thinking of in their hearts, and they are drawn to them. It is only with the aid of a master vampire that the hunger can be directed elsewhere."

"You're not angry?" I asked.

He laughed and hugged me. "I thought you would be angry with me for giving you the *ardeur*, the fire, the burning hunger."

I pushed back enough to see his face. "Why didn't you warn me that I couldn't control it?"

"I never underestimate you, *ma petite*. If anyone I have ever known in all these centuries could have withstood such a test, it was you. So I did not tell you you would fail, because I no longer try to predict what power will do to you, or through you. You are a law unto yourself so much of the time."

"I was ... helpless. I ... I didn't want to control it."

"Of course not."

I shook my head. "Is the *ardeur* permanent?"

"I do not know."

"How long until I can control it?"

"A few weeks. But even after you have control, you will have to be careful around those you most lust after. They will make the hunger flare like fire raging in your veins. There is no shame to it."

"So you say."

He held my face between his hands. "*Ma petite*, it has been over four hundred years since I first woke with the *ardeur* raging in me, but I remember. All these years, and I still remember that the cry for flesh was almost worse than the cry for blood."

I held his wrists, pressed his hands against my face. "I'm scared."

"Of course you are. You should be. But I will help you through this. I will be your guide. It may pass away in a few days, or come and go, I simply do not know. But I will help you through it, whatever happens."

Nathaniel pulled into the Circus of the Damned parking lot, beside the back door. It was still dark as we got out, but the air had that soft feel of predawn. You could taste the coming morning on the tip of your tongue.

Jason opened the outer door as if he'd been waiting for us. He probably had. Jean-Claude hurried past him to the door that led to the stairs. We followed, but Jean-Claude called back over his shoulder, "I must shower before dawn." With that he left us, running in a blur of motion. The rest of us walked more sedately down the stairs, able to walk three abreast, because none of us were large people.

"How are you feeling?" Jason asked.

I shrugged. "I'm pretty much healed."

"You look shook."

I shrugged, again.

"Okay, I can take a hint. You don't want to talk about it."

"No, I don't."

Jason glanced around me at Nathaniel. "You staying the night?"

"Am I?" I knew the question was directed at me.

"Sure, you may need to drive me home tomorrow, or rather, later today."

"Yes, I am staying."

"You can bunk with me then. God knows the bed is big enough and doesn't see many visitors."

I glanced at Jason. "Does Jean-Claude limit your social activities?"

He laughed. "No, not exactly, but the women who come down here are vampire freaks. They want to sleep in a bed under the ground at the Circus of the Damned. They don't want me, they want Jean-Claude's pet werewolf."

"I wouldn't think ..." I stopped myself because I realized it was an insult.

"Go ahead and say it."

"I wouldn't think that you'd be that picky," I said.

"I wasn't when I first got here. But lately I just don't want to be with someone who just wants me so she can brag to her friends that she slept with a shapeshifter, or got to sleep where the vampires sleep. No matter how good it feels for a few minutes, it still makes me feel like they've just come to look at one of the freaks."

I slipped my arm through his, squeezed his arm. "Don't let anybody make you feel like that, Jason. You're not a freak."

He patted my hand. "Look who's talking."

I pulled away from him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, I'm sorry I said it."

"No, I want you to explain it."

He sighed and hurried down the steps, but I was in Nikes and could keep up. Nathaniel followed a few steps behind without saying a word. "Explain it, Jason."

"You hate the monsters. You hate being different."

"That's not true."

"You accept that you're different, but you don't like it."

I opened my mouth to argue with him, but had to stop myself, had to think. Was he right? Was he? Did I hate being different? Did I hate the monsters because they were different? "Maybe you're right."

He looked back at me, eyes wide. "Anita Blake admitting she may be wrong? Gasp!"

I tried to frown at him, but I could feel it held an edge of smile that ruined the effect. "I better get used to being one of the monsters, or so I hear."

His eyes went serious. "Are you really going to be a wereleopard?"

"We'll find out, won't we."

"You okay with it?"

It was my turn to laugh, but it sounded bitter. "No. No I'm not okay with it, but the damage is done. I can't change it."

"Fatalism," he said.

"Practicality," I said.

"Same thing," he said.

"No, it isn't."

Jason looked past me at Nathaniel who treaded softly a few steps behind me. "How do you feel about her being a wereleopard?"

"I think I'll keep my feelings to myself."

"You're happy about it, aren't you?" And there was an edge of hostility in his voice.

"No, I'm not."

"You get to keep her as your Nimir-Ra now."

"Maybe."

"Doesn't that make you happy?"

"Stop it, Jason. Richard's told me his little theory about Gregory marking me on purpose."

"You talked to Richard?" He made it a question.

"Unfortunately."

"You know what's happened, then?"

"About you guys taking Gregory, yeah. I talked to Jacob on the phone even."

Jason looked surprised. "What did you say to him?"

"Gregory dies, Jacob dies."

"Jacob wants to be Ulfric."

"We discussed that, too," I said.

"What did he say?"

"He won't challenge Richard until after the full moon this month. You better give Sylvie a heads up, because that means Jacob has to defeat her within the next two weeks."

"Why is he waiting for the full moon?"

"Because I told him I'd kill him if he didn't."

"You can't undercut Richard's authority like that."

"I don't need to, Jason, he's doing such a good job all on his own."

We were at the bottom of the stairs, the heavy door hanging open where Jean-Claude had rushed through. "Richard is my Ulfric."

"I'm not asking you to bad-mouth him, Jason. He's destroyed his power structure within the pack. It's not something to debate, it's just the truth."

Jason stopped me at the door. "Maybe if you had been here, you could have talked him out of it."

I was finally angry. "One, you have no right to question what I do, or don't do. Two, Richard is a big boy and makes his own decisions. Three, don't you ever, ever question me again."

"You're not my lupa anymore, Anita."

Anger flared through me like a scalding wave, tightening my shoulders, my arms, spilling into my hands. I'd never felt rage so quickly and so completely. I had to close my eyes to concentrate, so I wouldn't take a swing at him. What was wrong with me?

I felt Nathaniel at my back. "Are you alright?" he said.

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Look," Jason said, "I'm sorry, but I don't want Jacob in charge of the pack--I don't trust him. Richard may be a bleeding-heart, flag-waving right-winger, but he's also fair, and he really does try to put the best interests of the pack before his own. I don't want to lose that."

I looked at him, trying to swallow past the anger. My voice came out squeezed tight. "You're scared about what will happen to all of you if Jacob takes over."

He nodded. "Yes."

"Me, too," I said.

He looked into my face, studied it. "If Jacob kills Richard in a fair fight, what will you do?"

"Richard isn't my boyfriend anymore, and I'm not lupa. If it's a fair challenge fight, then I can't interfere. I told Jacob if the fight was fair, and after the full moon, I wouldn't take revenge on him."

"You won't avenge Richard's death?"

"If I kill Jacob, and Richard and Sylvie are already dead, who'll take over? I've seen what happens to a group of shapeshifters who don't have an alpha to lead them. I won't let what happened to the leopards happen to the wolves."

"If Jacob died before he fought Sylvie, then you wouldn't have to worry about it," Jason said.

The anger that had been leaking away made a comeback. "You can't have it both ways, Jason. Either I'm not your lupa--not dominant to you--and thus can't help you fix this, or I *am* still your lupa, still dominant to you, still someone you come to for this kind of help. Make up your mind which you want me to be before you get up in my face again."

"You can't be lupa, the pack voted you out. But you're right, it's not your fault. You had to try and fix yourself before you could fix anyone else. I'm sorry I got in your face."

"Apology accepted," I said. I started to go around him through the door, but he caught my arm.

"I didn't ask you to kill Jacob because you were my lupa, or dominant to me. I asked you because I know you've already thought of it. I asked you because I know if you think it's best for the pack, you'll do it."

"Pack business is no longer my concern, so everyone keeps telling me."

"They don't know you like I do," he said.

I pulled away from him, gently. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that once you've given your friendship--your protection--to someone, you take care of them, even if they don't want you to."

"If I kill Jacob, Richard will never forgive me."

"He dumped you, right? What have you got to lose by killing Jacob? Nothing. But if you don't kill him, then you lose Sylvie and Richard."

I pushed past him. "I am getting really tired of doing everyone's dirty work."

"No one is better at dirty work than you are, Anita."

That stopped me, made me turn back around to face him. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything. It's just the truth." I stared into his so-solemn eyes. I would have liked to argue, but I really couldn't.

I'd thought I couldn't feel worse about myself tonight. I'd been wrong. Watching the look in Jason's eyes, hearing him talk about me like that, made me feel worse. This night just couldn't get any more depressing.

Chapter 14

DAWN WAS MINUTES away when Jean-Claude came through the door in a robe. "You may have the bed, *ma petite*, and I will take my coffin. I think your nerves are raw enough without me dying in your arms as the sun rises."

I'd have liked to argue, because I wanted him to hold me in the worst way, but he was right. I'd had enough shocks for one night. "Nathaniel will stay with me," I said.

A look passed over Jean-Claude's face. "And Jason, as well."

"Why?"

"I do not have the time to explain, *ma petite*, but please trust me that Jason should be here, too. It is for the best."

I could feel dawn trembling close, even so deep underground. "Okay, Jason can stay, too."

Jean-Claude was already edging out the door. "I will tell him on my way to the coffin room. I am sorry to leave you like this, *ma petite*"

"Go, it's almost dawn," I said.

He blew me a kiss then was gone, leaving the door slightly ajar. Nathaniel was sitting on the corner of the bed, neutral in face, eyes, even body language. He was very good at seeming nonthreatening, soothing almost.

I'd been sleeping off and on for almost four days, yet I was tired, unbelievably tired. I wasn't sure it was physical, more like I'd overused my mind, my emotions. I was wrung out. "Let's get some sleep."

He pulled off his tank top without another word, kicked off his shoes, pulled off his socks, and began to unbraid his hair. I knew that would take a while, so I went into the bathroom while he finished. It had been a long time since I'd seen Jean-Claude's bathroom, with its fancy black tub that was big enough for a small orgy. The silver swan that the water came out of always reminded me of a fountain. But no bath tonight. I just wanted to sleep and to forget. Forget everything.

Of course, I hadn't come away with jammies, and the shirt that Nathaniel had picked for me, though attractive and comfortable, was not long enough to be a sleep shirt. I could not sleep in jeans; it just wasn't comfortable. Damn, why should the small things be so important on a night when all the big things had gone to hell?

There was a knock on the bathroom door. "I'll be out in a minute, Nathaniel."

"It's Jason."

"What do you want?"

"Didn't Jean-Claude tell you that I was bunking with you tonight?"

"He mentioned it."

"He also sent me with pajamas for you. He figured you didn't pack an overnight case."

That got me to the door, and opening it. Jason stood there in a pair of blue silk boxers, baggy enough to be acceptable as sleepwear. Acceptable for him to wear while sharing a bed with me, I might add. Jason, left to his own devices, wore men's bikini underwear--or less--to bed.

He held out a folded piece of red satin. I took it and let it spill through my hands. It was actually two pieces, a loose top with spaghetti straps and a pair of shorts. It was obviously meant to be lingerie.

"He said to tell you that, of anything he had that would fit you, it covered the most, end quote," Jason said.

I sighed. "Thanks, Jason, I'll be right out." I closed the door without waiting for a reply. The top that had looked loose actually clung pretty tightly across my breasts. You'd certainly know whether I was cold or not. The shorts were cut so high on the sides that the legs almost met the waistband. It managed to cover everything and still not leave much to the imagination. Lingerie design at its best, I suppose.

I opened the door and turned off the bathroom light as I came out. Jason was already tucked into the covers on the right side of the bed. Nathaniel was still sitting on the other side. He got up as I came out, his unbound hair floating around him like a living curtain. "My turn," he said softly, turning on the bathroom light and closing the door.

"You look wonderful," Jason said.

"No compliments, Jason. I'm uncomfortable enough in the lingerie."

"Then by all means take it off."

I frowned at him.

He patted the bed beside him, grinning at me. "Come to bed."

"Piss me off enough and I'll send you back to your room."

"Jean-Claude told me to stay here today."

"I could insist." I had my gun on top of my folded clothes, tucked under one arm.

"If you'd shoot me just for teasing you, I'd have been dead a long time ago."

"Please, Jason, I have had a very hard night. Please, just behave yourself, just this once."

He raised his hand in the Boy Scout salute. "I won't bite, promise."

That made me think of Micah and caused me to blush, which was embarrassing under the circumstances.

Jason's eyes widened. "That's a better reaction than I've ever gotten from you. I'll have to remember the line."

"You reminded me of something embarrassing, that's all."

The grin faded to a smile. "I knew it wasn't because of me."

"I am not going to baby-sit your ego, too, Jason. You'll have to take care of it yourself."

"Always do." The smile had faded, leaving him serious. With his yellow hair and blue eyes, he looked somehow out of place against all the black silk, as

if he needed a different color to frame him to best advantage. Of course, the bed wasn't meant to frame him to best advantage, it was meant to frame Jean-Claude.

The thought was enough. I felt him in his coffin, felt him dead to the world, gone away wherever vampires go when the sun rises. The feel of him so distant, unable to hold me, or help me, made me feel cold, and even more cut adrift.

I leaned against the heavy cherry wood post of the bed, one hand on it. But my hands were not big enough to encircle the wood. It was a big bed--at least king size.

"What's wrong, Anita?"

I shook my head. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I'm sorry. I will be good. I promise."

"No more teasing?" I asked.

He tried to stay serious, but a smile crept through. "I'd promise no more teasing if I thought I could live up to it, but I will promise to try and not tease you anymore today. How's that?"

I had to smile. "Honest, I guess." I sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You seem lost tonight," he said.

It was so close to what I was thinking that I turned and looked at him. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to someone who knows you."

"Do you know me that well, Jason?"

"Sometimes. And sometimes you are totally confusing to me."

I pulled back the covers and crawled under the sheet, pushing the heavy satin coverlet away from me. I'd left a lot of distance between me and Jason. I slid my gun under the nearest pillow, safety on. And for extra precaution, since I was sleeping with non-gun users, no bullets were in the chamber.

"Honest, Anita, I'll behave myself, you can move closer."

"I know."

"And not just because Jean-Claude and Richard wouldn't like it."

"Richard isn't dating me anymore, Jason. He's not mine anymore." Just saying it out loud made my skin colder, my stomach clench tight.

"He may say that, but if he found out I tried anything tonight, anything serious, he'd make me pay for it."

"What do you mean?"

"He may not be dating you, but I'll bet my favorite body part that he wouldn't tolerate you dating any of the other werewolves. Him not being able to have you isn't the same thing as not wanting you."

I looked at him, sheet-covered knees hugged to my chest. "When did you get so smart?"

"I have my moments."

I had to smile. "Yeah, you do."

We were both smiling when Nathaniel came out of the bathroom. "Hit the lights, Nathaniel."

Nathaniel did what I asked, and the blackness was complete. The lights were on a timer and would come on softly in a few hours. But until then it was a darkness so complete it was like being dropped in ink. I'm not usually bothered by darkness, but just then it was claustrophobic, like some giant black hand pressing against me.

I felt Nathaniel by the bed. "Please, turn on the bathroom light, leave the door ajar." He went back and did it. One of the good things about Nathaniel was he didn't question orders much. It used to bug me. Now I counted on it, sometimes.

He left the door open a crack, just enough to let a slender finger of light fall into the room and slant along the bed.

Nathaniel lifted the sheet and crawled into bed without a word. But him crawling in meant I had to move over closer to Jason. I found the gun and moved it down a pillow with me. But Nathaniel didn't crowd me, and there was still space between us when we all tucked in for the night. Not as much space as I'd have liked, but still space. In fact I was able to roll over onto my side without bumping anyone. Of course, that wasn't how I slept at home. At home Nathaniel and the rest of the wereleopards cuddled into big piles. I'd slept most of the last six months among them. It was, sadly, getting to the point that when I slept alone I felt lonely.

Nathaniel had rolled automatically onto his side, his back to me, waiting for me to close the distance between us. He'd already moved his hair to one side like a blanket that had to be moved out of the way, leaving his back and part of his neck smooth and bare. I lay there for a second or two, then thought, screw it. I moved in against him, pressing myself to the smooth warmth of his body, my arm sliding around his waist. He was just a few inches taller than me, enough that I cuddled down just a little, pressing my face into his back, in the hollow behind his shoulder blade. It was the way we'd gone to sleep for a long time.

"Now I do feel left out," Jason said.

I sighed, clutching Nathaniel a little tighter. "Do you promise not to try anything?"

"I promise to be good."

"That's not what I asked."

He gave a small laugh. "You're better than you used to be at this game. Okay, I promise not to try anything."

"Then you can get closer, if you want to."

"You know I do," he said. I could feel him moving across the bed towards us.

"You also promised to be good."

"You have no idea how good I can be." He was very close when he said the last.

"You're pushing it, Jason."

"Sorry." But he didn't sound sorry. He curled against my back, his body spooning against me, his knees bending into a near perfect line behind mine. We were within an inch of being the same height, which made spooning easy. It

also put certain parts of his anatomy up against my butt, and it was hard not to notice that he was happy to be there. Not too long ago, I'd have made him move, but I'd spent months learning shapeshifter etiquette. The men tried their best not to get erections, and not to use them when they did; the women tried to ignore the fact that they had them. That was the rule. It allowed everyone to pretend we were just a bunch of puppies sleeping in a nice friendly pile. To acknowledge anything else meant the system fell apart.

I realized that it didn't bother me. Over the months I'd learned that it was just one of those involuntary things that happened, nothing truly personal. I think Jason was disappointed that he didn't get more of a reaction from me. When I didn't react at all, he moved his hips just a fraction away from me, but snuggled the rest of himself against me more tightly.

I was effectively sandwiched between them, and it reminded me forcibly of waking up between Caleb and Micah. Not a comforting memory. But the smell of Nathaniel's skin was familiar. The vanilla scent of his hair where it edged my face and stretched under his body was comforting. I drew the scent of him around me like a blanket, pulled my body in as close to the warm curve of him as I could go and not come out the other side, and clung. I acknowledged in my head, though never aloud, that tonight I clung. I held him like he was the last solid thing in the world, the way I'd wanted to hold Jean-Claude and couldn't.

Jason's hand smoothed along my hip, but I'd forced his hand up from around my waist when I tucked so tightly against Nathaniel; there was really nowhere else for it to go. His hand was very still against my bare leg, and there was a tension to him, as if he was waiting for me to protest. When I didn't, he relaxed and even moved his entire body back against me. He'd managed to calm himself. Good for him.

Honestly, it was nice having Jason's weight at my back. Normally, I spooned Nathaniel--took the dominant position with my body protecting his--my back bare to the room. But I wasn't feeling particularly dominant. I wanted someone to have my back. And, if it couldn't be Jean-Claude, or Richard, Jason wasn't a bad choice. For all his teasing, he was my friend.

Nathaniel fell asleep first; he usually drifted off faster than I did. Somehow I knew that Jason was still awake pressed against my back, his hand on my thigh. I could feel a tension in him as I began to drift off, and strangely, it was comforting. Jason literally had my back. It meant I could sleep, and between the three of us, whatever came through the door, we could probably handle it. Probably.

Chapter 15

I WAS DREAMING. Something confusing about bodies and running and a ringing noise that made the crowd run faster. Ringing noise? I woke up enough to feel Nathaniel move beside me. He groped over the side of the bed and came up with my cell phone from my pile of clothes. He handed the ringing phone to me. "It's for you."

Jason mumbled, "God, what time is it?"

I flipped the phone open and put it to my ear before anyone answered his question. "Yeah, it's me." I was only half awake.

"Anita?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"It's Rafael."

That made me sit up. Rafael was the wererat king. Their equivalent of an Ulfric. He was also Richard's ally. "I'm here, what's up?"

"First, my condolences. I hear you may be Nimir-Ra in truth next full moon."

"Gee, news does travel fast," I said, trying not to sound bitter, but failing.

"Second, I know the pack has one of your leopards, and that you must try and win him back from them tonight. You are allowed to bring allies with you, and I would be honored if you would allow the wererats to accompany you."

"I appreciate the gesture, Rafael, you don't know how much I appreciate it, but I'm not lupa anymore. Your treaty is with the pack, and I'm not pack anymore."

"True, but you risked yourself once to save me from torture, and possible death. I told you then that the wererats would not forget what you had done for us."

"What about your treaty with Richard?"

"It's with Richard, not the pack."

"Showing up at my back tonight is still a conflict of interests, don't you think?"

"I don't think so. I think it will make the point that if Richard is no longer Ulfric, the wererats will not be the werewolves' allies."

"You'll show up with me tonight to make it clear that your treaty is with Richard and not the pack?"

Jason sat up in the bed.

"Yes," Rafael said.

"Clever you."

"Thank you."

"So you don't like Jacob either?"

Jason moved closer to me, as if he could hear Rafael's side of the conversation. Maybe he could.

"No," Rafael said.

"Me either."

"So I will meet you at your home tonight before we drive to the lupanar."

"Just you?" I made it a question.

"Oh, no, we will be there in force so the point is not lost on Jacob's supporters."

"I like the way you think," I said.

"I wish Richard did," Rafael said.

"Have you tried to get him to execute Jacob, too?" I asked.

"I knew you would understand both the problem and the needed solution, Anita."

"Oh, I understand. I just wish Richard did."

"Yes," Rafael said, "yes. Jacob is not the man Richard is, but he has some qualities that I would wish on Richard if I could."

"Me too."

"I'll meet you tonight at your house at full dark."

"I'll be there. And Rafael ..."

"Yes?"

"Thanks."

"No thanks are necessary. The rats owe you a debt. We pay our debts."

"And it allows you to make a threat to Jacob and his supporters without doing anything that could start a war," I said.

"As I said, Anita, you understand things that Richard does not. Until tonight."

"Until tonight," I said. He hung up. I hung up, flipping the phone closed. Jason was practically leaning over my shoulder.

"Did I just hear that Rafael and the wererats are going with you tonight to the lupanar?"

"You going to tattle to Richard?" I asked, staring at his face from inches away, his back touching my shoulder.

"No."

My eyes widened.

"Unless Richard specifically asks, 'Is Rafael going to be there tonight as Anita's ally?' then I don't have to answer. And I'm not volunteering the information."

"That's cutting your oath of obedience pretty close, isn't it?"

"My loyalty is to Richard. And having the rats with you tonight will help Richard, not hurt him."

I nodded. "Sometimes you have to keep things from Richard to help him."

"Unfortunately," Jason said.

I handed the phone to Nathaniel, who put it back on the floor with my clothes. I checked my watch. It was ten o'clock; we'd had a little over six hours of sleep. Time to start the day. Yippee! It was still hours before I could expect Jean-Claude to be awake.

I snuggled down into the covers on my back. Nathaniel rolled onto his side, hand going across my stomach, one leg entwined over my legs. His second favorite sleeping position, though one I often had to move him out of before I could go to sleep. But I wasn't sleeping, I was thinking, so it was okay.

He rubbed his cheek against my shoulder, and a small movement of his lower body pressed him against me. He was hard and firm under the silky shorts. It as morning, he was male, it was normal. Normally, I could ignore it, just one of those things that you pretended didn't happen, but today ... Today

the feel of him pressed against me made things low in my body clench tight. The need rode through my body like fire spilling through me, over me, inside me.

Nathaniel went very still beside me.

Jason was sitting up, rubbing his bare arms. "What was that?"

I tried not to move, not to breathe, to just be as still as Nathaniel. I tried to think of something besides the warmth of his body pressed against the length of mine. Tried not to feel the press of him hard and ready through the satin of the jogging shorts. I grabbed the sheet and jerked it off of us in one violent movement. I gazed down the length of his body, of our bodies, pressed together. The shorts clung like a second skin to the back of him. The *ardeur* rushed through me again like a new pulse I'd never felt before, and my beast rose up through the depths with it. It was as if they were tied together. I hungered, and my beast woke, rolling inside me like a lazy cat, stretching, eyeing the mouse. Except what this cat wanted to do to the mouse was not only against the laws of nature, but physically impossible. The trouble was this mouse smelled of vanilla and fur, and he was warm and full against me. I wanted to roll him over on his back and tear off the shorts and see what I was feeling. I wanted to lick down his chest, down his stomach, and ... The visual was so strong that I had to close my eyes against the sight of him lying there. But sight wasn't my only problem. The smell of his skin was suddenly overwhelming, sweet. And I had a desire to roll my body on top of his, not for sex exactly, but to paint his scent on my body, to wear it like a dress.

"Anita," it was Jason. "What's happening?"

I opened my eyes to find him bending over me, propped on one elbow, and the *ardeur* widened to include him. It did not discriminate. I touched his face, ran my fingers down the edge of his cheek, traced the fullness of his lower lip with my thumb.

He moved his mouth back just enough to speak. "Jean-Claude said you'd inherited his need, his incubus. I don't think I believed him ..." My hand traced down his face, his neck, his chest. "... until now," he whispered.

My hand stopped over his heart. It beat against my hand, and I could suddenly feel my pulse in my palm beating against his skin, as if my heart had spilled down my arm to cup against his body.

"Ask me why Jean-Claude insisted I stay in here today."

I just looked at him. I couldn't think, couldn't speak. I could feel his heart, almost caress it. His heart sped, beating faster. My heart sped to catch it, until our hearts were beating together, and it was hard to tell where one pulse stopped and the other began. I could taste his heartbeat in my mouth as if it pulsed inside me already, caressing the roof of my mouth as if I had already taken a bite of him.

I closed my eyes and tried to distance myself from the ebb and flow of his body, his warmth, his need.

"Jean-Claude was afraid you'd try to feed on Nathaniel. I'm supposed to keep that from happening." His voice was breathy.

I raised up, and Nathaniel's arms curled around my waist, pressing his face into my side. I sat up beside Jason with Nathaniel like a tempting weight wrapped around my body. My hand stayed on Jason's chest, cupping his heart. He should have moved away, but he didn't. I could feel his desire, feel the need in him. It was a pure desire, not for power, or anything else, just simply for me. It wasn't love, but it was purity of a sort. He simply wanted me. I stared into his blue eyes, and there was no deceit, no agenda. Jason didn't want to secure his power base, or gain mystical energy, he just wanted to have sex with me, to hold me in his arms.

I'd always treated Jason as lesser than a friend, young and amusing, not serious. Jean-Claude's *ardeur* let me see into his heart, and I found it the most pure of any that I'd looked into in a long time.

I stared down at Nathaniel where he lay clinging to me. I knew his heart, too. He wanted me physically, but more, he wanted me to want him. He wanted to belong to me in every way. He longed for safety, a home, someone to take care of him, and to take care of. He saw in me all the things that he'd lost over the years. But he didn't really see me; he saw an ideal of me that he wanted.

I ran my hand down his arm, and he snuggled against me. I looked back at Jason and let my other hand drop away from him, but it was like I pulled something out of him as it moved; his heart still beat inside my body. We didn't have to touch for that.

The fact that Jason wanted me just for me with no ulterior motives made me want to reward him. Made me love him just a little. It overrode the hunger, stilled my beast, helped me think.

"Get out, both of you, get out."

"Anita, is that you?"

"Go, Jason, take him with you, and go."

"I don't want to go," Nathaniel said.

I grabbed a handful of that thick hair and raised him to his knees with it. I expected to see fear in his eyes, or betrayal, but what I saw was eagerness. I used his hair as a handle and drew him to me until our faces almost touched. I felt his heart thudding, the thrill through his body as I drew him into me. Nathaniel would never tell me no.

If someone can't tell you no, it's rape, or something like it. The *ardeur* poured through me, taking my breath in a long shuddering line. I wanted to kiss Nathaniel, to fill his mouth with my tongue. And I knew if I did, it would be too late.

My voice came out strangled. "You will go when I tell you to go, now get out!" I released my hold on him so suddenly that he fell back against the bed.

Jason was on the other side of the bed, pulling Nathaniel away from me, pushing him towards the door. Watching them go made me want to cry, or scream. They were perfect for feeding. The room was thick with mutual desire, and I was sending them away. I could still feel their heartbeats like candy in my mouth, like a double echo of my own heart.

I covered my eyes with my hands and screamed, wordless, pain-filled. It was as if the hunger finally realized that I was truly going to let them go. It

raged through me, tearing one ragged scream from my mouth after another, as fast as I could draw breath. I lay on the bed in the silk sheets, writhing, screaming. I had a sudden memory, and it wasn't mine, of this need denied, locked away in the dark where no hand could touch you, where no skin could melt into yours. I felt the faintest edge of Jean-Claude's madness after that particular punishment. He'd healed, but the memory was still raw.

Hands on me, holding me down. I opened my eyes to find Nathaniel and Jason holding me down. They each had a hand on one wrist and one leg. They could bench press small elephants, but as my body writhed against the bed, I raised them up, made them struggle to hold me.

"Anita, you're hurting yourself," Jason said.

I looked down my body and found bloody scratches on my arms and legs. I had to have done it, but I didn't remember doing it. The sight of those bloody scratches calmed me, made me lie still under their hands.

"I'm going to get something to tie you down with just until Jean-Claude rises," Jason said.

I nodded, afraid to speak, afraid of what I'd say.

He told Nathaniel to hold me, but the only way one person could do that was to hold my wrists while pressing against me with his lower body. It wasn't perfect control, but it kept me from hurting myself.

Nathaniel's hair fell around our bodies with a dry rushing sound, until I saw the world through a curtain of his hair. The scent of him was like some warm pressure between his upraised chest and mine. I could smell the fresh scent of blood, too. And my beast wanted to lick the wounds, wanted to feed on my own skin, or better yet, open wounds on Nathaniel and feed off of him. Just the thought tightened my body, made me writhe underneath him, until I'd freed my legs and he slid against me, only our clothing separating us. He made a small sound, half-protest, half-something else.

I raised my wrists off the bed, pushing against his grip on me. I felt his arms strain against me, forcing me back against the bed. It shouldn't have been a struggle for him to hold me here like this. I was gaining other things besides hunger through the marks, or the beast. Nathaniel was still stronger than I was, I could feel that. But there are things besides strength that count when you're struggling. I raised my arms from the bed again, only a few inches, and he forced me down again. But when I had enough room, I rotated my right wrist against his thumb, and my hand was free.

I raised up enough to kiss his chest, and he went very still above me. I knew in that instant that he wouldn't try and regain control of my arm. I bit him gently, and his breath went out in a soft, sharp sound. I licked my way up his chest, with him still holding my left arm, his lower body still pinning mine. I ran my tongue over his nipple and felt his breathing quicken. I locked my mouth around his nipple and bit into the skin, the flesh underneath. He shuddered above me, his body jerking enough that I had to be careful not to break the skin. But I held on as he moaned above me, and when I drew back, I saw that I had left a near perfect imprint of my teeth behind.

I lay back against the bed and stared at the bite mark on his chest, with his nipple in the center of it, and a thrill went through me, a wave of pleasure at the sight of it, and a feeling of ... possession. I'd marked him.

I drew my left wrist out of his hand, and he didn't fight me. He stayed propped above me on his arms, his hips pressed against me, his hair in a cascade around us. He stared down at me, and his face was raw with need. I didn't need anything else to tell me how much he wanted me to finish what I'd begun.

I raised up enough to kiss him, and his lips trembled against mine. The kiss was long and full, and a sound came low in his throat, and he suddenly collapsed against me, his full body weight pinning me to the bed, our mouths, our arms, our bodies locked together in a warm, vanilla-scented nest of his hair, like being rolled in warm satin. Nathaniel kissed me as if he would climb inside me through my mouth, and I opened for him, let him explore me, taste me, touch me. It wasn't his hand underneath my top, kneading my breast, that brought me to my senses. It was my hands down the back of his shorts, cupping the smooth curve of his buttocks. It helped me swim back into control, to fight down the desire, the hunger. Where the hell was Jason? I stopped kissing Nathaniel, stopped touching him, while his hands, his mouth, explored my body. His need was so strong, so strong. I could not leave the bed. I could not walk away. I was not that strong.

"Nathaniel, stop."

His mouth was on my breast through the satin of the top. He didn't seem to hear me.

"Nathaniel, stop!" I grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled him away from me. The front of the top was wet where his mouth had been. His eyes didn't seem to focus on me. It was as if he didn't see me at all.

"Nathaniel, can you hear me?"

He finally nodded. "Yes." Anyone else would have protested being stopped, but he simply looked at me, eyes beginning to focus. There was no resentment on his face, no anger. He simply did what I told him to do and waited for me to say more. I didn't understand Nathaniel; even knowing his heart's desires gave me no real understanding of him. We were too different, but today that difference might help us.

I would not, *could* not have sex with Nathaniel. But I couldn't stop completely either. I had to feed. I had to sink my teeth into his flesh, had to bathe in his lust, had to. "Get off me."

He rolled onto his back, gazing up at me, lying in a pool of his hair, like a shining auburn frame around his body. I wanted to see all of him framed against his hair, and all I had to do was drag his shorts down the curve of his hips. The image was so strong I had to close my eyes, take deep breaths. The need to touch him lashed through me, almost painful, as if the *ardeur* could force me to do it. And maybe it could. But I would control how I touched him. I would control at least that much.

I opened my eyes and found him gazing up at me with those impossible lilac eyes. "Roll over onto your stomach," I said, my voice hoarse.

He rolled over without a single question, and I was reminded how absolutely helpless he was with a dominant. He would do what he was told, whatever he was told. It helped steady me, to know that I had to be in charge. I had to have some control, because he would have none.

I picked up handfuls of that thick hair and pushed it to one side like a piled beast. I bared his back, in a clean smooth line. He turned his head to the side and gazed at me through the film of his hair. There was no fear in him, only a vast patience, an eagerness, and need.

I rose on all fours over him, straddling his body, and lowered my mouth to his skin. I licked across his shoulders, but it wasn't enough. I bit him, gently, and he made a small movement underneath me. I bit harder, and a tiny sound escaped his lips. I bit him hard enough that I felt his flesh fill my mouth, felt the grip of him, the meat of him. I wanted to tear at his flesh, to literally feed from him. The desire was almost overwhelming. I collapsed on top of him, my cheek against his back, until I could control myself. But the scent of his flesh, the smoothness of it under my cheek, the rise and fall of his breathing under my body, it was too much. I would not eat him literally, but I had to feed.

I bit the flesh of his back, drew him into my mouth, and this time I did not stop until I tasted the sweet metallic taste of blood. It was the beast that wanted to finish, blood was not enough. But I raised from the wound and moved on. I marked Nathaniel's back with near perfect imprints of my teeth, and more and more of them held blood. It was as if the longer I did it, the harder it was to control.

The scent of fresh blood tightened my body, filled me with heat and longings that had to do more with food than sex. I sat straddling his body looking down at his back, at my handy work. Blood ran in tiny drops from some of the wounds, but mostly it looked like tiny mouths pressed into his flesh. And it wasn't enough.

I slid my hands down the back of his shorts, drawing my nails delicately along his flesh. He writhed under the touch, started to rise from the bed, and I pushed him back down. "No, no," I said, and he went still under my hands.

I slid his shorts down his body until he lay nude underneath me. I spread his legs so I could kneel between them, lowered my mouth to that smooth, untouched skin, and marked him. There was more flesh to hold in my mouth here, tight, but more plentiful. I filled my mouth with him, drew blood in red, hot circles, until I heard him making small helpless noises. And I knew they weren't pain noises.

I rose on my knees above him, gazed down at the wounds I'd laid on his body, and I wanted more.

I slid my satin top off and wiggled out of the shorts. I laid my naked body on his and rolled along his back, his buttocks, rubbing the blood from the wounds on my body. Nathaniel was saying, "please, please, please," over and over under his breath. His need was like a pressing weight, a thick cloud that hovered over us. It was chokingly close, so overwhelming. He wanted this so badly. This, not sex, this. He'd waited so very long for me to dominate him, to take him.

Micah had wanted me, but his had been the want of a relative stranger. A man wanting an attractive and powerful mate. But with Nathaniel it was different. His desire had built over years, over a thousand intimacies, a thousand denials. It had built until it was a great weight in his body, in his mind. It was a thing that burdened him down, filled him up, and he could not be free of it. I understood why Jean-Claude had said that we would feed off those we were already attracted to. There was so much more to feed from with Nathaniel. Our history together made it not just a feeding, but a feast.

I worked my way back down his body, biting along his flesh, not drawing blood now. I lay with my cheek pressed against the curve of his buttocks, fighting with myself not to reach my hand around to the front of him. Fighting the growing need. I would not touch him, not like that. When I could trust myself, I spread his legs as far as they would go, and bit down, marking areas untouched, getting ever closer, until I could see him pressed between his body and the bed. I wanted to lick him there, roll his testicles in my mouth. But I didn't trust myself. I'd laid his back and buttocks bloody, I didn't trust myself, couldn't guarantee what I would do. I moved my mouth back without touching him, and the pressure of his lust and mine rode like summer lightning, almost there, almost there. I ran my tongue on the small ridge of skin just in back of his testicles, and Nathaniel cried out.

I sucked the skin, drew it into my mouth in a long line, working it with tongue and teeth, and the pressure broke over us like a storm released in one long thunderous burst. He called my name, and I raked his thighs with my nails and fought with two different hungers not to bite that delicate bit of skin away from his body. When it was over, I drew back from him just enough to see that I hadn't marked him, not even the mark of my teeth. I lay on the bed, between his legs, one arm on his thigh, the other folded beneath me, listening to the pounding of my heart.

He lay quiet except for his still frantic breathing. A sound raised me up to gaze over Nathaniel's leg, propping myself up on the smooth wounded flesh of his butt.

Jason was standing in the middle of the room with what looked like shackles in his arms. His eyes were wide, his own breathing a little too fast.

I should have been embarrassed, but the *ardeur* was sated, and my beast lay curled inside me like a contented cat. I was too well-pleased with myself to be embarrassed. "How long have you been watching?" Even my voice sounded lazy, content.

He had to clear his throat twice before he could say, "Long enough."

I climbed back up Nathaniel's body, until I was pressed against the length of him. I laid my cheek against his face, and whispered, "Are you alright?"

"Yes." It was a whisper.

"I didn't hurt you?"

"It was ... wonderful. Oh, God, it was ... better than I'd imagined it."

I raised up, stroking his hair, turning back to look at Jason, still standing in the middle of the floor. "Why didn't you try and stop me?"

"Jean-Claude was afraid you'd tear out Nathaniel's throat or something messy like that." Jason's voice was returning to normal, only the slightest edge of uncertainty in it. "But I watched you. Every time I thought I'd have to intervene, you drew back. Every time I thought you were going to lose control, you didn't. You rode the hunger, you tamed it."

I felt Jean-Claude waken, felt him take his first breath of the day. He sensed me, too, felt me still lying naked on Nathaniel's body, smelled the scent of fresh blood, felt that I had fed, and fed well. I felt him coming towards me, hurrying towards me, attracted to the scent of blood, and warm flesh, and sex, and me.

Chapter 16

"JEAN-CLAUDE'S COMING," JASON said.

"I know," I said.

Jason walked to the foot of the bed and gazed down at us, at me. His eyes lingered on me. Most of my body was hidden beside Nathaniel, but he looked at what was revealed. If I hadn't had that glimpse into his heart, I'd have been mad, or told him to stop, but I didn't know what to say now. He wanted me, just me for me, not forever, but just for a night, a day, a week, just for sometimes. Jason's feelings for me might be the most uncomplicated of all the men in my life. Uncomplicated had its attractions, even with the *ardeur* gone. The moment I thought *gone*, I realized that wasn't true. The hunger was just below the surface; like something simmering in a pot, you have to keep the heat low, or it boils over. I'd had enough heat for one day.

Jason and I looked at each other. I don't know what we would have said, but just then the door opened. It was Asher. His room was closer than the coffin room, but I hadn't expected him. His golden hair lay in perfect waves around the shoulders of his robe. Vampires didn't move in their "sleep" so no morning hair problems. The robe was a rich, deep brown, open over matching pajama bottoms. His chest was bare, and the robe flared around him like a cape as he strode into the room.

He came to stand beside the bed, but his gaze went to Nathaniel's body, to the blood. "I felt ..." He raised his eyes to my face, and I peered at him over Nathaniel's body. "I felt the call."

"I didn't call you," I said.

"The power did." He dropped to his knees beside the bed. "You did this?" I nodded.

He reached out towards me, as if to touch my face, then jerked back. It was like he'd touched something in the air in front of me that had startled him.

He raised his hand to his face and sniffed it, then licked it, as though there was something there to taste.

"May I taste your *pomme de sang*?" It was French for apple of blood, and it was a nickname for a person that was a regular donor to a particular vampire. Part of me wanted to argue with the phrase, but I had fed off of Nathaniel, even tasted his blood. To demand a different phrase was splitting hairs a little too finely for my conscience. We'd call a spade a spade.

"Define taste." I said.

"Lick the wounds."

The suggestion should have bothered me, but it didn't. I lowered my face enough to see Nathaniel's eyes. "Is it okay with you, Nathaniel?"

He nodded, face still pressed to the bed.

"Help yourself."

Asher lowered his mouth to Nathaniel's back, to a wound just above his waist. He kept those ice blue eyes rolled up towards me, the way you would watch someone on a judo mat--afraid that if you look away, they'll hurt you. It reminded me of watching lions drink from pools, with their eyes rolled up, watching for danger while they drank.

Nathaniel made a small sound as Asher licked the wound. It had stopped bleeding, but as the vampire traced the wound with his tongue, I saw blood well to the surface again. Vampires have an anticoagulant in their saliva, but I'd never seen its use demonstrated quite so well before.

It made me wonder. I curled closer to Nathaniel's body, one leg entwining over his. I didn't ask permission, because he was mine, and I knew him well enough to know he would not only not mind, but he would welcome it. I lowered my mouth to another of the wounds that had nearly stopped bleeding and licked. There was the sweet copper taste of blood, and the thick, rich taste of his skin, and a taste of ... meat. As if I could tell what he would taste like if I ate him one bite at a time.

The beast flared over my skin like something trembling and alive. Nathaniel's beast responded to it, flaring, rolling, as if I could see it just below his skin, just below his ribs, as if I could feel where it lay in the heart of his body. In that moment I knew I could call his beast, could coax him to change when the moon was far from full. I was his Nimir-Ra, and that meant so much more than merely being his dominant.

Asher's eyes had drowned in pale blue fire, so he looked blind as he licked at the wound. He gazed into my face, directly across Nathaniel's body, our eyes at the same level as we tasted the wounds. My wound bled a little bit more, but not as much as Asher's did. I was not truly a blood drinker -- I fed on other things -- and staring across Nathaniel's body, feeling his breathing quicken as the two of us touched him, I knew that those other things were here for the taking.

Asher's hand slid over Nathaniel's body, until he touched my thigh where it curved over Nathaniel's leg. The moment he touched me something rushed between us. It was as if the *ardeur* recognized him, as if it had touched him before.

It made me raise up from the wound, drew me back into myself, a little. Something on my face made Asher take his hand back.

Jean-Claude entered then. He was wearing a black robe with black fur at collar, lapel, and sleeves. His black hair melted into the fur, so you couldn't tell where one blackness stopped and the other began. The last time I'd seen him in the robe, I'd told him there better be something under the robe besides skin. Now, I hoped there wasn't.

Seeing him brought the *ardeur* boiling over me again. It made me catch my breath, things lower than my stomach clenching tight enough to draw a sound from my throat.

"She holds your incubus," Asher said, and his voice tore my gaze from Jean-Claude to him.

"*Oui*." Jean-Claude glided around the room to the opposite side of the bed from where Asher knelt.

"She tastes of you, and of Belle Morte."

"*Oui*," Jean-Claude said. He walked around the bed to the other side, and I rolled away from Nathaniel so I could see Jean-Claude move. The movement exposed the front of my body, and I had enough of myself left to roll onto my stomach.

Jason said, "Awww."

I ignored him.

Jean-Claude lifted the robe so he could crawl onto the bed. The movement revealed a long, pale line of skin from his shoulders to his stomach. The glimpse of that white flesh caught between the blackness of the fur made me want to untie the sash and expose his entire body. But I stayed where I was, half-leaning against Nathaniel, because I was afraid to move. Afraid to go to Jean-Claude, because I didn't trust myself.

There was just enough of *me* left not to want to make love to Jean-Claude in front of the other men. But it was a razor-thin part, something that glittered in the darkness but didn't quite believe itself anymore.

"The hunger recognizes Asher. Is it because it's yours, or because it's hers?" I asked.

"Hers?" he asked.

"Belle Morte."

"I do not know," he said. And he was close enough now that the edge of the robe brushed my body. I could see a thin line of pale skin below the waist where the robe gaped. A thin, thin line of white, but it was enough to let me know that there was nothing under the robe but Jean-Claude.

I wanted to open the robe, to see all of him. I said it without thinking, as if I hadn't meant to say it out loud. "Open the robe." It startled me as if I didn't know my own voice.

I closed my eyes, tried to think.

"It is alright, *ma petite*. Once taken, blood fills your stomach, but lust ..."
Fur brushed in a teasing line down my arm. "Lust is always there, never vanquished completely, never satisfied." He brushed the edge of his furred cuff down my waist, my hip, my thigh, my calf. When he brushed it along my foot,

he started back up, but this time on the back of my body, so that the teasing brush touched my buttocks, my back, my shoulder.

I lay wordless, breathless, under his touch. When he curved the fur around my face, I grabbed the edge of the robe and held him away from me. "Make everyone leave." My voice was barely above a whisper.

"I can do nothing until I have fed, *ma petite*, you know that."

"I know. Blood pressure." I was having a hard time thinking. "Then do it, but ..."

"Hurry," he said softly.

I nodded.

He drew his sleeve out of my grip and looked down the bed to Jason, who was still standing there, watching the show. "Come, *pomme de sang*, come and enjoy the rewards of your sacrifice."

The phrase was oddly formal, and I'd never heard it put that way before. I expected Jason to go around the bed to the same side as Jean-Claude, but he didn't. He rolled over the foot of the bed in a movement so liquid it was like watching water flow, as if his skin barely contained some elemental energy that had nothing to do with the flesh and bone body I was seeing. He ended on his knees on the opposite side from Jean-Claude. I could taste the movement of his body in my mouth, not just his heart, but as if every throb and beat of him was trying to slide over my tongue and down my throat. I could feel his eagerness, not for me, but for what Jean-Claude had to offer. He came eagerly to the vampire, in that breathless rush that you usually save for sex. They mirrored each other, both on their knees, gazing at each other across my body.

"I will leave you alone with your *pomme de sangs* and each other." Asher was standing next to the bed, belting the sash at his waist, securing the robe around him. He stood very straight with that perfect posture that all the old nobles seemed to have, but still he huddled inside the robe.

I rolled onto my stomach, gazing at him, trying to read his face, his body. The discomfort I could read, and even pain. And it must have shown on my face, because Asher dropped his gaze, that wonderful golden hair sliding over the scarred side of his face, so that when he looked up, you could see nothing but the perfect half of him, that one ice-blue eye.

I had a sudden memory of lying in a different bed in a huge dark room surrounded by dozens of candles until the shadows moved and rippled with every small breath of air, every movement of a pale arm. I lay in that trembling golden darkness in the embrace of a pale, dark-haired woman. I gazed up at her, and her face was like something carved of alabaster, with lips red and perfect, hair like the darkness of night made into furred silk, falling around her nude perfection like a veil. Her eyes were pale brown, like dark honey. I knew it was Belle Morte, as if I'd always known her face.

The door opened, and Asher entered, wearing a robe more elaborate, heavier than the one he wore now. But still he huddled in it, held it around his body, afraid. I saw the scars on his face--fresh, raw--and it was ... painful. My chest went tight with the sight of his ruin. I went to my knees, reaching out to him, moving a body that I'd never been inside. Jean-Claude reaching out to

Asher all those centuries ago. But she lay there nude and perfect showing every curve, every secret place to the candlelight, and turned him away. I couldn't remember the words she used, only the look on her face, the utter arrogance, the distaste. The look on Asher's face as he turned from her to Jean-Claude, to me. The look of pain, and he let that glorious hair fall forward, hiding his face, and it was the first time we'd seen him do that, hide from us.

I felt her hands on our body as she turned back to us, as if Asher were no longer there, but we remembered the look on his face, the line of his body as he left that room. I blinked and was back in Jean-Claude's bedroom, watching Asher in his brown silk robe walking towards the door. And the line of his shoulders, the way he held himself, made my chest tight, closed my throat, made my eyes hot with things unsaid and unshed.

"Don't go." I heard myself say it, and I glanced up at Jean-Claude. His face was careful, unreadable, but for just a moment I saw his eyes, and the pain I was feeling was only an echo of what filled his eyes.

Asher stopped at the door and turned, his hair falling over his face, the robe covering everything else. He said nothing, just looked back at me, at us.

I repeated, "Don't go, Asher, don't go."

"Why not?" he asked, his voice as careful and neutral as he could make it.

I couldn't tell him about the shared memory. It would sound like pity, and it wasn't that--not exactly. I couldn't think of a good lie. But this wasn't really the time for lies, anyway. Only truth would heal this. "I can't stand to watch you walk away like this."

He moved his gaze from me to Jean-Claude, and there was anger in him now. "You had no right to share that memory with her."

"I do not choose what *ma petite* knows and what she does not."

"Very well," Asher said. "Now you know how she cast me out of her bed. How she cast me out of his bed."

"That was your choice," Jean-Claude said.

"How could you bear to touch me? I couldn't bear to touch me." He stayed near the door with his head turned to one side, so all you could see was a wave of golden hair. His voice held bitterness the way it could sometimes hold joy--a bitterness that was hard to swallow, like choking on broken glass. Asher's voice and laugh weren't as good as Jean-Claude's, but he seemed better at sharing sorrow and regret than Jean-Claude.

"Why?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Why what?"

"Why did she cast you out?"

Jean-Claude moved beside me, and I realized two things. One, he was shielding from me, from all of us, so I couldn't sense him, and two, his body movement alone let me know he wasn't happy.

Asher grabbed his hair, forced it back from his face, showed the scars to the light. "This, *this*. Our mistress was a collector of beauty, and I am no longer beautiful. It pained her visibly to see me."

"You are beautiful, Asher. That she couldn't see that isn't your fault."

He let his hair fall back. It slid over the scars, hiding them. He had almost stopped doing that when he was here in the Circus. I'd forgotten how, when he first arrived in St. Louis, he had automatically hidden whenever you looked directly at him. He had used every shadow, every fall of light to hide the scars and highlight the beauty that remained untouched. He had stopped doing that around me.

It hurt my heart to see him hide. I tried to keep the sheet over me as I crawled towards the edge of the bed, but it was all tangled and trapped under Jason's and Jean-Claude's weight. Screw it, everyone here had seen the show. I wanted to wipe that hurt look from Asher's face more than I wanted to be modest.

Jason moved out of my way without uttering a single teasing comment. Unheard of! I crawled off the bed and walked towards Asher, and other memories spilled over me like cards thrown in the air. How many times had he watched Jean-Claude and Belle Morte and Julianna and so many others walk towards him nude and eager. Even Jean-Claude had failed him. There had been that shadow in his eyes formed of guilt. Guilt at failing to save Julianna, failing to save Asher. But Asher had assumed it was rejection and that Jean-Claude touched him only out of pity. It hadn't been pity--I had the memory of it-- it had been pain. They had become constant reminders of how each had failed the other. A constant reminder of the woman they'd both loved, and lost. Until the pain was all they had left. Asher had turned it into hate, and Jean-Claude had simply turned away.

I walked through the memories like moving through cobwebs, things that brushed me, clung to me, but did not stop me. His hands were behind his back, his body leaning against the door, pinning them, and I knew why. Through Jean-Claude's "gift" I knew that Asher wanted to touch me and didn't trust himself enough to have his hands out in front of him. But it wasn't me he wanted to touch. In a way he was like Nathaniel; he saw in me what he needed to see, not exactly what was there.

I touched his hair where it hid his face. He flinched. I swept the hair back from his face, standing on tip-toe to reach him, putting one hand lightly on his chest for balance. He moved away from me, taking a step into the room. I grabbed his robe, but he stayed turned away as the robe pulled back from the perfect half of his chest. "Look at me, Asher, please."

He stayed turned away, and I finally had to walk those few steps to him. I was short enough that, standing right in front of him, I could look up underneath the hair into his face. He turned away again, and I stretched up, putting a hand on either side of his face, turning him to look at me. It put my body against his just for balance, and I felt the reluctance in his body, the need to move away. But he stayed immobile under my touch. He kept his hands behind his back, as if I'd tied them there.

The skin under one hand was so smooth, the other so rough. He could have fought me, but he didn't. He let me turn his face to me. I wrapped my hands in the thickness of his golden hair, holding it back from his face. I stared into his upturned face. The eyes, that impossible pale blue, were unreal, like the

eyes of a husky. His lips were still full and kissable, his nose still a perfect profile. Even the scars that started far on the right side of his face were just another part of Asher--just another piece of him that I loved. I'd always assumed that any emotions I felt for Asher were from Jean-Claude's memories of him when they were lovers, companions for over twenty years. But staring at him now, I realized that that was only part of it.

I held memories of his body smooth and perfect. But that wasn't what I thought of when I thought of Asher. I pictured him as he was now, and I still loved him. It wasn't the way I felt about Jean-Claude, or Richard, but it was real, and it was mine. Maybe it wouldn't have existed if I hadn't had Jean-Claude's memories and emotions to build on, but whatever the foundation, I had feelings for Asher that were all mine, no one else's. I realized with something like a shock that it wasn't just everyone else's heart I could see into. I turned and looked back at Jean-Claude, tried to ask with my eyes what I was thinking.

"To know another's heart, you must first know your own, *ma petite*." His voice was soft, no reproach.

I turned back to Asher, and there was something in his eyes--half wonderment, half pain--as if he expected me to hurt him in some way. He was probably right. But if so, I wouldn't mean to do it. Sometimes the greatest wounds are the ones we try the hardest not to inflict.

I let what I was feeling fill my eyes, my face. It was the only gift I had to give him. His expression softened, and what I saw in those lovely eyes was at the same time wonderful and painful. He dropped to his knees, one tear trailing down his smooth cheek. The look on his face was full of so many things. "The look in your eyes heals a part of my heart, *ma cherie*, and wounds another."

"Love is such a bitch," I said.

He laughed and hugged me around the waist, the roughness of his right cheek pressed into my belly, and I valued that more than anything else he could have done. I stroked his hair and held him against me. I looked across the room to Jean-Claude, and the look on his face was drowning deep, a longing so immense that there were no words to hold it. He wanted Asher and me. He wanted what he had had so many centuries ago. He'd once told Asher that he'd once almost been happy, and that had been when he was in Asher's and Julianna's arms. Before she died and Asher was saved but no longer Belle Morte's perfect golden boy. Jean-Claude had been forced to take Asher back to the vampire Council to have him healed. Jean-Claude had traded a hundred years of his own freedom to the Council for the favor of them saving Asher's life. Then Jean-Claude had fled, and Asher had stayed behind, blaming Jean-Claude for Julianna's death and for his ruin. Jean-Claude had gone from being in love and being loved by two people, to losing one lover and having the other one hate him.

We gazed at each other. The look in Jean-Claude's eyes was so raw, like a fresh wound that still bled. He wanted to secure his power base with the triumvirate. He did want that--needed it--but there were other things that he

wanted, almost needed. And one of those was hugging my waist, pressing his face to my stomach.

Jean-Claude lowered his eyes as if he couldn't control what was in them. He was the master of blank, careful expression. The fact that what he felt was too strong to hide said more than anything else. He couldn't shield his emotions right now. They were too strong; they shattered all his careful control, and a part of me was glad.

In that moment I wanted to give him what he most desired. I wanted to do it because I loved him, but it was more than that. I suddenly realized that with Richard gone from our bed, other things were suddenly possible. I turned back to Asher, gazing down on the top of his head, and knew that to be held in the circle of both our arms would heal something inside him that might never heal any other way.

The *ardeur* flared through me, hot, so hot, as if my skin must feel feverish. Asher drew back from me, letting his arms drop slowly to his sides. He gazed up at me, and the look in his eyes was enough. I knew he felt the hunger, too.

"It feels hot," I said. "Always before your power has felt cool, or cold even. It's Richard's beast that holds the heat."

"Lust is warm, *ma petite*, even among the cold-blooded."

I turned towards the bed and was suddenly very aware that I was nude, I was really going to have to get a robe. It wasn't Jean-Claude's gaze that made me look away, it was Nathaniel and Jason. Everyone in this room responded to me, in different ways, for very different reasons. But it was all fodder for this ... need inside me.

Asher made some small movement that drew my attention back to him. I started to reach for him, to push his robe from his shoulders, to watch it fall to the floor. I hugged my arms to me, as if I was cold, but I wasn't cold. It was my turn not to trust where my hands were. The temptation was so thick every where I looked that there seemed no place to walk in safety. I felt trapped. Trapped, not in the room, but in the desire.

When I was sure I could talk without sounding as confused as I felt, I asked "Is this thing permanent, or will it go away when we all adjust to the marks being married?"

"I do not know, *ma petite*. I wish I could tell you something more certain. If you were truly of my get, truly vampire, then I would say, yes, it is permanent. But you are my human servant. You have manifested powers in the past, and some have come and gone." He raised his hands. "There is no way to be sure."

"Is it always like this, never satisfied, never finished?"

"No, you can sate yourself, but it takes much to do it. Usually, one must be content with enough to keep the desire from overwhelming you."

"And you haven't fed like this in months, because you thought I would disapprove?"

"Years. And yes."

I stared at him across the room with Asher still kneeling in front of me. I'd always thought of Jean-Claude as the weaker-willed of the three of us--Richard,

him, and me. Now I stood there afraid to move, afraid not to move, wanting to do things that were not me, not mine, not even Jean-Claude's. I'd known that the lycanthes spoke of their animal half as something separate from them--their beast--but I'd never understood that some of the vampires' powers were the same way. Desires, hungers, so strong and overwhelming that they were like separate beings trapped inside your head, your body, your blood.

Asher made a small movement, and I turned to him. My hand reached out to stroke his hair before I'd turned completely to face him, as if my body had been moving without my eyes or my brain. His hair was thicker textured, more like mine, not the baby-fine curls of Jean-Claude or Jason, or the velvet silk of Nathaniel. I bundled my hands into Asher's hair as if I'd memorize the feel of it. Somewhere between mine and Richard's, somewhere in the middle, but not warm like Richard's was to the touch. Asher hadn't fed today, and he had no warmth to give. His skin was cool under my fingertips as I traced his cheek.

I spoke without looking at Jean-Claude. "How have you stood it? How could you fight the need all this time?"

"You are a fledgling, *ma petite*. Your control will never be weaker than now. I have had centuries to practice my control."

I made myself stop petting Asher. But he took my hand as I moved it back and laid a gentle kiss on my knuckles. Even that small touch made me catch my breath. My voice came out weak. "So you can go without feeding the desire."

"No, *ma petite*."

I turned and stared at him, and Asher rubbed his thumb in small circles on my hand. I remembered that small touch as precious, a habit he had no matter which of us he held hands with. "You said you hadn't fed like this."

"I have had no sex, nor touched anyone in such a complete manner as you have done with Nathaniel. But I must feed the desire, just as I must take blood."

"What happens if you don't?"

"You remember what happened to Sabin when he stopped taking human blood?"

I nodded. Asher's thumb continued its small circle on my hand, and it made things low in my body tighten. "Sabin started to rot while he was still alive." I stared into Jean-Claude's perfect face. "Is that what would happen to you?"

He sat back on the bed in his black robe. Jason had moved against the headboard as if watching a show, and Nathaniel still lay on his stomach where I'd left him, watching us with pale eyes. "There was a vampire of Belle's lineage who renounced the lust. He took only animals, as well, and I believe would have rotted as Sabin did, but he did not have the time. He began to age in a matter of days. When he was a wizened thing, Belle had him killed."

"But you haven't aged, what have you been doing?" It wasn't accusatory. I simply wanted to know, because I could feel Asher on the end of my hand like something huge and ... like something I couldn't live without. I'd wanted Nathaniel, I'd wanted Jason, I'd wanted Micah, but not like this. I think it was Jean-Claude's feelings that made this so much more.

"It is possible to feed from a distance without touching," Jean-Claude said.

"That's why a strip club was your first business. You were feeding off the lust."

"*Oui, ma petite.*"

"Teach me to feed from a distance." Even as I said distance Asher drew my hand to his cheek and rubbed against it like a cat. I had to close my eyes for a second, but I didn't tell him to stop.

"Feeding from a distance is a poor substitute for a true feeding."

I opened my eyes and stared at him across the room, and now I could feel him. I could feel his need--for blood, sex, love, and the touch of our flesh against his. He wrapped his arms around his body, as if he were cold, or didn't trust himself not to leave the bed and come to us.

"Teach me anyway," I said.

"I cannot, not this soon. In a few nights I will instruct you, but your control is not ... complete enough yet."

I started to say, "try me," but Asher drew my finger into his mouth in one long, wet line, and I suddenly couldn't think.

"Come to bed, *ma petite*," Jean-Claude said. "If you feed here, there is a chance you may be sated enough that you will not press our so-stubborn Richard."

The thought was enough to dim the desire for a moment or two. I drew my hand away from Asher, and he didn't protest. The sheer horror of what I'd be like around Richard with this inside me helped me think. Being around him normally made me want sex, but now ... "My God, I'll be lucky if I don't just strip down and do him in the lupanar." I stared at Jean-Claude. "What do I do?"

"I say again, *ma petite*, if you feed now off of such rich fare, you may be too full to need to feed again so soon. It is all I can offer you for tonight. You could simply delay the meeting for a few nights."

I shook my head. "They'll kill Gregory. I have to get him out tonight."

"Then come and feed."

"Define feed?"

"Drink their lust," he said.

I looked at Jason and Nathaniel, and they weren't even trying for neutral. The looks on their faces brought heat in a rush up my face. I shook my head.

"You do not have to have intercourse to feed from them, as you have discovered."

"Aww," Jason said, but the look on his face didn't match the light teasing of his voice. They were responding to my need, the way I'd responded for so long to Jean-Claude's, drawn like a moth to a flame. You just couldn't help wanting to touch it, even when you knew it would burn.

Asher stood. "I will leave you alone. But with permission, I would feed on Nathaniel as my *pomme de sang* for the day."

"No," I said.

His eyes widened just a touch, face going neutral, eyes empty and cool as a spring sky. I felt him draw away from me. "As you wish." He turned for the door.

I grabbed his hand, slid my fingers between his. "Come to bed, Asher."

I'd thought his face was as blank and careful as it could get. I was wrong. His voice held nothing when he asked, "What do you mean?"

"I can't give you back what you had. I can't even give you ..." I stopped and tried again. "But I can let you feed together again."

"How?"

"If Nathaniel says it's okay, you can take blood from him, and Jean-Claude will take blood from Jason. You can feed together."

"Do you know how intimate a thing it is to feed together on your *pomme de sang*? A *pomme de sang* is not a casual feeding, it is intimate, to be shared only with intimate companions."

I entwined my fingers around his hand. "I know." I took a step towards the bed, drawing him with me. "Let us feed on your lust, Asher, as in days of old."

Asher stared past me at Jean-Claude. "The last time two fed from my desire, it was Belle and you."

"I remember," Jean-Claude said softly.

He held his hand out to Asher from across the room, and I was reminded of him reaching for Asher all those centuries ago. "Let it be again as it was before, but better this time. Anita loves you as you are now, not as some ideal thing like a butterfly on a pin to be tossed aside if a wing falls away. Come to us, Asher, come to us both."

Asher smiled, then took a step to be beside me. He offered me his arm in a very old-fashioned gesture. I wanted to take his arm, to have an excuse to rub my body against his as we walked, and that was why I asked, "How about the use of your robe, as well as your hand?"

He gave a low and perfect bow, so low that his hair almost swept the floor. "That you had to prompt me to offer you my robe proves I am not a gentleman." He slipped it off as he stood, and held it for me like a coat. Asher is six feet, so the sleeves hung over my hands and the hem pooled around my feet. I pushed the sleeves up and got the sash tied, but the only thing to do for the length was just to bundle it in one hand like you would an overly long dress. But it covered almost every inch of me, and I felt better for it. The sweet scent of Asher's cologne clung to the robe, and that soft, masculine scent made me turn back to him. Made my eyes seek him out. Seeing Asher with no shirt on didn't make me feel better. I had the urge to caress his bare skin, to lick the scars. I never remembered being this orally fixated before, and wondered if it was the beast talking or the vampire. But to ask the question would be to admit the desire, and I didn't want to know that badly.

I laid my hand in Asher's, partially because he was holding his hand out to me, and partially because even that small touch was satisfying. I wanted to touch him, wanted to wrap myself around him and answer that question that Jean-Claude was so desperate to answer. Was all this beauty and heat ruined? Was Asher unable to function as a man now? I closed my eyes as he led me forward, because the visuals were just too strong. Through Jean-Claude I knew exactly what Asher had looked like nude, before the scars. I held memories of his body bathed in firelight as he lay rampant on a rug in a room in a country

that I had never seen. I knew the play of moonlight on his back as I touched him.

I tripped on the hem of the robe, and he had to catch me to keep me from falling. I was suddenly pressed against his chest with the feel of his arms solid against my back. My face was suddenly uptilted, as if I were waiting for a kiss, and there was one of those moments when you become aware of each other--painfully and suddenly aware of the possibilities of the next few seconds. He picked me up in his arms, carrying me easily, smoothly forward. I'd have told him to put me down, but my heart had filled my throat, and I couldn't speak around it.

Chapter 17

ASHER STRODE TO the bed and laid me on it, leaning over Nathaniel's nude body to do so. I lay on my back and felt movement from every direction. Jean-Claude crawled up beside me, and Jason moved down beside him from the head of the bed. Nathaniel rolled over until we were lying beside each other with him on his side. His eyes told me nothing, except he would not say no, but I asked anyway.

"Do you want Asher to feed from you?"

"Oh, yes," Nathaniel said, and there was something in his voice that I rarely heard--surety. In this moment he knew what he wanted. There was no doubt in him, and the strength of his desire made him ... stronger.

Asher slid in against Nathaniel's back, so that their bodies spooned together. I turned in time to see Jean-Claude mirror the movement with Jason. Jason reached out, touched my arm, and it was like a door had been burst open. I thought I'd felt desire before this, but it had been a dim echo. It roared over me like something huge and burning, except this fire did not burn, it fed me energy, as if I were not the wood on which it fed, but I was the flame. I was the thing that fed and grew and consumed.

I found Jason's mouth and kissed him, kissed him with lips and tongue and teeth, biting at his lips, pulling him into my mouth. And his body was suddenly pressed against mine, his arms pinning me to him, and Nathaniel slid in behind my back. I was pinned between them, and I didn't care.

My leg slid over Jason's hip, my leg touching Jean-Claude on the other side of him. Jason was suddenly pressed between my legs, with only the silk of his shorts between us. It should have been enough to stop me, but it wasn't. I needed him. Nathaniel raised my hair, bit gently at the back of my neck, and a sound drew from my throat. The two of them fell on me, hands, mouths, bodies, like they were fire to my wood, but this wood drew them in, drank them, almost. Jason pushed against me, and the shorts were baggy enough, the

silk thin enough that he entered me. The barest of touches, but it was enough to bring me up for air, to make me draw back from him.

He drew back enough to whisper, "Sorry."

My voice sounded as breathless as his when I said, "I'm not on birth control."

Everyone froze. Jean-Claude peered over Jason's shoulder. "What did you say, *ma petite*?"

"I stopped taking the pill six months ago. I've only been on it for two weeks. No guarantee for another two to four weeks."

"You made love to the Nimir-Raj."

"He's been fixed."

Asher said, "She did what?"

Jean-Claude looked across the bed at him. "Her hunger woke for the first time with the new Nimir-Raj. You have not met him."

"You have," Asher said.

"*Oui*."

Jason was looking at me, and I had to put a hand over his eyes, close them. And the embarrassment helped, but the *ardeur* only withdrew momentarily, like a wave pulling back from the shore, I could feel it rushing towards us again. Jean-Claude was right, every time I said no, the next time was harder to deny.

Jean-Claude rolled off the bed, and I heard a drawer open. He came back into sight with foil-wrapped packages and wordlessly handed them to Jason and Nathaniel.

That did it. I crawled out from between them to huddle against the headboard. "No, no, no, you said no intercourse."

"I said, that you do not need intercourse to feed."

"No, oh, so no." I tucked the robe around my legs and covered everything I could, which was pretty much all of me.

"We are not planning on them having intercourse with you, *ma petite*. But I have both fed on desire and been fed off of by Belle Morte. There comes a time in the feeding where you lose yourself and cannot always think clearly. I do not want regrets if we get carried away."

"I am not going to have sex with Nathaniel, or Jason. Keep this up, and you won't even be on the list."

"I would rather have you angry with me and not in my bed than accidentally pregnant by one of them."

"I think I can keep from fucking them." I sounded angry, but it wasn't anger that I felt, it was a seed of doubt. That hesitation made the anger worse. I always hid behind anger when I could.

"And before this morning, you would have sworn even more strongly that you would not fuck a strange man you had just met."

The blush was so hot, it almost hurt. "I didn't mean to." That sounded weak even to me. "I couldn't ..."

"You could not control yourself, *ma petite*, I know. But if you lose control again, would you not rather be safe?"

I shook my head. "If I can't control myself better than this, we're not going to do this."

"And if you do not feed from the lust in this room, how will you go into the lupanar tonight? How will you see your wereleopard lover tonight when he accompanies you to the lupanar without losing your precious control? How will you stand this close to our Richard and not offer yourself to him? *Ma petite*, you have had sex with a stranger."

"He is her Nimir-Raj," Nathaniel said. "They are meant to be a mated pair."

"Pretty to think so," Jean-Claude said, "but I have been where *ma petite* is right now. I have felt the hunger for centuries, and I tell you that you will not be able to go among the shapeshifters tonight unless you are sated. I ask again, can you delay this meeting for a few nights?"

"I might be able to delay it for a night," I said.

He shook his head. "No, *ma petite*, one night will not suffice. You are drawn to Richard and now to the Nimir-Raj. I think you will be unable to think around them unless you have fed. Your wereleopard's life is at stake. Can you afford to be that distracted? Can you bear the thought of being that out of control in a public setting, among potential enemies?"

"Damn you," I said.

He nodded. "Yes, perhaps, but is anything I have said untrue?"

"No." I shook my head. "I hate it, but no."

"Then let us at least take precautions, *ma petite*. It is luck alone that had the Nimir-Raj made safe. Our lives are complicated enough without that."

I knew what "that" meant. An accidental pregnancy. The thought of it made my blood run colder than anything else had. I hid my face in my hands. "I can't do this."

"Then you must call Richard and tell him you cannot come tonight. You cannot go as you are, *ma petite*. The need will only worsen the longer you deny it."

I raised my face and stared at him. "How much worse?"

He lowered his gaze. "Bad enough."

I crawled across the bed to him, made him look at me. "How bad?"

He tried not to meet my gaze. His shields were back in place, and I couldn't tell what he was feeling. "You would be attracted to all the men. You would ... I cannot guarantee what you would do, *ma petite*, or who you would do it with."

I just stared at him. "No. No, I would never ..."

He touched my mouth with his fingertip. "*Ma petite*, if you have not found my memories of my first days with this inside my body, then it is a blessing. I was a wanton thing before I became a vampire. But what I did when the desire first fell upon me ... The desire did not hit me at once, because I craved blood first, then when that quieted, the desire rose inside me." He took my hands in his, pressed them against the cool flesh of his chest. "I did things, *ma petite*, things that even to a hardened libertine were humiliating. A look, a glance, and it was enough to bring me to them."

"Didn't Belle Morte try to protect you?"

"I did not meet Belle until I had been dead nearly five years."

I stared at him. "I thought Belle was your, whatever, that she made you into a vamp."

"Lisette was my creator. She was of Belle's line, but not a master vampire, not by any stretch of the definition. In France it is customary that every kiss of vampires has at least one vampire belonging to each of the council bloodlines. Lisette was the only one of her kind in a nest descended mostly of far less pleasant vampires. Julian was her Master of the City, and he was my first true master. He brought in people for me, but not people I would have chosen. He brought in ..." Jean-Claude shook his head. "He amused himself at my expense, because he knew I would take whatever he offered, because I would have no choice. I thought I had no room for embarrassment, but he taught me that there were things I did not want to do, and I did them anyway."

I think if he hadn't been shielding so strongly that I would have seen what he was remembering, but he didn't want me to see.

"Let me spare you such degradation, *ma petite*. You are not as I was. You have never given yourself freely. I fear what you would do, or think of yourself, if you did these things. I do not think your sense of yourself would survive intact."

"You're scaring me," I said.

"Good, you should be frightened. Asher met me before I had mastered the *ardeur*. He can tell you what I was like then."

I just looked at Asher.

"I had seen the *ardeur* rise in others before Jean-Claude, and I have watched it since, but I have never seen anyone so crazed by it," said Asher.

"So you helped him learn how to control the *ardeur*."

"*Non*. Lisette sent to Belle, telling her of Jean-Claude's beauty. I was sent to, how would you say, look him over for Belle. I advised Belle not to bring Jean-Claude and his master to court."

"Why?" I asked.

"I was jealous of his beauty and his prowess. After ten years she was bored with me, or so I feared. And I did not wish the competition."

"I learned to control the *ardeur* without the aid of another who had experienced it. For five years I fed on flesh as I fed on blood. Only then did I master the ability to feed from a distance."

"Five years!" I said.

"Belle taught me true control of the *ardeur*, and I was not hers until I had been dead five years. But I will be there for you from the beginning. It will not be as it was for me." Jean-Claude hugged me against him, and that scared me more. "I would never have married the marks with you if I had thought you could inherit my incubus. I would not knowingly have done this to you."

I pushed away from him and found him crying, and the fear sat like stale metal on my tongue. I was so scared my body went quiet, not racing, but almost as if every beat of my body, every breath, had simply stopped, and all there was to fill me was fear.

"What have you done to me?"

"I thought at first that you were not vampire, and it would not be a true hunger. But watching you today, I know that it is as it was for me. You must feed. You must not deny yourself. To do so is to court madness, or worse."

"No," I said.

"If you had withstood the Nimir-Raj's advances, then I would say that your strength of will might conquer it. If you had withstood the desire to feed on Nathaniel, I would say you would master it. But you fed on him."

"I did not have sex with Nathaniel."

"No. And wasn't what you did instead more satisfying to some part of you than mere intercourse would have been?"

I started to say no and stopped. I could still feel Nathaniel's flesh in my mouth, the touch of his skin under my hands, the taste of his blood on my tongue. The memory brought the hunger over me in a hot rush. Not merely the lust, but Jean-Claude's craving for blood, and Richard's beast--or my beast--wanting to take that last bite and tear flesh for real, no pretending, no holding back.

I had an awful idea. "If I deny one hunger all of them grow worse, don't they?"

"If I deny the lust, I need more blood, and the reverse is true."

"I don't just have your blood lust, Jean-Claude, I have Richard's beast--or mine. I wanted to tear Nathaniel up. I wanted to feed on him for real, the way an animal does. Will that grow worse, too?"

His face started to slip back into careful, neutral lines. I grabbed his shoulders, shook him. "No! No more hiding. Will it grow worse?"

"I have no way of knowing for certain."

"No more games! Will it grow worse?"

"I believe so." His voice was very soft as he said it.

I drew back from him, huddled against the headboard, stared at him, waiting for him to say, "sorry, just kidding," but he just met my eyes. I stared at him, because I didn't want to see anyone else's face. If I saw pity, it might make me cry. If I saw lust, it'd make me mad.

I finally said, "What am I going to do?" There was no inflection in my voice, just a dragging tiredness.

"You will feed, and we will help you. We will keep you safe."

I finally glanced at the others. Every face was either carefully neutral or, in Nathaniel's case, staring down at the bed, as if he didn't trust me to see his eyes. Probably smart of him.

"Fine, but I think we can do better than condoms."

"What do you mean, *ma petite*?"

"Nathaniel can put his shorts on, and I'll find my jammies."

"I still think ..."

I held a hand up, and Jean-Claude fell silent. "They can put them on underneath their clothes, just in case, but I know that if I tell Nathaniel not to ... that he won't." I frowned at Jason.

"I'll be good," he said.

"I am not afraid that Nathaniel will disobey you, *ma petite*."

The tone in his voice turned me from Jason's face to his. "What do you mean?"

"I am worried that he will indeed do everything you tell him to do."

We stared at each other for a long space of my heartbeats. I understood what he meant now. It wasn't the boys he didn't trust, it was me. I would have liked to say, I would never ask them--either of them--to do that to me, but there was something in Jean-Claude's eyes, some knowledge, some sorrow, that kept me from saying it.

"How much control am I going to lose?" I asked finally.

"I do not know."

"I'm getting really tired of hearing you say that."

"And I of saying it."

I finally asked what I had to ask, "What do we do now?"

'Our *pomme de sangs* fetch their clothing and yours, and we feed."

And as much as I hated it, as much as I wanted to deny it, I knew he was right. I'd been trying not to be a sociopath because it made me a monster. I just hadn't known what I was saying. I needed to feed off humans, lust instead of blood and flesh, but it was still feeding. Being a sociopath was beginning not to sound so bad.

Chapter 18

SOMEWHERE DURING THE dressing process I came to my senses. I stayed up against the headboard, Asher's robe belted securely over the red pajamas, my face averted, forehead pressed to the wood. Control was the heart of who I thought I was. I could do this, or rather not do this. I had to try and let this pass me by, because to do anything else ... I could not do this.

The bed moved, and just the sensation of the men moving around on the bed was enough to tighten my body, speed my pulse. Dear God, help me. This couldn't be happening. I'd feared ending up as a vampire. I'd come close many times, but I'd never thought it would happen like this. I was still alive, still human, but the hunger rose inside me like some great beast trying to dig its way out of me, and all that kept it from surfacing was my fingers digging into the wood, my forehead pressed against the carvings. I wasn't sure which hunger I was fighting. But the *ardeur* colored all of it, whether I was craving flesh, or blood, the sex was there in all of it. I couldn't separate them, and that was scary all on its own.

I felt someone crawling towards me, and I knew without looking that it was Jean-Claude. I could just feel him.

"*Ma petite*, all is prepared, we need only you."

I spoke with my face still pressed into the wood, my fingers clinging to it. "Well, then you'll just have to do without."

I felt his hand hovering over my shoulder, and I said, "Don't touch me!"

"*Ma petite, ma petite*, I would change this if I could, but I cannot. We must make the best of what is given us."

That made me look at him. His face was too close, eyes that intense midnight blue, hair a dark glory around his pale face. I flashed on another face just as pale, just as perfect, with a wealth of black hair, but with eyes a rich brown like dark amber. They grew in my vision until the world drowned in the dark honey of her eyes, as if it were poured over my eyes, over my skin, my body, until it filled me, and when I raised my eyes to Jean-Claude's worried face, his hand on my arm, I saw something close to terror in his eyes.

He scrambled back from me, and when I turned and stared at Asher, he spilled off the bed, to stand shaking. Jason and Nathaniel stayed on the bed because they didn't know any better. "What's wrong?" Jason asked.

Nathaniel whispered, "Her eyes."

I turned and caught sight of myself in the standing mirror in the corner. My eyes had filled with pale brown fire, not the darkness of my own eyes, but hers.

"No," I said, softly. I felt her thousands of miles away. Her pleasure at my terror rolled through my body, raised my beast and sent me falling onto the bed. My hands strained for something to hold on to, some help, but there was nothing to fight; it was power and it was inside me.

She explored me, raising my beast until it rolled just under the surface of skin. She touched that part of Richard that was still inside me and raised his beast, until the two energies entwined and my body started to convulse.

I heard yelling. "She's going to change!" Hands holding me down to the bed.

But Belle had learned what she wanted and let them slide back into my body. She separated out the powers inside me like you'd sort a deck of cards. She touched Jean-Claude's link to me and it puzzled her, I could feel it. Until that moment she'd assumed I was a vampire, and now she knew I wasn't. She let what puzzled her slide back deep inside me, then she called the *ardeur*, the incubus, and the moment I thought it, I realized it was the wrong word. Succubus, she whispered in my head, succubus. The hands that had been holding me down, poured over my body, responding to the *ardeur*. It was like being covered in pure lust, rolled in it, like flour on a piece of meat before you cook it.

Hands slid along my skin, a mouth closed on my mouth, and I couldn't see who was right above me, kissing me. I could feel the weight of their body, another set of hands, but I could see nothing but a shining amber light.

Belle kept the *ardeur* on the surface, because it amused her. I couldn't see whose hands were where, or who was doing what, all I could do was feel them; the brush of silk, the press of flesh, a curtain of hair, the scent of vanilla, but I could not see. Belle Morte was using my eyes for other things. She touched that part of me that allowed me to raise the dead. She caressed my necromancy,

tried to bring it to the surface as she had the two; beasts and the *ardeur*, but everything else she had explored was hers to call, it was all in some way part of her lineage, her blood. But the necromancy was all mine.

My magic welled up through me, pushing her back, but I couldn't cast her out, not with just the raw power. It was as if she floated near the surface of some dark pool and I sat at the bottom trying to push her out. I couldn't cast her out, but I could see again, think again.

I was nude from the waist up. Nathaniel's mouth closed on my nipple drawing it in. I cried out, and Jason lowered his mouth to my other breast. There was a moment when I stared down at the two of them pressed to my body, the blond head, the auburn, their mouths working at my breasts, the line of their bodies pressed along mine, the marks of my teeth still visible in Nathaniel's flesh, when the *ardeur*, when Belle Morte spilled over me again. Jason's hand slid down the front of the red silk bottoms, his fingers finding me as if he'd always known just where to touch me. I writhed under his touch, their touch.

I grabbed Jason's wrist, tried to pull his hand away, but he fought me and it was a tender place to fight over. I screamed, "Jean-Claude! Asher!"

"*Ma petite?*" Jean-Claude made the name a question as if he wasn't sure it was really me. I found the vampires standing beside the bed, not helping, not hindering, just watching. But I understood; the *ardeur* called to them too. They were afraid to touch us.

"Feed," I said.

"*Non, ma petite.*"

"I can't fight her and the hunger. Feed, and let me feed."

"You cannot break free of her, *ma petite!*"

"Help me!"

He looked across the bed at Asher, and I watched something pass between them, something built of sorrow and old regrets. "She is right, *mon ami*, she cannot fight Belle and the *ardeur*."

"She doesn't understand what she's asking," Jean-Claude said.

"No, but she asks, and if we do not do it, we will always wonder. I would rather try and fail, than regret having never tried at all."

They stared at each other for a second or two, then Asher crawled onto the bed and Jean-Claude followed him. Asher stretched out beside Nathaniel, and Jean-Claude mirrored him with Jason. Belle Morte's joy flared through me, filled my eyes with honey-colored flames, and I lost my grip on Jason's wrist. His hand slid back over me, but when I turned to look, I could see Jean-Claude through the dark glass of her eyes and Asher on the other side. I knew that once they touched either *pomme de sang* they would be caught in the desire, and they would not break free. It was a trap. I opened my mouth to say, don't, but three things happened all at once. They each struck into the neck of the man on their side, as if they'd known exactly what the other would do, and Jason forced me over that shining edge of orgasm. I screamed, body bucking against the bed, and only their weight kept me from sitting up, from clawing the air, because it wasn't just my own pleasure I was feeling. I felt Asher's fangs in Nathaniel's

neck, felt Nathaniel's body build, build, and finally release in a rush of pleasure that made him bite down on my breast, made me score not his back, but Asher's with my nails. Jason drew his mouth back from me and screamed. The vampires rode their bodies, and I knew with Belle Morte's awareness that the only reason they didn't orgasm with us was the blood pressure wasn't there yet. But the pleasure was. The five of us were locked into wave after wave of pleasure. Like the heat the *ardeur* was named for, it passed over and through us again and again. It was like floating, skinless, formless, just above the bed, and I could feel their heartbeats inside my body. Finally I could feel Jean-Claude and Asher, feel their hearts give a massive beat and feel the life flood through their bodies and spill in a long, hot, line of pleasure that seemed to be pulled from the soles of their feet to the tops of their heads, as if every piece of their bodies, every atom, exploded in pleasure at once. Nathaniel, Jason, and I screamed for them, because their mouths were still locked on the blood, still drinking, still feeding. Then it was over, and the five of us lay motionless, except for the frantic rise and fall of our chests, trying to breath, trying to remember what it was like to be inside our own skins, with just one heart inside us, instead of five. We melted back into our own skins, only the faint dew of sweat and the panicked thunder of our pulses beating against each other's bodies.

Jean-Claude and Asher pulled back from Nathaniel and Jason just as they'd bitten them--together, in a synchronization as perfect now as it had been two centuries ago. Belle Morte filled my mind with images--images of the two of them making love to her before Asher was scored, when they were her perfectly matched pair. I had a confused image of them making love to her at the same time. The feel of them pushing inside her, as perfectly aware then as now of where each other's bodies were, and of exactly what they would do. She missed them, and it was partially my love of Asher, my seeing him as beautiful, that made her regret. The sharing wasn't only one way; she was getting my feelings, too. But I was myself again. The desire had been well fed, sated, so now I could do what I did best.

I called my magic, pulled it around me like a breath of cool wind against my sweat-soaked skin. Nathaniel and Jason pulled back from me, eyes still unfocused.

Jean-Claude and Asher raised up above each of the smaller men, their eyes as out of focus as the lycanthropes', but Jean-Claude said, "*Ma petite*, what ..."

I reached for him. "Take my hand."

"*Ma petite*..."

"Now!"

Belle's power cut through me like a whip in a practiced hand. She'd been using it to tickle my skin; now she meant it to hurt. I writhed on the bed, only Jason's and Nathaniel's weight keeping me from flailing. My vision was being consumed by brown flames.

A hand in mine, cool flesh, and the moment Jean-Claude touched me I could see again. I was his human servant, he was my master, we were part of a triumvirate of power. If Richard had been here we could have chased her back

to the hell she crawled out of. I sent the call in my head, screaming psychically for Richard, but the answer came against my skin. Jason stared at me, confused. He said, "Anita ..." I felt Richard's power in Jason, the link of their pack. The power of the triumvirate leaped between Jean-Claude's hand, my hand, and Jason's body. It would work, it had to work, because I could feel Belle Morte rising inside me again, and I wasn't sure I had it in me to chase her back.

I drew my necromancy like a great dark cloud, a storm ready to break, filling the room with the tingling brush of magic. Nathaniel drew back, whispered, "Nimir-Ra."

The power pressed like lightning in a bottle, but the bottle was my body, and there was no release without one more thing ... blood. The last time we'd done overt triumvirate magic I'd asked the boys to give me blood, watched as Jean-Claude had sunk fangs into Richard for the first time, but not today. Today *I* needed the blood, *I* wanted the blood. I would not share.

I used my free hand to lower Jason's face towards me, but I didn't kiss him. My mouth moved down the side of his cheek, and I whispered, "I need blood, Jason. Say yes."

He'd been holding himself off of me with his arms, but he whispered, "Yes," and collapsed his upper body across my breasts, his hand sliding along my stomach as if he meant to do other things. I could smell the blood just below the surface of his neck, could taste his pulse like candy on my tongue, and I bit him. I wasn't a vampire. There were no mind tricks to make it pleasant. We weren't having sex anymore, there was no distraction, only my teeth tearing his flesh, his blood pouring into my mouth, and the moment the blood poured over me the necromancy flared and I pushed it into that honeyed touch. She laughed at me, at us, then the laughter stopped, because she felt the push of my power. I was a necromancer, and she was just another kind of vampire. My magic didn't differentiate between her and any other corpse. I shoved her out, cast her back, locked her outside us. I'd been training in witchcraft this year, so I bound her from us, bound her from harming us in any way, bound her from contacting us through her power. My last thought to her was, *If you want to find out what the fuck is going on, pick up a phone.* Then she was gone.

Chapter 19

I WAS NAKED again. It seemed to be a theme that night. The five of us lay in a heap, breathing hard, bodies tingling, with that rush that magic will leave behind sometimes--where you feel both tired and exhilarated at the same time--sort of like sex. Asher and Nathaniel lay on the bed just out of my reach. My mouth, chin, and neck were covered in Jason's blood. He lay with his head on

my chest, his head turned so I could see the neck wound. I'd marked Nathaniel and Micah, but there was a piece of meat missing from Jason's neck. It wasn't a big piece, but it was a missing piece of flesh, nonetheless.

I swallowed hard, taking deep, even breaths. I would not throw up. I would not throw up. I would not throw up. I was going to throw up. I pushed everyone off the bed and ran for the bathroom. I threw up, and the flesh--about the size of a fifty-cent piece--came up just like it had gone down--whole. There was something about seeing it, about having my worst fears confirmed that brought nausea in a burning wave. I threw up until I thought my head would explode and I was dry heaving.

There was a knock on the door. "*Ma petite*, may I come in?" He hadn't asked if I was alright. Smart vampire. I didn't answer him, just stayed kneeling with my head against the cool bathtub edge, wondering if I was going to throw up again or my head would fall off first. My head hurt worse than my stomach.

I heard the door open. "*Ma petite*?"

"I'm here," I said, my voice sounding thick, as if I'd been crying. I kept my head down. I didn't want to see him, or anyone.

I saw the edge of the black robe, then more of it as he knelt down in front of me. "Is there anything I can get you?"

A dozen answers flew through my mind, most of them sarcastic, but I settled for, "Some aspirin and a toothbrush."

"You could ask me to cut my heart out at this moment, and I might do it. Instead you ask for aspirin and a toothbrush." He leaned in and laid the gentlest of kisses on the top of my head. "I will get what you ask." He stood, and again I heard a drawer opening and closing.

I looked up and watched him move efficiently around the bathroom, setting out a bottle of aspirin and a toothbrush and a choice of toothpastes. It was absurdly domestic, and the black-furred robe didn't fit the part. Jean-Claude looked like someone who should have servants, and he did. But mostly around me he'd always done for himself, and for me. When I wasn't around he probably had fifty dancing girls waiting on him hand and foot. But with me, it was often just him.

He brought me the aspirin and a glass of water. I took them, and there was a moment when I wasn't sure my stomach would keep them down, but it passed. Jean-Claude helped me stand, and I let him. It wasn't just that my legs were shaky--though they were--it was more like all of me was shaky, uncertain.

I started to shiver and couldn't stop. Jean-Claude held me against his robe in the circle of his arms. My breast hurt where it rubbed against the cloth. I pulled back enough to look down at my body. There was a perfect imprint of Nathaniel's teeth encircling my breast around the areola. He'd only drawn blood in a few places, but the rest was a deep red-purple. It was going to be a hell of a bruise if my body didn't heal it first.

Jean-Claude traced his finger across the upper part of the bite mark, and I winced. "Why is it things like this never hurt while you're doing them?"

"The question is its own answer, *ma petite*."

Strangely, I understood what he meant. "It's almost a mirror of what I did to his chest."

"Nathaniel is being cautious, I think."

"What do you mean?"

"He did nothing to you that you had not done to him first."

"I thought they were both carried away with the *ardeur* and Belle Morte."

"The first time you feel the call of her power it is heady stuff. But the fact Jason did something that he knew you would not allow, and Nathaniel didn't, may mean that Nathaniel has more control of himself than Jason does."

"I would have thought it was the other way around."

"I know," he said, and the way he said it made me look at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, *ma petite*, that you may know Nathaniel's heart's desire, but I do not think you truly know him."

"He doesn't know himself," I said.

"In part that is true, but I think he will surprise you."

"Are you hiding something from me?"

"About Nathaniel, no."

I sighed. "You know on another day I'd make you tell me what that cryptic remark meant, but damn it, I want a little comfort from someone right now, and I guess you're it."

His eyebrows raised. "When you ask in so flattering a manner, how can I refuse?"

"No games, please, Jean-Claude, please, just hold me."

He drew me back into the circle of his arms, and I moved so that the bite mark wasn't hurting, or rather wasn't hurting more than it already did. It had turned into a throbbing pain, sharp when touched. It did hurt, but a part of me found that satisfying. It was a confirmation of what we'd done, a painful souvenir of something that had been amazing. If my morals hadn't gotten in the way, I could have just marveled at the whole thing.

"Why am I pleased that Nathaniel marked me?" I asked it in a small voice, because I wasn't a hundred percent sure Jean-Claude shouldn't have been jealous about it.

He stroked my hair, as his other arm held me close. "I can think of many reasons." His voice vibrated through his chest against my ear, mingling with the sound of his heartbeat.

"One that makes sense to me would be enough," I said.

"Ah, one that makes sense to you, now that is a different question."

I squeezed my arms around his waist. "No games, remember, just tell me."

"It could be that you are truly becoming his Nimir-Ra." His arm tightened around me. "I do feel something different in you, *ma petite*, some wildness that was not there before. It does not feel like Richard's beast feels, but it is a difference. It may simply be that as Nathaniel's Nimir-Ra you want closer contact with him."

It made sense. It was hard to argue with the logic of it, but I wanted to.

"What could be the other reasons?"

"Belle Morte treated you as a vampire of her line. If through the marks or your necromancy you have some of the powers of a vampire, you may have others. It could be that leopards will be your animal to call. I admit that the first is the more likely reason, but the second is also possible."

I leaned back enough to see his face. "Are you attracted to the wolves?" I asked.

"I find it pleasant to have the wolves around me. It is comforting to touch them like a ... pet, or lover."

I wasn't sure how I felt about him using pet and lover in the same sentence, but I let it go. "So you want to have sex with the werewolves?"

"Do you want to have sex with Nathaniel?"

"No ... not exactly."

"But you want to touch him and be touched?"

I had to think about that for a few seconds. "I guess so."

"In a true joining of animal and vampire, there is a desire in both to touch, for one to serve and the other to take care of them."

"Padma, the Master of Beasts, treated his animals like shit."

"One of the many reasons that Padma will always be a secondary power on the Council is his belief that all power must be taken, that all power must come through fear. True power comes when others offer it to you and you merely accept it as a gift, not as the spoils of some personal war."

"So the fact that you treat your wolves better than most is just, what, a political decision?"

He shrugged, still holding me against him. "I do not know how other vampires feel. I know only that Belle Morte felt attracted to her cats and I feel the same for my wolves. Perhaps it is only her line that turns the bond between animal and vampire into something like lovers? Much of her power fed into sex, or at least, attraction, and perhaps that is not how others feel?" He frowned. "I had not truly thought about that before. Perhaps it is another benefit of her lineage--or a shortfall of it--that most of my powers turn to something resembling sex."

"Does Asher feel the same way about his animal to call?"

"He has no animal to call."

I widened my eyes. "I thought all master vamps over a certain age had an animal to call."

"Most of the time they do, but not always. Just as his bite can give true sexual release and mine cannot. We have different powers."

"But not having an animal to call is like a major ..."

"It means he is weaker than I am."

"But he could still be Master of the City somewhere else. I mean I've met Masters of the City that had no animal to call before."

"If there was a territory vacant in this country, and he would be willing to leave us, then yes, he might rise to Master of the City."

I started to ask, Then why doesn't he go? But I was pretty sure I knew the answer, and it was a painful answer, so I left it unsaid. Maybe I was growing up

at last. Not every thought that came into my head had to come out of my mouth.

"Or it could simply be that you've wanted Nathaniel for a very long time. There is satisfaction in finally giving in to the desire."

I pushed away from him. "You know, you're not very good at this comforting stuff."

"You said no games. Isn't a lie the same as playing a game?"

I frowned at him. "I did not have sex with Nathaniel."

"Come, *ma petite*, you did not have intercourse, but to say you did not have sex is splitting the hair a little too fine, no?"

I glared at him and tried to be angry, but there was something closer to panic than anger making my heart beat faster. "Are you saying that what we just did qualifies as sex?"

"Are you saying that it did not?"

I turned so I couldn't see his face, hugging my arms around myself. I finally turned back to look at him. I tried leaning against the wall, but the tiles were cold and I was still naked. I needed my clothes, but they were out in the other room, and I was so not ready to see the other men again.

"So you're saying that we had sex--all of us?"

He took a deep breath. "What answer do you want, *ma petite*?"

"Truth would be nice."

"No, you do not want the truth. I thought that you did, or I would have taken better care about what I said." He looked tired. "I am glad you are the woman that you are, but there are moments when I wish that you could simply enjoy something without being chased around the room by your guilt and your morals afterwards. What we did tonight is a glorious thing. A thing to be shared and treasured, not something to be ashamed of."

"I was doing better with it before you told me it counts as sex."

"And the fact that I had to tell you that it counts as sex means you are still lying to yourself more than I have ever tried to lie to you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He held up a hand. "I will say no more about this. You do not want the truth, and you told me not to lie. I am out of options."

I hugged myself and frowned at the floor. I tried to wrap my mind around what he'd said, what we'd done, and I just couldn't do it. We needed a change of topic, fast.

"Jason acted like a power substitute for Richard," I said.

"*Oui*." He let me change the subject without a word or a change in expression.

"I didn't know we could do that."

"Nor did I." He took those few gliding steps that put him beside me again. "If it is comfort that you want, more than truth, then I can do that." He touched my chin, raised my face so that our gazes met. "But you must tell me when you do not want the truth, *ma petite*. It is usually your greatest demand on me."

I stared up into his beautiful face and understood what he was offering--comfort, but not honesty. Comforting lies, because I didn't want to hear the

truth. "I don't want you to lie to me, but I'm about at my limit for hard truths for the day. I need a breather."

"You want a space of calm to think about everything. I understand that. I can even give it to you for a few hours, but you have to confront Richard at the lupanar tonight, and I fear that more hard truths await you there."

I put my face against his chest, cuddled into the smoothness of his skin, caught between the furred lapels. "Your bringing up Richard isn't going to make me feel better."

"My apologies." He was rubbing my back with his hands, over and over. The movement made the fur on the sleeves rub up and down my body, from my butt to my shoulders. It was soothing and not soothing at the same time. I looked up at him and didn't know whether to cry or scream. "I thought I fed the *ardeur*."

His hands went still against my body. "You have, and you have fed it well, but it is always just below the surface. Like being full but still admiring a beautifully made dessert."

I didn't really like the analogy, but couldn't think of a better one. I pressed my body into his robe, let him cradle me against his body, and listened to the comforting beat of his heart.

I spoke with my face pressed against his chest, the black furred edge of the lapels tickling my lips. "Why didn't you warn me that she could do that?"

"If you were a vampire of my line, then I would have warned you, but you not vampire, you are human, and it should not work that way for you."

I leaned back enough to see his face. "Can she enter any of her ... children?"

"No, her ability to look in upon her children only lasts for a few nights. Once the new vampire is strong enough to control its own hunger, then she is unable to enter, as if some door closes that was held open before."

"She called my beast, or beasts, or whatever the hell is going on with me. She called it to the surface like she knew what she was doing."

"Her animal to call is all great cats."

"So, leopards," I said.

He nodded. "Among other things."

"I thought only the Master of Beasts could call more than one animal."

"It was the ability he came with from almost the beginning, but many of the oldest grow into a variety of powers. She began, as I understand it, able to call only leopards, then one by one the other great cats answered to her."

"If I really am a wereleopard, will she be able to control me--if she meets me?"

"You cast her out, *ma petite*. You can answer your own question, can you not?"

"You're saying I kicked her butt once, I can do it again."

"Something like that, *oui*."

I pushed away from him, my fingers trailing down his arms under the heavy robe until our hands touched. "Trust me, Jean-Claude, one victory doesn't guarantee you'll win the war."

"This was not a small victory, *ma petite*. Never in all her two thousand years of life has any of her line defied her as you just did." He'd bent at the waist just a little to kiss my hands, showing a long, thin triangle of his chest and upper stomach. My gaze followed that line of pale flesh down into the shadow that hid the rest of him. For once I didn't want to undo the robe. Part of it was that I was well ... satisfied, and part of it--most of it--was that I had just had sex with four men at once, and my discomfort level was just a little too high to think about any sex for a while.

"I knew that vampires could make the bite pleasant, but I never dreamed it felt like that," I said.

"It is one of Asher's gifts to make his bite orgasmic."

I looked at him.

He nodded. "*Oui, ma petite*, I can make it pleasant, but not that pleasant."

"Asher bit me once, and it wasn't orgasmic."

"He drew back when he realized he had rolled your mind without intending to. He ... behaved himself."

I raised my eyebrows at that. If tonight was the real thing, he'd more than behaved himself. "You fed off of it, too, and Belle Morte, as well."

"It was a feast, was it not?" And something in the way he said it made me blush. "I do not mean to embarrass you, *ma petite*, but it was glorious. I have not shared Asher's gift in over two hundred years. I had almost made myself forget what it was like."

"So you can't do this without Belle Morte."

"One of her gifts is to be a bridge, a connection, between her children. That allowed the sharing of gifts."

"I cast her out, Jean-Claude, it won't be happening again."

"And we are both thrilled. I do not think you understand the risk we all took, *ma petite*. If you had failed to cast her out, then she could have done things to us, even from such a distance. We are the only two of her line that ever left her side willingly. Some were exiled, but none simply left, and she is not a woman that takes rejection well."

That was an understatement. "She saw Asher through my eyes. I felt her regret that she'd let him go, that she hadn't seen him the way I did."

He turned his head to one side. "Then perhaps even a very old dog can learn new tricks."

I swallowed, and something about it made me very aware of the taste of blood and other things in my mouth. I had to get cleaned up.

I went to the sink and watched him in the mirror behind me. I'd known I was nude, but it wasn't until I saw myself in the mirror that I really noticed it. I'd managed to wipe most of the blood off my mouth with toilet paper, but it was still clinging to my chest and my neck. "I really need a robe of my own," I said.

"I would offer you mine," he said.

I shook my head, reaching for the toothbrush. Normally, I would have washed the blood off first, but I wanted that taste out of my mouth more. "You naked around me right now is not what I need."

"I will send ..." he hesitated, "Asher for a robe for you."

"You started to say Jason, didn't you?"

He looked at me in the mirror.

"I know he'll heal, but ... I could have really hurt him," I said.

"But you didn't, and that is what matters."

"Pretty to think so," I said.

He smiled, but not like he was happy. "I will send Asher for a robe."

"Great. Thank you."

I squeezed toothpaste onto the brush as he went for the door. He stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "Normally you would owe your *pomme de sangs* some gift or show of gratitude for serving you."

"I think they've had all the gratitude they're getting from me for one day.

He laughed, and the sound rode over my body like a caress of silk. "Oh, yes, *ma petite*, and I think they would agree, but I tell you this for later. You must reward your *pomme de sang* for his, or her, services."

"Money wouldn't do it?" I asked.

The look on his face said he was truly insulted, outraged, in fact. "You have just shared something more intimate than most people will ever know with another being. They have given us a great gift this day, and they are not whores, Anita." My real name, I was in trouble. "They are *pomme de sangs*, think of them as beloved mistresses."

I frowned at him.

"Today the sharing of pleasure was reward enough, but you will need to feed the *ardeur* every day, and unless it is a feeding worthy of the thirst, more than once a day for a few weeks."

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"I am saying that it would be best if you chose a *pomme de sang* and kept him near you, for you do not truly know yet what your hunger is like. It may be a light thing, easily tended, or it may not."

"You're saying I'll need to do this every day?"

"Yes."

"Fuck."

He shook his head. "Was today so horrible, *ma petite*? Was the pleasure you gained so very small?"

"It's not that. It was glorious, and you know it. But we'll never be able to duplicate that, not without Belle Morte, and I don't want a return visit from her."

"Nor do I. But there are many things that can be done to feed, and when you have some control I will teach you to feed from a distance."

"When?"

"A few weeks."

"Shit." I turned back to the mirror, not looking at him. "How do I pick a *pomme de sang*?"

"I think you already have," he said.

I looked at him. "You mean Nathaniel."

He nodded.

"No, I ... I don't trust myself not to lose control and ... you know what I mean."

"He is lovely to the eye, and he cares for you. Would it be so very wrong?"

"Yes, yes, it would be like child molesting. He can't say no. If a person can't say no, then it's the same as rape."

"Perhaps what you do not wish to acknowledge, *ma petite*, is that Nathaniel knows exactly what he wants, and what he wants is you."

"He wants me to dominate him in every sense of the word."

"It is best if a *pomme de sang* is submissive to you."

I shook my head.

"Then who else would you want to risk being carried away with, your Nimir-Raj?" This time there was something in his voice.

"You are jealous."

"The Nimir-Raj is not a *pomme de sang*, a mistress, a dessert, no matter how delectable. He is an entree, a very, very main course, and I wish to be the only entree at your table."

"You were sharing me with Richard, and he certainly wasn't just dessert."

"Very true, but he also had ties to me. He is my wolf to call, and that is a different ... relationship to me, to you, than some stranger."

"I know it was the *ardeur*, but damn, I've never ..."

"You are not a woman of casual lusts. No, *ma petite*, you are not. And I fear that this Nimir-Raj is no more casual than the rest of your lusts." He looked so serious when he said it, solemn.

"What do you mean?"

"If you are truly his Nimir-Ra, then you will be drawn to him. There is no help for it. And truthfully, I cannot fault your taste. He is not as fair of face as our Richard, but he does have certain compensations." The look on his face made me blush again.

I turned to the sink and started brushing my teeth, and he took it as a dismissal. He went out laughing. When the door was closed behind him and I was alone I stood for a long time looking at myself in the mirror. It still looked like me. But I could taste Jason's blood underneath the toothpaste. I started scrubbing and spitting and running the cold water, listening to the sound of the water instead of the screaming inside my head.

When Jean-Claude came back into the room I was rinsing the blood out of the washrag I'd used and had three different kinds of mouthwash sitting beside the sink. I'd used all three, and I couldn't taste anything but minty freshness. You could scrub yourself clean of the blood and the taste of it in your mouth, but the stains that really mattered were the ones that no amount of soap or water could touch. I'd have said that things couldn't get any worse, but I knew they could, and rapidly. If I locked myself away for a few days until I could control the *ardeur*, the werewolves would vote without me there, and they'd execute Gregory. If they killed Gregory, it wasn't just Jacob that I'd kill. It would be war between me, my pard, and Richard's pack. Richard was just Boy Scout enough to get in my way, and maybe force me to kill him. Something

inside of me would die if Richard died, and if I pulled the trigger ... some things you recover from, some things you don't. Killing Richard would be one of those things I wouldn't recover from.

Jean-Claude said softly, "Are you alright, *ma petite*?"

I shook my head, but said, "Sure."

He held a bundle of blue satin out to me. "Then you need to get dressed, and I will escort you back outside."

I looked at him. "Is it that obvious that I don't want to go back out there?"

"Jason has been taken to his room. He will heal. But we thought it would upset you to see him. Nathaniel awaits your pleasure, since he did drive you."

"What about Asher?"

"He took Jason away."

"You know we have the answer to the question you've been wanting to know," I said.

We looked at each other. "I felt his release, *ma petite*. I know that he has been tormenting me, allowing me to believe he was ruined. But we still do not know how badly scarred he is, and that is a ruin of a different sort."

"You mean he may feel he's so scarred that he doesn't want anyone to see him, or touch him?"

"*Oui*."

"Until the two of you touched the boys, the *ardeur* didn't spread to you. Belle Morte didn't spread to you. It's like a disease," I said.

"I have seen that particular disease set loose in a banquet room the size of a football field and spread from person to person until all fell upon each other in a ... well, orgy is too mild a word."

"What did she gain from making a whole room of humans lose control like that?"

"She gains power from every feeding around her, but it was not that alone. She wished to see if there were limits to the number of people she could spread the desire through."

"Did she find her limit?"

"No."

"So hundreds of people," I said.

He nodded.

"And she fed off of the lust from them all?"

"*Oui*."

"What did she do with all that power?"

"She helped a marquis seduce a king and changed the trade routes and alliances of three countries."

I widened my eyes. "Well, at least it didn't go to waste."

"Belle has many faults, but the wasting of an advantage is not one of them."

"What did she gain through all the political maneuvering?"

"Land, titles, and a king that adored her. Remember, *ma petite*, that this was at a time in history when to be king of a nation meant to be absolute

monarch. His word was life and death, and she ruled him through the sweet secrets of her body."

"No one is that good in bed."

A look passed over his face--a small smile that he tried to hide.

"If she was that wonderful, then why did you and Asher leave her the first time?"

"Asher had been with Belle for many years before I arrived, and more beyond that before he found Julianna. He and I were in the circle of innermost power, where many strived for centuries to get to and failed. We were her favorites until Asher found Julianna. It did not occur to me until decades later that Belle was jealous, but I think in a way that was it. She slept with other men, other vampires, and she was content that Asher and I shared each other's beds, and that we went to the vampires she chose to share us with. But another woman that we chose ourselves--that was different. But it is one of our most sacred laws not to harm another's human servant, so Belle did nothing. Then Asher offered Julianna to me, and we became a menage a trois, and that raised the question of Julianna sleeping with others."

He looked down at the floor, then up again. "Arturo was one of her favorites as well. He desired Julianna, but Asher refused him."

"Asher refused him, not Julianna," I said.

"She was his servant. She could not deny if he had consented."

"Ick," I said.

He shrugged. "It was a different century, *ma petite*, and Julianna was a different woman than you are."

"So why did Asher refuse?" I asked.

"He feared for Julianna's safety. We both did."

"Arturo liked it rough?"

"Mother Nature had made it almost impossible for Arturo to have it any way but rough."

I looked at him. "What do you mean?"

He gave that graceful shrug again. "Arturo is still the most well-endowed man I have ever seen."

It was my turn to shrug. "So?"

He shook his head. "You do not understand, *ma petite*. He is *bien outille*, well tooled. Ah, what is the English? ... Hung like a horse."

I started to point out that Richard was pretty well-endowed, but it's bad form to point out to boyfriend A that boyfriend B is bigger. Micah was better endowed even than Richard, but again, it didn't seem the thing to mention. I was finally left with, "I've seen two men that were hung like horses, as you say, and it was intimidating, but ... you're implying that you feared for Julianna's safety because he was so big."

"That is exactly what I am saying."

"No one's that big."

"Arturo makes even our Richard and your Nimir-Raj seem ungraced."

I blushed and wished I hadn't. "Those weren't the two men I was referring to."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "Indeed?"

The way he said it made me blush harder. "In New Mexico, one of Edward's backups, and one of the bad guys."

"And how did you happen to see just how well-graced they were, *ma petite*? There was something in his voice, a hint of warmth, like the beginnings of anger.

"I did not have sex with anyone."

"Then how did you see them nude?" His voice still held that warm edge, and I couldn't really blame him.

"Bernardo, Edward's backup, and I got questioned by a local biker gang, uh club. They didn't believe he was my boyfriend. They asked if he was circumcised, and I said yes. I figured I had a better than fifty-fifty chance in America. They made him drop his pants to prove it."

"Under some threat, I assume." He was looking more amused than angry now.

"Yeah."

"And the other one?"

"He tried to rape me."

Jean-Claude's eyes went wide. "What became of him?"

"I killed him."

He touched my face, gently. "I have only recently understood why I was so very attracted to you from almost the first time I heard you interact with the police."

"Not love at first sight," I said, "but love at first hearing. I don't have that good a voice."

"Do not underestimate the dulcet sounds of your voice, *ma petite*, but it was not the sound of your voice that fascinated me. It was your words. I knew from the moment I heard you, the moment I saw the gun and realized that this lovely, petite woman was the executioner, that you would never die waiting for me to save you--that you would save yourself."

I cupped his hand against my cheek, looked into his eyes and saw again that sorrow for failing to save Julianna that never quite left him. "So you wanted me because I was such a tough broad?"

He let me make the joke. He even smiled, but it never reached his eyes. "*Oui, ma petite.*"

My voice was soft when I said, "So Arturo wanted Julianna."

He took his hand back, slowly. "And she feared him, and we feared for her. This is two hundred years ago, a little more now. Asher was not as powerful as he is now, and we feared that his human servant would not survive Arturo's attentions."

"I've got to ask, how big was he?"

Jean-Claude spaced his hands apart like you'd measure a fish. "Like this big." It looked to be about six inches.

"That's not so big."

"That is how wide he was," Jean-Claude said.

I just gaped at him. "You're exaggerating."

"No, *ma petite*, believe me, I remember."

"Then how long was he?"

He made another measuring movement. I laughed because I didn't believe him. "Oh, please. You're saying he was what, about six inches wide and over a foot long? No way."

"Yes, way, *ma petite*."

"You said Arturo was one of Belle's favorites. Does that mean she ..."

"Had sex with him, *oui*."

I frowned, couldn't think of a slick way to say it, so just blurted out, "Didn't it hurt her?"

"She was a woman with a large capacity for men in every way."

Gee, that was polite. "Most women wouldn't be able to ... accommodate that" I said.

"No," he agreed.

"Did she want to kill Julianna?"

"No, she believed Arturo would not harm her."

"Why?"

He licked his lips, which he rarely did, and looked uncomfortable, which he did even less often. "Let us say that something that Belle Morte taught Asher and me to take pleasure in, we also did with Julianna."

I frowned at him, because I so did not have a clue. "If you're hinting, I'm not getting it."

"I would rather not discuss it, now. Perhaps at a later time."

I frowned harder. "What aren't you telling me?"

He shook his head. "I think, *ma petite*, that you would rather not know."

I looked at him. "You know, Jean-Claude, there was a time--not that long ago--that I'd have thrown a fit and made you tell me everything. But now if you tell me I don't want to know, then I'll just believe you. I really am not up to hearing intimate and shocking details about your vampire sex life. I've had enough shocks in that area for one day."

"*Ma petite*, I think you are growing up at last."

"Don't push it. And I'm not growing up, I'm just getting tired."

"As are we all, *ma petite*, as are we all."

I let the royal blue satin robe fall from my hands. It had wide lace sleeves and more lace at what passed for the lapels, to curve in flowers down the sides. It was beautiful and fit me perfectly. Most robes are too long for me. He'd probably bought it with me in mind. I belted it in place and didn't want to ask any more questions about the *ardeur* and sex and vampire stuff. But some things had to be clear between us.

"I need to get this straight, Jean-Claude."

"*Oui, ma petite*."

"You say that what we did was sex, so in effect I had sex with everyone?"

He just nodded.

"You don't seem at all jealous about that."

"I was participating, *ma petite*. Why should I be jealous?"

The answer confused me more. I frowned up at him. "Okay, let me try this again. You say the *ardeur* may need to be fed more than once a day. We can't count on you being Johnny-on-the-spot when it happens. I can sleep over here, but ..."

"You may need to feed when I am not awake. This is very possible, in fact, it is likely."

"Okay, then what are the rules?"

It was his turn to frown. "What do you mean, *ma petite*?"

"Rules. I mean like what will make you jealous and what won't? What, or who, am I supposed to stay away from?"

He started to smile, then stopped. "You are one of the most cynical people I have ever met, the most practical in a life-and-death context, and if you knew some of the people I had met, you would understand the compliment that is. But you are also very earnest, like a child. It is a type of innocence that I do not think you will ever outgrow. But I find it hard to deal with."

"It's a fair question."

"Indeed it is, but most people would not need to ask it so blandly. They would either ignore it and do the best they could when the need arose, or they would ask who among my people will I allow you to have sex with, without becoming angry."

It made me wince to hear him say it, but ... "I like the way I phrased the question better."

"I know. You are simultaneously one of the most direct women I know, and one of the most self-deluding."

"I am really not liking where this conversation's going."

"Fine, but I will answer my question, because it is the truth. If Nathaniel is your *pomme de sang*, then I will let intimacy with him pass. Jason as my *pomme de sang* is within his rights to make love with my human servant. It is considered a great gift for a vampire to share his servant with another, and Jason has earned that. He has served me faithfully for many years."

"I'm not a prize to be given away."

He held up a hand. "Hush, *ma petite*, I will answer the question, and I will try for truth, even though you do not want to hear it today. There are many things I would have told you today, if you had been in the mood for truth. But you are right, this we must have clear between us. I would simply have urged you to keep Nathaniel close at hand and let the cards fall as they may, but if you insist on a list, then I will give it to you, but not without reasons. Because I want it clear that I do not share you lightly, and there are men I will not share you with at all."

He was angry now, and his eyes had bled to sapphire flame. The rest of his body was very still, but the eyes gave it all away. He was in the grip of some strong emotion, probably anger, but I wasn't sure. And he was shielding like a son of a bitch, so something he was feeling, or thinking, he didn't want me to share.

"Asher is acceptable."

He didn't give the reasons for that one, and I didn't ask, because there were too many of them, most of them painful.

"If Richard comes to his senses, then of course." He smoothed his hands down the front of his robe; he often checked his clothes when he was nervous. "The Nimir-Raj will have to be acceptable, because he calls to you. Richard's beast calls to you through my marks, my ties to him, to it, but the Nimir-Raj, he calls to you, Anita." My real name again. He was not happy. "He calls to something in you, in your power. It may be that you are truly Nimir-Ra, and the full moon will see it true. Or it may be that, as with Nathaniel, you have found your animal to call. If you are drawn more strongly to all the leopards, then it could be for either reason. Be wary if the leopards are yours to call. It may not merely be Nathaniel and the Nimir-Raj that beckon."

"Please, don't tell me that I'm going to turn into slut-girl."

He smiled. "I do not think you need to fear that. You are stronger willed than that."

"You just said I might be tempted by the other wereleopards."

"If the Nimir-Raj or Nathaniel are not near you when the *ardeur* rises, then my advice is to give in to it instantly."

I gave him wide eyes.

"If you fight it, *ma petite*, it grows. If it grows large enough, then you may indeed turn into slut-girl. If you give in and feed immediately, then you will have sex with one person, not several, and it will be more a person of your choosing."

"So the real advice is, keep the men I prefer within easy reach."

"I would make Nathaniel, or someone of your choosing, your constant companion."

I swallowed hard and searched his face, but it was pleasantly blank--his expression when he didn't want me to know what he was thinking. His eyes had bled back to normal.

Something occurred to me. "I haven't seen Damian around."

"I speak of sex, and you think of Damian." His voice was still pleasant but the words held something harsh.

"You give me this list of people to sleep with, and not to sleep with, but you leave him off either list. And he wasn't at the club, and he didn't come to the bedroom, attracted by the power like Asher. Where is he?"

Jean-Claude rubbed his hands over his face. "I was going to tell you, then you decided you wanted no more hard truths today." He lowered his hands and looked at me.

"He's alive, I'd know it if he wasn't."

"Yes, I believe you would. There was a time when my first master made my heart beat. Her power suffused me, made me live. But her power came from her Master of the City, so it was in reality his power that filled me. Each master vampire that I belonged to demanded blood oaths, and each one in turn made my blood course, my heart move. Then Belle, herself, the head of my line, brought me in, and she filled me. She was like the pounding of the ocean, and all others before her were but rivers seeking to drown in her embrace.

Gradually, I filled with my own power. But even now it is her lineage that makes me live. The power that made her is what keeps me alive. Damian is descended from her line, not from Belle herself, but from one of her children, as I am. I am Master of the City and the power that animates me, animates Damian. When he took the oaths that bound him to me, that made him loyal to me, it became my power that filled him, my power that made his heart beat. And I broke the tie with she who made him."

"You make all the vampires under you alive?" I made it a question.

"The power comes through me, yes, but only if they are of my line, my lineage. If they are descended from other than Belle's children, then no, the blood oaths do not bind as tightly."

"What about Asher? You don't make his heart beat."

He nodded. "Very good, *ma petite*. No, I do not. A Master Vampire is a vampire that has become enough of a power that they fill themselves up. It is one of the things that being a master means, and one of the reasons that many of the older vampire masters still kill their children when they feel that tie break."

"You're volunteering an awful lot of information, and don't think I'm not grateful, it's fascinating, but what does this all have to do with Damian?"

"You have raised Damian from his coffin once, filling him with your necromancy like a zombie. You have saved his life twice with your necromancy. You have forged a tie between him and you."

Actually, I knew that, but out loud I said, "He said that he couldn't tell me no if I gave him a direct order. That he wanted to serve me. It scared him."

"It should have."

"I didn't mean to do it, Jean-Claude. I didn't even know it was possible."

"Legends speak of necromancers that could control all types of undead, not merely zombies. It was at one time Council policy to slay all necromancers on sight."

"Gee, glad the policy changed."

"Yes," he said. "But you severed my tie with Damian. I did not realize it at first, but when he returned from Tennessee, it was not my power that made his heart beat, it was yours."

I remembered feeling that in Tennessee, feeling the tie between us. "It wasn't done deliberately," I said.

"I know that, but you left me with a problem when you went away for over half a year. Damian is over a thousand years old. Though not a Master Vampire, he is still powerful. He no longer had ties to any vampire hierarchy. It freed him of all blood oaths, of all mystically bound loyalties. He was yours, but you did not come to claim him."

"You should have told me."

"And what would you have done? Taken him home to live in your basement? You did not have the power or control six months ago to deal with him."

"Now I do. Is that what you're saying?"

"You cast out Belle Morte. One of the most powerful of the Council. If you can do that, *ma petite*, then you can handle Damian."

"This is all great, but where is Damian?"

"I could no longer count on his loyalty. I no longer controlled him, do you understand, *ma petite*? I had a vampire that was more than twice my age, and could not control him. It both made me look weak in others' eyes when I could not afford to appear weak, and it was dangerous, because he knew when you healed over your aura and shielded so tight. It wasn't only Richard and me who felt the loss of you. You cut Damian off, and he went a little ... mad."

I was scared now, my heart beginning to climb up my throat. "*Where is Damian?*"

"First, *ma petite*, understand that you cannot take him with you tonight because to tend him will be a full-time job for the first few hours."

"Just tell me," I said.

"I had to lock him away, *ma petite*."

I stared at him. "Lock him away, how?"

He just looked at me, and it was eloquent.

"He's been locked in a cross-wrapped coffin for six months?"

"About that, yes."

"You bastard."

"I could have killed him, *ma petite*, that's what others would have done."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because it was partially my fault for exposing him to you. Damian was mine to protect, and I failed him."

"He's mine, mine to protect," I said.

"Yet, you deserted him."

"I didn't know. You should have told me."

"And six months ago would you have believed me? Or would you have thought it was some ploy to get you back into my life?"

I started to tell him, of course I'd have believed him, but I stopped and thought about it. "I don't know if I'd have believed you or not."

"I hoped that I would find a way to reestablish my dominance over him, but he is closed to me."

I swallowed hard and looked at him. "If he's mine, then why didn't I feel him when my shielding broke all to hell in New Mexico?"

"I have been blocking you from sensing him, and it has not been easy."

I closed my eyes and counted to ten, but it didn't help. I was so angry my skin felt hot. "You had no right to do that."

"Without the marks being married, I think Damian would have seduced you. Because you would have been drawn to him as you are drawn to Nathaniel now, or perhaps even the Nimir-Raj."

"I would not have fucked Damian without the *ardeur* helping me, and I didn't have that six months ago."

"You may have your vampire back tomorrow night. I will help you nurse him back to health."

"I'm coming back tonight to get him."

"Talk to Asher, *ma petite*. Ask him what it will take to nurse a vampire back from six months in the coffin. Damian is not a master; he has had no ability to feed or gain energy. He will come out of the coffin a starved, crazed thing. There will be very little left of him, at first." He was so calm while he said it.

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to hit him, but it wouldn't change anything. I wasn't even sure it would make me feel better. "I want him out tonight, when I get back from the lupanar."

"You will not be able to tend both your injured wereleopard and Damian tonight. Ask Asher, and he will tell you how much work goes into such as this. One more night will not make a difference to Damian, and tonight you are trying to prevent war between the leopards and the wolves. More than that, you are trying to make a strong enough show of force to convince Richard's enemies that he is too well-allied to be killed. You must concentrate on these things tonight, *ma petite*."

"I don't believe you," I said.

He shrugged. "Believe what you like, but it will take hours of care to make Damian sane again. It will take days of care, and blood, and warmth, to bring him back to himself."

"How could you know that and still do this to him?" My voice didn't even sound angry, just tired.

"I learned the lessons of the cross-wrapped coffin personally, *ma petite*. I have not done to Damian anything that has not been done to me."

"You were in it for a few days until I killed the old Master of the City."

He shook his head. "When I returned to the Council with Asher and bargained with them, the price for them saving his life was my freedom. I spent two years inside a coffin, unable to feed, unable to sit up, unable ..." He was hugging his arms, holding himself. "I know that what I have done to Damian is a terrible thing, but my only alternative was to kill him. Would you have preferred that?"

"No."

"Yet, I see the accusation in your eyes. I am a monster because of what I have done to him. But you would feel me more a monster if I had killed him. Or perhaps you would have preferred that I let him go into the city streets and slaughter people."

"Damian would never do that."

"He went mad, *ma petite*. He became an alien. Do you remember the couple that was slaughtered about six months ago?"

"I saw several slaughtered couples over the last year. You'll need to be more specific."

He was angry now, too. Great, we could be angry together. "They were in a car, at a stoplight. The front of the car was dented as if they had hit a body, but no body was found."

"Yeah, I remember that one. They had their throats torn out. The woman had tried to defend herself. She had wounds on her arms where something had clawed at her."

"Asher found Damian wandering a few blocks from the car. He was covered in blood. He fought Asher, and it took over half a dozen of us to bind him and bring him home. Was I supposed to let him wander the streets after that?"

"You should have called me," I said.

"And what? You would have executed him? If insanity is a viable plea in your court system, then he cannot be held accountable. But your court system does not give us the same privileges it gives humans. We cannot plead insanity and live."

"I saw that crime scene. It didn't look like a vampire did it. It looked more like a shapeshifter, but ... but the marks were wrong." I shook my head. "It was vicious, a vicious animal."

"*Oui*, and so I locked him away and hoped that you would come home to us, or sense his plight. At first I did nothing to block him from reaching you but you did not come."

"I didn't know."

"You knew that Damian was yours, and yet you did not ask about him. You cast him away."

"I didn't know," I said, again, each word tight with anger.

"And I had no choice, Anita. I had to put him away."

"Do you think the insanity is permanent?"

He shrugged, arms still hugging his body. "If you were a vampire and he your vampire child, I would say no. But you are not vampire, you are necromancer, and I simply do not know."

"If he stays that crazy ..."

"He will have to be destroyed," Jean-Claude said, voice soft.

"I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Nor did I."

We stood there for a few moments while I thought about everything and Jean-Claude either thought about it, too, or just stood there. "If all you're saying is true, then you had no choice," I said.

"But you are still angry with me. You will still punish me for it."

I glared up at him. "What do you want me to say? That knowing you've shoved him in a box for six months takes the sparkle out of our relationship? Yeah, it bothers me."

"Under normal circumstances you would rescue Damian and avoid me for a time until your anger cooled."

I nodded. "Yeah, that's about right."

"But you will need me, *ma petite*, in these first few nights. You will need another vampire with the same hungers to teach you control."

"Can't live with you, can't live without you, is that it?"

"I hope your anger cools before you need my help again, but I fear it will not. Remember this, *ma petite*, that the *ardeur* is not bound by morals, or even by your preferences. If you fight it long enough, hard enough, you will eventually give in, and it will be out of your control who it chooses. So do this one thing for me, if you cannot forgive me right away, keep always by your

side either Nathaniel or the Nimir-Raj. Not for my sake, but for yours. For I think, of the two of us, I would forgive you sooner for sleeping with strangers than you would."

We pretty much left the conversation there. I found Asher and had him confirm the story. Hell, I waited for Willie McCoy to climb out of his coffin and heard the story from him. Damian had gone ape-shit and killed a couple that apparently hit him with their car. The man had gotten out to check on whoever they hit. They had hurt him and Damian struck out, killing the man. But the woman ... he'd climbed into the car after her. We might have to kill him, because I hadn't understood what my magic meant to Damian. I hadn't understood a lot of things.

I drove out in the soft summer dusk with Nathaniel riding beside me. It had been a very long day. I was going to go home and pick up Rafael and the wererats, and Micah and his pard. He'd left a number at the shapeshifter hospital, and I'd called for it. I almost didn't call, but we needed backup tonight. My embarrassment was a small price to pay. If I had been in contact with Jean-Claude and Richard for the last half year, I probably could have talked Richard out of doing all the shit he'd done to his pack. I'd come home to try and reestablish a relationship, or two, but I was mostly cleaning up the mess that my absence had made. Richard might be dead at the full moon, and Jacob, Ulfric. Damian might be permanently crazy and have to be destroyed. The couple that had hit him with their car would have been alive if I'd known what the hell my magic was doing.

I'd avoided a lot of Marianne's teachings because it was too much like pure witchcraft for my monotheistic beliefs, but I knew now that I had to understand how my powers worked. I couldn't afford to be squeamish. God kept telling me I was okay with Him. I wasn't evil. But at some level I didn't believe it. At some level I thought that witchcraft, raising the dead, wasn't very Christian. If God was okay with me doing it, then what was my problem? I'd prayed about it often enough and gotten the answer more than once. The answer was to do it, that this was what I needed to be doing. If God was for it, then who was I to question it? Look where my arrogance had gotten us. Two dead, one crazy, and if Richard lost the pack ... there'd be a lot more dead.

I felt a quietness inside me as I drove. Usually the touch of God is golden and warm, but sometimes when I've been really slow and not picked up on what He's wanted for me, I get this kind of quiet sadness, like a parent watching a child learn a necessary hard lesson. I'd never once prayed to God about Richard and Jean-Claude--not about who to choose anyway. It just hadn't seemed right to ask God to help me choose a lover, especially when I thought I knew who He'd pick. I mean vampires are evil, right?

But driving through the falling darkness, feeling His soft presence fill the car, I realized that I hadn't asked because I'd been afraid of the answer. I drove and I prayed, and I didn't get an answer, but I knew He heard me.

Chapter 20

IT WAS FULL dark when we pulled up in front of my house. Almost every light in the house was on, like I was giving a party and no one had bothered to tell me. The driveway was full and overflowing onto the road. One of the reasons I'd rented the house was because I had no near neighbors to get caught up in whatever crisis I was having. My crises usually involved gunfire, so no neighbors to get hurt had been my primary requisite in a house. There was no one around to peek out a window and wonder what the hell was going on next door. Just trees and the lonely road, neither of which cared what I did. Or at least I didn't think the trees cared, though Marianne might tell me I'm wrong on that one. You never know.

I ended up parking quite a ways down from the house, with nothing but trees on either side of the road. I turned off the engine, and Nathaniel and I sat in the dark, listening to the engine tick. He hadn't said much since I came back out of the bathroom at Jean-Claude's--nothing at all on the forty-minute drive here. But then, neither had I.

I'd left Jean-Claude in a huff with a firm date to come back tomorrow night and get Damian out of hock. It wasn't just Damian locked away all these months that made me not want to be with Jean-Claude, it was that he had finally changed me into one of the monsters. I already knew that sex with him bound the marks closer, but now that the marks were married ... what would sex do to us now? How much closer could the marks bind us all? Was it just changes with Jean-Claude, or did I have mystical surprises coming up tonight with Richard, too? Chances were likely, and Jean-Claude really had no clue what the surprises might be. He didn't know what he was doing. He really didn't. Since I didn't know what the hell I was doing either, and Richard had no clue. That left us in a bad place. I'd call Marianne tomorrow on the theory that one magic is much like another, but until then I was on my own. Big surprise.

Of course, I wasn't exactly alone. I looked across the front seat at Nathaniel. He looked back at me, face peaceful, hands in his lap, seat belt still in place. He'd pulled his hair back into a thick braid, leaving his face very plain and unadorned. In the moonlight his eyes looked pale gray, instead of their usual vibrant violet. Without the hair or the eyes showing, he looked closer to normal than I'd ever seen him. He was suddenly a person sitting across from me, and I realized with a shock that I didn't really think of Nathaniel as a person. Not as a grown-up separate human being kind of person anyway. He was more a burden than a person to me. Someone to be rescued, helped. He was a cause, a project, but not a person.

The heat began to press in around the Jeep. If we sat here much longer I'd have to turn the air conditioning back on. If Jean-Claude was right, then I'd had sex with Nathaniel earlier tonight. I was hoping Jean-Claude wasn't right,

because I still considered Nathaniel a child, an abused child. You took care of them, you did not have sex with them, not even if they wanted you to.

My breast was aching, faintly, from his teeth marks. We'd shared a bed so often that it felt odd when he wasn't beside me. But I still didn't see him as a grown-up. Sad, but true.

"Jean-Claude is pretty sure that the *ardeur* is well fed enough that it won't be an issue for the rest of the night," I said.

Nathaniel nodded. "You won't need to feed again until you've slept for a few hours. Jean-Claude explained it to me, a little."

That pissed me off. "He did, did he?"

He shook his head. "Anita, he's worried about you."

"I'll bet."

"You really aren't going to sleep at the Circus tonight, are you?"

"No," I said. I was sitting back in the seat with my arms crossed over my stomach. I'm sure I looked as stubborn as I felt.

"And when you get up tomorrow, what then?" His voice was very soft in the hot, dark car.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do," he said.

I sighed. "I don't want to do this, Nathaniel. I don't want to have Jean-Claude's incubus inside me. I'd rather be Nimir-Ra for real than have to feed off of others."

"And if you're both?" he asked, voice even softer.

I shrugged, arms still crossed, but hugging me more than being stubborn now. "I don't know."

"I'll be there for you, Anita."

"Be where?" I looked at him.

"Tomorrow, when you wake."

"What else did Jean-Claude tell you while I was running around trying to find out about Damian?"

Nathaniel's gaze never wavered, never changed. He wasn't embarrassed or bothered in the least about the conversation. "That he wouldn't hold a grudge if you had real sex with me."

I studied his face. "You don't consider what we did today sex?" I made it half-question, half-statement.

"No," he said.

"I don't either, but ..." I was glad it was dark, because I was blushing, but damn it I wanted someone else to answer this question. "I know why I don't think today was actual sex, but why don't you?"

He smiled and did look away. He answered looking down at the floorboard. "What we did the first time with you marking my back, that was closer to real sex for me."

"So it was the dominance/submission thing?"

"No," he said, still looking down. "If we'd really needed the condoms, then it would have been sex."

"You mean intercourse," I said.

He nodded, still not looking at me.

"That's how I feel too. Jean-Claude said I was fooling myself."

Nathaniel flashed me a small smile, then went back to staring at nothing.

"He told me I was being very American, very male, and very young."

"You are American, male, and twenty," I said. "What else are you supposed to be?"

He looked at me for a moment, then looked away again. He was definitely uncomfortable now.

"What else did Jean-Claude say?" I asked.

"You'll be mad."

"Just tell me, Nathaniel."

He shrugged, the thin straps of the tank top showing most of his shoulders as he did it. "He's hoping you'll choose me as your *pomme de sang*. He said he mentioned it to you."

"He mentioned it."

"Can I undo the seat belt?" he asked.

"Be my guest."

He let the belt slide to one side and turned so he was facing me, one leg drawn up into the seat, his braid curled over one shoulder. "Jean-Claude said that the more you fight the *ardeur* the stronger it grows, but if you feed when it first arises, then it's not such a big deal."

"He told me," I said.

"He's afraid you'll try and tough it out tomorrow without him. He's afraid you'll fight it all day, then only give in when you have to."

"Sounds like a plan to me," I said.

Nathaniel shook his head. "Don't be tough on this one, Anita, don't fight. I'm afraid of what will happen if you do."

"What, I'm supposed to roll over tomorrow morning and fall into your arms?" I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my voice, though it brought a hurt look to his face, and made me want to apologize. "It's nothing personal, Nathaniel. It's not you, it's having to do it that I don't like."

"I know that." He lowered his face, not meeting my eyes again. "Just promise me that when the hunger rises tomorrow that you'll turn to me, or to someone, early and not try to be so ... tough."

"What were you really going to say on the end of that sentence?"

He smiled. "Stubborn."

I had to smile. "I don't think I can just roll over the first time the *ardeur* hits me. I just can't give in that quickly, Nathaniel. Do you understand that?"

"You have to prove you're tougher than it is," he said.

"No, I have to be who I am, and who I am doesn't just give in to anyone, or anything."

He grinned at me. "That's an understatement."

"You're making fun of me," I said.

"A little," he said.

"You saw what I did to Jason's neck, Nathaniel. What if I hurt you? I mean really hurt you?"

"Jason will heal, Anita, and he wasn't complaining when Asher took him away." Nathaniel grinned and looked away as if he were trying not to laugh.

"What?"

He shook his head. "You'll get mad, and he didn't mean it that way."

"What did he say, Nathaniel?"

"Ask him yourself. He always seems to be able to say outrageous things to you and you think it's cute. When I say them, you just get mad."

"What if I ordered you to tell me?"

He seemed to think about it for a second, then flashed me another smile. It was a good smile, young, relaxed, real. When I'd first met Nathaniel he'd forgotten how to smile like that. "No, no I wouldn't."

"Some submissive you are," I said.

The smile widened to a grin. "You didn't like me submissive. It made you uncomfortable."

"So you're changing to please me?"

The smile faded, but not like he wasn't happy, more like his expression had shifted from humor to thoughtful. "At first, but lately some of it's to please me, too."

That made me smile. "That's the best news I've had all night."

"I'm glad," he said.

I undid my own seat belt. "Let's get out of this car before we melt." I opened the door and knew he'd do the same. We closed the doors, and I hit the button on my key chain that locked the Jeep. It made the little beeping sound, and I walked around the cars to the road, where the walking was smoother. Nathaniel and I started walking down the line of cars towards my house. His braid fell along his spine like a long, thick tail, moving as he walked.

Cherry and Zane came out from between the cars just ahead of us. "We thought you'd gotten lost," she said, smiling.

"You guys let everyone into the house?" I asked.

Her smile faded. "Yes, I hope that was okay."

I smiled. "It's okay, Cherry, really. If I'd been thinking, I'd have arranged for someone to let them in."

She relaxed visibly and dropped to her knees in front of me. I offered her my left hand. I was keeping my right hand free in case I had to draw my gun. Not likely, but you never know. Cherry gripped my hand in both of hers and rubbed her face against it like a cat marking its scent. The other formal greeting involved licking, but I'd finally convinced all of my cats that face rubbing was about all I was comfy with.

Zane went to his knees beside Cherry but didn't try to grab my right hand. He waited until she was done with my left. I'd also broken them of being grabby with my gun hand. He rubbed his face on my hand, and there was the faintest roughness alongside his jaw, as if he'd missed a spot when he shaved.

Cherry rubbed herself against my legs while Zane greeted me. It was like being body-rubbed by a really big cat that just happened, at the moment, to be in human form. The first few times it had happened, I'd freaked. But it just

didn't strike me as that strange anymore. I wasn't sure if that was good or sort of sad.

When the greeting was over, Zane said, "We've got the extra key, so we took care of the company." They were both standing now, like good little people-- alright, good *tall* people, whatever.

"Good, though I had no idea we'd have this big a crowd."

They fell into step, one on either side of us, and I could feel Cherry beside me. I could feel her energy like a vibrating line against my body. I'd never sensed her this strongly before. Just another nail in the coffin on the Nimir-Ra question. The evidence was getting thick enough that if I hadn't been so damn good at self-delusion, I'd have had to admit it by now. But I'd had enough for one day. I needed a pass on this one tonight. So I ignored it, and if Cherry felt anything different, she didn't say.

It was Zane who put his face next to Nathaniel and sniffed him as we walked "You smell like fresh wounds." He touched Nathaniel's back where it showed above the tank top. I knew there were bite marks up around his shoulders, all the way up to his neck. I should have known we couldn't hide it. Hell, even with clothes covering it, they'd have smelled it.

"What have you been doing?" Zane asked. "Or should I say who?"

Nathaniel didn't even glance at me. He was going to leave it all to me-- what was said and what wasn't. Smart of him. Or maybe he just didn't know what to say either. I tried to think of a lie that would explain it, and nothing that didn't make Nathaniel sound slutty came to mind. Either he'd had sex with some strange woman, or ... or what? The truth? I didn't want to tell the truth until I was sure how I felt about it. Knowing me, that could take at least a couple of days.

Cherry and Zane circled Nathaniel in ever-tightening circles, until their bodies brushed him as they moved around him. They bumped him continuously, like a shark testing to see if you're good to eat.

"Come on guys, we don't have time for this. We need to get to the lupanar and rescue Gregory."

Zane dropped to his knees beside Nathaniel, running his hands over the smaller man's body. Zane's hands slid under Nathaniel's tank top.

"Zane, get up," I said.

Cherry stepped very close to Nathaniel, looking down at him, putting a hand under his chin to lift his face to her, as if she meant to kiss him. "Who was it?"

"That's Nathaniel's business," I said. Nathaniel glanced at me, sort of sideways. The look was enough. I was being a coward. My pulse was going way too fast in my neck, like I'd tried to swallow something while it was still trying to get away.

"If it were Zane, or me, yes," Cherry said. "But while you were in the hospital these last few days we decided that Nathaniel has to run all girlfriends past the pard before he does anything intimate with them."

"As Nimir-Ra, don't I have like presidential veto?"

Cherry looked at me. "Of course, but you have to agree with checking out people for Nathaniel. He nearly got you killed again."

I did agree, but just not that night. That night, of all nights, I wanted everyone to mind their own business. No one cared a damn who slept with whom--until now. It figures. I make my first indiscreet move with one of them, and I was going to have to confess, even though I still didn't know how I felt about it. I opened my mouth to say, *It was me*, but I stopped when I saw the next wereleopard coming down the street. Of all of them, she was the one I least to talk in front of about intimate matters.

It was Elizabeth. Her walk was always a cross between a strut and a glide, the ultimate hooker's walk. She strode from between the cars on Caleb's arm, and there was a self-satisfied smile on her face that said either she didn't know I was angry with her or she was confident I couldn't do anything about it. She was taller than Caleb by nearly five inches. Her hair fell in curls to her waist, a brunette so dark you would have called it black if you didn't have my hair to compare it to. She was pretty in a pouting, lush sort of way, like some sort of tropical plant with thick, fleshy leaves and beautiful but deadly blossoms.

She was wearing a skirt so short the tops of her black hose and the garters that held them up showed. Her shoes were black sandals with a lower heel than she usually wore. After all, we were going to be tramping through the woods. The shirt was sheer enough that even by starlight you could see she wasn't wearing a bra, and she, like me, was a woman who needed one.

Caleb was wearing a pair of bell-bottom jeans, no shoes, no shirt. The jeans were cut low enough to show off his belly-button ring. I was too young to remember wearing bell-bottoms personally, but I did remember my older cousins competing to see who could get the widest bell. Even as a child I'd thought the pants were ugly. Time had not changed my opinion.

Caleb looked pretty satisfied himself. I was betting they'd had sex together, but it wasn't any of my business who they fucked. Honest it wasn't.

"I'm glad you've had a good night, Elizabeth."

She squeezed Caleb's arm. "Oh, it's been a very, very good night."

"I'm glad, because it's about to get very, very bad," I said.

She fake-pouted at me. "Oh, did our little Nimir-Ra get her feelings hurt because I wouldn't come and sleep naked beside her?"

I had to laugh.

"What's so funny?" she asked. Caleb started moving away from her, pulling free.

"Why is it that you don't think I'll kill you, Elizabeth?"

"For what?" she asked.

"Oh, maybe for deserting Nathaniel at the club and letting the bad guys get him, which led to me nearly getting killed, and maybe becoming Nimir-Ra for real."

"I'm tired of baby-sitting him," she said. "He used to be a lot of fun, but not anymore. He's got standards now."

"Meaning that he won't fuck you anymore," I said.

The first touch of real anger slid across her face. "We used to have some real good times, Nathaniel and me."

"Not good enough, apparently," I said.

She strode up to stand beside Cherry, which put her very close to me. She wasn't afraid of me, and I knew why -- or thought I did. She'd been insulting, arrogant, and a downright pain in the ass since I took over the pard and I hadn't hurt her. I'd let it all slide, because, as she was so happy to point out, I could shoot her, but I couldn't really punish her. Punish to a shapeshifter means either beat the shit out of them or do some mystical crap that scares the shit out of them. She was right. I couldn't do the shapeshifter stuff. It had taken me a while to realize why I let Elizabeth slide so much. I'd killed her sweetie, the man she loved. It made me feel bad. Gabriel had earned death, but she had loved him, and I sympathized. But she'd used up the last of my sympathy when I saw Nathaniel hanging from those chains with the swords grown into his flesh. The rules had changed, and Elizabeth didn't know it. Yet.

The other wereleopards glided out of the trees, trailed down the road. Merle's hair gleamed white in the darkness, his beard and mustache silvered. He was wearing straight-legged jeans and cowboy boots with silver-tipped toes. An open leather jacket did more to frame his chest than cover it. He had a woman with him.

She was tall--six feet or maybe a little over. She was wearing jogging shoes, jeans, and a baggy T-shirt that hung to mid-thigh. The baggy T-shirt couldn't hide the fact that she was leggy and well built. Her hair was almost black, straight, thick, cut just above her shoulders. She wore no makeup, and the bones of her face made her look sculpted--almost harsh. Her eyes were pale, her lips, thin. She had one of those faces that would have been beautiful with a little makeup, but was still striking. It was a face you wouldn't forget or grow tired of. Merle was holding her hand, but not like they were a couple, more like a father holds a daughter's hand--a comforting gesture.

She vibrated with that otherworldly energy that all the leopards had to some degree. But this one made my skin dance from yards away. When they got close enough for me to see that her eyes were pale, I could also see that she was afraid. Her eyes had that wincing look of a person who's been abused once too often.

Merle introduced her, "This is Gina."

"Hi, Gina," I said.

She looked at me, and the fear in her eyes was replaced by disdain. "She's a little short for a Nimir-Ra."

"Micah and I are the same height," I said.

She shrugged. "Like I said." But her bravado didn't ring true. It was more like someone whistling in the dark. But I let it go. Gina wasn't my problem tonight.

Vivian was the last of my leopards, and she came alone down the street. She was one of the few women who made me feel protective and made me think of adjectives like *doll-like* and *delicate*. She was simply one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen, and the casual shorts and striped tank top with

sandals couldn't hide that. She was African-American by way of Ireland, and her skin was that flawless pale cocoa shade that you only get with that particular mixture. She looked sort of lost, and I realized why. I hadn't seen her without Stephen at her side in over a year. Stephen was Gregory's identical twin, also a stripper at Guilty Pleasures. Stephen and Vivian were living together and seemed very happy doing it. But Stephen was at the lupanar tonight like all good werewolves, and she was here with the leopards. Poor Vivian. Poor Stephen. I hadn't really thought until that moment that Stephen might lose a brother tonight. Shit.

Vivian dropped to her knees in front of me, and I offered her my hands. She took them in her hands, then rubbed her face against them, as Cherry and Zane had done. Elizabeth hadn't offered a greeting, and it was an insult. The others weren't my leopards, but she was. And she'd deliberately snubbed me. It was the first time in front of company. I didn't usually insist on it, because I didn't like Elizabeth touching me, but I watched Caleb's face as Vivian rose from her greeting. He'd noticed the oversight.

"How you doing, Vivian?"

"A real Nimir-Ra wouldn't have to ask," Elizabeth said.

I squeezed Vivian's hands and helped her stand. "Are you going to help us rescue Gregory, or just be a big pain in the ass?" I asked Elizabeth.

"I want Gregory safe," she said.

"Then shut the fuck up."

She started to say something, and Cherry gripped her arm. "That's enough, Elizabeth."

"You're not dominant to me," Elizabeth said.

"I'm trying to be your friend," Cherry said.

"You want me to leave her alone?"

"Please," Cherry said.

"Fine," Elizabeth said. She turned back to Nathaniel. "I can smell fresh blood on you, Nathaniel." She put her arms on either side of his neck, hands clasped together, her body pressed the length of his, moving Cherry back. "You finally find someone to top you?"

"Yes," he said.

"Who?" Cherry asked.

"We really don't have time for this," I said. "We need to get to the lupanar."

Merle had to add his two cents worth. "The only reason that Elizabeth treats you the way she does is that you let her. Disobedience must be punished immediately, or the power structure cannot survive--much like your local Ulfric and his pack."

"I control my leopards," I said.

Elizabeth laughed, planting a big kiss on Nathaniel's forehead and leaving a red lipstick print behind. "He fucked someone tonight, when he'd been forbidden to be with anyone without pard approval. And you're going to let *that* slide, too. You are *so* weak."

I took a deep breath and let it out. "He didn't fuck anyone tonight."

Caleb had joined the others crawling around Nathaniel. He plunged his face into Nathaniel's groin. Elizabeth moved back so he could do it. "I smell sperm, but not pussy." This after I knew that Nathaniel had washed thoroughly. Caleb stood, and Elizabeth moved back. He put his hand behind Nathaniel's neck and moved their faces together as if they were going to kiss, but he stopped just short of their lips touching. "I don't smell pussy here either. I don't think he had sex."

Zane raised Nathaniel's shirt as far as he could reach from his knees, then stood pushing the shirt up to Nathaniel's neck. The bite marks were almost black in the starlight. There was a bite mark on almost every inch of his back; the edges didn't touch, but I hadn't missed much. It made me blush.

Vivian looked at me, and I realized that she could probably smell the blood rushing to my cheeks.

Zane said, "He might not have had sex, but he had something."

Caleb came around to gaze at Nathaniel's naked back. "Someone had fun."

"Look at this," Elizabeth said. She drew them around to the front and the bite mark around his nipple. They ran their fingers over it, and Zane pulled Nathaniel's shirt off and threw it on the hood of the nearest car. Everyone but Merle, Gina, and Vivian swarmed Nathaniel, touching the wounds with fingers, hands, and tongues. Nathaniel's head went back, eyes closed, and I knew he wasn't exactly having a bad time, but ...

"That's enough," I said.

Elizabeth pulled Nathaniel's shorts down, and I got a glimpse of just how not-unhappy he was.

I yelled, "That's enough!"

Elizabeth turned on her knees, her hands on his butt. "Whoever did this could have just as easily done more damage. They could have cut him up bad, and he would have let them do it. Wouldn't you have, Nathaniel?"

"I would have let her do anything she wanted," he said.

Shit.

"You can't let him do this," Cherry said, standing and coming to me. "You can't let him skate on this, Anita. Or the next time whoever she is might just kill him."

"She won't kill him," I said.

"You know who it is?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Why didn't you say so?" Merle asked.

I took a deep breath and blew it out. "Because I'm not comfortable with it yet. But that's my problem not Nathaniel's." I held my hand out to him.

"Nathaniel."

He pulled his shorts up so he could walk and came to me, squeezing my hand as he took it. I put him behind me, the line of our bodies touching. Physical contact was a way of saying he was under my protection. "I marked him."

Elizabeth laughed still on her knees. "I know he's your favorite, but I never thought you'd outright lie for him."

"At least some of you can smell it if I lie. I marked his body, my teeth marks."

"Your anxiety level has been high since we got here. I can't tell if you're lying," Merle said. "And if I can't tell, then no one else here is alpha enough to be sure."

"It's gotten so that your scent doesn't change when you lie," Cherry said.

I'd heard of lying with your eyes, but never with your scent. "I didn't know you could do that, lie with your smell."

"I think lying just doesn't make you anxious anymore," she said.

Oh. "Being a sociopath does have its benefits," I said.

Caleb crawled towards us, in that gliding crawl the leopards could do. It was inhumanly graceful. He came close enough to put his face against my leg. I let him, because I figured that they'd get around to smelling me if I claimed Nathaniel. I just hadn't planned on it being one of Micah's cats first.

"He does have her scent on his skin."

"They sleep in the same bed most nights," Elizabeth said. She was on her feet, hadn't even snagged her hose.

Caleb rubbed his face against my leg. "She smells of wolf and ... vampire." He gazed up at me. "Did you do your Ulfric and your master last night? Is that why Nathaniel doesn't smell like pussy, because there wasn't a hole left for him?"

I'd tried to keep my version of an open mind, but I decided then and there that I didn't like Caleb. "The pard has a right to question who Nathaniel sleeps with, because he doesn't have good judgment. None of you have the right to question me."

Caleb moved in one of those too-fast-to-see motions and shoved his face into my groin, hard enough that it almost hurt. I pulled the Browning without thinking about it and had it pressed against his skull before I realized it. Faster than normal--even for me.

Caleb raised his head back so that his forehead was pressed against the end of the gun. He stared up at me. "You don't smell like dick. Don't tell me you had at least three men with you in a bed and nobody got to fuck you."

"Caleb, I'm really beginning not to like you."

He grinned. "But you won't shoot me, because that would make Micah mad."

"You're right, I shouldn't have pulled the gun. I'm just not used to being able to draw a gun before I have time to think about it."

"I've never seen you move that fast," Zane said.

I shrugged. "Benefits of the change, I guess." I put the Browning back. I wasn't going to shoot him for just being obnoxious.

Caleb rested his cheek against my thigh, and I let him. My struggling would just amuse him, and he was behaving himself, relatively speaking.

Vivian touched my arm. "Are you really going to be one of us?"

"We'll know in about two weeks," I said.

"I am sorry," she said.

I smiled at her. "Thanks."

"You didn't top Nathaniel," Elizabeth said. "You're too squeamish to use teeth on him like that."

I looked at her, and I let the darkness fill my eyes that was my own version of a beast. The look that said just how far down the well I'd fallen. "I'm not as squeamish as I used to be, Elizabeth. You might want to remember that."

"No," she said, "no, you're protecting him. He's been teacher's pet since day one. You're just afraid of what Micah will do. Afraid of what a real Nimir-Raj will do to him now that he's disobeyed a direct order." She stalked over to us. "And you should be afraid, Anita, you should be very afraid, because Micah's strong, strong the way Gabriel was strong. He doesn't flinch."

"I've heard enough about Gabriel to wonder if that's a compliment." Micah came out of the woods with a tall man beside him. Before Micah, I'd never slept with a man that I'd just met. I'd never slept with anyone that didn't make my heart beat faster, my skin react to the sight of him. As Micah glided from the trees, he was graceful and handsome, but I wasn't in love with him, and my body didn't react like I was. I was both relieved and a little ashamed of that.

He was wearing shorts that had been cut off and allowed to go ragged at the hem. A white tank top seemed to glow in the dark, making his tan look even darker. A wide leather belt encircled his slender waist. He'd tied his hair back in a ponytail, but it was so curly that it didn't give the illusion of short hair; you knew even from the front that there was a lot more hair behind him. He seemed more delicate in clothes than he had without them. Maybe I just hadn't been paying attention to how small boned he was. There was something graceful in the way he was made, fine bones, smooth skin, very ... refined, especially for a man. Jean-Claude was prettier, but he was too tall to ever be called delicate. Micah was delicate. The only thing that saved him from looking fragile was the play of muscles in his arms, the way he walked, like the world was his and everywhere he moved he was the center of the universe. It wasn't so much confidence as surety. So much potential in such a small package. He reminded me of somebody.

The man trailing behind Micah was dark complected, with very short, close cut hair, and there was something about his skin tone, even by starlight, that didn't look tan. He was handsome in a young, almost preppy sort of way, but muscled and very alert. That explained why Merle hadn't been glued to Micah's side. We'd had a change of guard. Micah introduced him as Noah.

I'd dreaded seeing Micah again--wondered what I'd say, how I'd feel. I wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as I'd thought I'd be. Maybe I'd have been more so if I hadn't been trying to defend Nathaniel's honor. Maybe because I didn't give any sign of what we'd done, Micah didn't either. Or maybe he was as confused as I was about it. Or maybe that's how casual sex works. I just didn't know.

"What is everyone so tense about?" Micah asked.

"Show him, Nathaniel."

Nathaniel never questioned, just stepped out from behind me and showed his back to the two men.

The bodyguard gave a sharp whistle. Micah's eyes widened, and he looked over Nathaniel's shoulder at me.

"You did this?"

I nodded.

"She didn't," Elizabeth said.

Caleb had risen as far as he could on his knees and was sniffing my stomach, his face pointed towards other things, but he was careful not to touch them. I don't think he would have sniffed my groin in front of Micah. Elizabeth was right on one thing. The leopards just weren't as afraid of me as they were of Micah.

"She smells of blood, too," Caleb said.

"Get away from me," I said.

He smirked, but he crawled away.

"Are you saying she has a wound on her like what he has on his back?" Elizabeth asked.

Caleb nodded as he crawled.

"Then she's lying. Whoever did his back, did her, too."

I sighed. "Am I really going to have to prove this?"

"I would take your word," Micah said, "but apparently your pard won't."

"It's just that we've wanted you to take one of us like this for so long," Cherry said. "And now ... I think we'd have believed sex but not this. It just doesn't look like your work, and Elizabeth's right about one thing. Nathaniel is your favorite, and you do protect him."

Great, no one believed me. "Fine, just fine," I said. I started sliding out of the shoulder holster to let it flop at my back. Pulling my shirt out of my jeans wasn't a problem, even taking it off and laying it beside Nathaniel's shirt on the car hood wasn't a problem. I was wearing a very nice black bra. It was meant to be seen. Jean-Claude had been a very bad influence on my wardrobe. The problem was taking off the bra. I really didn't want to do that.

I undid the back, but held the front in place. "What happens when you see the bite mark?"

"If you show me a bite mark on your breast that doesn't have fang marks in it, I'll believe it was Nathaniel," Micah said.

Everyone had crowded close. I never liked being the center of attention, not for this kind of thing. "Give me a little breathing space guys."

They moved back a fraction of a step, and I thought, screw it. Everyone here, except Elizabeth and maybe the new bodyguard, had seen me naked. Oh, hell. I slipped the bra off and laid it on the hood with my shirt. I made absolutely no eye contact.

A hand came into view, and I grabbed the wrist. It was Caleb. "Nathaniel gets to take a bite, and I can't even touch it."

"No, you can't," I said.

Micah didn't come any closer. "Why did you mark him?"

I met his eyes, expecting to see accusation, or disdain, or something negative. But his face was very still. "I needed to sink my teeth into something."

I needed ..." I shook my head and looked away. "It wasn't sex I wanted. I wanted to feed."

"No." Elizabeth came crowding close. "No, you can't be Nimir-Ra for real, not for real." There was something close to panic on her face. I could smell her fear. She moved close enough that our bodies almost touched, and I could hear her heart thundering.

"Be afraid, Elizabeth, be very afraid," I said.

She half-turned away from me, and Micah said something at the same time which is my only excuse for not seeing her fist coming. She rocked me back against the side of the Jeep, filling my mouth with blood and making my knees go weak. Only Cherry catching me around the waist kept me standing. The world swam in black and white streamers for a second. When my vision cleared Elizabeth was being held by Micah and Noah, the bodyguard.

I pushed myself upright and stepped away from Cherry. She kept hold of my arm, and I let her for a second while I let the last of the vertigo slip away. I put a hand to my mouth and came away with blood.

Merle moved up to take Elizabeth's arm, and Micah came to stand in front of me. "Are you alright?"

"I'll be okay."

He touched my bare arms. It was the lightest brush of fingertips, but it made me shiver. My nipples grew hard, and there was nothing I could do to hide the sudden reaction.

I looked at him, and I didn't have to look up for it, not even an inch. "I don't know you, why ..."

His arms slid behind my back, pressed our bodies together, and I suddenly couldn't get enough air. "I am your Nimir-Raj, Anita. There is no shame in that."

"You say Nimir-Raj like other people say husband."

He ran one hand through my hair, until his fingers were tight to my scalp, the other hand at the small of my back. "Our souls resonate like the sound of two perfect bells," he whispered, as his mouth hovered over mine. The comment was so romantic it was stupid, and I should have laughed at it, but I didn't.

He kissed me, a push of his lips, then his tongue slipped into my mouth. I knew when he tasted my blood, because his hands tightened on my body and his body reacted against me. He was too large for me not to feel him grow hard between our bodies.

I ran my hands over his arms, his shirt, and it wasn't enough. I wanted to touch his bare skin to mine, to drink in every inch of him, into every inch of me.

He kissed me as if he would drink me in, and I knew that part of the excitement was the fresh blood. I pulled his shirt out of his pants and ran my hands up his back. But it wasn't enough.

He drew back from the kiss, and I pulled his shirt over his head. Just pressing our bare chests against each other was better. It was as if my skin craved his skin. I'd never felt anything like it.

We held each other, both breathing too hard, our arms locked around each other, faces pressed to each other's shoulders, his breath hot on my neck.

"We don't have time for more," he whispered.

I nodded, my head still against his neck. It wasn't like I'd been planning on more, but ... "I had to touch my skin to yours, why?"

"I told you, you are my Nimir-Ra, and I am your Nimir-Raj."

I pulled back enough to see his face. "That doesn't explain it to me."

He held my face in his hands, making very serious eye contact. "We are a mated pair, Anita. It's legend among the leopards that you can find your perfect mate, and from the first moment you have sex you're bound, more than marriage, more than law. We will always crave each other. Our souls will always call to each other. Our beasts will always hunt together."

It should have scared me, but it didn't. It should have made me angry, but it didn't. I should have felt a lot of things, but all I really felt was that he was right, and I didn't even want to try and talk him out of it.

"Richard's going to love this," Elizabeth said.

Merle and Noah took her down to her knees, in an abrupt gesture that had to hurt a little. I looked at her. "Thanks for reminding me what I was about to do, Elizabeth. I got distracted." I drew away from Micah, my fingers trailing down his arm, as if I couldn't quite bare to let go of him.

"Let her go, boys. She's my problem, not yours."

They looked to Micah, who nodded. Elizabeth stayed on her knees, as if uncertain what to do. She tried to get one of them to help her to her feet, but they ignored her and left her to stand on her own.

I took time to put my bra on as I walked back to my Jeep, the shoulder holster still flapping around my waist. I slipped it over my naked skin, and it was not comfortable, but I didn't want to take the time to put my shirt on. I knew what I was going to do now.

I walked to my Jeep, and everyone waited in the dark while I unlocked the door, scooted into the passenger seat, opened my glove compartment, and got out a spare clip of lead bullets. I'd started carrying an extra clip of lead bullets in the Jeep since I ran afoul of a few rogue fairies. You can shoot the fey with silver all day and it won't do much. But lead, they didn't like lead. Lead also had other uses, because it wouldn't kill a wereanimal. Only silver would do that. I walked back towards them, popping out the clip that was in the gun as I moved. I put the clip in my pocket, though it didn't fit well, and shoved the new clip home until it clicked.

Elizabeth finally started looking worried when I was about two cars away. Anyone else would probably have been running, but common sense wasn't one of Elizabeth's strong suits. I had actually pointed the gun at her while I very calmly walked closer, before she said, "You wouldn't dare."

I stared down the barrel of the gun at her, and I felt nothing. It was a big, cold empty place inside me--utterly calm, peaceful. But at the center of that empty peacefulness was a tiny kernel of satisfaction. I'd been wanting to do this for a long time.

I shot her twice in the chest, while she was still telling me I wouldn't shoot her. She went over backwards, spine bowing, hands scrabbling at the road, legs kicking while she tried to breathe.

Everyone had cleared a big space around her. I stood over her and stared down while she tried to breathe, and her heart struggled to beat around the hole I'd put in it. "You keep saying I can't kill you like a real Nimir-Ra by tearing your throat out, or gutting you. Maybe that's going to change soon but until then I can shoot you, and you'll be just as dead."

Her eyes rolled desperately, while her body tried to cope with the damage. Blood welled out of her mouth.

"This time it wasn't silver. But fail me again, Elizabeth, in anything large or small, fail any member of this pard, and I will kill you."

She'd finally gotten enough air to talk. She spat out blood and the words, "Bitch, you don't even ..." more blood, "have the guts ..." dark blood from her mouth, "to shoot me for real."

Staring down at her, I realized something I hadn't before. Elizabeth wanted me to kill her. She wanted me to send her to wherever Gabriel was. She probably didn't realize that's what she wanted, but if it wasn't a death wish, it was close enough.

She lay there and healed, and cursed me, and told me how weak I was. I shot her in the chest again. She writhed and jerked, and the pool of blood just grew wider underneath her body.

I let the ammo clip fall into my hand from the gun, put it in my other pocket and got my main clip back in the gun. "Silver now, Elizabeth. Any more smart remarks?" I waited until she had healed enough to talk. "Answer me, Elizabeth."

She stared up at me, and there was something in her eyes, something that said we finally had an understanding. She was afraid of me, and sometimes that's the best you can do with people. I'd tried kindness. I'd tried friendship. I'd tried respect. But when all else fails, fear will do the job.

"Good, Elizabeth, I'm glad we understand each other." I turned to the others. They were staring at me like I'd sprouted a second head--a nasty one. Micah held out my clothes to me, and I slipped the shoulder holster off and the clothes on. No one said anything while I dressed.

When everything was back in place, I said, "Shall we go to the house now?"

Caleb looked positively ill. Micah looked pleased. So did Merle, and Gina, and all my leopards.

"You will not be allowed guns tonight in the lupanar," Merle said.

"That's what the knives are for," I said.

He looked at me as if he wasn't sure whether I was serious or not.

"Smile, Merle, she'll heal."

"I'm beginning to agree with what the wererats said."

"And what was that?"

"That you were scary enough all on your own without being Nimir-Ra."

"This isn't even close to as scary as I get," I said.

He raised his eyebrows at me. "Really?"

It was Nathaniel who said, "Really." My other cats echoed him, nodding.

"Then why aren't you afraid of her?" Gina asked.

"Because she doesn't try to be scary to us," Zane said. He looked down at Elizabeth on the ground, still unable to move much. "Of course, maybe the rules have changed."

"Only for bad little leopards," I said, "Let's get to the rats and go see the wolves."

"And the swans," Micah said.

"Swans?" I asked.

He smiled. "You just keep making conquests, Anita, even when you don't mean to do it." He held his hand out to me. I hesitated, then, slowly, I took it. Our fingers interlaced, and we walked together hand-in-hand down the road, and it felt good, and right, like I'd found a piece of myself that was missing. I left Zane behind to make sure Elizabeth didn't get run over by a car. We'd send Dr. Lillian back for her. The rest of the leopards followed behind Micah and me, and for the first time since I'd inherited the cats, I felt like I really was Nimir-Ra. And maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't fail them.

Chapter 21

RAFAEL THE RAT king had a black limo. He'd never struck me as a limo kind of guy, and I said as much. He said, "Marcus and Raina used to put on quite a show for things like this. I and my rats are not willing to make a spectacle of ourselves, so the limo."

"Hey, I wore makeup," I said. That had made him smile.

We were riding in the back of the limo, with one of his wererats driving. Merle and Zane were in the front with the driver. Merle, because he'd objected to us all being split up among people he didn't know, and Zane, because I just didn't completely trust Merle yet. Though I had no illusions about which of them would win the fight, if it came to that. Richard had a werewolf or two that I would have bet on against Merle, but there was something downright scary about Micah's head bodyguard, a "something" that all of my leopards lacked. Not ruthlessness, more an ultimate practicality. You just knew Merle would do whatever needed to be done, no hesitation, no sympathy, just business. When that's pretty much how you operate yourself, you begin to recognize it in other people, and you watch them closely.

All the leaders got to ride in the back of the limo, which smacked of elitism to me, but it did allow us all to talk together, and no one else seemed to have a problem with it. I wasn't sure why it bugged me, but it did.

Rafael was tall, dark, handsome, and strongly Mexican. He spoke with no trace of an accent, or rather he sounded like he was from Missouri. He sat facing us. Yes, us. Micah and I sat across from him. We were not holding hands. We were not casting longing glances at each other. In fact, strangely once I was away from the other leopards, I was uncomfortable around him. Maybe it was my usual discomfort that always set in after intimacy. But I wasn't sure, it felt different. Or maybe it was the closer we got to seeing Richard, the more I wondered what the hell I was doing. Was I really going to tell Richard that I'd taken a lover, another shapeshifter? We'd broken up before and gotten back together, but if Richard thought I'd taken a permanent lover besides Jean-Claude, it was over. I didn't want it to be over, though part of me wasn't at all sure that dating Richard was healthy for either of us. We weren't really good for each other. Love is like that sometimes.

I pushed away serious thoughts and looked at the last member of our little party. Donovan Reece was the new swan king in town. He was about six feet tall, though it was hard to tell exactly while he was sitting down. His skin was that flawless milk and cream complexion that the beauty aids promise when tan is out for a year or two, but Donovan's was the real deal. He was whiter than I was, as white as Jean-Claude, but there was a slight pink flush to Donovan's cheeks, like perfectly applied blush. You could almost see the blood flowing under his skin, as if it were nearly translucent. He not only looked alive, but very alive, as if he'd be hot to the touch.

His eyes were a pale blue-gray that shifted with his moods like a summer sky that couldn't make up its mind whether it wanted to be peaceful with fluffy white clouds or rain all over your head. He was handsome in a clean-cut, preppy sort of way, as if he should have been on a college campus somewhere pledging to a frat and chugging beers. Instead he was going with us into a gathering of werewolves where he would be the only nonpredator there. That didn't sound like a good idea to me.

"You saved my swanmanes, Ms. Blake. You nearly got yourself killed doing it. I couldn't risk the girls coming, they are not ..." He looked down at his folded hands, then raised those changeable eyes to me. "They are like your Nathaniel--victims."

"Nathaniel is driving my Jeep with the rest of my people in it," I said.

Reece nodded. "Yes, but the shape of his beast is a predator. My girls are not. If they lost control and changed during the meeting, they would be meat."

"I agree with you, Mr. Reece, but doesn't the same logic apply to you?"

"I am a swan king, Ms. Blake, I will not change shape unless I will it so."

Will it so. I'd never heard anyone put it quite that way. Donovan Reece had a bad case of arrogance. I wasn't going to talk him out of this. Rafael had been trying to before I arrived. Micah never offered. He'd been very good about letting me do all the talking. I liked that in a man.

"Can you fight?" I asked.

"I will not be a burden, Ms. Blake, don't worry."

I was worried, because I could smell the blood just under his skin. I could almost see it flowing under his flesh. He smelled like meat and blood, and heat.

He smelled like food. I'd been around shapeshifters that were prey animals, but I'd never realized you could tell by smell what wasn't a predator. I knew by the gentle scent of him that Reece's beast was something soft and easily killed. Something that would struggle but not hurt me. I had to swallow hard, trying to slow my pulse, but it would not slow. I wanted to drop on my knees in front of him and sniff his skin, rub my face against his bare arms until the short sleeves of his button-up shirt stopped me. A white undershirt peeked out the top of the blue and white striped shirt. I wanted to rip the shirt open, send the buttons popping through the air, take a knife from my wrist sheath and slit the undershirt, bare his naked chest and stomach. But it wasn't the *ardeur*, it wasn't sex I was thinking about. I wanted to see his stomach bare, to feel the soft tissue under my mouth, my teeth, to bite into ...

I covered my eyes with my hands, and shook my head. What was wrong with me?

Micah touched my arm, gently. "Anita, what's wrong?"

I lowered my hands and looked at him. "He smells like food."

Micah nodded. "Yes."

I shook my head again. "You don't understand what I'm thinking. It's ... frightening." I couldn't say it out loud. I wanted to feed on him, or at least sink my teeth into his flesh. I think I could keep from actually feeding, but the urge to mark that flawless skin was so strong that I almost didn't trust myself.

"When you told me why you marked Nathaniel I knew it was the hunger." Micah said the last word like it should have been in capital letters. "It usually takes a few days, or weeks, before your first full moon, to have the hunger become a problem. It's okay to have thoughts, images in your head about feeding. It's normal."

"Normal." I laughed, but it was a harsh sound. "What I'm thinking isn't even close to normal." Again I couldn't bring myself to say it out loud.

"What do you want to do to Reece?" Rafael asked.

I looked across the seat at him. I opened my mouth to say, then glanced at Reece and stopped. "No, it's like telling a sexual fantasy in front of the stranger you just had the fantasy about. It feels that intimate."

"It *is* that intimate," Rafael said.

I looked back at him, and his dark eyes held my gaze. "If you tell Mr. Reece what you're wanting to do to him, then maybe he'll fly home."

"A rat is a prey animal, too," Reece said.

"Everything that is smaller is a prey animal," Rafael said, "but rats are omniverous. They eat anything that crosses their path, including humans, if they can't get away. A wererat is not a small thing, Mr. Reece, we are large enough to be the predators that our namesakes cannot be."

Reece was scowling at us all now. He shook his head angrily and leaned forward and shoved his wrist into my face. "Get a good whiff, all of you seem to like it."

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," Rafael said.

"Listen to him, Reece," Micah said.

I didn't say anything because the scent of his flesh so close was intoxicating. It was like the most exotic perfume spread across silk sheets, with an undertone of fresh baked bread and some sweet jelly spread over flesh. I had no word for it, but it smelled better than anything I'd ever smelled in my life.

I was holding his wrist, pressing the thin skin against my lips, before I realized what I was doing. The skin was so tender, and I could smell the blood under that paper-thin layer of skin. I wanted to do more than smell it. I wanted to taste it, to feel his flesh give under my teeth, to have the blood gush warm in my mouth, to ... I jerked away from him and crawled across Micah, across the seat to huddle in the far corner as far away from the swan king as I could get and not jump out the door.

There must have been something on my face, in my eyes that scared him because his eyes widened, his full mouth opened slightly. "My God, your control really is that bad."

I managed to say, "Sorry."

"Do you really want to put yourself in the midst of hundreds of us?" Rafael asked.

"I won't be bluffed," Reece said. "You won't hurt me. From everything I've heard about Anita, and you, Rafael, you're the good guys." His gaze flicked to Micah. "Him, I don't know, but I do know that the swans have never thrown their allegiance to anyone. We've been autonomous. The fact that I'm supporting Anita and her pard will mean something to the wolves. We are weak as battle allies, but that any animal other than her own would ally with her pard will mean something to their Ulfric."

I huddled on the far corner of the seat, arms hugging my legs to my chest, a position not really meant to be performed while wearing a shoulder holster. But I was literally holding on to myself, hugging my control and my body. How was I ever going to get through tonight without doing something embarrassing, or deadly? How much worse was my control going to get?

"Your last swan king answered to their now-deceased lupa," Rafael said.

"So I've heard. Though technically he was a swan prince, not a king. I don't know what he owed the old lupa, but I'd guess it was something blackmailable, because I've found some Polaroids that would make you blush."

I had to clear my throat twice before I could talk. "Kaspar refused to be in Raina's dirty movies, but the price for that was that he helped audition people for the films."

Reece looked at me. "Audition, what do you mean?"

I huddled and talked, but I was talking over the pulse in my head, the rush of blood in my body. I wanted to be next to Reece. I wanted to take a bite. Instead, I talked. "Kaspar could change form from swan to man at will. Raina used him to see if non-shapeshifters freaked when he changed in the middle of sex."

I felt Micah's reaction even from a distance. Reece looked horrified. "You saw this?"

"No, but Raina took great delight in telling me about it in detail. She tried to get me to watch one of his auditions, but I had better things to do."

"He did this willingly?" Reece asked.

"No," I said. "It was most definitely not his choice. He seemed to hate it."

"We see the fact that we can change forms at will as a great gift. We're one of the few shapeshifters that can do it with ease."

"Is that because your gift is either a curse or a born talent, rather than a disease?"

"We think so," he said.

"Kaspar was under a curse," I said.

"Are you wondering about me?"

Actually I was watching the way his Adam's apple bobbed when he talked, and wondering what it would feel like to fix teeth in his throat, but that was probably a fact best kept to myself. I kept talking, but I think both Micah and Rafael knew how ragged my control was. I hugged myself and kept talking, because silence filled with awful images, terrible desires.

"Yeah, I'm wondering," I said.

"I was born a swan king."

"You were born a swan king, not a swanmane. Does that mean you're male? Is swanmane only used for women?"

He looked at me, studying my face. "I was born to be their king. I'm the first king in over a century."

"Everybody else is chosen to lead, or fights for the right, but you make it sound like a hereditary monarchy," I said.

"It is, but it's not bloodlines that makes the difference, though being a swanmane either runs in your family or it doesn't. But I didn't inherit the title."

"Then how did you know?" I asked.

His eyes had gotten dark, dark gray like storm clouds. "The answer to that is somewhat intimate."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"I'll give you the answer you seek, if you answer a rather delicate question for me."

We stared at each other. My heart rate was almost normal again. I could look at him without smelling the blood under his skin. Talking, listening, doing somewhat normal things had helped. I was a person, with speech and higher functions, not an animal. I could do this. Really. I eased out of my little ball, slowly.

"Ask and I'll let you know," I said.

"Did you kill Kaspar Gunderson, the last swan king?"

I blinked at him. That was unexpected. The sheer surprise made my pulse rate speed up a touch. "No, no, I didn't."

"Do you know who did?"

I blinked at him again. I wondered if I could lie and if he would be able to tell, or not. I finally stuck to the truth. "Yes."

"Who?"

I shook my head. "That I won't answer."

"Why not?"

"Because I would have killed Kaspar myself if he hadn't gotten away."

"I know he was responsible for several deaths, and that he tried to kill you and some of your friends," Reece said.

"It was a little more diabolical than that," I said. "He was taking money from hunters and supplying them with shifters."

Reece nodded. "He also made the swanmanes in his care into victims. I think that's what he and the old lupa shared--sexual sadism."

"That's why your girls, as you put it, were at the club with Nathaniel."

"Yes, I don't play those sorts of games, and they've grown to crave it."

I nodded. "I sympathize," I said.

"You've answered my questions truthfully, I can do no less." He started unbuttoning his shirt.

I looked at Micah, who shrugged. I looked at Rafael, who shook his head. Nice that none of us knew why he was undressing.

He left the overshirt tucked in but started pulling the undershirt out of his pants. He was about to bare his soft underbelly, and I wasn't a hundred percent sure my control was up to seeing it. My pulse was in my throat again. Since apparently neither of the men was going to ask, I asked, "Why are you undressing?"

"To show you the symbol of my kingship."

I stared at him. "Excuse me?"

Reece frowned at me. "Don't worry, Ms. Blake, I'm not about to flash you."

"I'm not worried about you flashing me, Reece, it's that ..." but I never finished, because he'd bared the white, white skin of his stomach. In the darkened car I could still see the pulse just behind his belly button. Hell, I could almost taste it in my mouth, as if I'd already sunk teeth into that tender flesh, as if I was already eating my way through to more vital things. Something was odd about the hair on his chest. It was almost too fine, too thin, too delicate, running in a dainty white line down the center of his chest and spreading in an upside down triangle around his belly button then down into his pants.

I was on the floorboard crawling towards him, and I didn't remember getting there. I stopped, pressed against Micah's legs. "I don't remember leaving my seat. I'm losing time."

Micah put his hands on my shoulders. "It happens when your beast controls you, at first. The first few full moons will be almost complete blackouts, until you can begin to access the memories, and that will take work."

Reece had leaned back across the seat, half-reclining, and started to undo his belt.

This close I could see, or thought I saw what was wrong with the hair on his chest and stomach. I tried to move forward, but Micah held me, hands tightening on my shoulders. I stretched out my hand and could brush fingertips over Reece's stomach. The light touch of my fingers over his skin made him stop fussing with his belt, made him look at me.

It wasn't hair. "Feathers," I said, softly, "like the down on a baby chicken, so soft." I wanted to run my hands over the surprising texture of it, to roll my body across the feathers and the heat of his skin. I could hear his heart in his

chest pounding, and when I looked up, I met his gaze. His pulse was in his neck, like a trapped thing, and I could taste his fear. That one touch of my hand, the soft, dreamy quality of my voice had frightened him.

Micah's arms wrapped around my neck and shoulders and drew me in against his body with his legs on either side of me. He leaned over me, his face pressed to mine, and said, "Ssshhh, Anita, ssshhh." But it was more than a soothing voice. I could feel his beast calling to mine, as if he'd rolled his hand through my body, but so much larger. And that touch made my body tighten, grow wet. It brought my own pulse into my throat.

"What did you do?" I sounded breathless.

"The hunger can be turned to sex," Micah said.

"I wasn't going to feed," I said.

"Your skin went hot. Our bodies spike a temperature just before we change, like a human before a seizure."

I turned, still held in his arms, half-pinned between his knees. "You thought I was going to change?"

"It usually takes weeks, or at least the first full moon, for the first shape change. But you seem to be gaining problems faster than normal. If you changed for the first time here, I don't think either Rafael or I would be able to keep you from tearing Reece up."

"The first change is very violent," Rafael said, "and even the backseat of a limo doesn't have much room to hide or to run in."

Reece looked at me from only inches away, held in Micah's arms, his body, and I knew that it wasn't romantic. He was holding on in case the sex as distraction didn't work. "She's been Nimir-Ra for over a year," Reece said.

"But still human, until recently," Rafael said.

Reece stared at me for a second or two, then said, "Very well, I have a birthmark in the shape of a swan. My family knew from my birth what I was meant to be."

"I've heard of such things," Micah said, "but I thought it was legend."

Reece shook his head. "It's very true." He sat back in his seat, tucking his undershirt down in front.

"Kaspar had feathers instead of hair on his head," I said.

"I'm told that if I live long enough that gradually that will happen to me." There was something in his voice that said he wasn't looking forward to the prospect.

"You don't sound happy," I said.

He frowned at me, rebuttoning his shirt. "You were human once, Ms. Blake, I've never been human. I was born a swan king. I was raised to take my place as their king from my earliest memories. You have no idea what that's like. I insisted on going to college, on getting a degree, but I may never get to use it, because going from place to place caring for the other swans keeps me very busy."

I stayed in the circle of Micah's body, but the tension was draining away, "I saw my first soul when I was ten, and my first ghost earlier than that, Reece.

At thirteen I accidentally raised my dog that had died. I've never been human Reece, trust me on that."

"You sound bitter about it," he said.

I nodded. "Oh, yeah."

"You must both accept who and what you are, or you will make yourselves miserable," Rafael said.

We both looked at him, and I don't think either look was friendly. "Give me a week or two to come to terms with being a kitty cat," I said.

"I am not referring to you being Nimir-Ra for real," Rafael said. "From the moment I met you, Anita, you have half hated what you are. As Richard has run from his beast, so you have run from your own gifts."

"I don't need a philosophy lesson, Rafael."

"I think you do, and badly, but I'll let that go, if it bothers you so very much."

"Don't even start on me," Reece said. "I've had people preach to me all my life that I'm blessed and not cursed. If my entire family couldn't convince me of it, you might as well not even try."

Rafael shrugged, then turned back to me. "Let's pick a different topic, because we are only minutes away from the lupanar, and I saw Micah's beast--his energy--pass through you, and your beast responded."

"You saw it?" I asked.

He nodded. "His energy is very blue, and yours is very red, and they mingled."

"So you got what, purple?" I said.

Micah hugged me a little tighter, a warning I think not to be flippant, but Rafael was more direct. "No jokes, Anita, if I saw it, so will Richard."

"He's my Nimir-Raj," I said.

"You don't understand, Anita. Micah said he thought birthmarks in the shape of your beast was legend. Well, until just now, I believed talk of a perfect mate was legend. Like true fated love, just a romantic story." Rafael's already serious face got even more solemn. "You recognize some bond from the beginning, so the stories go, but it's only after you have sex for the first time that your beasts can roll through each other's bodies. Only physical intimacy will allow such metaphysical intimacy."

I glanced down from those hard, demanding eyes, but finally made myself look back up. "What are you asking, Rafael?"

"Not really asking, telling. Telling you that I know you had sex with Micah, and that, even though Richard has dumped you and publicly declared that you and he are no longer a couple, he won't like it."

That was an understatement. I pulled away from Micah, and he let me go, no lingering touches. I moved away, and he allowed it. It earned him brownie points. "Richard dumped me, Rafael, not the other way around. He doesn't have any right to bitch about what I do."

"If he dumped her, then she's free to do what she wants," Reece said. "The Ulfric has only himself to blame."

"Logically, you're right, but when has logic dictated how a man acts when he sees the love of his life in someone else's arms?" The bitter way Rafael said it made me look at him, study his face. He sounded like he was speaking from experience.

"As Ulfric to my Nimir-Ra, he has no authority over me."

"Tonight is going to be dangerous enough, Anita. You don't need to make Richard angry."

"I don't want to make things worse. God knows they're bad enough as they are."

"You're angry with him for dumping you," Rafael said.

I started to say no, then realized he might be right. "Maybe."

"You want to hurt him."

I started to say no, then stopped and tried to think--really think--about how I felt. I was angry and hurt that he could just cast me aside. Okay, it hadn't been that simple, but still ... "Yeah, I'm hurt, and maybe a part of me wants to punish Richard for that, but it's not just him dumping me. It's the mess he's made of the pack. He's endangered people I care about, and he's doing his usual Boy Scout shit that doesn't even work well in the human world, let alone with a bunch of werewolves. I'm tired, Rafael, I'm tired of it, and him."

"It sounds like you might have dumped him if he hadn't beat you to it."

"I came back to make it work. To see if we could make some sense of it all. But he has to give up that moral code of his that has never worked for him or anyone around him."

"To give up his moral code is to give up being who he is."

I nodded. "I know." And just saying that made me feel worse. "He can't change, and staying who he is is going to get him killed."

"And maybe you and Jean-Claude with him," Rafael said.

"Does everyone know that part?"

"It's standard that if you kill a vampire's human servant, the vampire may not survive the death. And if you kill a vampire, their human servants either die or go crazy. Logic dictates that killing either of you endangers the other."

I still didn't like that everyone knew that to kill one of us might kill all of us. Made it too damn easy for assassins. "What do you want me to say, Rafael? That Richard and I have a fundamental difference of philosophy in nearly every important area? There's more than one reason we didn't get married and live happily ever after. That maybe he's going to have to choose between survival or his morals? That I'm afraid he'd almost rather die than compromise those morals? Yeah, I'm afraid. It's going to kill a little piece of him to see me with Micah. I'd spare him if I could, but I didn't choose any of this."

"You take no blame in this," Rafael said.

I sighed. "If I hadn't left for six months maybe I could have talked him out of the democracy with his pack. Maybe if I'd been here a lot of things would be different, but I wasn't here, and I can't change that. All I can do is try fix what got broke."

"You think you can fix this, all of it?" Rafael asked.

I shrugged. "Ask me again after I've met Jacob and seen how Richard deals as Ulfric with all of them. I need a feel for the dynamics before I say if it's fixable."

"How would you fix it?" Micah asked.

I glanced back at him. "If Jacob and a few others are the problem, then it's fixable."

"Killing the ones who stand against Richard won't fix things, Anita," Rafael said. "The experiment in democracy must end. Richard must begin being harsher to those who would stand against him. He must be frightening to them, or there will be another Jacob, and another after that."

I nodded. "You're preaching to the choir here, Rafael."

"If you are not his girlfriend, or his lover, then I fear that your influence over Richard will be slight."

"I'm not sure I had a lot of influence over him when we were dating."

"If you cannot talk sense into him, then eventually Richard will die and someone else, probably Jacob, will take over the pack. The first thing any good conqueror does is kill those closest and most loyal to the executed leader."

"You think Jacob is that practical?" I asked.

"Yes," Rafael said.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to hide the fact that you and Micah are lovers."

I glanced behind me at Micah. He shrugged, face peaceful. "I told you I wanted you on any terms that you wished, Anita. What do I have to do to convince you I meant that?"

I searched his face, tried to find something false in it, and couldn't. Maybe he was that good a liar. Maybe I was just being too suspicious. "When we were with the leopards, just the leopards, I was completely comfortable with you. It felt right and ... why doesn't it feel that way now?"

"You're having second thoughts," Reece said.

"No," Rafael said. He looked at Micah, and the two of them had major eye contact.

The staring contest went on so long that I had to interrupt. "One of you better start talking," I said.

Rafael inclined his head at Micah, as if to say, go ahead. I turned to Micah. "Alright," he said, and he seemed to be choosing his words carefully. I was almost positive I wasn't going to like this conversation. "Every pard, every group of shifters that is healthy has a group mind."

"You mean a group identity?" I asked.

"Not exactly. It's more ..." He frowned. "It's more like a coven that's worked magic together for a while. They begin to be parts of a whole when it comes to working magic or healing. Together they form more than they form separately."

"Okay, but what's that have to do with why I felt more comfortable when it was just us leopards?"

"If you feel differently when the leopards are around you, then we're forming a group mind. It usually takes months to forge that kind of bond

between shifters. Maybe it's just a bond with your own leopards. The change coming on could have set it in motion."

"But you think it's more than that, don't you?"

He nodded. "I think you're forming a group mind with my pard, that in effect, the decision to join our pards into one unit has already been made."

"I haven't decided anything."

"Haven't you?" he asked. He looked so reasonable sitting there, hands clasped in front of him, leaning a little towards me. So earnest.

"Look, the sex was great. But I'm not ready to pick out china patterns here, you do understand that?" There was a feeling very close to panic in the pit of my stomach.

"Sometimes your beast picks for you," Rafael said.

I looked at him. "What does that mean?"

"If you are already a part of a group mind with his pard, then your beast has chosen for you, Anita. It's more intimate than being his lover, because it's not just him that you have a commitment to."

I gave him wide eyes. "Are you saying that I'm going to feel responsible for the safety and well-being of all his wereleopards as well as my own?"

Rafael nodded. "Probably."

I looked back at Micah. "How about you? You feel responsible for my people?"

He sighed, and it was heavy, not happy at all. "I didn't expect to form a bond this quickly. I've never seen it work this fast."

"And?" I said.

His mouth moved, almost a smile. "And, if we've really formed a group mind, then yes, I'll feel responsible for your people."

"You don't sound happy about that."

"Nothing personal, but your cats are a mess."

"Yours are so much healthier," I said, "Gina looks like someone who's been kicked once too often."

Micah's eyes hardened, and he searched my face. "No one talked to you. They wouldn't dare."

"No one tattled, Micah, but I could see it on her, smell the defeat. Someone's damn near broken her, and it's recent, or ongoing. She got a bad boyfriend?"

His face closed down. He didn't like that I'd figured that out. "Something like that." But his pulse had sped up, and I knew he was hiding something from me, something that scared him.

"What aren't you telling me, Micah?"

His gaze flicked past me to Rafael. "Will she be able to read my people more easily as time goes on?"

"And you hers," Rafael said.

"Her people are pretty easy to read now," he said.

I was watching his face. He was controlling his body, keeping the tension out of it, but I could taste the speed of his pulse, and the fear. It wasn't just a

small fear either. The thought that I could read his people so completely almost terrified him.

I laid my hand over his clasped ones, and he turned serious, guarded eyes to me. "Why does it scare you that I knew that Gina is being abused?"

He tensed under my hand and pulled away, gently, but he definitely didn't want me to touch him. "Gina wouldn't like it if you knew."

"As her Nimir-Raj, aren't you supposed to protect her from abusive assholes?"

"I've done my best for her," he said, but it sounded defensive.

"Kick the guy's ass and forbid her to see him again. It's a simple problem, don't complicate it. Or is she in love with him?"

He shook his head, eyes down, his hands clutching so tight that the skin mottled. His voice came out even, normal, but that terrible tension shook through his hands. "No, she's not in love with him."

"Then what's the problem?"

"It's more complicated than you could ever imagine." He looked up, and there was anger in his eyes now.

I started to reach out, to touch him, then let my hand fall back. "If we really are forming one pard. If I really am her Nimir-Raj, then no one's allowed to hurt her. No one hurts my people."

"The wolves took your Gregory," he said. The anger was still in his eyes, trembling down his hands.

"And we're going to get him back."

"I know you've had a hard life. I've heard some of the stories, but you talk as if you're young and naive. Sometimes no matter how hard you try, you can't save everyone."

It was my turn to look down. "I've lost people. I've failed people, and they've gotten hurt, and dead." I raised my eyes to meet his gaze. "But the people who hurt them, killed them, they're dead too. Maybe I can't keep everyone safe, but I'm damn fine at revenge."

"But the harm still happens. The dead don't really walk again. Zombies are just corpses, Anita. They aren't the people you lost."

"I know that last better than you do, Micah."

He nodded. Some of the terrible tension had eased away from him, but I left his eyes haunted with some old pain that was still raw.

"I've done everything I can for Gina and the others, and it's still not enough. It will never be enough."

I touched his hands, and this time he let me slide my hands over his. "Maybe together we can be enough for them all."

He searched my face. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"Anita rarely says anything she doesn't mean," Rafael said, "but if I were her, I'd ask first what the problems are before I promised to fix them."

I had to smile. "I was just about to ask, what is Gina into that's got you so terrified?"

He turned his hands so he was holding mine tight. He looked into my eyes. The look was not love, or even lust, but so serious. "Let's save your leopard first, then ask me again, and I'll tell you all of it."

The car slowed and turned. Gravel sounded under the tires. It was the turn-off to the farm that fronted the woods around the lupanar.

"Tell me some of it now, Micah. I need something here, now."

He sighed, looked down at his clasped hands, then up, slowly to meet my eyes. "Once we were taken over by a very bad man. He still wants us, and I'm searching for a home strong enough to keep us safe."

"Why are you afraid to tell me?"

His eyes widened a little. "Most pards don't want that kind of trouble."

I smiled. "Trouble is my middle name."

He looked a little puzzled. I guess I was the only one who liked film noir. "I'm not going to kick you guys out because of some asshole alpha. Let me know which way the danger's coming from, and I'll deal with it."

"I wish I had your confidence."

There was a weight to his gaze of such sorrow, such horrible loss. It made me shiver to see it, and he let go of my hands, sliding away from me just before Merle opened the door and offered a hand out. He didn't take the hand, but he slid out into the dark.

Reece followed him with a look at Rafael, as if the rat king had told him to get out and give us some privacy. I turned to Rafael. "You have something to say?"

"Be careful of that one, Anita. None of us know him, or his people."

"Funny, I was pretty much thinking the same thing."

"Even though he can make your beast roil through your body?"

I met his dark, dark eyes. "Maybe especially because of that."

Rafael smiled. "I should know by now that you are not a person to let her affections cloud her vision."

"Oh, it can be clouded, but never for long."

"You sound wistful," he said.

"Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to actually be able to just fall in love and not weigh the risks first."

"If it works out, it's the best thing in the world. If it doesn't work out, it's like having your heart torn out and chopped up into little pieces while you watch. It leaves a big hollow space that never really heals."

I looked at him, unsure what to say, but finally, "You sound like experience talking."

"I've got an ex-wife and a son. They live in a different state, as far away from me as she could drag him."

"What went wrong, if you don't mind me asking?"

"She wasn't strong enough to handle what I am. I didn't hide anything from her. She knew everything before we married. If I hadn't been so much in love with her, I'd have seen that she was weak. It's my job as king to know who's strong and who isn't. But she fooled me, because I wanted to be fooled. I

know that now. She is what she is--not her fault. I can't even regret her getting pregnant right away. I love my son."

"Do you ever get to see him?"

He shook his head. "I get to fly in twice a year and have supervised visits. She's made him afraid of me."

I started to reach out to him, hesitated, then thought, what the hell. I took his hand, and he looked startled, then smiled. "I'm sorry, Rafael, more than I can ever say."

He squeezed my hand then moved back from me. "Just thought you ought to know that falling blindly in love isn't at all the way all those poems and songs make it sound. It hurts like hell."

"I did fall in love like that once," I said.

He raised his eyebrows at me. "Not since I've known you."

"No, in college. I was engaged, thought it was true love."

"What happened?"

"His mom found out my mother was Mexican, and she didn't want her little blond-haired, blue-eyed, family tree getting contaminated."

"You were engaged before they'd met your family?"

"They'd met my father and his second wife, but they are both good little Aryans, very nordic. My stepmother didn't like pictures of my mother being out, so they were all in my room. I wasn't hiding it, but that's how my almost mother-in-law took it. Funny thing, her son knew. I'd told him the whole story. It hadn't mattered until his mom threatened to cut him off from the family money."

"Now I'm sorry."

"Your story is more pitiful."

"That doesn't make me feel better," he said, smiling.

I smiled back, but neither of us really looked happy. "Ain't love grand?" I said.

"You can answer your own question after you see Richard and Micah in the lupanar together."

I shook my head. "I don't love Micah, not really, not yet."

"But," he said.

I sighed. "But I almost wish I did. It would make seeing Richard less painful. I don't know how I'm going to feel seeing him tonight and knowing that he's not mine anymore."

"Probably about the same way he'll feel when he sees you."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"No, it's just the truth. Remember that cutting you out of his life was forced on him. He loves you, Anita, for better or worse."

"I love him, but I won't let him kill Gregory. And I won't let him cost Sylvie her life. I won't let him take the pack down to wrack and ruin because of some idealistic set of rules that only he is paying attention to."

"If you kill Jacob and his followers without Richard's permission, then he may send the pack after you and your leopards. If you are not lukoi, not lupa,

then to let their deaths go unpunished would make him appear so weak you might as well let Jacob kill him."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know."

Merle stuck his head in the car. "We've got wolves out here. Your rats are holding them back, but they're getting impatient."

"We're coming," Rafael said. He looked across the seat at me. "Shall we?"

I nodded. "I guess it'd be silly not to get out of the car."

He slid out to the edge of the seat, then hesitated, holding his arm out for me. Normally, I wouldn't have taken it, but tonight we were trying for a show of solidarity and style. So I stepped out of the car on the rat king's arm, like a trophy wife--except for the wrist sheaths and the two folding knives hidden in my clothing. Somehow I think trophy wives wear more makeup and less cutlery. But, hey, I haven't ever met a trophy wife, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe they know what I know, that the true way to a man's heart is six inches of metal between his ribs. Sometimes four inches will do the job, but to be really sure, I like to have six. Funny how phallic objects are always more useful the bigger they are. Anyone who tells you size doesn't matter has been seeing too many small knives.

Chapter 22

THE CLEARING WAS huge, but not huge enough. The cars, trucks, and vans filled most of the available ground; some parked so far under the trees that the paint jobs had to have gotten scratched all to hell. There wasn't room for all the wererats to park, and the cars filled the gravel drive, until it was just another parking lot. Some people ended up parked beside the road, or so they said, as they drifted up through the trees. Rafael had brought all his rats--about two hundred of them. The treaty between the rats and wolves dictated that their numbers had to top at two hundred. Rafael had agreed to that on the understanding that the much larger werewolf pack--six hundred or so--would come to his aid if needed. No questions asked. Your enemies are my enemies sort of thing. He'd explained that in the last few minutes, and it meant that he was risking a great deal tonight. Made me feel guilty. Made me wish I'd found a way to sneak a gun into the lupanar. Truthfully, I hadn't even tried. Was I growing soft, overconfident, or just tired?

The tallest woman I'd ever seen came to stand beside Rafael and me. She was at least six feet six inches, broad-shouldered, and had the muscles that only serious weight lifting will give you. She was wearing a black sports bra across her tanned chest and a pair of faded black jeans. Her dark hair was caught back

in a tight ponytail, leaving her face clean and startling with not a touch of makeup on it.

"This is Claudia. She's going to be one of your enforcers for the night" Rafael said.

I opened my mouth to protest, but he stared me into silence. His face so serious. "You have wereleopards, but only Micah has bodyguards. We can't afford to lose you Anita, not for something stupid like this."

"If I can't take care of myself, then what good is my threat?"

"Richard will have his Skoll and Hati. I will have my guards. Micah has his. Only you are without escort. Raina kept the wereleopards as an adjunct to the werewolves. They never really grew into a full pard, not really. Even Micah's people added to yours don't have the right personnel for a working pard. You have too many submissives and not enough dominants. So tonight you will have Claudia and Igor."

Zane said, "We can take care of Anita."

"No we can't," Nathaniel said.

I stared at him. He touched my arm. "Take the help, Anita, please."

"We can protect her," Micah said.

Merle echoed him.

"And if you have to choose between saving Micah, or saving Anita, which one will you choose?" Rafael asked.

Merle looked away, but Noah said, "Micah."

"Exactly."

"Won't your rats feel just as torn between you and Anita as my leopards would?" Micah asked.

"No, because I'll have bodyguards. My rodere, my gang, runs high to enforcers and professional soldiers. Why do you think that Raina and Marcus agreed to the treaty when Richard brought it to them? They'd never have allied with us if we weren't stronger than just our numbers."

"I don't ..."

He actually touched my mouth with his finger. "No, Anita. When this is over, and you are truly Nimir-Ra, then you will need to advertise for enforcers of your own. Until then, I'll share."

I moved his hand away from my mouth. "I don't think this is necessary."

"I do," he said.

"I agree," Cherry said.

Finally, Micah said, "Agreed." Merle and Noah both gave him a funny look, then exchanged glances with each other.

"I haven't agreed to this," I said. ...

Nathaniel leaned into me, and said, "If you don't give in on this we'll still be standing here an hour from now."

I frowned at him.

He smiled and shrugged.

I turned to the bodyguard in question. She just looked at me, face impassive, as if it didn't matter to her one way or another. A man moved up beside her. He was about two inches shorter than she was, broader through the

shoulders, and had so many tattoos that for a second I thought he was wearing a colorful long-sleeved shirt. His tank top was small and strained over the swell of his chest. Jeans and work boots completed his outfit. He was bald, with a tattoo of a dragon curling around his ears and the back of his skull. Even by starlight you could see the design of the tat was oriental and well done.

"How do you guys feel about putting your life on the line for someone you just met?"

"You saved our king's life," the man said. "We owe you a life."

"Even if it's your own," I said.

"Them's the breaks," he said.

I stared up at the woman. "You agree with that?"

"Like Igor says, we owe you one."

It always made me uncomfortable when people were willing to put my safety ahead of their own. I just wasn't really comfy with the concept of bodyguards, but, what the hell? I put my hand out. They exchanged glances between them, then shook my hand. Igor touched me like he was afraid I'd break, and Claudia tried to squeeze hard enough to make me cry uncle. I didn't. I smiled pleasantly at her, because I knew she wouldn't really hurt me. She just wanted to see if I'd squirm. My pleasant smile made her frown, but she let go of my hand. My hand actually ached just a little, and if my healing powers weren't up to it, I'd be bruised in the morning. Damn.

Rafael turned to some of his rats, giving instructions, leaving me alone with the two bodyguards. "Is Igor your real name?" I asked.

"Nickname," he said.

"What's your real name?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"What could be worse than Igor?" I asked.

His smile widened to a grin. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

It made me smile, and some tightness in my chest eased. You'd almost think I was relieved to have bodyguards of my own. Naw, not me. I didn't need no stinking bodyguards. I probably wouldn't need them, but extra muscle is like extra ammunition. If you need it, it's good to have it, if you don't need it, then it can always go back in the box.

Truth was, I felt more protective of my leopards than protected by them. Sad, but true. And I didn't entirely trust Merle, or Noah, or even Micah. He was keeping things from me, and I didn't like that. Some women are just never satisfied.

Rafael moved off through his people, giving them soft-voiced instructions. Micah moved up closer to me, with Merle and Noah at a very attentive distance. I looked at Micah and suddenly couldn't be this close and not touch him. I reached my hand out to him, his eyes widened, but he took my hand. His hand slid over mine in a play of pulsing warmth that almost took my breath away. I watched a similar reaction play on his face. What was going on? I drew my hand out of his, and it was like pulling it through melted taffy, so thick.

I looked up to find that, except for Claudia and Igor, we were surrounded by wereleopards, his and mine. The moment I met Nathaniel's eyes the power

jolted through me. I turned from him to Cherry, and her pale eyes widened. The power was so thick it was like trying to breathe something liquid, as if it hurt for the air to go down. The power leaped between me and Zane, Vivian and Caleb, who was next in the circle. Caleb, who I didn't particularly like. But as soon as I searched his face, the power leaped between us, just as it had with the others.

He gasped, hand going to his chest, as if he'd felt it like a blow there. His voice came out strangled. "What are you doing?"

"She is being Nimir-Ra," Micah said.

I turned back to him, but in the turning crossed Noah's gaze first. The power stretched between me and this stranger, and the fear showed on his face. I was strangely calm; it felt right, good. Gina moved closer to Merle, and that drew my gaze. The power swung through her, from her. We were all like some great circuit of energy, sharing, flowing, growing. Tears trailed down Gina's face; she cried softly, clinging to Merle's arm. I met his eyes last, as if I was supposed to, and he tried to turn away, but it wasn't a matter of locking gazes, it was a matter of my attention going to him. The power, my power, my beast, noticing him.

The power lashed through him, because he fought it. He tried to shield, but he couldn't shield from this. It wasn't that I was strong enough to force him. I didn't try to push. It was more that the power recognized him, and something, maybe his beast, resonated with the power. He turned slowly to stare at me, and the look on his face was pained. It didn't hurt, it felt warm and good and frightening.

The power grew, wound tight and tighter, until it filled the air around us.

Claudia said, "What the hell are you doing?"

"Bonding," Rafael said, and he drew the two wererats out of our circle.

The instant they were gone, the circle tightened, and it was like the pressure of a storm; my ears needed to pop, as if the pressure of the air had changed.

Micah moved to stand in front of me. The others formed a circle around us as if someone had choreographed it. We stared at each other and then reached a hand towards each other. It was hard to move forward, as if the air had grown solid and we had to push our way through. Our fingertips touched, and our hands slid together, quickly, easily, like a fish breaking through water into open air. We spilled around each other, our arms, our bodies touching completely, as if we could walk into the other's body like it was an open door. His mouth hovered over mine, and the power was there, breathing, pulsing, hot against my lips. I tried to be afraid. Tried to draw back, but I didn't want to. It was as if a part of me that I hadn't even known existed was in charge, and no amount of common sense--or doubts--could stop it.

It wasn't a kiss, it was a melding. The power poured in a scalding wave from his mouth to mine, from my mouth to his. I could feel the others, like lines of heat running out like spokes of a wheel, and Micah and I were the hub of that wheel. The power ran between us all, back and forth, liquid, burning, growing, growing, and melting. Melting boundaries, borders that kept us separate as people. It was as if Micah's body and mine were a door and we stepped into each other, closer than flesh could touch, closer than hearts could

beat, and I felt his beast and mine roll through us, around us, as if the two great animals bound us together like a rope that ran through our flesh, our skin, our minds. And the beasts flared outward, traveled down those lines of power and smashed into each of the others. I felt it as a physical blow, felt them stagger as our twinned beasts traveled the circle and caressed their beasts in turn. And our beasts came home in a rush of heat, like standing in the middle of a bonfire, but it was also a glorious rush, a joyousness like nothing I'd ever felt. I caught, with that rush of power, glimpses into all the others.

I saw Gina tied to a bed and a man above her like a shadow, something evil that the power could not see clearly; Merle covered in wounds and blood, huddled against a wall, weeping; Caleb standing alone, covered in blood, his eyes haunted; Noah running down a hallway with screams chasing him, making him run faster; Cherry lying in a huge heap of warm bodies, beside Zane and Nathaniel and me; Zane's memory was of sitting at my kitchen table eating, laughing with Nathaniel; Vivian lying in Stephen's arms in their bed; Nathaniel's memory was of me marking his back, but the sense of peace I got from him with the memory was stronger than the sense of sex, as if some great burden had lifted from him; and I saw Gregory bound wrist-to-ankle behind his back, gagged, blindfolded, terrified. He lay naked on a bed of bones. I knew this was not a memory, this was what was happening to Gregory right this minute. And I could see it, feel his terror, and I still didn't know where he was.

The power burst over us all in a wave of skin-rushing, nerve-caressing contentment, as if we'd all walked into a strange room and suddenly realized that everything in it was familiar, every corner of the room was a key to our hearts, and the word that washed over me, was home.

Micah drew back first, shaking. I was crying, and didn't remember when it had started. I heard other people crying in the dark, and I looked beyond us and found that it wasn't just our people. Some of the wererats were crying, faces turned towards us with something like awe--or fear--in their eyes.

Something made me look past all of them to the wood's edge. Richard stood shirtless, dressed in nothing but jeans and whatever shoes he was wearing. The sight of him there painted with starlight and shadows made me catch my breath, not because he was beautiful, or because I wanted him--that always went without saying with Richard--but because he was suddenly, for the first time, wild. It wasn't his anger that made the difference. I saw him at the edge of the woods, the way you'd come unexpectedly upon a wild animal, like glimpsing deer in the twilight, or that flash as something large and furred raced in front of your headlights, and you knew it wasn't a dog and it was too big to be a fox. Richard stood there, and when our eyes met, it sent a jolt through me from the top of my head to the soles of my feet, and into the ground beyond. Whatever else Richard had been doing to screw up his pack's structure, one thing he'd done right, he'd embraced his beast. You could see it on him like a coat that he'd finally grown into, something that fit him, tailor-made.

Marcus, the old Ulfric, had always insisted on dressing up, so at a glance you'd know he was king. Richard stood there with no clothes to distinguish

him, yet you knew he was king. Power makes you a monarch, and all the fancy robes in the world won't do the job without it.

We stared at each other across the clearing. Underneath that new veneer of comfortable power, the look on his face made my chest so tight it hurt. If I could have thought of anything to say that would have made things less painful, I'd have said it, but I couldn't think of any words that would help.

Jamil and Shang-Da came up on either side of him, and there was a look of anger on Shang-Da's face. Anger at me, I think. Jamil looked at Richard, as if he wished there was some way for him to guard Richard from this, as well as from bullets and claws. But with some things, even a really good bodyguard can't take the hit for you. This was one of those things.

Richard's voice came deep, loud, clear, untouched by the look on his face. "Welcome rat king of the Dark Crown Clan. Welcome Nimir-Ra and Nimir-Raj of the Blooddrinkers Clan. Welcome to the lands of the Thronnos Rokke Clan. The leopards have shown us this night what it truly means to be a clan, be they pard, lukoi, or rodere. They show us what we all strive for--a true melding of all our parts into a whole." Bitterness crept in at the last, but on the whole, it was a lovely speech, and more heartfelt than pleasant.

"Now join us at our lupanar, and we will see if you can win back your lost cat." There was anger in his voice, and I wondered if Gregory was about to pay the price for Richard's anger with me.

Richard turned and melted into the trees with Shang-Da at his side. Jamil spared a glance back at me, then followed.

Micah leaned close and whispered, "I owe you several apologies. I'm sorry your Ulfric had to see us this way."

"Me, too," I said.

"I said your cats were a mess, and I was wrong. You have made a home for your cats, and mine have nowhere to hide."

"What is wrong with all of you?" It wasn't perhaps the most diplomatic question, but it covered things.

"That is a very long story."

Merle leaned over us. He spoke so low that I almost couldn't hear him. "Be very careful for all our sakes."

They had some very serious eye contact. I said, "What is going on?"

Micah raised my hand and laid a brief kiss on the knuckles. "Let's save your Gregory. That has to be priority tonight, right?"

He smiled and tried to charm his way out of the stare I was giving him. I stared at him until the smile faded from his face and he dropped my hand.

"Yeah, saving Gregory is priority for tonight, but I want to know what's going on."

"One problem at a time," Micah said.

I was getting the very distinct feeling that if they all could have lied to me forever, they would have. It wasn't lying, as much as hiding things from me. Things that had to do with blood and pain, and no matter how powerful they all were, Micah's pard wasn't a family, wasn't whole. Strangely, as messed up as me and my leopards were, we were a family. More so than Richard and his

wolves, even. Richard was so busy fighting his moral battles and his power structure problems that there wasn't time for mending other things.

"Give me the *Reader's Digest* condensed version, Micah" I said.

"Gregory is waiting for you to rescue him."

"So give me a couple of sentences, but make it the truth, Micah."

"Micah," Merle said softly, but with force to his voice. It was a warning.

I looked at the big man. "What are you guys hiding, Merle?"

Micah touched my arm, brought my attention back to his face. "I told you that once we were taken over by a very bad man, who still wants us. I'm searching for someplace strong enough to keep us safe."

"Are you saying this guy will come looking for you here in St. Louis?"

"Yes," he said.

"Most alphas can take a hint," I said.

Micah shook his head. "This one won't. He will never give us up." He gripped my arm. "If you take us on, you'll have to deal with him eventually."

"Is he bulletproof?" I asked.

The question seemed to confuse him, because he frowned. "No, I mean, no, I guess not."

I shrugged. "Not a problem then."

He looked at me. "What do you mean? That you'll just kill him?"

It was my turn to look at him. "Is there any reason I shouldn't?"

He almost smiled, stopped, then frowned again. "Just kill him, just like that." It was almost as if he were thinking it over, as if it had never occurred to him.

Merle said, "He's a hard man to kill."

"Unless he's faster than a silver bullet, Merle, nobody's that hard to kill."

Rafael came slowly through the leopards, Claudia and Igor trailing him. "We've all been thinking of your leopards as lesser than us. What I just saw makes me envious."

"I know how the wolves work," I said. "And I know that they don't have a sense of home. First Raina and Marcus made them afraid of each other, now Richard's morals have him struggling to be safe. But you and yours seem pretty secure. How different is what I've done with my leopards from what everyone else is doing?"

"I've benefited from your loyalty, your sheer stubbornness. What I didn't realize until tonight is that you didn't save me just because I was your friend, or just because it was the right thing to do. You didn't risk yourself and your people to save me from torture because of the kind of moral rightness that Richard is fond of. You saved me because you could not bear the thought leaving me behind." He touched my face, very gently. "Not from a sense of right and wrong, but because you are just that tenderhearted."

I looked at him. "I've been called a lot of things, but never that."

He chuckled me under the chin like you would a child. "Don't make light of one of your better qualities. You love your people like a mother is supposed to love her children. You want what's best for them, even if that makes you uncomfortable, even if you don't like their choices."

I had to look away from the wonderment on his face, like he was looking at somebody else that couldn't be me. "You have never been their leopard queen in body, but you shamed us all tonight. It's not seeing your closeness to Micah that will torment Richard, though that will burn. It's that you gave us a glimpse of what we are all striving for, for our clans. Richard believes his moral rightness will get him where your leopards already are."

I looked up at him. "My pard is not a democracy, and I have a hell of a lot more than just presidential veto when it comes to decisions."

"Richard knows that, better probably than anyone, and that will gall him, Anita. It will make him doubt himself."

I shook my head. "Richard always doubts himself when it comes to the lukoi. He'll never have surety about them until he has surety about who and what he is."

"First I have to accept the fact that you're kindhearted, now I have to accept the fact that you're insightful as well. I knew you were powerful, ruthless, and pretty, but that you have a mind and a heart besides is going to take some getting used to."

"Does everyone pretty much think I'm just a sociopath who happens to have magical abilities?"

"It's all you let people see," he said, "until now." He gazed out towards the circle of faces still turned to us. I saw a kind of hunger in their faces, and I knew that they had felt what I'd felt, a sense of true belonging, of being home within the circle--not of bricks or mortar--but of flesh, of hands to grasp, arms to hold, smiles to share. So simple, so rare.

All these months I'd been worried I'd fail the wereleopards. I thought failure meant them dying, or getting hurt. What I realized suddenly was that the true failure would have been if I hadn't given a damn. You can bandage a wound, set a broken bone, but not caring ... you can't cure that, and you can't recover from it.

Chapter 23

THE LUPANAR WAS a large clearing 100 yards by 150 yards. The clearing appeared to be flat, but actually it sat in a large smooth valley between hills. You couldn't notice it at night, but I knew that just beyond the trees that ringed the far side of the lupanar were steep hills. It had taken me more than one visit to find what lay beyond the trees.

Now all vision stopped at the far edge of the clearing. Torches that rose man-high were stuck into the ground on either side of the stone throne. The throne was a huge chair carved of rock, so old that there were places on the arms where countless generations of Ulfrics had touched it and worn away the

stone. Probably the back and seat of the chair were worn as well, but they were covered by a spill of purple silk, suitably royal. There was something very primitive about the huge stone chair and its spill of cloth caught between the wavering golden light of the torches. It looked like a throne for some ancient barbaric king, someone who should wear animal skins and a crown of iron.

Werewolves, most--but not all--in human form, stood or crouched in a huge circle. There was one opening in the circle, which we walked through. The werewolves flowed behind us, like a door of flesh closing. The wererats spread around behind us and to either side, but we all knew if it came to a fight, we were outmatched, and outflanked.

Rafael and two very large wererats stood to one side of me. Donovan Reece, the swan king, was on the other side. Rafael had kindly given him a quartet of bodyguards. Micah stood just a little behind me, and my newly acquired bodyguards were just behind him. Our leopards had spilled out in a rough knot behind us, like a line of defense, before the main show of wererats.

Someone had hung cloth in the trees to one side of the throne. Black cloth, like a curtain, and it took a movement of the wind to draw my attention to it. It was held aside, and Sylvie came through, followed by a tall man I didn't know. Her face was less refined with no makeup, less soft. Her short hair curled neatly, but carelessly. She was dressed in the first pair of jeans I'd ever seen her in, with a pale blue tanktop and white jogging shoes.

The tall man was thin the way basketball players are thin--all arms and legs and lanky muscle. Most of that lanky muscle showed because all he wore was a pair of cutoff jean shorts. But he, like Richard, didn't need finery. He moved in a circle of his own grace and power, like a tiger stalking into view. Except there were no bars to hide behind, and I'd had to leave my gun at home.

He had short, dark hair that curled a little thicker than Sylvie's. His face was one of those that you couldn't decide was attractive or plain. It was made up of strong bones, long lines, thin lips on a wide mouth. I'd just about decided he was plain when he looked at me, and the moment I saw those dark eyes I knew I was wrong. Intelligence burned in there, intelligence and dark emotion. He let anger flow over his face, and I realized the very force of his personality made him so striking that he was handsome, though it was the kind of handsome that would never come across in a still photo, because it needed movement, his vibrating energy to make it work.

I knew without being told that this was Jacob, and I knew something else. We were in trouble.

Richard came next, and he moved in his own vibrating spill of power. He glided as gracefully, filled with as much anger as Jacob, but he still lacked something, some edge that the other man had. An edge of darkness, maybe. All I knew for sure was that Jacob was ruthless. I could almost smell it on him. And Richard, for better, or worse, still was not.

I sighed. I'd thought if he could just once embrace his beast he'd be alright. He sat on the throne with the firelight playing in the loose waves of his hair, turning it to spun copper and burnished gold, the fire shadows playing on the muscles of his chest, shoulders, arms. He looked the part of the barbarian king,

but there was still something in him, something ... soft. And if I could taste it, then so could Jacob.

I had one of those moments of clarity that comes sometimes. There was nothing that any of us could do to Richard to make him truly harsh. He might act in anger, like he'd taken Gregory, but no matter what the world did to him, there would still be something in him that flinched. His only hope for survival was to surround himself with loyal people who *wouldn't* flinch.

Jamil and Shang-Da stood together to one side of the throne, not too close, but not too far either. Shang-Da was back in his usual monochrome black business dress: black slacks, black shirt, black suit jacket, and the polished black shoes. He always looked very *GQ*, even in the woods.

Jamil could dress up with the best of them, but he tried to be appropriate to the situation. He had on jeans that looked freshly pressed and a red muscle tank top that looked splendid against the darkness of his skin. He'd changed the beads in his waist-length cornrowed hair to red and black. The beads gleamed softly in the torchlight, as if they might be made of semiprecious stones.

Jamil caught my glance. He didn't exactly nod, but he acknowledged me with his eyes. Shang-Da avoided my gaze, searching the crowd, but never quite looking at me. I think if Richard would have allowed it the two of them would have done whatever was necessary to secure his throne. But they were hamstrung by Richard, and the best they could do was work within his honorable trap.

Sylvie and I stared at each other for a few heartbeats. I'd seen her collection of bones of her enemies. She got them out periodically and handled them. She said it was comforting to run her hands over them. I personally liked a good stuffed toy and some really fine coffee, but, hey, whatever makes you feel better. Sylvie would do whatever needed doing, if Richard would only let her.

And if I'd still been lupa, hell, we had enough ruthless people to get the job done, if Richard would just get out of our way. We were so close, and at the time we weren't even in the ballpark. It was more than frustrating. It was like watching a train race towards Richard, and we were all yelling, "Get off the tracks, get off the tracks!" Hell, we were trying to drag him off the tracks, and he was fighting us.

If Jacob was the train, then I could kill him and Richard would be safe. But Rafael was right. If it wasn't Jacob, it'd be someone else. Jacob wasn't the train hurtling to destroy Richard. Richard was.

His voice filled the clearing. "We gather here tonight to say good-bye to our lupa and to choose another."

There was a rash of howls and applause from about half of the pack. But dozens of the werewolves stood silent, watching. It didn't mean they were on my side. Maybe they were neutral, but it was good to notice who wasn't a rousing supporter of my being kicked out of the pack.

"We are here to stand in final judgment for one who has wronged our pack by taking our lupa from us."

There was less applause, fewer howls. It looked like the vote to condemn Gregory had been a close one. That made me feel better, not much, but a little. Though if Gregory died, I guess it really didn't matter.

"We are also here to give the leopards' Nimir-Ra a last chance to win back her cat."

The howls and applause stayed at about fifty-fifty, but the general atmosphere was definitely cooler. The pack wasn't lost, and it certainly wasn't wholeheartedly on Jacob's side. I said a little prayer for guidance, because this was more a political problem, and that wasn't one of my best things.

"It is business between the lukoi and the pard. Why are the rodere here, Rafael?" Richard asked. He talked like he didn't know us, very political, very distant.

"The Nimir-Ra saved my life once. The rodere owe her a great debt."

"Does this mean that your treaty with us is null and void?"

"I formed a treaty with you, Richard, and I will hold to that, because I know you are a man that honors his obligations and remembers his duty to his allies, but I owe Anita a personal debt, and I am honor-bound to uphold that as well."

"If it comes to fighting, who will you fight with, us or the leopards?"

"I hope most sincerely that it does not come to that, but I came with the leopards, and we will go with them, under whatever circumstances that leave-taking will be."

"You have destroyed your people," Jacob said.

Richard turned on him. "I am Ulfric here, Jacob, not you. I say what will be destroyed and what will not."

"I meant no offense, Ulfric." But his voice made the words a lie. "I meant only that if it comes to a fight the rats cannot defeat us. Perhaps their king would like to reconsider who he owes a debt of honor to."

"A debt of honor exists whether you want it to or not," Rafael said.

"Richard understands what it means to owe an honor-debt. That is why I know that Richard will honor our treaty. I have no such assurances when it comes to other members of this pack."

There, he'd said it. It was as close to saying, *I don't trust you, Jacob*, as he could get. A spreading well of silence filled the clearing, so that the brush of cloth, the shift of a furred body was suddenly loud.

Richard's hands tightened on the arms of his throne. I watched him, because he was shielding so tight against me that I couldn't feel him, but I could watch, watch him think. "Are you saying that if I am no longer Ulfric that the treaty no longer holds?"

"Yes, that is what I'm saying."

Richard and Rafael stared at each other for a long time, then the faintest of smiles played on Richard's lips. "I have no plans to step down as Ulfric, so the treaty should be secure for a while, unless Jacob has other plans."

That one statement sent a wave of unease through the waiting werewolves. You could feel it, see it spreading out through them, as if they smelled a trap of some kind.

Jacob looked surprised, shocked. He was a perfect stranger, but I watched the confusion play over his face, as he tried to think of what to say. If he said he had no designs on the throne, then he would be foresworn, and the shapeshifters were a little touchy about things like that.

Jacob was either going to have to lie or declare his intentions, and the look on his face said clearly he wasn't ready to do that.

A woman's voice came from the right, clear and ringing like she'd had stage training. "Aren't we getting distracted from the business at hand? I for one am very interested in choosing the new lupa."

The woman was tall, but built all of curves, voluptuous the way that movie stars in the fifties had been. She seemed soft, feminine, yet she stalked over the ground in a swaying glide, half sex on the hoof and half predatory, like she'd lure you in by playing victim, fuck you till you cried for mercy, then eat your face off.

She was even wearing a dress, one that clung to her curves and had a neckline so low that you knew she had to be wearing a bra. Breasts that size didn't do perky without some help. She stalked barefoot, her deep red hair styled and perfect, falling just above her shoulders in a burnished shine.

"We'll get around to choosing the new lupa," Richard said.

She dropped to her knees in front of the throne, folding the dress under her thighs, very ladylike, though making sure to lean forward enough for Richard to look straight down her cleavage. I didn't like her much.

"You can't blame us for being eager, Ulfric. One of us," and she hesitated, making it clear that the "us" was for politeness' sake, "will be chosen lupa and become your mate all in one glorious night." Her voice had dropped to a sultry murmur, still loud enough to be heard.

Nope, didn't like her. I had no room to bitch with Micah standing beside me, but that didn't matter. Logic had nothing to do with it. I wanted to grab a handful of that bottle-dyed red hair and hurt her. It wasn't until Micah touched my arm that I realized I'd been caressing one of the knives in its wrist sheath. Sometimes I touch my weapons when I'm nervous; sometimes my body just betrays my thoughts. I forced my hands to be still, but I was so not happy.

"Go back with the other candidates, Paris," Richard said. He was carefully not looking at her, as if he were afraid to. That didn't make it better; it made it worse.

She leaned forward, putting a hand on his knee. He jumped. "You can't blame us for being eager, Ulfric. We've all wanted you for so *very* long."

Richard's face had thinned down with anger. "Sylvie," he said.

Sylvie smiled, and it was a smile of pure evil pleasure. She grabbed Paris's wrist and dragged her, none too gently, to her feet. Paris was a good two inches taller, but Sylvie's power, her beast, made her seem ten feet tall.

"The Ulfric told you to go back and stand with the other candidates. Do it." She gave Paris a little shove towards the crowd. The woman stumbled, but regained her composure, smoothing the tight dress down over her thighs.

Sylvie had turned to walk back to her place at Richard's side, when Paris said, "I heard you liked it rough."

Sylvie froze, and I didn't need to see her face to feel the instant rage that radiated from her. I knew before she turned, slowly, muscles tense, that her eyes had bled to wolf amber. "What did you say?"

"Sylvie," Richard said, voice soft. It wasn't a command, it was a request. I think if he'd made it a command, she'd have fought it, demanded some sort of satisfaction. But it was a request ... She turned back to Richard.

"Yes, Ulfric."

"Take your place, please."

She went back to take her place as Freki on his right side. But the anger boiled around her like nearly visible heat off a summer road.

"I apologize to the swan king, for not recognizing him sooner, but we've only met once."

"Yes," Donovan Reece said, "I remember."

"Welcome to our lupanar. I would give you safe passage among us, but I have to know why you are here before I can do that."

"I am here because the Nimir-Ra rescued my swanmanes from the people that nearly killed her. She risked her life for them. I am here at her side tonight as an ally."

"I can't grant you safe passage, Donovan, because if things go badly it will be a fight. If you're Anita's ally, you'll be in the middle of it."

"She risked her life for my people, I can do no less."

Richard nodded, and I watched an understanding pass between them. Birds of an honorable feather, so to speak.

"Does she save every shapeshifter she comes across in trouble?" Jacob asked, and he made it derisive.

Richard started to say something, and Sylvie stepped forward, touching his arm. He gave a small nod, and let her speak. "How many of us has Anita saved from torture or death?" She raised her own hand.

Jamil stepped out from around the throne and raised his own. All my leopards raised their hands like a small forest of gratitude. Rafael raised his hand. I finally spotted Louie, his lieutenant, and Ronnie's boyfriend. He gave a small nod to me and raised his own hand.

Richard stood and raised his hand. There were other hands here and there. Then Irving Griswold, mild-mannered reporter--and werewolf--stepped forward. His glasses reflected the firelight so that he looked blind. He looked like a tall, slightly balding cherub with eyes of flame.

"What would have happened if Anita hadn't saved Sylvie from the vampire council's torture? Sylvie's strong, but what if she had broken? She's dominant enough to call most of us in, to have forced us to give ourselves over to the vampire council." Irving raised his hand. "She saved us all."

Hands went up among the werewolves until nearly half of them were holding a hand up. It made my throat tight, my eyes burn. I wasn't going to cry, but if someone hugged me, I couldn't be sure of that.

Louie stepped forward, small, dark, and handsome, with his short black hair cut neat. "Rafael is a strong king, so strong that if the vampire council had broken him, none of us could have refused his call. We would all have been at

their mercy. You all saw what they did to him and how long it took him to heal. Anita saved all the rodere in this city."

The rats raised their hands--all of them.

Sylvie said, "Look around you, do you really want to lose Anita as our lupa? Most of you remember what it was like with Raina. Do you want to go back to that?"

"She's not lukoi," Jacob said.

A few others said the same thing, but not many. "If your only objection to her is that she's not a werewolf," Sylvie said, "then that's a poor excuse for losing Anita."

"Losing her," Jacob said, "this is the first time I've ever seen her. I've been with this pack for five months and this is the first time I've set eyes on your precious lupa. We can't lose something we never had."

There was a lot of support for that, a lot of howls, cries of *yeah*, applause even. I couldn't blame them on this one. I stepped forward, moving until I stood alone between my allies and the throne. Silence fell around the clearing, until you could hear the torches sizzling.

Richard stared down at me. I could meet his eyes now. I made sure my voice carried when I said, "Jacob's right."

Sylvie looked startled. So did Jacob. And there was movement behind me as people startled. "I haven't been much of a lupa to the Thronnos Rokke Clan, but I didn't know I was supposed to be. I was just the Ulfric's girlfriend. I had my hands full with the wereleopards, and I trusted Richard to take care of the wolves. The leopards had no one but me." I turned and faced the crowd. "I was human, not fit to be lupa, or Nimir-Ra." The crowd's murmur was louder this time.

"I don't know if you've all heard, but there was an accident in the fight that saved the swanmanes. I may be Nimir-Ra for real in a few weeks. We won't know for sure, but it seems likely."

They were quiet now, watching me, human eyes, wolf eyes, rats, leopards, but every face held intelligence, a burning concentration. "There's nothing I can do about that. We'll just have to wait and see, but my leopard did not injure me on purpose. I will stake my word of honor on that. I'm told that Gregory stands accused of killing your lupa." I raised my hands out from my body. "Here I stand, alive and well. If you lose me as your lupa, it won't be because Gregory took me from you, it will be because you choose to let me go. If that's what you want, fine. I don't blame you. Until tonight, until just a few minutes ago, I didn't think I was doing a very good job as Nimir-Ra, let alone trying to be human lupa. Now, I think maybe I was wrong. Maybe if I'd stayed around more, things would be better. I did what I thought was right at the time. If you don't want me as lupa, that's your right, but don't punish a fellow shapeshifter for an accident that happened during a fight where he saved me from getting my heart dug out of my chest."

"A pretty speech," Jacob said, "but we've already voted, and your leopard has to pay the price, unless you're shapeshifter enough to win him back."

I looked back, not at Jacob, but at Richard. "Richard, please."

He shook his head. "I can't undo the vote, Anita. I would if I could." He sounded tired.

I sighed. "Fine, how do I win Gregory back?"

"She needs to stop being lupa, before she can be Nimir-Ra." This from Paris, who though back in the crowd, still managed to make her voice ring over the clearing.

"I thought you voted me out as lupa," I said.

"They have," Richard said, "but to make it official by our laws, there's a ceremony that will sever your ties to us."

"Is it a long ceremony?" I asked.

"It can be," he said.

"Let me get Gregory out first, then I'll do whatever lukoi ceremony you want me to do."

"You have the right to refuse to step down," Sylvie said.

I looked at Richard.

"You have that right." His face, his voice, were neutral as he said it. I couldn't tell if he was happy or sad about the idea.

"What happens if I refuse?"

"You'd have to defend your right to be lupa, either by one-on-one combat with any dominant that wants the job ..." And he stopped there.

Sylvie looked at him, but it was Jacob who finished. "Or you can prove that you're lupa enough to keep the job by anointing the throne."

I just looked at him and shrugged. "Anointing the throne -- what does that mean?"

"You fuck the Ulfric on the throne in front of all of us."

I was already shaking my head. "Somehow I don't think either Richard or I are up to public sex."

"It's a little more complicated than that," Richard said. He looked at me and there was so much in his eyes -- anger, pain -- that it hurt to hold his gaze.

"Sex alone isn't enough. We'd have to have a mystical connection between our beasts." He was quiet, and I thought he'd finished, but he hadn't. "Like you have with your Nimir-Raj."

We stared at each other. I couldn't think of anything good to say, but I had to say something. "I'm sorry." My voice came out soft, almost sad.

"Don't apologize," he said.

"Why not?"

"It's not your fault, it's mine."

That made me widen my eyes at him. "How so?"

"I should have known you'd have that kind of bond with your mate. You're more powerful as a human than most true lupas."

I looked at him. "What are you saying, Richard? That you wish you'd made me one of you while you had the chance?"

He lowered his eyes as if he couldn't bear for me to see his expression anymore. I stepped closer, close enough to touch him, close enough so that his vibrating energy spilled like a march of insects across my skin. It made me

shiver. But I felt something else, something I'd never felt before, not with Richard.

My beast spilled over my skin and reached out like a playful kitten to swat at Richard's power. The energies sparked against each other, and I could almost see the play of colors in my head, like flint and steel being struck against one another, except in technicolor.

I heard Richard catch his breath; his eyes were very wide. His voice came hoarse, almost strangled. "Did you do that on purpose?"

I shook my head. I didn't trust myself to speak. The sparks had quieted, and it was as if I were leaning against a nearly solid wall of power, his and mine, as if I could have leaned against that energy and it alone would have kept us from touching. I finally found my voice, but it was a whisper. "What's happening?"

"The marriage of the marks, I think," he said, voice almost equally soft.

I wanted so badly to reach through that power and touch him, to see if the beasts would roll through each other like they did for Micah and me. I knew it was silly, he was wolf, and apparently I was leopard, so our beasts wouldn't recognize each other. But I'd loved Richard for so long, and we were bound to each other by Jean-Claude's marks, and I carried a piece of his beast inside me. I had to know. I had to know if I could have with Richard what I had with Micah.

My hand moved through the power, and it was like shoving it into an electric socket. The energy was so strong, it bit along my skin. I was reaching for his shoulder, a nice neutral place to touch someone, when he rolled off the side of the throne and was suddenly standing beside it. He'd moved so fast I couldn't follow with my eyes. I'd seen the beginning of the movement and the end, but the middle--I'd blinked and missed it.

"No, Anita," he said, "no, if we can't ever touch again, I don't want to feel your beast. We may not be the same animal, but it will be more than anything we've ever had between us. I couldn't bear it."

I let my hand fall to my side and stepped back far enough from the throne for him to regain his seat. I wasn't apologizing again, but I wanted to. I wanted to cry for both of us, or scream. I know the universe has a sense of irony, and sometimes you get reminded just how sadistic that can be.

I would finally have to accept his furry half, because I'd have one of my own. I could be Richard's nearly perfect lover, at long last, and we could never touch each other again.

Chapter 24

RICHARD WAS SITTING on his throne again, and I was standing back far enough for him to feel safe. Rafael, Micah, and Reece had all moved up beside me, a half-circle of kings at my back. It should have made me feel secure. It didn't. I was tired, so terribly tired, so terribly sad. Even with Micah at my back, I couldn't stop looking at Richard, couldn't stop wondering, *what if*. Oh, I knew, I'd never have allowed him to make me a werewolf on purpose, but a small part of me wondered. But I told that small part to shut up, and I got down to business.

"I want Gregory back unharmed. How do I do that, according to lukoi law?"

Richard said, "Jacob." That one word sounded as tired as I felt.

Jacob stepped forward, obviously pleased with himself. "Your leopard is here on our land, and we've done nothing to hide his scent trail. If you can track him, you can take him home."

I raised my eyebrows at him. "I have to follow a scent trail like a dog?"

"If you were a true shapeshifter, you could do it," Jacob said.

"This isn't a fair test," Rafael said. "She hasn't had her first change. Most of our secondary powers don't appear until after our first full moon."

"It doesn't have to be scenting," Richard said, "but it must be something that only a shapeshifter could do. Something that only a shifter powerful enough to truly be Nimir-Ra, or lupa, could do." He was looking at me when he said it, and there was something in his eyes, something he was trying to tell me.

"That doesn't sound very fair either," Micah said.

Richard kept looking at me, willing me to understand him. I didn't know why he didn't just drop his shields and let me see his mind.

Almost as if Richard had read my mind, he said, "No werewolf or wererat or wereleopard, no one can aid you in finding your leopard. If anyone interfere in any way, then the test is invalid, and he'll die."

"Even if that help is metaphysical?" I asked.

Richard nodded. "Even if."

I looked at him, studied his face, and frowned. I finally shook my head. I'd had a vision of where Gregory was, and under what circumstances, but it gave me no real clue. All I really needed to do was ask someone where a hole was with bones at the bottom. But I couldn't ask anyone there. Then I had an idea.

"Can I use my own metaphysical abilities to aid me?"

Richard nodded.

I looked at Jacob, because I knew the objection would come from him, if anyone. "I don't think your necromancy is going to help you locate your leopard."

Actually, it might have. If the bones Gregory was lying on were the largest burial sight in the area, then I might be able to track the bones and find him. Or I might spend all night chasing after piles of buried animals or old Indian graves. I had a faster way, maybe not better, but faster.

I sat down on the ground, Indian fashion, resting my hands lightly on my knees.

"What are you doing?" Jacob asked.

"I'm going to call the munin," I said.

He laughed, a loud bray of sound. "Oh, this should be good."

I closed my eyes, and I opened that part of me that dealt with the dead. I've heard Marianne and her friends describe it to be like opening a door, but it's so much a part of me that it's more like unclenching a hand, like opening something in my body that is as natural as reaching across the table for the salt. That might sound like an awfully mundane description of something mystical, but the mystical stuff truly is a part of everyday life. It's always there, we just choose to ignore it.

The munin are the spirits of the dead, put into a sort of racial memory bank that can be accessed by lukoi who have the ability to speak with them. It's a rare ability; to my knowledge no one in Richard's pack could do it. But I could. The munin are just another type of dead, and I'm good with the dead.

In Tennessee, the munin of Verne and Marianne's pack had come quickly and eagerly--so very close to being real ghosts, crowding around me, eager to speak. I'd practiced until I could pick and choose who would join with me and be able to communicate. It was close enough to channeling or mediumship that Marianne had suggested I could probably do this with normal ghosts, if I wanted. I didn't want to. I didn't like sharing my body with another being, dead or alive. Creeped me out, yes it did.

I waited to feel the press of the munin spreading around me, like a ghostly card deck that I could shuffle and pick the very card I wanted. Nothing happened. The munin did not come. Or rather a gathering of munin did not come. There was always one munin that came when I called, and sometimes when I didn't.

Raina was the only munin of Richard's pack that traveled with me always. Even in Tennessee, surrounded by munin from a different clan line, Raina was still there. Marianne said that Raina and I had a etheric bond, though she wasn't sure why. I'd managed to call munin hundreds of years old, and Raina, the very recently dead, came with more than ease. But Marcus, the previous Ulfric, remained elusive. I'd thought with my newfound control I'd be able to call him, but not only was Marcus not there, no one was there. The clearing was empty of spirits. It shouldn't have been. This was the spot where they consumed their dead, each pack member eating the flesh to take on the memories and courage, or faults, of the recently dead. They could choose not to feed, but it was like the ultimate excommunication. Raina had been a bad person, and I wondered sometimes what exactly you had to do to get excommunicated from the lukoi. Raina had been so bad that I would have let her go, but she was powerful. Maybe that's why she was still hanging around.

Though hanging around implied she was like the phantoms of Verne's pack, and she wasn't. She was internal to me, as if she poured out from inside my body, rather than pouring into me from outside. Marianne still couldn't explain why it worked that way for Raina and me. Some things you just accept and work around, because to do anything else is to butt your head against a brick wall; the wall will not break first.

Raina filled me like a hand inside a glove, and I was the glove. But I'd worked a long time to be able to control her. We'd worked out a deal of sorts. I used her memories and powers, and I let her have some fun. The problem was that Raina had been a sexually sadistic nymphomaniac when alive, and death hadn't changed her much.

I opened my eyes and felt her smile curve my lips, felt my face take on her expression. I rose to my feet in a graceful line, and even my walk was different. Once I'd hated that; now I shrugged it off as the price of doing business.

She laughed, full throated, the kind of laugh that makes a man look in a bar. Her laugh was deeper than mine, contralto, a practiced seduction of sound.

Richard went pale, hands gripping the arms of his throne. "Anita?" he made it a question.

"Guess again, my honey wolf."

He flinched at the nickname. In wolf form Richard is a ginger color, like red honey, though I'd never really thought of it like that before. Trust Raina to think of something thick and sticky when she looked at a man.

Her words came out of my mouth. "Don't be bitchy, when you called me for help."

I nodded, and it was my voice that explained to Richard's confused frown. "I was thinking something less than charitable about her. She didn't like it."

Jacob walked towards me and stopped when I looked at him with Raina's expression. "You can't have called munin. You're not lukoi."

Strange, but it hadn't even occurred to me that being a leopard might mean couldn't call munin. It might explain why the other munin hadn't come when I called. "You said my necromancy wouldn't help me, Jacob, can't have it both ways. Either I'm lukoi enough to call the munin, or I'm necromancer enough to help myself."

We--Raina and me--stalked towards the tall, shirtless man. Raina liked him. Raina liked most men. Especially if the man was someone she'd never had sex with, and among the pack that had been a short list. But Jacob and more than twenty others were new. She looked out over the pack and picked out the new faces. She hesitated over Paris and didn't like her either. You can't have too many alpha bitches in one pack without them fighting amongst themselves.

I felt something I hadn't felt before from Raina--caution. She didn't like how many new people Richard had allowed into the pack in such a short space of time. It worried her. I realized for the first time that it hadn't just been love that made Marcus put up with her as lupa. She was powerful, but more than that, in her own twisted way she did care about the pack, and she and I were in perfect agreement on one thing: Richard had been careless with it. But we both felt we could fix it. It was almost scary that the wicked bitch of the west and I were in such perfect agreement. Either I had been corrupted, or Raina had never been quite as corrupt as I thought. I wasn't sure which idea bothered me more.

Of course, she thought we should seduce Richard into letting us kill a few select people, and I was still hoping that a slightly less sweet reason would

prevail. Raina thought I was a fool, and I wasn't sure I didn't agree with her. Scarier and scarier.

"Anita." Richard said my name again, hesitant, as if he wasn't sure I was in there.

I turned, one hand coming up to my hair, flinging it back from my face. It was Raina's gesture, and I watched that one movement make not only Richard, but Sylvie and Jamil behind her, nervous. No, frightened.

I could smell their fear. Raina's laugh bubbled out of my mouth, because she liked it. I didn't. I never liked it when my friends were afraid of me. My enemies, fine, but not my friends.

"I'm here, Richard, I'm here."

He stared at me. "The last time I saw you call Raina's munin you weren't able to think like yourself with her inside you."

"I really didn't leave you for all these months just because I was afraid of how close we all were. I left to get my shit together, and part of that was learning how to control the munin."

Raina said, "Control me? You wish." She hadn't said it aloud, only in my head. It had taken me a long time to realize that some things were said out loud and some things weren't. It was confusing, but you got used to it.

I said aloud what I'd seen in vision. "I saw Gregory in a hole, naked, tied up, lying on a bed of bones. Where is it?"

Raina showed me in images. It was like a fast-forward picture show, but the images came with emotions, smashing into me, one after the other. I saw a metal cap that screwed down with a tiny airway on top that let in enough light for you to see, if the sun was high enough. There was a rope ladder that spilled down into the dark and was taken up when it wasn't needed. I was Raina kneeling on a bed of bones, a human skull next to my knee. I had a syringe and injected its contents into a dark-haired man that was chained like I'd seen Gregory chained, ankles to wrists. He was gagged and blindfolded. When the needle went in, he whimpered and started to cry. The drugs were to keep him from changing.

I turned him over on his side and saw that a bone fragment had cut into his naked groin. I bent towards the smell of fresh blood, fresh meat, and the absolutely intoxicating stink of fear that came off the man. Not man, lukoi. I clawed my way up from my memory before Raina pressed our lips over him. I shoved it away from me, but I could still smell the fear, the drugs sweated out on his skin, the smell of soap from where Raina had cleaned him up, daily, before the abuse began. I knew his name had been Todd, and he'd talked to a reporter about the lukoi, helped them set up a blind with a camera on a full moon, for money. Maybe he had deserved to die, but not like that. No one deserved to die like that.

I came to myself lying on the ground in front of the throne, tears drying on my face. Jamil and Shang-Da were standing between me and the crowd that had moved to help me. Claudia and Igor were facing off with them, and Rafael had Micah by the arm, trying to convince him not to fight his way to me. Merle

and Noah were moving up to join Claudia and Igor. This was all about to go to hell.

I propped myself up on my arms, and that small movement froze everyone in place. My voice came out hoarse, but mine. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

I'm not sure they believed me, but the tension level started to drop almost immediately. Good, I had enough problems tonight without a free-for-all breaking out.

I looked up at Richard, and all I could feel was anger. "Is that how you're going to kill Gregory, just leave him down in the oubliette until he rots?" My voice came out soft, because if I lost control of it, I wasn't sure how much other control I'd lose. I knew Raina. She wasn't gone. She'd want her "reward" first. She'd done her job. I knew where Gregory was. I even knew how to get there. She'd earned her prize. I didn't dare lose control of myself with her waiting like a shark just under the water.

"I told them to put Gregory some place far away from me. I didn't tell them to put him there."

I got to my feet slowly, even my body movements controlled, muscles almost stiff with adrenaline and the need to lash out. "But you left him there. Who's been going down and pumping him full of drugs to keep him from turning? You don't have Raina to do the dirty work anymore. Who was it? WHO WAS IT!" I screamed it into his face, and the rage was all she needed. She poured over me, and the last control I might have had drowned because I wanted to hurt Richard. I wanted to do it.

I hit him, closed-fist, turning my body into it, twisting my hand at the end, putting all I had into it. I did what they taught us to do in martial arts class if it was for real. I aimed not at Richard's face, but at a point two inches inside his face; that was the real goal.

I was back in a protective stance before Jamil and Shang-Da had time react. I felt them move towards me and felt others move forward, too. The very thing I'd been trying to avoid, and I'd set it off. Raina was laughing in my head, laughing at us all.

Chapter 25

RICHARD WAS LEANING over the arm of his throne, hair covering his face, when Sylvie grabbed me. I didn't fight her. Her fingers dug into my arms, and I knew I'd be bruised in the morning. Or maybe not. Maybe I'd heal it. Jacob was watching it all astonished and pleased.

I glanced back and found the bodyguards fighting. The leopards and rats were spreading out, the wolves beginning to close around them. I opened my mouth to yell something, but Richard's voice boomed over the clearing.

"Enough!" That one word froze us all, and we turned shocked faces to him. He was standing in front of his throne, blood spattered across one shoulder and on his upper chest. One side of his mouth was a red ruin. I'd never been able to do that kind of damage before.

He spat blood and said, "I'm not hurt. Some of you here have been inside the oubliette. You know what it was when Raina still lived. Can you blame the Nimir-Ra for hating me for putting her leopard down there?"

You could feel the tension begin to ease as the wolves pulled back. Richard had to order Jamil and Shang-Da to back off, and they and Claudia and Igor pushed at each other, like bullies that still didn't know who was tougher. I hadn't realized that Claudia was nearly six inches taller than Jamil, until they drew away from each other and he had to stare up at her to glare into her eyes.

Sylvie whispered in my ear, "Are you okay?"

I looked up at Richard. He was still bleeding. "Other than embarrassed, yeah."

She let me go, slowly, as if not sure that I was safe to let loose. She hovered right next to me, between me and Richard, until he motioned her back.

He stood in front of me, and we stared at each other. Blood still dripped from his mouth. "You pack a hell of a punch now," he said.

I nodded. "If you'd been human, what would that have done to you?"

"Broken my jaw, or maybe my neck."

"I didn't mean it," I said.

"Your Nimir-Raj will teach you how to judge your strength. You might stop going to your martial arts classes for a while, until you understand how your body works now."

"Good advice," I said.

He put his hand to his mouth, and it came away bright with blood. I had the urge to take his hand and lick the blood off of it. I wanted to climb his body and press my mouth to his and drink him down. The image was so vivid that I had to shut my eyes, so I couldn't see him standing there half-naked, bloodied, as if that would help me not want him. It didn't. I could smell his skin, the scent of him, and the fresh blood, like icing on a cake that I couldn't have.

"Go get your leopard, Anita."

I opened my eyes and looked up at him. "The oubliette was one of the things you fought against under Marcus. You said it was inhuman. I don't understand how you could use it."

"He was in there for nearly a day before I asked where they'd put him. That was my fault."

"But who's idea was it to put him there?" I asked.

Richard looked at Jacob. The look said it all.

I walked over to the tall man. "You never called me, Jacob."

"You got your leopard back, so what does it matter?"

"If you ever touch one of my people again, I'll kill you."

"You going to pit your kitty-cats against our pack?"

I shook my head. "No, Jacob, this is personal, between me and you. I know the rules. I make this a personal challenge between you and me, and that means that no one can help you."

"Or you," he said. He stared down at me trying to use his height to intimidate me. It didn't work. I was used to being short. I gave him dead eyes until the smirk on his face faltered and he took one step back, which pissed him off. But he didn't retake that step. Jacob might be able to kill Richard in a fair fight for dominance, but he'd never be a true Ulfric.

I stepped up close to him, close enough that a good insult would have made us touch. "There's something weak in you Jacob. I can smell it, and so can they. You may challenge Richard and win, but the pack will never accept you as Ulfric. You winning will tear them apart--it'll be a civil war."

Something flashed through his eyes.

"That doesn't scare you. You don't care," I said.

He stepped back from me, averting his eyes, his face. "You heard the Ulfric. Go fetch your cat before we change our minds."

"You couldn't change your mind with a hundred watt bulb and a team of helpers."

He frowned at me then. Sometimes my humor is a little esoteric, or maybe it's just not funny. Jacob didn't find it funny.

"Go with her, Sylvie, make sure she gets everything she needs to get him out of there and back to the cars safely," Richard said.

"Are you sure you want me to go?" she asked.

"We'll stay with him," Jamil said. None of them tried to hide the fact that they were looking at Jacob while they said it. Not only didn't they not trust him, but they didn't care that he knew that they didn't trust him. How had things downgraded to that? What had been happening in the pack that no one had told me about yet? Plenty, from the looks on everyone's faces.

"She can't go home until after the ceremony to break her ties with the pack" Jacob said.

"She will go home when I say she goes home," Richard said, voice low and full of that deep tone he got just before his voice crawled to something growling and inhuman.

"The candidates have all come prepared tonight, Ulfric, dressed to please you."

"Then they can dress to please me another night."

"You disappoint ..."

"You are about to overstep yourself, Jacob." There must have been something in the way he said it, because Jacob finally shut up and gave a small bow. But he managed to make the movement mocking, and even from a distance you could tell he didn't mean it. But he lowered his eyes with his head, as he bent at the waist. It's a mistake to take your eyes off your opponent.

I asked, "Am I still lupa until the ceremony?"

"I suppose," Richard said.

"Yes," Sylvie said. And they looked at each other.

"Good." I kicked Jacob in the face, though not as hard as I'd hit Richard. You didn't have to kick as hard to do the same kind of damage.

I watched who in the pack made movements towards us and who didn't. I didn't see what everybody did, but I saw enough. Nobody near the throne made a single move to stop me, or help him.

Jacob staggered to his feet. His nose had burst like a piece of overripe fruit. Blood poured from his face, over his hands, like crimson water. He yelled at me, voice thick with the blood running down his throat. "You broke my nose!"

I was in a defensive stance, the one I'd learned in kenpo, just in case, but he didn't try to hit me back. I think he knew that there were too many people close at hand aching for an excuse to hurt him. Jacob was weak, but he was smarter than he looked, and not quite as arrogant.

"I am lupa of the Thronnos Rokke Clan. Maybe just for tonight, but I am lupa here. And he is Ulfric, and you will by God show some respect!"

"You have no right to question the Geri of this clan. I've *earned* my place. You just fucked the Ulfric."

I laughed, and it startled him, made him unsure. "I know pack law, Jacob. It doesn't matter how I got the job. All that matters is that I am lupa, and that means that except for the Ulfric, my word is law."

His eyes looked uncertain, and the first faint trace of fear showed, like a bitter scent on the wind. "You are about to be dethroned as lupa. Your word means nothing here."

"I am Ulfric here, Jacob, not you, and I say whose word means something and whose does not. Until we have the ceremony breaking her ties with our pack, Anita is still lupa, and I will support what she says."

"And I," Sylvie said.

"And I," Jamil said.

Shang-Da said, "I support my Ulfric in all things."

"Then let's have a little irony," I said. "Since it was Jacob's idea to put Gregory down in the oubliette, let him take Gregory's place."

Jacob started to protest, hands still trying to stop the blood flow from his nose. "You can't do that."

"Oh, but she can," Richard said, and there was a coldness in him that I'd never seen before. He wouldn't have come up with the idea himself, but he liked it. It let me know just how frustrated he'd been with Jacob.

"Great," I said. "Shall we all walk like civilized wereanimals to the oubliette and rescue Gregory?"

"I will not go willingly down in that hole," Jacob said. His voice sounded a little funny, what with all the blood and his nose smashed to hell, but he sounded sure of himself. He shouldn't have been.

"Your Ulfric and your lupa have both decreed you will go," Sylvie said. "To refuse the order is to refuse their authority."

Jamil continued, "To refuse their authority is to be declared outlaw from the clan."

Jacob glared at me when he said, "I will obey my Ulfric, but I do not acknowledge the Nimir-Ra as my lupa."

"If I say she is lupa, then to deny that is to question my authority as Ulfric," Richard said.

Jacob's eyes flicked to Richard. "We voted her out as our lupa."

"I'm voting her back in," Richard said, voice deep and quiet, but loud enough that it carried.

"Take another vote," Jacob said, still trying to slow the blood from his face. "It will go against her again."

"No, Jacob, you misunderstand me. I said, I am voting her back in, not you, not anyone else, just me."

Jacob's eyes widened. "You've preached about democracy in action since I joined this clan. Are you going back on all of it now?"

"Not on all of it, but we don't vote for Freki, or Geri, or for Hati and Skoll. We don't vote for Ulfric. Why should we vote for lupa?"

"She's fucking the Nimir-Raj. For that alone she should be cast out as lupa."

"That's my problem, not yours, not the pack's."

"You going to fuck her, too? You think the Nimir-Raj will share?"

Richard started to say something, but Micah spoke first, taking a step from the rest, his guards flanking him. "Why don't you ask the Nimir-Raj?"

Richard looked at me, a question in his eyes. I shrugged.

"Ask him, Jacob," Richard said. The blood had almost stopped dripping from Richard's mouth.

"You mind if the Ulfric fucks your Nimir-Ra?" Jacob was still bleeding like a stuck pig. His chest, stomach, even the front of his shorts were soaked with blood.

"I've agreed to any arrangement that Anita wishes, as long as she remains my Nimir-Ra and lover."

"You'd share her with another man?" Jacob said, voice thick with disbelief

"With two other men," Micah said.

That got almost everybody staring at him. I glanced at him, but mostly watched everyone else's reaction, especially Richard's. The others looked shocked, Richard looked thoughtful, as if Micah had finally done something he didn't hate.

"She is the Master of the City's human servant. Being my Nimir-Ra has not changed that. I've felt the mark that binds them together, and it is not something that will break, as, apparently, the mark that binds her to the Ulfric will not break."

"Nothing binds her to the Ulfric but her stubbornness, and his," Jacob said.

"You think so?" Micah made it a question.

Jacob looked uncertain. The blood from his nose was finally beginning to slow. "You've seen more than I've seen, if you think they still have a special bond."

"More than any of us have seen." This from Paris, who had pushed her way to the front of the crowd.

"I am Nimir-Raj, of course I see more than you do." His voice made it so logical, so matter of fact.

"I am Geri, third in line to the throne."

"Noah is my third in line. I think if you ask him he will say he did not see what I saw either. Third in line to be Nimir-Raj, or Ulfric, is not the same as being the real thing."

I fought not to give Micah the look of gratitude that I wanted to give him. We were still deep in bluff territory, and not safely out the other side yet.

"You can't mean to share your lupa with two other men," Paris said. She'd pushed her way to stand in front of Richard, with her back to me. She was either being insulting, or stupid. Maybe both.

Richard looked down at her, and it wasn't a friendly look. Somehow I didn't think Paris ever had a very good shot at being lupa, not with Richard in charge anyway. "What I and my lupa do, or don't do, is none of your business."

I saw her back stiffen, as if he'd hit her, and maybe he had hit her pride. She'd really believed she could seduce him into picking her. I could have told her that sex wasn't the key to Richard's heart. He liked it well enough, but it wasn't one of his top priorities, not if it interfered with other things that were. It had been the same mistake that Raina had made with him, or one of the mistakes she'd made with him. Raina had never really understood Richard, either.

"You can't just arbitrarily decide you don't need a vote for this," Jacob said.

"Yes," Richard said, "I can."

I stepped up beside Jacob. "That's what being Ulfric means, Jacob."

"You're going back to a dictatorship after all the high-minded talk," Jacob said.

"For tonight, it's sufficient that Anita is my lupa, and that's not going to change. We'll discuss everything else later."

"I say we put it to a vote whether the pack wants to go back to being a dictatorship," Jacob said.

"If you don't have someone set that nose, it may heal crooked," I said.

He glared at me. "You stay out of this."

Richard called up a man with short brown hair and a neat mustache. He shrugged a backpack off his shoulders and began taking out medical supplies. "Fix his nose," Richard said and then turned to Sylvie. "When he's bandaged up, pick some people and escort Jacob to the oubliette."

There were murmurings in the crowd. One clear voice that I hadn't heard before said, "You can't do that."

Richard looked up, searching the crowd, and they fell silent under his gaze. His power rolled out from him like a burning invisible fog, something that clung to your skin and made it hard to breath. They avoided his eyes; some even dropped down into submissive postures, their bodies low to the ground, eyes rolled up, arms and legs held close, making themselves seem small and defenseless, clearly asking not to be hurt.

"I am Ulfric here. If there is any among you that disagree with that, then you are free to challenge the next in line, and the next after that, until you are Freki, then declare yourself Fenrir, and you can challenge me. If you kill me then you can be Ulfric, and you can set any damn policy you want. Until that time, shut the fuck up and follow my orders."

I don't think I'd ever heard Richard cuss. The silence was thick enough to cut. It was Jacob who cut it, like I knew he would. He pushed the mustached doctor away impatiently, while the shorter man tried to pack his nose with what looked like gauze. "Anita shows back up, and so does your backbone. Does she kill and torture for you like Raina did for Marcus?"

Richard's fist struck out in a blur that I couldn't follow. It was almost magical. One moment Jacob was standing, the next moment he was on the ground with his eyes rolled back inside his head.

Richard turned to the rest of them, the dried blood decorating his nude upper body, his hair turned to spun bronze in the torchlight. His eyes had gone wolf amber, and looked more gold than normal against his darker than usual summer tan. "I thought we were people, not animals. I thought we could change the old ways and make something better. But we all felt it tonight when Anita and her leopards melded. Something safe and good. I've tried to be temperate and kind, and look where it's gotten us. Jacob said Anita is my backbone. No, but she's doing something right, something that I've missed. If you won't take kindness, then we'll have to try something else." He looked at me with those alien eyes, and said, "Let's go get your leopard. We need to get him out of the oubliette before Jacob comes to." And he stalked off through the trees and left the rest of us to trail after. There was no question about what to do next. We followed Richard into the trees. We followed the Ulfric, because you're supposed to follow your king, if he's worthy of the name. For the first time ever I thought maybe, just maybe, Richard was going to be Ulfric after all.

Chapter 26

THE OUBLIETTE WAS a rounded metal lid set in the ground. The metal lid sat in the middle of a clearing scattered with tall, thin trees. Honeysuckle bushes ringed the lid on one side; leaves were so thick on the ground that the area looked untouched. I would never have found it if I hadn't known it was there.

Oubliette is French for a little place of forgetting, but that's not a direct translation. Oubliette simply means little forgetting, but what it is, is a place where you put people when you don't plan on ever letting them out. Traditionally it's a hole where once you push someone in they can't get out. You don't feed them, or water them, or talk to them, or anything to them. You

just walk away. There's a Scottish castle where they found an oubliette that had literally been walled up and forgotten, discovered only during modern remodeling. The floor was littered with bones and had an eighteenth-century pocket watch in among the debris. It had an opening where you could see the main dining hall, could have smelled the food, while you starved to death. I remembered wondering if you could hear the person screaming from the dining hall while you ate. Most oubliettes are more isolated, so that once you put him away, you never have to worry about the prisoner again.

Two of the werewolves in nice human form knelt by the metal and began unscrewing two huge bolts in the lid. There was no key. You screwed the lid in place and just walked away. Fuck.

The lid lifted off, and it took both of them to carry it away. Heavy, just in case the drugs didn't keep the adrenaline from pumping enough and cause the change. Even in animal form you'd still have a hard time getting through the lid.

I walked to the edge of the hole, and the smell drove me back. It smelled like an outhouse. I don't know why it surprised me. Gregory had been down there for what, three days, four? In the movies they talk about you starving to death, the romantic stuff -- if such horror is really romantic -- but no one ever talks about your bowels moving, or the fact that when you have to go, you have to go. It's not romantic, it's just humiliating.

Jamil brought a rope ladder and attached it with large metal clips to the side of the hole. The ladder fell away into the darkness with a dry, slithery sound. I forced myself to crawl back to the edge of the oubliette. I was prepared now for the smell, and underneath the ripe smell of life in too small a space was a dry smell, a dry, dusty smell. The smell of old bones, old death.

Gregory wasn't the strongest person I knew, not even one of the top hundred. What had it done to him to lie there in the dark with the stench of old bones, old death, pressed against his body? Had they explained to him how they'd leave him there to die? Had they told him every time they screwed the lid back in place that they weren't coming back, except to drug him?

The hole was like a perfect blackness, darker than the star-filled night sky, darker than anything I'd seen in a long time. It was wide enough for Richard's broad shoulders to have scooted down into the dark, but barely. The longer I stared at it, the narrower it seemed to become, as if it were some great black mouth waiting to swallow me down. Have I mentioned that I'm claustrophobic?

Richard came to stand beside me, peering down into the hole. He had an unlit flashlight in his hand. Something must have shown on my face, because he said, "Even we need some light to see by."

I held my hand out for the flashlight.

He shook his head. "I let this happen. I'll get him out."

I shook my head. "No. He's mine."

He knelt beside me and spoke softly, "I can smell your fear. I know you don't like close places."

I stared back into the hole and let myself acknowledge just how afraid I was. So afraid that I could taste something flat and metallic on my tongue. So

afraid that my pulse was hammering in my throat, like a trapped thing. My voice came out calm, normal. I was glad. "It doesn't matter that I'm afraid." I touched the flashlight, tried to pull it from his hand, but he held on. And, short of playing tug of war--which I would probably lose--I wasn't getting it away from him.

"Why do you have to be the toughest, the bravest? Why can't you, just once, let me do something for you? Going down in the hole doesn't scare me. Let me do this for you. Please." His voice was still soft, and he was leaning into me enough so that I could smell the drying blood on him, the richness of fresh blood in his mouth, as if some small cut had not healed completely.

I shook my head. "I have to do it, Richard."

"Why?" and his voice held the first hint of anger, like a slap of warmth.

"Because it scares me, and I have to know if I can."

"Can what?"

"If I can crawl down into that hole."

"Why? Why do you need to know that? You've proven to me and everyone here that you're tough. You don't have anything left to prove to us."

"To me, Richard, I have something left to prove to me."

"What difference would it make if you couldn't climb down in that stinking hole? You'll never have to do it again, Anita. Just don't do it."

I looked at him, at the puzzlement in his face, his eyes, which had bled back to their normal, perfect brown. I'd been trying to explain shit like this to Richard for a few years now. I finally realized that he would never understand and I was tired of trying to explain myself, not just to Richard, to everybody.

"Give me the flashlight, Richard."

He held on with both hands. "Why do you have to do this? Just tell me that. You're so scared your mouth is dry. I can taste it on your breath."

"And I can taste fresh blood on yours, but I have to do it because it scares me"

He shook his head. "This isn't courage, Anita, this is stubbornness."

I shrugged. "Maybe, but I still have to do it."

He clutched the flashlight tighter. "Why?" And somehow I thought the question was about more than the oubliette and why I had to climb inside it,

I sighed. "Less and less scares me, Richard. So when I find something that does bother me, I have to test it. I have to see if I can do it."

"Why?" He studied my face like he'd memorize it.

"Just to see if I can."

"Why?" and the anger was more than a faint hint now.

I shook my head. "I'm not competing with you, Richard, or anyone else. I don't give a shit who's better or faster or braver."

"Then why do it?"

"The only person I compete against is me, Richard, and I'll think less of me if I let you, or anyone else, climb down in that hole first. Gregory is my boy, not yours, and I have to rescue him."

"You've already rescued him, Anita. It doesn't matter who climbs in the damn hole."

I almost smiled, but not like it was funny. "Give me the flashlight, please, Richard. I can't explain this to you."

"Does your Nimir-Raj understand it?" The anger burned along my skin, like a swarm of stings. It damn near hurt.

I frowned at him. "Ask him yourself, now give me the damn flashlight." If you get angry at me, it never takes me long to respond.

"I want to be your Ulfric, Anita, your guy, whatever the hell that means. Why won't you let me be ... ?" He stopped talking, looking away from me.

"*The man*. Was that what you were going to say?"

He looked back at me and nodded.

"Look, if we keep dating, or whatever the hell we're going to do, we have to get one thing straight. Your ego is no longer my problem. Don't be the man for me, Richard, be the person I need. You don't have to be bigger and braver than I am to be my man. I've got male friends that spend most of their time trying to prove they have bigger, brassier balls than I do. I don't need that from you."

"What if I need to be braver than you for myself, not for you?"

I thought about that for a second or two, then said, "You're not afraid of going down into the oubliette, are you?"

"I don't want to go down, and I don't want to see what they've done to Gregory, but I'm not as afraid as you are, no."

"Then it doesn't make you braver than me to go down into the hole, does it? Because it doesn't cost you anything to go down there."

He leaned very, very close to my ear, then breathed the barest of sounds against my skin. "Like it would cost you nothing to kill Jacob for me."

I stiffened beside him, then turned, trying to keep the shock off my face.

"I knew that was what you were thinking the moment I saw you look at him," Richard said.

"You'd let me do that?" I asked, voice soft, but not as soft as his had been.

"I don't know yet. But wouldn't your reasoning be that it would cost you nothing to do it and it would cost me dear?"

We stared at each other. I finally nodded.

He smiled. "Then let me go down the fucking hole."

"When did you start using the F-word?"

"While you were away. I think I missed hearing it." He grinned at me suddenly, a bright flash of smile in the dark.

I couldn't not smile back. Kneeling by that horrible black opening, fear still flat on my tongue, his anger still riding the air between us, and we smiled at each other. "I'll let you go down the hole first," I said.

The smile widened until it filled his eyes, and even by starlight I could see them gleam with humor. "Okay."

I leaned into him and gave him a quick kiss. Too quick for the powers to move between us, too quick to taste the blood in his mouth, too quick to find out if our beasts would roil through each other's bodies. I kissed him just because I wanted to, because for the first time I thought we might both be willing to bend a little. Would it be enough? Who the hell knew? But I was

hopeful. For the first time in a long time, I was truly hopeful. Without hope, love dies and parts of you wither. I didn't know what it meant for Micah that I had hope for Richard and me. We'd talked openly about sharing, but I didn't know how much of that had been for public show and how much had been real. But right that second, I didn't care, I clutched that positive emotion to me and held on. Later, later, we'd worry about other things. I'd let Richard climb down first, but I'd still be going down, and I wanted that small warm hope inside my chest along with the fear.

Chapter 27

RICHARD'S WEIGHT ON the rope ladder kept it tight under my hands. He'd put his flashlight on a strap around his wrist. I watched the pool of yellow light vanishing down into that narrow darkness and realized that I was still barely on the ladder, my head still aboveground.

Micah was kneeling beside the hole. "It'll be alright," he said.

I swallowed and looked at him, knowing my eyes were just a little wide, "I know," but my voice came out breathy.

"You really don't have to do this," he said, voice soft, and as neutral as he could make it.

I frowned at him. "Don't *you* start."

"Then you better catch up with him." His voice was a little less neutral, but I couldn't tell what tone it held.

I started climbing down the soft roughness of the rope ladder, moving quickly, angrily. I wasn't angry with Micah, not really. I was angry with me. The anger got me well down into the dark where the light from the flashlight below me seemed very yellow and very stark against the earthen walls.

I clung there for a second or two, staring at that hard-packed earth. I gazed up slowly and found Micah staring down at me from a distance so far away that I couldn't tell what color his eyes or hair were. I knew it was him from the shape of his face and shoulders. My God, how deep did this pit go?

It seemed like the earthen walls were curving in towards me, like a hand about to close into a fist and crush me, so that I couldn't breathe enough of the stale, flat air to fill my lungs. I closed my eyes and forced myself to move one hand off the ladder and touch the wall. It was farther away than I'd thought, and when I finally touched it, it startled me. The earth was surprisingly cool against my hand, and I realized it was cool in the pit, even with early summer heat up above. I opened my eyes, and the walls were still about six feet circular, just like they'd always been. The earth wasn't closing in around me, only my phobia was doing that.

I started climbing down again, and this time I didn't stop until I felt the ladder loosen under my body and it was suddenly harder to climb down without bumping into the dirt walls. Richard's weight was no longer steadying the ladder for me. If I hadn't been such a pain in the ass, I might have asked for him to hold it steady until I got down to the end. Instead I hugged the ladder frantically and kept moving downward. It's hard to cling to something while you're climbing down it, but I managed.

The world narrowed down to the feel of the rope under my hands, my feet trying to find purchase--just the simple act of moving downward. It got to the point that I stopped jumping every time my body bumped the walls. Hands touched my waist, and I let out that little yip that is only a girl sound. I always hated when I did it.

They were Richard's hands around my waist, of course. He steadied me the last few feet, while my heart tried to jump out of my chest. I stepped down onto a floor that crunched and rolled with bones. They were deep yet you didn't sink into them, rather walked on top of them like a saint treading on water.

The narrow shaft opened into a small, cramped, cave-like hole in the earth. Richard had to stand bent almost in two. I could stand up if I was careful, though the top of my hair brushed the ceiling solidly enough that ducking a little was a good idea.

Micah called from way, way above us, "Are you alright?"

It took me two tries to be able to say, "Fine, we're fine."

Micah pulled back from the opening, a dark dot against the paler grayness. "My God, how far down are we?"

"Sixty feet, give or take." There was something in his voice that made me turn to him.

He shook his head and looked to one side, shining the flashlight on something small and hunched. It was Gregory.

He was on his stomach, hog-tied, his arms and legs at such acute angles that I couldn't imagine lying there like that for three days. He was nude, a white cloth blindfold cutting across his face, knotted in a tangle of long blond hair, as if even that had been done to hurt, and not merely to blind. As Richard's light played over Gregory's body, he made small helpless sounds. He could see the light through the cloth, if nothing else. I knelt beside him, seeing where the silver chains had dug into his wrists and ankles. The wounds were raw and bloody where he'd struggled against them.

"The chains have rubbed him raw," Richard said, voice soft.

"He struggled," I said.

"No, he's not powerful enough to take this much silver against his skin. The chains ate their way into his skin."

I stared at the raw wounds and didn't know what to say. I touched Gregory's shoulder, and he screamed through the gag I hadn't seen. His hair had hidden it. But there was a dark rag stuffed in his mouth. He screamed again and tried to worm away from me.

"Gregory, Gregory, it's Anita." I touched him as gently as I could, and he screamed once more. I looked up at Richard. "He doesn't seem to hear me."

Richard knelt and raised a tangle of Gregory's hair. Gregory struggled harder, and Richard handed me the flashlight so he could use one hand to steady the smaller man's face and the other to keep the hair out of the way. There was more cloth stuffed in his ears. Richard pulled out the cloth and found a black earplug deeper in the channel. They were never meant to be pushed in that far, and when Richard pulled it free, fresh blood trickled from his ear.

I just stared, my mind frozen for a second, not wanting to understand. But finally, I heard myself say it. "They burst his eardrums. Why, for God's sake? Wasn't the blindfold and gag enough sensory deprivation?"

Richard held the earplug up to the light. I had to shine the flashlight directly on it to see that it had a metal point.

"What is that?"

"Silver," he said.

"Oh, God, they were designed for this?"

"Remember, Marcus was a doctor. He knew all kinds of medical supply places. Places that would make things." The look on Richard's face told me he was lost in memory and something darker.

I glanced back at the marks on Gregory's arms and legs. "Dear God, did the silver tear up his ear canals the way it did his skin?"

"I don't know. It's good that it's still bleeding. It means if he shapeshifts soon, he'll probably heal." Richard's voice was thick.

I wasn't close to crying, the horror too overwhelming for tears. I wanted Jacob down here, and whoever had helped him, because you didn't do this to a shapeshifter without help, not one-on-one.

Richard tried to take off the blindfold, but it was tied so tight he couldn't get a good hold on it. I handed him the flashlight and drew the knife from my left wrist sheath. "Hold him, the knives are sharp, I don't want to cut him if he struggles."

Richard held Gregory's head between his two hands like a vise, and Gregory struggled harder, screaming through the gag. But Richard held him firm while I slid the knife carefully between the cloth and Gregory's hair. One quick slice downward and the blindfold eased away from his skin, but it had been tied so tight for so long that Richard had to peel it away.

Gregory blinked at the light and saw Richard and screamed more. Something died on Richard's face when he did it, like it had killed something inside him to have anyone be that terrified of him.

I leaned over, placing my hand carefully on the pile of bones and watched Gregory's eyes finally see me. He stopped screaming, but he didn't look relieved enough. I pulled the gag out of his mouth, and it peeled away, taking bits of lip skin with it. He worked his mouth slowly, and for some odd reason I was reminded of the scene from *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy puts oil on the Tin Man's jaw after he'd been rusted. The image should have made me smile, but it didn't.

There was a padlock on the chains around each of his limbs. Richard crawled around me, letting me stay where Gregory could see me. I was saying

over and over again, "It's going to be alright. It's going to be alright." He couldn't hear me, but it was the best I knew how to do.

Richard snapped the lock on one wrist, and pain showed on Gregory's face like it hurt for the arm to move at all. Richard freed both wrists and then began to slowly uncurl Gregory's body.

Gregory screamed, but not from fear this time, from pain. I tried to cradle him, but moving at all seemed to hurt. It took both of us crawling around to get him unbent enough to lay in my lap. He was never going to be able to climb the ladder.

The bends of both of his arms were covered in needle marks; none of them had healed. "The needle marks, why haven't they healed?"

"Silver needles in direct contact with the bloodstream. A sedative to keep the adrenaline low so you can't change, but not so much that you can't feel, or know where you are, and what's happening. That's how Raina used to do it."

"This is how she used to tie them up and exactly what she used to do to them. How did Jacob know that?" I asked.

"One of my people told him," Richard said. He stayed on his knees rather than stand bent over. His face was calm, almost serene.

"I want them down here. Whoever helped Jacob. Whoever brought out those damn earplugs. I want them down here."

He turned those calm eyes to me, and I saw the anger at the bottom of that calm. "Could you do this to someone? Could you plunge these things in their ears? Could you do all this to *anyone*?"

I thought about that, really thought about it. I was angry, sickened. I wanted to punish someone, but ... "No, no, I could shoot them, kill them, but I couldn't do this."

"Neither could I," he said.

"You knew Gregory was in the oubliette, but you didn't know what they'd done to him, did you?"

He shook his head, kneeling on the bones, still staring down at the bloody earplug, like it held answers to questions too hard to ask out loud. "Jacob knew."

"You're Ulfric, Richard, you should know what's done in your pack's name."

The anger flared so hot and tight that it filled the little cave like water just this side of boiling. Gregory whimpered and watched Richard with fearful eyes.

"I know, Anita, I know."

"So you're not going to put Jacob down here?"

"I am, but not like this. He can stay down here, but not chained, not tortured." Richard glanced around the tiny space. "Being down here at all is torture enough."

I didn't even try to argue that one. "What about whoever helped him?"

Richard looked at me. "I'll find out who helped him."

"Then what?"

He closed his eyes, and it wasn't until he opened his hand and I saw the flash of blood that I realized he'd pressed the silver point into his palm. He pulled it out and stared at the bright flash of blood.

"You just keep pushing, don't you, Anita."

"The pack knows you well enough, Richard. They know you didn't mean for anyone to be put down here, especially not with all Raina's old accoutrements. Doing this at all was a challenge to your authority."

"I know that."

"I don't want to fight, Richard, but you have to punish them for this. If you don't, then you lose more ground to Jacob. Even if you put him down here, it won't stop things. Everyone that touched this has to suffer."

"You're not angry now," he said, and he looked puzzled. "I thought you wanted revenge, but you seem cold about it all, now."

"I wanted revenge, but you're right, I couldn't do this to anyone, and I can't order done what I wouldn't do myself. Just a rule I've got. But the pack is a mess, and if you want to stop the downward slide and keep them from a civil war, werewolf against werewolf, you must be harsh. You must make it clear that is not acceptable."

"It isn't," he said.

"There's only one way for them to know that, Richard."

"Punishment," he said, and he made the word sound like a curse.

"Yes," I said.

"I've worked for months--no, years--to try and get away from a punitive system. You want me to throw away all that I've worked for and go back to the way it was."

Gregory's hand came up, slowly, painfully, to clutch weakly at my arm I stroked his matted hair, and his voice came out hoarse, abused, as if even through the gag, he'd been screaming for days. "I want ... out of ... here. Please."

I nodded my head so he could see it, and a relief so large it was beyond words flashed through his eyes.

I looked up at Richard. "If your system worked better than the old one, then I'd support it, but it's not working. I'm sorry that it's not working, Richard, but it's not. If you continue this ... experiment in democracy and gentler, kinder laws, people are going to die. Not just you, but Sylvie, and Jamil, and Shang-Da, and every wolf that supports you. But it's worse than that, Richard. I watched the pack. They're divided almost evenly. It will be civil war, and they will tear each other to bits--Jacob's followers and the ones who won't follow him. Hundreds will die, and the Thronnos Rokke Clan may die with it. Look at the throne you're sitting on as Ulfric. It's ancient, you can feel it. Don't let everything that it stands for be destroyed."

He stared down at the still-bleeding wound in his hand. "Let's get Gregory out of here."

"You'll punish Jacob, but not the others," I said, and my voice was tired.

"I'll find out who they are first, then we'll see."

I shook my head. "I love you, Richard."

"I hear a 'but,' coming."

"But I value the people who count on me for their safety more than I value that love." It felt cold and awful saying it out loud, but it was true.

"What does that say about your love?" he asked.

"Don't go all sanctimonious on me, Richard. You dropped me like yesterday's news when the pack voted me out. You could have said, screw it, take the throne, I want Anita more, but you didn't."

"You really think Jacob would have let me walk away?"

"I don't know, but you didn't make the offer. It didn't even occur to you to make the offer, did it?"

He looked away, then back, and his eyes held such sadness that I wanted to take it back, but I couldn't. It was time we talked. It was like the old joke about the elephant in the living room. No one acknowledged it existed until the shit was so deep they couldn't walk. Glancing down at Gregory, I knew the shit was too deep to ignore. We were out of options except for the truth, no matter how brutal.

"If I'd stepped down as Ulfric, even if Jacob had let me do it, it would still have been civil war. He'd have still executed those closest to me. It would have been deserting them. I'd rather die, than just walk away and leave them to be slaughtered."

"If that's how you really feel, Richard, then I've got a better plan. Make an example of Jacob and his followers."

"It's not that simple, Anita. Jacob's got enough support that it might still be war."

"Not if it's bloody enough."

"What are you saying?"

"Make them fear you, Richard. Make them fear you. Machiavelli said it nearly six hundred years ago, but it's still true. Every ruler should strive for his people to love him. But if they cannot love you, then make them fear you. Love is better, but fear will do the job."

He swallowed hard, and there was something close to fear in his eyes. "I think I could kill Jacob, and even execute one or two of his people, but you don't think that's enough, do you?"

"Depends on how you execute them."

"What are you asking me to do, Anita?"

I sighed and stroked Gregory's cheek. "I'm asking you to do what needs doing, Richard. If you want to hold this pack together and save hundreds of lives, then I'm telling you how you can do it with the minimum amount of bloodshed."

"I can kill Jacob, but I can't do what you're asking. I can't do something so terrible that the entire pack would fear me." He looked at me, and there was a wildness, a panic in his face, like a trapped thing that finally realizes there is no escape.

I could feel my face grow calm, and I felt myself sinking into that place where there is nothing but white noise and the solid, almost comforting surety that I felt nothing. I said, softly, "I can."

He turned away from me, as if I hadn't spoken, and called up for them to lower the harness. We slid the harness around Gregory, talking only about the task at hand--no metaphysics, no politics. There was a second harness on the rope, and Richard made me put it on. I'd get to cradle Gregory, protecting him with my body so he didn't get scraped up too badly.

"I've never done this before," I said.

"I'm too broad through the shoulders to add Gregory's bulk to mine. It has to be you. Besides, you'll keep him safe, I know you will." There was something in his eyes that made me want to say something, but he jerked on the rope and we started rising into the air.

Richard watched us, face upturned, his flashlight casting odd shadows around the small room as he knelt on the bones. Then we were up inside the tunnel, and I couldn't see him anymore. I had my arms full, literally and figuratively, trying to keep Gregory from crashing into the walls. His arms and legs were still almost useless. I wasn't sure if it was because of the long confinement or the drugs he'd been given, or both. Probably both.

Gregory kept saying "thank you, thank you, thank you" under his breath.

By the time we reached the top, there were tears drying on my cheeks. Regardless of what Richard decided, someone was going to pay.

Jacob was there, already bound in silver chains, carried like a piece of struggling luggage between three werewolves. They let him keep his cutoff shorts. No nudity for the good guys. I guess there has to be some differences, or how do you tell which side you're on?

Cherry was already checking Gregory over. She had to keep chasing the other leopards back. They kept trying to touch him.

I stared across the clearing at Jacob. The look in his eyes was enough. Richard could be squeamish if he wanted to be, but if I let what had been done to Gregory stand unchallenged, then Jacob and his followers would see it as weakness. They'd turn and destroy us once Jacob secured his power base. Because there was one way for Jacob to avoid a civil war, and that was by doing what I was encouraging Richard to do. If he did something so terrible that the others were afraid to fight, then he could be Ulfric without a bloodbath. I'd seen what he'd done to Gregory. Call it a hunch, but I was willing to bet Jacob would do what needed doing. He didn't strike me as the squeamish sort.

Richard climbed out of the hole. "Put him in."

"Do you want the drugs used?" Sylvie asked.

Richard nodded.

"What about the blindfold and the rest?"

Richard shook his head. "Not necessary."

Jacob started struggling again. "You can't do this!"

Richard knelt in front of him, holding him by his thick hair. The grip looked painful. "Who showed you where these were?" He held his hand out with the silver-tipped earplugs in his palm.

"Oh, my God," Sylvie whispered.

Others asked, "What is it?"

"Who, Jacob? Who told you our dirty little secrets?"

Jacob just stared at him.

"I could have them used on you," Richard said.

Jacob paled a little, but he didn't answer. His jaw was so tense that I could see the muscles pulsing, but he didn't give up who'd helped him. He didn't even ask if answering the question would save him from the oubliette. I had to admire that, at least, but I didn't have to like it.

"You wouldn't do that." It was Paris, looking a lot less confident than she had by the throne. She looked downright unsure of herself in her skintight dress.

Richard looked at her for a long time, or maybe it just seemed long, and something in his eyes made her look away.

"You're right, I can't use them on Jacob, or anyone." He looked around the clearing at the scattered wolves and at the ones waiting in the trees beyond- "But hear me, if there are anymore of these things around, I want them destroyed. When Jacob comes out of the oubliette, it is to be sealed up forever. You have learned nothing from me, if any of you could do this, you have learned nothing." He signaled Sylvie, and she came forward with a syringe.

The three werewolves had to hold Jacob against the ground for her to give him the shot. They held him until his limbs went limp and his eyes fluttered shut.

"He'll wake up in the oubliette," Richard said. His voice held not just tiredness, but defeat. He turned to me as they carried Jacob towards the hole. "Take your leopards, and your allies, and go home, Anita."

"I'm lupa, remember, you can't kick me out of pack business."

He smiled, but it left his eyes empty and tired. "You're still lupa, but for tonight you're also Nimir-Ra, and your leopards need you. Take care of Gregory, and for what it's worth, I'm sorry about all of this."

"Sorry is worth something, Richard, but it doesn't change things."

"It never does," he said.

I couldn't read his mood. He wasn't sad exactly, or worried, or, anything I had a name for, except defeated. It was like he'd already lost the battle.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"I'm going to find out who helped Jacob do this."

"How?" I asked.

He smiled and shook his head. "Go home, Anita."

I stood and looked at him for a heartbeat or two, then turned back to my leopards. Gregory was on a stretcher, and Zane and Noah were carrying it. Cherry was talking to the werewolf doctor that had packed Jacob's nose. She was doing a lot of nodding. Instructions, maybe.

Micah was standing at the edge of the group watching me. I met his eyes, but neither of us smiled. I looked back but Richard was already moving off through the trees with Jamil and Shang-Da at his back. Micah's face was very neutral as I walked towards him. I wasn't hopeful anymore. I could have played it cool, but I didn't want to. I was tired, so terribly tired. My clothes smelled like an outhouse, and probably so did my skin. I wanted a shower, clean clothes, and to make the lost look in Gregory's eyes go away. The shower and

clothes were the easy part. I didn't even know how to begin to make Gregory's pain go away.

I held out my hand to Micah, not because of otherworldly energy, apparently depression dampens that, but because I wanted the touch of another hand. I wanted the comfort, and I didn't want to have to think about it. I just wanted to be held.

He widened his eyes, but took my hand, squeezing it gently. I started walking towards the trees, leading him by the hand. The others followed us. Even the swan king and the wererats. Anita Blake, preternatural pied piper. The thought should have made me smile. But it didn't.

Chapter 28

TWO HOURS LATER I'd had a shower and Gregory had had a bath, though I'd showered by myself, and Gregory had had company. He still didn't have complete use of his arms and legs. I didn't think that Cherry, Zane, and Nathaniel needed to get naked and in the tub with him, but, hey, I wasn't offering to help, so who was I to complain? Besides, it never became sexual; it was as if the touch of their flesh on his was necessary, part of the healing process. Maybe it was.

I was sitting at my new kitchen table. My old two-seater table just hadn't been roomy enough for all the wereleopards to have bagels and cream cheese at the same time. The new table was pale pine, varnished to a golden glow. There still wasn't enough room at the table for everyone to sit and drink coffee, but it was closer. I'd have needed a banquet table to have that much room, and the kitchen wasn't long enough for it. There was more than one reason that feudal lords had had great big castles--you needed the room just to feed and care for all your people.

The only person sitting in the dimly lit kitchen was Dr. Lillian. Elizabeth had been transported to the secret hospital that the shapeshifters kept in St. Louis. All my other leopards were tending to Gregory. Micah and his cats wandered around the periphery of it all. Caleb had tried to include himself in the bath and had been refused. The rest of Micah's pard seemed unsettled, nervous, not knowing what to do with themselves. I had my priority for the evening--taking care of Gregory. Everything else could wait. One disaster at a time, or you lose your way, and your mind.

Dr. Lillian was a small woman with gray hair cut straight just above her shoulders. Her hair was longer than the first time I met her, but everything else was the same. I'd never seen her wear makeup, and her face still looked pleasant and attractive in a fifty-plus sort of way--though I'd discovered she was actually well over sixty. She certainly didn't look it.

"The drugs are still in his system," Dr. Lillian said.

"Drugs, plural?" I asked.

She nodded. "Our metabolism is so fast that it takes quite a cocktail of chemicals to keep us sedated for any length of time."

"Gregory wasn't sedated. He seemed very much aware of everything that was happening," I said.

"But his heart, his breathing, his involuntary reflexes were all subdued. If you can't access the full effects of an adrenaline rush, you can't change shape."

"Why not?"

Lillian shrugged, taking a small sip of her coffee. "We don't know, but there is something in the extremes of the fight or flight response that opens the way for our beast. If you can deprive a shapeshifter of that response, then you can keep them from shifting."

"Indefinitely?" I asked.

"No, the full moon will bring it on, no matter what drugs you pump into someone."

"How long until Gregory's back to normal?"

Her eyes flicked downward, then up, and I didn't like that she'd needed that second to school her eyes, as if something bad were coming.

"The drugs will probably wear off in about eight hours, maybe more, maybe less. It depends on so many things."

"So he stays here until the drugs wear off, then he shapeshifts and he's fine, right?" I put a lilt at the end, making it a question, because I knew the atmosphere was too serious for it to be that easy.

"I'm afraid not," she said.

"What's wrong, doc, why so solemn?"

She gave a small smile. "In eight hours the damage to Gregory's ears may be permanent."

I blinked at her. "You mean he'll stay deaf?"

"Yes."

"That's not acceptable," I said.

Her smile widened. "You say that as if by sheer will you can change things, Anita. It makes you seem very young."

"Are you telling me that there's nothing we can do to heal him?"

"No, I'm not saying that."

"Please, doc, just tell me."

"If you were truly Nimir-Ra, then you might be able to call his beast out of his flesh and force the change, even with the drugs in his system."

"If someone can tell me how to do it, I'm willing to give it a shot."

"So you believe that you will be Nimir-Ra in truth come full moon?"

Lillian asked.

I shrugged and sipped my coffee. "Not a hundred percent sure, no, but the evidence is sort of mounting up."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Being Nimir-Ra for real?" I asked.

She nodded.

"I'm trying really hard not to think too much about it."

"Ignoring it won't make it go away, Anita."

"I know that, but worrying about it won't change things either."

"Very practical of you, if you can pull it off."

"What, not worrying?"

She nodded again.

I shrugged. "I'll worry about each disaster as it happens."

"Can you really compartmentalize to that degree?"

"How do we fix Gregory?"

"I take that as a yes," she said.

I smiled. "Yes."

"As I said, if you were a Nimir-Ra in full power, you might be able to call his beast, even through the drugs."

"But since I haven't shifted yet, I can't?"

"I doubt it. It's a rather specialized skill, even among full shapeshifters."

"Can Rafael do it?"

She smiled, the smile that most of the wererats got when you asked about their king. It was a smile that held warmth and pride. They liked and respected him. Let's hear it for good leadership.

"No."

That surprised me, and it must have shown on my face.

"I told you, it is a rare talent. Your Ulfric can do it."

I looked at her. "You mean Richard?"

"Do you have another Ulfric?" she asked, smiling.

I almost smiled back. "No, but we need someone who can call leopards, right?"

She nodded.

"How about Micah?"

"I've already asked him. Neither he nor Merle can call another's beast. Micah did offer to try and heal Gregory by calling flesh, but the injuries are beyond him."

"When did Micah try and heal Gregory?"

"While you were cleaning up," she said.

"I took a quick shower."

"It didn't take long for him to be certain that Gregory's injuries were above his abilities."

"You wouldn't be belaboring the point if there wasn't some hope."

"I can use other drugs to try and overcome the effects."

"But ..." I said.

"But the mix of the drugs could explode his heart or rupture enough blood vessels in other major organs to kill him."

I stared at her for a heartbeat or two. "How bad are the odds?"

"Bad enough that I need his Nimir-Ra's permission before trying."

"Has Gregory given his permission?"

"He's terrified. He wants to be able to hear again. Of course he wants me to try, but I'm not sure he's thinking clearly."

"So you're coming to me like you'd go to a parent for a child," I said.

"I need someone who is thinking clearly to make a decision on Gregory behalf."

"He has a brother." I frowned, because I realized I hadn't seen Stephen at the lupanar. "Where *is* Stephen?"

"I've been told that the Ulfric ordered Gregory's brother not to attend tonight. Something about it being unfair for him to watch his own brother executed. Vivian has gone to get him."

"My, that was big of Richard."

"You sound bitter."

"Do I?" And that sounded bitter even to me. I sighed. "I'm just frustrated, Lillian. Richard is going to get people I care about slaughtered, not to mention himself."

"Which risks both you and the Master of the City."

I frowned at her. "I guess everyone does know that part."

"I think so," she said.

"Yeah, he's risking us all for his high moral ideals."

"Ideals are worth sacrifice, Anita."

"Maybe, but I'm not a hundred percent sure I've ever held an ideal close enough to trade the people I love for it. Ideals can die, but they don't breathe, they don't bleed, they don't cry."

"So you would trade all your ideals for the people you care about?" she asked.

"I'm not sure I have any ideals anymore."

"You're still Christian, aren't you?"

"My religion isn't an ideal. Ideals are abstract things that you can't touch or see. My religion isn't abstract, it's very 'stract,' very real."

"You can't see God," she said. "You can't hold Him in your hand."

"How many angels can dance on the head of a pin, huh?"

She smiled. "Something like that."

"I've held a cross while it flared so bright it blinded me until all the world was just white fire. I've seen a copy of the Talmud go up in flames in a vampire's hands, and even after the book had burned to ash, the vampire kept burning until it died. I've stood in the presence of a demon and recited holy script, and the demon could not touch me." I shook my head. "Religion isn't an abstract thing, Dr. Lillian, it is a living, breathing, growing, organic thing."

"Organic sounds more Wiccan than Christian," she said.

I shrugged. "I've been studying with a psychic and some of her Wiccan friends for about a year, hard not to soak some of it up."

"Doesn't studying Wicca put you in an awkward position?"

"You mean because I'm a monotheist?"

She nodded.

"I have God-given abilities and not enough training to control those abilities. Most denominations of the church frown on psychics, let alone someone who raises the dead. I need training, so I've found people to train me."

The fact that they're not Christian I see as a failing of the church, not a failing of theirs."

"There are Christian witches," she said.

"I've met some of them. They all seem to be zealots, as if they have to be more Christian than anyone else to prove that they're good enough to be Christian at all. I don't like zealots."

"Neither do I," she said.

We looked at each other in the darkened kitchen. She raised her coffee mug. I'd given her the one with a tiny knight and a large dragon that said, "No guts, no glory."

Lillian said, "Down with zealots."

I raised my own mug in the air. It was the baby penguin mug, still a favorite. "Down with zealots."

We drank. She set her mug on the coaster and said, "Do I have your permission to try the drugs on Gregory?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then nodded. "If he agrees, do it."

She pushed back from the table and stood. "I'll get everything ready."

I nodded, but stayed sitting. I was praying when I felt someone come into the room. Without opening my eyes, I knew it was Micah.

He waited until I raised my head, opened my eyes. "I didn't mean to interrupt," he said.

"I'm finished," I said.

He nodded and gave that smile of his that was part amusement, part sorrow, and part something else. "You were praying?" He made it a question.

"Yes."

Some trick of the light made his eyes gleam in the dark, like there was a spark of hidden fire down deep in their green gold depths. The illusion lost his eyes and most of his face to shadow and darkness. Only that shimmering gleam remained, as if the color dancing in his eyes was more real than the rest of him.

Without seeing his face, I knew he was upset. I could feel it like a tension down my spine. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"I can't remember the last time I prayed."

I shrugged. "A lot of people don't pray."

"Why does it surprise me that you do?" he asked.

I shrugged again.

He took a step forward, and the light fell upon his face and that odd, mixed smile of his.

"I have to go."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"What makes you think anything's wrong?"

"Tension level between you and your cats. What's up, Micah?"

He pressed his thumb and forefinger against his eyes, rubbing, as if he were tired. He blinked those jewel-like eyes at me. "A pard emergency. We've got one member that couldn't come tonight, and she's got herself in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Violet is our version of your Nathaniel, the least dominant of us." He left it at that, as if it explained everything. It did, and it didn't.

"And?" I said.

"And I have to go help her."

"I don't like secrets, Micah."

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. He ripped the ponytail holder out, threw it on the floor, ran his hands through the shoulder-length curls, over and over, as if he'd been wanting to do it all night. The movement was harsh, frantic with tension.

He looked down at me, dark brown hair in disarray around his face, eyes gleaming. In an instant he went from being this nice, attractive man to something feral and alien. It wasn't just the hair or the kitty-cat eyes. His beast bubbled against my skin like boiling water. I'd felt his power, but not like this, almost hot enough to scald. Then I realized that I could see that heat, *see* it. It flowed over him, invisible, but almost not, like something half-seen out of the corner of your eye. I could almost see the shape of something monstrous looming around him, like heat rising off of summer pavement, a rippling thing. I'd been around shapeshifters for years and never seen anything like it.

Merle appeared in the doorway. "Nimir-Raj, is anything wrong?"

Micah turned, and I got a swimming afterimage, as if something large and almost invisible moved around and just above his body. His voice came out low and growling. "Wrong, what could possibly be wrong?"

Gina pushed past Merle. "We've got to go, Micah."

Micah put his hands up, and the afterimage moved with him. I couldn't actually see claws and fur, just hints of it, swimming around him. He covered his eyes with his hands, and I saw those ghostly claws go through, into, *past* his face. Watching it made me dizzy, and I looked down at the tabletop to steady myself and reality.

I'd heard Marianne say she could see auras of power around people and lycanthropes, but I'd never been able to see one before.

I felt his power folding away, the heat, the skin-ruffling sensation pulling away, like the ocean going back from the shore. I raised my face to see, and that seen-not-seen shape was gone, swallowed back into his body.

He stared down at me. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"You're closer than you think," I said.

"She's afraid of your power," Gina said, and there was scorn in her voice.

I looked up at her. "I saw his aura, saw it like a white phantom around his body."

"You say that like you've never seen it before," Micah said.

"I haven't, not a visual."

Gina took his arm, gently but firmly, and tried pulling him towards the door. He just looked at her, and I felt his presence, his personality, for lack of a better word, like something almost touchable. She dropped to the floor, gripping his hand, rubbing her cheek against it. "I meant no offense, Micah."

The look on his face was cold. His power, his force began to trickle through the room again.

"Nimir-Raj," Merle said, "if you are going, then you must go. If you are not going..." His voice was careful, almost gentle, a pitying tone of voice, and I didn't understand why.

Micah growled at Merle, I think. Then his voice came out normal, human. "I know my duty as Nimir-Raj, Merle."

"I would never presume to tell you the duties of a Nimir-Raj, Micah," he said.

Micah suddenly looked tired again, all that energy draining away. He helped Gina to her feet, though it looked awkward since she was more than a head taller. "Let's go."

They all turned towards the door. "I hope your leopard is alright," I said.

Micah glanced back. "Would Nathaniel be, if he'd called for help?"

I shook my head. "No."

He nodded and turned back for the door. "Mine either." He hesitated and said without turning around, "I'll take Noah and Gina with me, but if it's alright I'll leave Merle and Caleb here?"

"Won't you need them with you?"

He looked back, smiling. "I just need to pick up Violet. I don't need muscle for that, and you might want some extra muscle."

"You mean in case Jacob's people get pesky?"

His smile widened. "Pesky, yeah, in case they get pesky."

Then they were gone into the other room, and I was left alone at the table. Lillian came back in, her eyes narrowed.

"What?" I asked.

She just shook her head. "None of my business."

"That's right," I said.

"But if it were ..."

"But it's not," I said.

She smiled. "But if it were, I'd say two things."

"You're going to say them anyway, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said.

I waved her to go ahead.

"First, it's nice to see you letting yourself follow your heart with someone new. Second, you don't know this man very well. Be careful who you give your heart to, Anita."

"I haven't given anyone my heart, yet."

"Not yet," she said.

I frowned at her. "You do realize that you've told me to follow my heart and not to follow my heart."

She nodded.

"Those are contradictory bits of advice," I said.

"I'm aware of that."

"Then which piece of advice do you want me to follow?"

"Both, of course."

I shook my head. "Let's go save Gregory and worry about my ever-sordid love life later."

"I can't promise that we'll save Gregory, Anita."

I held up a hand. "I remember the odds, doc." I followed her out and into the darkened living room and tried to believe, really believe, in miracles.

Chapter 29

WE DECIDED TO do it on the deck out back. My deck backed to a couple of acres of mature woodland. No neighbors. No one to see us. The deck was also twice the size of the kitchen, which was the only part of the house without carpeting. Once a shapeshifter changed on carpet it was either steam clean it yourself, or hire it done. I was not the one who suggested that Gregory would ruin the carpet; it was actually Nathaniel. He was, after all, the person most likely to be vacuuming between housekeeper visits. I wasn't even sure I knew where the vacuum was.

Gregory was curled in the center of the deck, his head in his brother's lap, his arms wrapped around the other man's naked waist. Only the curling yellow hair, paled by moonlight, covered Stephen's upper body. He'd stripped to the waist in preparation for the change. He was going to go out into the woods with his brother. This presupposed that Gregory would survive the change. We had a fifty-fifty chance, not bad odds, if all you were about to lose was money, but when it was someone's life, fifty-fifty just didn't sound that good.

Stephen looked up at me. His cornflower blue eyes were silvered with moonlight. He looked pale and ethereal. His face was raw with emotion; his eyes held an intelligence and a demand that Stephen didn't often show. He was submissive, fragile in every walk of his life, but in that moment he laid a demand on me with his eyes, his face, the pain that showed in the set of his shoulders, the fierce way he touched his brother, who was still huddled in his lap, just a fall of long pale curls and paler skin. Gregory was naked in the hot summer night, and until that moment I hadn't noticed. The nudity didn't make me think of sex, it made me think how terribly vulnerable he was.

Stephen looked up at me and asked with every line of his body, the desperation in his eyes, what he was too submissive to say out loud. I didn't need to be telepathic to know what he wanted. Save him, save my brother, he screamed at me from his eyes. To say it out loud would have been redundant.

Vivian, who was as fragile as Stephen, as submissive, said it out loud anyway. "Please, try and call his beast, at least try before they use the drugs."

I looked at her, and there must have been something in my face that frightened her, because she dropped to her knees and crawled towards me. It wasn't that graceful stalk that the leopards could do. It was like a human crawling, awkward, slow, head down, eyes rolled up. She was displaying the leopard version of submissive behavior, and I hated it. Hated her feeling the

need, like I as some ogre that needed placating, but I let her do it. Richard had shown me what happened in a were-group when the dominant refused to be dominant.

She leaned against my legs, pushing her body against me, head down. Normally, leopards would roll around my legs like huge cats, but tonight Vivian just pressed against my legs more like a frightened dog than a luxuriating cat. I leaned over to touch her hair and heard her murmuring under her breath, so soft, "Please, please, please." You would have had to be colder than even I was to ignore that soft pleading.

"It's okay, Vivian, I'll try."

Rubbing her cheek along my jeans as she raised her head, her eyes rolled up to me, again like a frightened dog. Vivian had always been timid around me, but I'd never seen this level of fear before. I didn't think it was Gregory's torture that had made the difference. I think it was the fact that I'd shot Elizabeth full of holes. Yeah, that probably did it. And I couldn't undermine the lesson by reassuring Vivian now that I wouldn't shoot her. Merle and Caleb were listening, and if we were really going to combine our pards, being feared was not a bad way for me to start.

I looked across the deck and found Merle watching me. He was still fully dressed, jeans, boots, jean jacket over bare chest, the scar showing like a flash of moonlit lightning across his stomach. We stared at each other, and the force in his gaze, the physical potential that shimmered around him, made the hair on the back of my neck crawl. I'd spent years around dangerous men, and dangerous monsters; Merle was both. If I could make him truly afraid of me, that would be a good thing.

Caleb on the other hand had started stripping off his clothes when everyone else did, and only my protest, backed by Merle, had kept his pants on. He walked barefoot, moonlight catching in the rings in his nipple and the edge of his belly button. He had to look directly at me for the ring in his eyebrow to spark. He was circling Cherry, who had never dressed after helping Gregory in his bath. She stood tall and comfortably nude, ignoring him.

The fact that he was paying attention to her nudity was a breach of protocol among the shapeshifters. You only noticed nudity if you'd been invited to have sex. Short of that, you pretended everyone was as neuter as a Barbie doll.

Zane stepped between Cherry and the circling Caleb, giving a low growl. Caleb laughed and backed off. I did not need another pain in the ass in my pard, and that's what Caleb was.

Dr. Lillian was standing behind us holding a huge needle all ready to go. The two wererat bodyguards, Claudia and Igor, were behind her. They'd surprised me by putting on guns in the car on the way over. Guns weren't allowed in the lupanar, but they were bodyguards, and guns were a good thing for bodyguards. Claudia had a 10 millimeter Beretta tucked behind her back. The fact that she could carry a 10 mil anything said how much larger her hands were than mine. Igor had a shoulder rig with a Glock 9 mil. They were both good guns, and the two wererats handled them like they knew what they were

doing. Rafael had insisted that they stay just in case Jacob, or his allies, got some wild idea about a preemptive strike.

Claudia and Igor stood in typical bodyguard pose, hands clasped in front of them, one hand holding the opposite wrist. It's usually a guy thing to stand like that, or a jock thing, but bodyguards do it too. It's like they hold their own hands for reassurance.

Their faces were neutral. They were here to protect me, not Gregory. Didn't matter to them, or didn't seem to.

Nathaniel leaned against the railing, wearing a pair of shorts, his hair hanging like a dark curtain around his body, still wet from the bath. It took forever for his hair to dry naturally. His face was serene. It reflected an almost zen-like pleasantness, as if he trusted me to make everything alright. Of all their faces, his was the most unnerving. I was used to people being afraid of me, eventually, but soft adoration--that I was not used to.

I looked back down at Vivian, still pressed against my legs. There was fear in her eyes, but there was also hope.

I touched her face and managed a smile. "I'll do what I can."

She smiled, and it was radiant. She was always beautiful, but when she smiled like that there was a little girl peeking out, someone more joyous and more free than the Vivian I knew. I valued that little girl smile from her, because I saw it so rarely.

I walked the few feet to the two men. Stephen was still kneeling, his brother huddled against him. He watched me with cautious eyes. He was rubbing his hand on Gregory's bare back over and over in small circles, the way you stroke a sick child when they want some touch to let them know they're going to be alright. Looking into Stephen's eyes, I knew he didn't believe that. He didn't believe Gregory would be alright, and it terrified him.

I knelt beside them and was almost the same height as Stephen. I met that pale gaze, that demand, and said, "I'm going to try and heal him."

It was Caleb who said, "If Micah couldn't heal him, why do you think you can?"

I didn't even bother glancing back at him. "It doesn't hurt to try."

"You haven't seen your first full moon," Merle said. "You can't call flesh and heal him, not yet, maybe not ever. Calling flesh to heal is a rare talent."

I did look at Merle. "I'm not going to call flesh, I'm not even sure how that works."

"Then how will you heal him?" Merle asked.

"With the munin."

"How will a werewolf ghost help you heal a wereleopard?"

I shook my head. "I've healed the leopards before using the munin."

"You've healed Nathaniel," Cherry said, "twice, but no one else."

"If it works for one of you, it should work for all of you," I said.

Cherry was frowning.

"What's wrong?"

"You heal with Raina, everything was sex with her, and you want Nathaniel in that way. You've never been attracted to Gregory."

I shrugged. She was pretty much voicing the same doubts that I had, but hearing them out loud made them sound worse. I felt more doubtful that I could do it and more slutty because I needed sexual attraction to heal. But I was getting over the slutty feeling. If I could save both Gregory's hearing and his life, a little embarrassment wasn't too high a price to pay.

I looked down at Gregory, still huddled in a tight fetal ball around Stephen's lap and waist. He held on as if his brother were the last solid thing in the universe, as if, if he let go he'd swirl away and be lost.

I touched his hair, lightly, and he moved his face so that he could see me through a tangle of pale curls. I swept the curls away from his face. It was a gesture you used for a child. I'd hated Gregory once because of some things he'd done when Raina and Gabriel were still alive. But the moment they were dead and he knew he had a choice, he'd stopped doing most of them. Had he made me Nimir-Ra on purpose? Staring into his wide blue eyes I didn't believe that. It wasn't naivete, it was a surety that Gregory just wasn't that dominant. To decide, even in a split second, to change the status quo that profoundly was just beyond him. He'd debate, or ask advice, or ask permission, but he wouldn't make a unilateral decision without some feedback. I knew this about Gregory. Richard didn't.

I touched his face, cupping it, raising it so he'd meet my eyes without having to do that eye roll that unnerved me. Just too subservient for my taste. I stared into that beautiful face, let my gaze glide over the fall of curls, the line of his back, the curl of his hip, but I felt nothing. I could appreciate his beauty, but I tried very hard to think of my leopards as neuter. You can be someone's friend and have sex with them. The trick is you have to want their emotional and physical well-being more than you want to fuck them. If you cross that line and want sex more than their happiness, then you aren't their friend. Their lover maybe, but not their friend.

But it was more than that. Cherry was right, Gregory had never moved me in that way. I sighed and moved my hand back from him. "What's wrong?" Stephen asked.

"He's pretty to look at, but ..."

Stephen almost smiled. "But you need more than just a pretty face to lust after."

I shrugged. "Sometimes my life would be simpler if I didn't, but yeah."

"I remember I had to talk you through the first time you healed Nathaniel," he said, voice soft.

I nodded. "I remember too."

Gregory sat up, watching us both, trying to read our lips, I think. There was something frantic about the way he tried to decipher what we were saying. God, please let me help him. He was so scared.

"I think of him more like a child, no offense."

"You think more like a parent than a seducer; that's a good thing," Stephen said. "Don't apologize for it."

Cherry joined us, kneeling on her heels, long body curved in graceful lines. "You called Raina in the lupanar without any lust, right?"

I nodded. "I can call Raina's munin, sometimes even if I don't want to, but she always demands a price before she leaves."

"You didn't seduce anyone at the lupanar tonight," she said.

"No, but I damn near started a fight by hitting Richard, and that was part Raina's doing. She enjoyed my loss of control, and ... and she was worried about the pack tonight. She doesn't like what Richard's done. I think she toned down her demands because of that."

"And she doesn't care about us like she does the wolves."

"No, she doesn't."

"What are you afraid of?" Stephen asked. "That you'll molest Gregory."

I shook my head. "No, I'm afraid Raina will."

"You healed Nathaniel in the woods and didn't do anything awful to him," Cherry said.

"No, but I had Richard and the pack there to balance me, to help me control her through the marks. Without extra help in that area, Raina's idea of payment can get a little messy."

"Define messy," Stephen said.

"Sex, violence--" I shrugged--"messy."

"You have the pard here now," Cherry said. "You can use us for balance."

Truth was, without Micah here I wasn't sure I could do that. Just as Richard was my door to the wolves, Micah was my door to the leopards. Or was he? I was treating this like I treated Richard and Jean-Claude, like I was the outsider and they were my ticket in. But what if I really was the leopard queen? If I really was Nimir-Ra, then I should be able to do this without Micah. I realized the moment I doubted that, I was still hoping I wasn't going to be furry next full moon. No matter how much evidence to the contrary, I still didn't believe it. Maybe I didn't want to believe it. But I wanted to heal Gregory, that I did want.

I looked at them all and knew Cherry was right. If I was Nimir-Ra, then I had all I needed to balance me. If I wasn't Nimir-Ra, then it wouldn't work. What did we have to lose? I looked at Stephen and Gregory, their mirror faces, their frightened eyes, and knew exactly what we had to lose if I didn't try.

I took the Uncle Mike's sidekick holster complete with Firestar out of the front of my jeans and looked around. If I was going to be calling on the leopards, I didn't want them having to worry about the gun. I motioned Claudia the wererat over. Since I was still kneeling, she towered over me, only two inches shorter than Dolph. I had to admit it was impressive, even more so because she was a woman.

I handed the holstered gun to her, and she took it. "Make sure no one gets shot with it."

She frowned down at me. "You think someone is going to try and get the gun?"

"Me, maybe."

The frown deepened. "I don't understand."

"Raina's amused by violence. I don't want to be carrying a gun when I call her munin."

Claudia's eyebrows raised. "You mean she'd try to get you to use it on some one?"

I nodded.

"She's tried before?"

I nodded again. "In Tennessee when I was practicing with the munin, yeah."

Claudia shook her head. "You didn't seem that worried at the lupanar."

"I can call her once and be okay, probably. But if I call her too often, too close together, it's like she grows--" I hesitated--"stronger, or maybe I just get tired of fighting."

"She was a bitch when she was alive," Claudia said.

"Being dead hasn't changed her much," I added.

The tall woman shivered. "I'm glad the wererats don't have anything like the munin. The thought of some entity inside me just creeps me out."

"Me too," I said.

She looked down at me, thoughtful now. "I'll keep the gun safe. Is there anything else Igor and I can do to help?"

I tried to think of something, but only one thing came to mind. "If the leopards can't control me, make sure I don't hurt anyone."

"How bad is this going to be?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Normally, I wouldn't be this worried, but last time I called her she didn't get her bit of flesh, or sex. Hitting Richard made her happy, but ..." I tried to explain. "I called her three times in a row for practice, without molesting or hurting anyone. My teacher, Marianne, and I both thought it was a sign that I was gaining control of Raina. Then the fourth time I called her, it was worse than it had ever been. You either pay as you go with Raina, or you end up owing her, and owing comes with interest, and the interest is hell to pay."

"Should you give me the knives, too, then?" Claudia asked.

She had a point, no pun intended. I took the wrist sheaths off, folded them up, and handed them to her.

"I thought you could control this shit." Caleb was standing just a little behind and to one side of Claudia. He was looking up at the tall woman as if wondering what she'd do if he tried to climb her. I almost wanted him to try, because I was pretty sure what would happen, and even more sure that I'd enjoy watching it. Caleb needed a good lesson from someone.

"I can."

"Then why all the precautions?"

I could have told him about the time in Tennessee when Raina's munin nearly started a riot among Verne's pack in a sort of game of rape tag, with me as the rapee, but I didn't. Instead, I said, "If you're not going to be helpful, stand over to the side and shut the fuck up."

He opened his mouth as if to protest, but Merle said, "Caleb, do what she says." His voice was quiet, a deep rumble of sound, but that mild tone seemed to work on Caleb like a charm.

"Sure, Merle, anything you say." He went to stand over to one side, near Dr. Lillian and Igor.

I glanced at Merle. "Thanks," I said.

He just bowed his head at me.

Dr. Lillian said, "I take this to mean that you want me to wait on the injection."

I nodded. "Yeah."

She turned and walked back through the sliding glass doors, into the darkened house. Everyone else stayed where they were, looking at me. Even Caleb, sulking by the railing with his arms crossed, was still watching the show.

I slipped my shirt off and felt rather than saw all my people react, like wind through a wheat field, involuntary. I never undressed in front of people unless I absolutely had to. The black bra I was wearing covered more than most swim suits, but there's something about letting people see you in your underwear that just makes all us good little girls squirm.

"Black lace, I like it," Caleb said.

I started to say something, but Merle beat me to it. "Shut up, Caleb, and don't make me tell you again."

Caleb settled back against the rail, arms hugging himself, face crinkled into a sulk that made him look even younger than he was.

"Go on," Merle said, "he won't interrupt again."

I looked at him. It was bad that he kept interfering. It undermined my authority, but since I wasn't entirely sure I had any authority over Caleb, it was okay, I guess. But it bugged me. I just wasn't sure what to do about it.

"I appreciate the help, but if our pards really do merge, then Caleb is going to have to learn to respect me, not you."

"You don't want my help?" He made it a question.

"Priority tonight is Gregory, but Caleb and I are going to have to come to an understanding."

"Are you going to shoot him too?"

I tried to read Merle's face and failed. A sort of blank hostility was all that showed. "You think I'll have to?"

Merle gave a very small smile. "Maybe."

It made me smile, a little. "Great, just what I need, another discipline problem in my pard."

His smile vanished like a hand had wiped it away. "We're not your cats, Anita, not yet."

I shrugged. "Whatever you say."

"We are not yours," he said.

I watched his face and saw something cross it in the moonlight. Maybe if I'd had better light I could have deciphered it. "Why does the thought of me being in charge bother you so much?"

He shook his head. "It's not you being in charge that bothers me."

"Then what is it?"

He shook his head again. "What bothers me is you trying to be in charge and failing--failing really, really badly."

"I do my best, Merle, that's all I can do."

He nodded. "I believe you, but I've seen a lot of people try their best and still not make it."

I shrugged and let it go. "Be pessimistic on your own time, Merle, we need a little hope here, not negativity."

"I'll just shut up then," he said, which implied that if he couldn't be negative he had nothing to say. Fine by me.

I turned back to Gregory and his wide, frightened eyes. I touched his face gently, trying to ease some of that fear, but he flinched ever so slightly when I touched him. You get enough abuse in your life, and you begin to think that every offered hand is a blow waiting to strike.

"It'll be alright, Gregory," I said. Since he couldn't hear me, I must have been saying it to reassure myself. It didn't seem to do a damn thing for Gregory.

I tried to see Gregory as a lust object, and I failed. I ran my hands over the smooth skin of his back, I grabbed a handful of those yellow curls, looked into those lovely eyes, but all I could feel was pity. All I could feel was protective towards him and how much I wanted to keep him safe. He was totally nude, sitting in front of me, and he was lovely. There was nothing wrong with the way he looked, except that I didn't see Gregory in that way. Trust me to find a way to make virtue a problem.

I turned to Stephen, who was still kneeling beside us. "I'm sorry, he's beautiful, but I want to hold him, keep him safe, not have sex with him, and protective instincts are not going to get Raina to come out."

Cherry said, "You simply called Raina at the lupanar. Why is this different?"

I looked up at her, standing nude and comfortable against the deck railing. Zane was next to her, clothed, and just as comfortable.

"I can call Raina, but I can't guarantee she'll help me heal Gregory. The healing usually comes with lust, not without."

"Call her," Stephen said. "Once she's here maybe the rest will come."

"You mean call her munin, then get her in the mood, not me."

He looked very solemn, but he nodded.

"You know what her idea of sex is, Stephen."

He nodded again. "Trust me," he said.

Strangely, I did. He wasn't dominant, in fact was very often a victim, but Stephen did what he said he'd do, at almost any cost. There was a desperate stubbornness in him, no matter how often you knocked him down.

"I'll call the munin."

"And I'll make sure that Raina sees Gregory the way she needs to see him."

We looked at each other and had one of those moments of near perfect understanding. Stephen would do anything to save his brother, and I would almost anything to help him do that.

Chapter 30

I SAT BACK on my heels in front of Gregory, and I opened myself to the munitin, dropped that barrier that kept Raina out, and she spilled up through me like warm water filling a pipe, up, up, riding on a wave of eagerness that she hadn't had at the lupanar. A thrill of fear went through me. I knew it was a bad sign, but I didn't fight her. I let her come, let her fill me up, let her laugh bubble from my throat.

When she looked at Gregory, she had no trouble seeing him as a sexual object, but then Raina saw almost everyone as a sexual object, so no big surprise.

I touched his face, caressed the line of his jaw. Gregory's eyes widened. I realized in that moment that he might not know what the hell we were doing, or what had changed. I could call Raina and think rationally. I'd fought long and hard to be able to do that. I could be distant while my hand glided down Gregory's bare chest. I could stop my hand--our hand--at his slender waist, and Raina couldn't force me lower. She snarled in my head, giving me a visual of her in wolf shape, snapping at me. But it was just a visual, like a dream; it couldn't hurt me, or anyone.

Raina spoke in my head. "This wolf still has teeth, Anita."

"You know the rules," I said.

"What?" Stephen asked.

I shook my head. "I'm talking to Raina."

"That is just creepy," Zane said.

I agreed with him, wholeheartedly, but Raina was already talking in my head, and I couldn't answer him. "I know the rules, Anita, do you?"

"Yeah."

"I do whatever I please ..."

"And I try to stop you," I finished for her.

"Like old times," the voice in my head said.

It did sound like the relationship we'd had when she was alive. She wanted to kiss Gregory, and I didn't fight it. The kiss was openmouthed, but soft, nothing that would scare me too badly. In her own way Raina was learning how to work me, too.

I'd never kissed Gregory before, never wanted to. I still didn't want to. Kissing, in some ways, is more intimate than intercourse, more special. I pulled away from his lips, and Raina was just as happy to kiss the side of his neck. His skin was warm and smelled like soap. I buried my face under his hair at the back of his ear and found the hair still damp, smelling of my shampoo.

I tried to call healing from Raina, but she fought me. "No, not until after my reward."

I actually had leaned back from Gregory, and must have said it out loud, because Stephen asked, "What reward?"

I shook my head. "Raina won't heal him until after she's been ... fed." It was a type of feeding; in her own way Raina was like the *ardeur*, except she only needed feeding when I called her--her craving, not mine.

"What do you want?" I asked it out loud, because I still wasn't comfortable with having silent conversations in my head.

She gave me a visual of kissing down his chest, of forcing him onto his back on the deck, and the next thing I remembered clearly was laying a gentle kiss beside Gregory's belly button. He was lying on his back, watching me with unfocused eyes. I was lying across his body, pinning his legs, my nearly naked chest pressed over his groin. I didn't remember getting there. Shit.

I rolled off of him, and Raina came like heat, racing through my body, drawing my mouth down to his hip, licking along that small hollow just where the waist meets groin. Gregory writhed under the stroke of my mouth, and as much as I'd tried to ignore it, drew our gaze to his groin.

He was hard, ready, but the sight of him pushed Raina back, left me in control, not because it was embarrassing, but because I had never seen Gregory erect before. He was still lovely to look at, but he was an odd shape, almost hooked at the end. I didn't know that men could be made that way, and it stopped me cold.

Raina screamed in my head, roared over me in a rush of body memory. The memory was of being on all fours with a man riding me from behind, riding Raina. I couldn't see who it was; all I could do was feel. They'd found that spot in a woman's body, and the rush of orgasm was close. Raina threw her-- our--head back, a rush of auburn hair flinging free of our face, and I saw Gregory's reflection in the room's mirror.

Raina whispered in my head, "It's always like that with him from behind, because of his shape."

I tore free of the memory and found myself on all fours beside Gregory, one hand on his body. I fell back from him, because the shared memories didn't work without body contact.

I turned my face away so I wouldn't see him nude and ready, because I could still feel the memory of him inside my body, Raina's body. A hand touched my bare arm, and the rush of memories this time was overwhelming. I was there.

He filled my mouth, my throat, came inside my mouth in a spill of thick heat, and with his body trembling, thrashing, teeth tore into thick, tender flesh, and we ate him. Blood poured upwards, and Raina bathed in it.

I fought free of it, screaming, shrieking, and someone else was screaming. It was Gregory. For one awful second I opened my eyes, because the memory was so strong I couldn't tell the difference between it and reality. But when I could see again, he was whole, crawling away from me, from the shared memory. Because that was one of Raina's gifts, the ability to share the horror.

I could still feel the thickness of meat in my mouth, taste blood and thicker things. I crawled to the railing, pulled myself up and lost everything I'd eaten that day.

Someone came up behind me, and I put out a hand, head still dangling over the dark edge of the deck. "Don't touch me."

"Anita, it's Merle. Nathaniel said that no one was to touch you that had ever shared a ..." he hesitated, "moment with the old lupa. I didn't know her. She can't hurt you through me."

I held my head in my hands. It felt like it was going to split apart. "He's right."

His grip on my shoulders was as hesitant as his words. I pushed away from the railing and the world swam. Merle caught me, held me against his chest. "It's alright."

"I can still taste meat and blood and ... oh, God! God!" I screamed it, and it didn't help, not for this. Merle held me against his chest, tight, my hands pinned to my sides, as if I'd tried to hurt myself. I didn't think I had, but I didn't know anymore. Months of practice, and Raina could still do this to me.

I screamed wordlessly over and over again, as if I could scream the memory out of me. Every time I drew breath I could hear Merle whispering, "It's alright, it's alright, Anita, it's alright."

But it wasn't alright. What Raina had just shown me would never be alright. Merle carried me into the bathroom, and I didn't protest. Caleb wet a cloth and put it on my forehead without a word of teasing. A small miracle, but not the one we needed.

Chapter 31

RAINA HAD GONE, fled laughing, pleased with herself. God, I hated that woman. I'd already killed her; it wasn't like I could do anything else to her, but I wanted to. I wanted her to hurt like she'd hurt so many others, but I guess it was a little late for that.

Dr. Lillian was shining a tiny light in my eyes and trying to get me to follow her fingers. I wasn't doing a good enough job apparently, because she wasn't happy. "You are in shock, Anita, and so is Gregory. He was a little shocky before you began, but damn it."

I blinked and tried to focus on her. My eyes just couldn't settle on anything, as if the world were trembling, but that made no sense. Maybe I was the one that was trembling? I couldn't tell. I clutched the cover they'd put around me, huddling on my white couch amid the multicolored pillows, and couldn't get warm. "What are you saying, doc?"

"I'm saying that Gregory's chances are worse than fifty-fifty now."

I blinked and fought to look at her, meet her eyes, to think. "How bad?"
"Seventy-thirty, maybe. He's curled on the deck in a blanket, shivering worse than you are."

I shook my head, and couldn't seem to stop. I closed my eyes, forced myself to be still for a second, a heartbeat. I spoke without opening my eyes. "I saw ... how did Gregory heal ..." I stopped, tried again. "How did he survive ... what she did to him?"

"We can regrow any body part short of decapitation, unless fire is added to the wound to close it. We can't heal burns, unless the burned flesh is completely removed, in effect making a new wound." Her voice was bitter, fierce. I'd never heard her so angry.

I looked up at her. "What's wrong with you?"

Lillian looked down, wouldn't meet my eyes. "I was the doctor on call the night she did that to Gregory. I saw the reality, not just a memory."

I shook my head, and had to bury my chin on my knees to stop the movement. "It isn't a memory with the munin, doc, it's real. It's like ... it's like a live-action movie, but with me in the movie." I hugged my knees and tried desperately not to think, not to revisit what I'd experienced. I was actually having some luck being absolutely blank. Even my mind had finally found something so terrible it couldn't cope with it. In a bizarre way, it was comforting. I'd finally found a line that I could not cross.

"If I try to force Gregory into animal form now, it'll probably kill him," Dr. Lillian said.

I buried my face into my knees, hiding. I spoke with my mouth buried against the thick covers. "I can't try again."

"No one is asking you to call that bitch again."

"Anita." It was Nathaniel.

It wasn't his voice that made me look up, it was the rich, bitter smell of coffee. I found him holding my baby penguin mug full of fresh coffee. It was very pale, lots of sugar, lots of cream; good for shock. Hell, good for everything.

He helped me rescue my hands from the blanket and wrap them around the mug. I held the mug tight, and it took several seconds to realize I was burning my hands. I didn't panic, just handed the mug back to Nathaniel. He took it, and I stared at my pink, red hands. I had first-degree burns, and I hadn't felt the heat until it was too late.

"Damn," I said, softly.

Lillian sighed. "I'll get some ice." She left us alone.

Nathaniel knelt in front of me, being careful not to spill the coffee. Merle and Cherry glided into the living room while I was still staring at my reddened hands. Cherry sat beside me on the couch. She was still nude, but it didn't matter. Nothing seemed to matter. Merle stayed standing, and I didn't even bother trying to look up at him. All I could see were the silver toes of his boots.

"Nathaniel said that you touched his beast when you marked his back," Cherry said.

I blinked at her, meeting her pale eyes. I nodded. I remembered a shining moment, after I'd marked his back actually, where I'd felt his beast roiling under the touch of my power, and I'd been sure I could call that part of him, make him shapeshift for me. I was still nodding, and made myself stop, saying, "I remember."

Lillian came back out and applied bags of ice wrapped in a small towel to my hands. "Try not to hurt yourself for a few minutes. I'm going back to check on Gregory." She left me with the three leopards and my ice.

"If you touched Nathaniel's beast, there's a chance you could call Gregory's now."

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

Cherry gripped my arm. "Don't fall apart on us now, Anita, Gregory needs you."

The first flare of anger pushed through the shock. "I have done my fucking best for him tonight."

She dropped her hand away from my arm, but didn't look away. "Anita, please, Merle thinks you may be strong enough to call Gregory's beast, even before your first full moon."

I clutched the towel-covered ice to my chest. The sudden cold across my nearly naked chest helped clear my head. "I thought that wasn't possible before I shifted for the first time."

"With you, Anita," Merle said, "I would be a fool to say what you can and can't do."

I let the ice fall on the coverlet in my lap and looked up at the big man. "Why the change of heart? I failed Gregory out there on the deck."

"You risked yourself for one of your cats. It is the very best a Nimir-Ra, or -Raj, has in them, to take great risks for their people."

I touched the towel, found one corner wet, and knew the plastic bag hadn't sealed completely. I moved the bag rightside up so it wouldn't spill anymore. "What do you want from me?" My voice sounded as tired as I felt.

Merle knelt in front of me, and I met his eyes. There was a look in them that I didn't want right now. He seemed to trust me, and I didn't feel trustworthy. I felt scared.

"Call Gregory's beast."

"I don't know how. When I was with Nathaniel, it was ..." I sighed.

"It was sexual," Cherry finished for me.

I nodded. "I am not trying for that kind of mood with Gregory again tonight. I don't think either he, or I, could handle it if it went wrong again."

"Calling the beast doesn't have to be sexual," Merle said.

I met his strangely trusting gaze. I was beyond tired. I just didn't have anything left tonight, not for Gregory. I did not want to touch him again tonight. Part of me was afraid that Raina would make an unplanned appearance, though I knew that was almost impossible for her now. I did have better control than that. But ... "How can I ever touch Gregory again and not remember that?"

"I don't know," Cherry said, "but please, Anita, please help him."

"How do I call his beast without getting in the mood?" I asked.

"You need to talk to someone who can call the beast from their people," Merle said.

I looked at him. "You got someone in mind?"

"I am told your Ulfric can call the beast from his wolves."

I nodded. "So I hear."

"If he called a wolf into form, while you watched, then he might be able to show you how to do it."

"You really think it will work?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said, "but isn't it worth trying?"

I handed him the leaking bag of ice. "Sure, if Richard will come."

Nathaniel answered that one. "Richard blames himself for Gregory's injuries. If we offer him a chance to heal him, he'll come."

I stared at Nathaniel, watched the intelligence in those flower-colored eyes. It was one of the most insightful things I'd ever heard him say. It gave me just a little hope, that indeed Nathaniel could be made whole--that he was getting better. I needed some hope just then, but it was still unnerving for Nathaniel to know Richard so well, to be that observant. It meant that I'd underestimated Nathaniel. I kept equating submissiveness with being inferior, and that wasn't really the case. Some people choose to be bottoms, to serve; it doesn't make them less, just different. I looked into his face and wondered what else I'd missed, or what else he'd show me? It was a night for revelations, so why the hell not have Richard join us? How much worse could it get? Please, no one answer that.

Chapter 32

I BRUSHED MY teeth and sat at the kitchen table in the dark, drinking coffee while we waited. Nathaniel padded barefoot into the room, his hair swinging loose around his bare chest and the jean shorts he'd put on.

"How's Gregory?" I asked.

"Dr. Lillian put an IV in him, to help with the shock, she said." He stopped beside the table, not quite in front of me.

"An IV. Richard will be here within an hour or less. If she put an IV in then ..." I let my voice trail off.

Nathaniel finished for me. "Gregory's very hurt."

I looked up at him in the darkened kitchen. The only light was the small one over the sink. It left most of the room in thick shadows. "You don't mean the injuries he got from the wolves, do you?"

He shook his head, all that hair sliding around his body. A long heavy strand slid over one shoulder, and he tossed his head to flip it back behind him.

I'd never been around a man that had such long hair, who was so comfortable with it.

"He kept talking about Raina," Nathaniel said, "kept swearing under his breath." His voice had dropped low, almost a whisper. He was staring over my head at things I couldn't see, and probably didn't want to.

I touched his arm. "You alright?"

He looked down at me, smiled, but not like he was happy. He moved his hand so he was holding mine. His grip was tight like he needed the comfort.

"Talk to me, Nathaniel."

"I gave you copies of three of my movies." He smiled, wide this time, before I could say anything. "I know you've never watched them. When I gave them to you, I still thought you were like Gabriel and Raina, that it had to be sex, that you would like that they were porn. I understand now that you'll take care of us no matter what, not because you lust after us or because you love one of us, but just--because." He went to his knees, still holding my hand, pressing it against his chest with both his own. He laid his head on my lap, his face turned away from me. I moved a thick line of hair away from his face, so I could see his profile as he leaned against me.

We sat there for a few moments, me waiting for him to continue, him maybe waiting for me to prompt him, but the silence wasn't strained. One of us would fill it when we were ready, and we both knew that. He was the one who sighed, keeping one hand on my hand, pressed to him, his other hand curling around my leg. I could feel the beat of his heart against the back of my hand.

"I did more movies than just those three. Most of them with Raina. Gabriel wouldn't let her have me as a lover, or a slave. I think he knew she'd kill me, but on film where things could be controlled ..." He hugged his body against mine, clinging.

"What happened?" I said, softly.

"She did that to Gregory on her own, as a kind of ... fun. But when he survived it, she wanted to do a version of it on film."

I went very still for a second or two. I think I stopped breathing, because when my breath finally did come out, it shook. "You?" I made it a question.

He nodded his head, cheek still pressed to my thigh. "Me."

I stroked his hair, stared down into that young face. He was six years younger than me, almost seven, but it seemed like there should have been decades between us. He was so much a victim, so much anyone's meat.

"Gregory wouldn't do it again, said he'd kill himself first, and Gabriel must have believed him."

I kept petting his hair because I didn't know what else to do. What do you say while someone whispers horrors in your ear, tells you their most intimate, nightmarish secrets? You sit and you listen. And you give them the only thing you can--the silence and the safety to talk and to be heard.

His voice dropped soft, softer, until I had to lean my face over his to hear turn. "They chained me down, and I knew the script. I knew what was about to happen, and I was excited. The fear made the anticipation almost unbearable."

I laid my cheek against his, felt his mouth move as he spoke, and I kept very, very quiet. I had nothing to offer but my silence, and my touch.

He whispered, "I like teeth, biting, I like a lot of damage. It was wonderful until ..." He closed his eyes, turned his face into my jeans, as if even now he couldn't look at the memory. I had lifted my head up when he moved, but laid a gentle kiss on the back of his head. "It's okay, Nathaniel, it's okay."

He said something, but I couldn't understand it.

"What?"

He moved his head just enough so that his mouth wasn't buried against my leg. "God, it hurt. She took it in pieces, wanted it to last longer than it had with Gregory."

His whole body gave one great shiver, and I leaned over him, my free hand across his back, smoothing the hair away so I could reach his skin. I stroked over his back, and found all the little bite marks I'd left in his skin. I hadn't felt bad for marking him, until now. Now I felt like I'd used him like everyone else had.

I curled my body over his, hugging him into my lap, holding him as close as I could. "I am sorry, Nathaniel, so sorry."

"You don't have anything to be sorry about, Anita. You've never hurt me."

"Yes, I have."

He raised up enough to meet my eyes. He looked so young, eyes wide. "I love that you've marked me, don't be sorry about that." He gave a small smile. "If you start feeling guilty about it, you won't do it again, and I want you to, I want that very much."

"If I feed on you, Nathaniel, for the *ardeur*, or the flesh, or whatever, I'm using you. I don't use people."

He held my hand so tight that it almost hurt. "Don't do this to me."

"Do what?"

"Don't punish me for telling you about how Raina hurt me."

"I'm not punishing you."

"I tell you this horrible thing, and you start feeling protective of me, and guilty. I know you, Anita, you'll let your head get in the way of what we both need."

"And what exactly is that?" And even I could hear the impatience, almost anger, in my voice.

He raised up farther, bringing his face close to mine, because I'd sat up, distancing myself from him. "You need to feed the *ardeur*, and I need to have a place to belong."

"You are welcome in my house as long as you need it, Nathaniel."

He shook his head, pushing the hair back impatiently, letting go of my hand, putting his hands on my knees, half-crawling under the table so that he was kneeling between my legs, though only his hands touched the tops of my knees. He stared up at me. "No, you tolerate me. I do some housework, errands, but I don't belong. You don't go through your day thinking about me. I'm here, but I'm not part of your life, I know that. If I am your *pomme de sang*, then I will be. I'll finally belong to you in a way that both of us can live with."

I shook my head. "No, Nathaniel, no."

He grabbed the legs of the chair and picked the entire thing up with me on it from a kneeling position and moved it backwards with a bump, so he could fit under the table better. He hadn't even strained when he did it. He put his hands on the chair arms, slid his lower body against the chair, putting my knees on either side of his hips.

"And who else are you going to feed off of every day? Richard? Jean-Claude? Micah?"

"The *ardeur* may be temporary," I said.

He put a hand on either side of my waist. "If it's temporary, then feed on me until it goes away. If it's permanent ..."

"I don't want to feed on anyone."

His hands slid around my waist, his head going to my lap, and I realized he was crying. "Please, don't do this, Anita, please don't do this."

I stroked his hair, his face, and didn't know what to say. What was I going to do if the *ardeur* was permanent? Richard didn't let anyone feed off of him for any reason--same rule I had. Jean-Claude would be literally dead to the world when I most needed to feed. Micah was still a question mark. But in some ways, feeding off of Nathaniel because he was the only one that would let me, was almost worse.

I lifted his face from my lap, a hand on either side. Tears glittered on his cheeks in the faint light. I kissed his forehead, kissed his closed eyes, the way you would a child's.

"Did I get here just in time, or am I interrupting?" It was Richard standing in the doorway. Perfect fucking timing, as always.

Chapter 33

I FROZE WITH Nathaniel's face cradled in my hands, him kneeling between my legs with the table hiding most of him, having just risen from kissing him, and knew how it looked. I wasn't sure I could explain it to Richard's satisfaction. To my knowledge Richard didn't know about the *ardeur* yet, and right then I didn't want to tell him.

I laid another gentle kiss on Nathaniel's forehead and leaned back. I wasn't going to act like I'd done something wrong when I hadn't. Nathaniel took his cue from me, laying his head back in my lap, which I realized meant he was invisible from the doorway, the table hiding what he was doing.

Richard strode into the kitchen like an angry wind, his power biting along my skin. He came to stand where he could see that Nathaniel had his cheek against my thigh, gazing up at the larger man, as he towered over both of us.

Jamil and Shang-Da were hanging back by the doorway. They were good bodyguards, but some things bodyguards can't keep you safe from.

I felt my face go neutral, empty, vaguely pleasant. "I was comforting one of my leopards, something wrong with that?"

"He looks very comfortable," Richard said, voice mild enough, but his power was hot, like opening the door to an oven.

I licked my lips. I was going to have to explain the *ardeur*, sooner or later, and since I wanted him to help us save Gregory, tonight was probably the right time. "Nathaniel and I were discussing some side effects of marrying the vampire marks."

"You mean the *ardeur*," he said.

I was surprised and let it show. "Who told you?"

"Jean-Claude thought I should know. He encouraged me to come over and be here for you in the morning."

"And you said?" I kept my voice as neutral as I could, but not as neutral as I wanted it to be.

"I don't let him, or Asher, or any of them, feed off of me, blood or anything else. I don't see why I should change that rule just because it's you and it's sex instead of blood."

"Did he explain that if I don't feed off of you, or him, I still have to feed off of someone?"

"There's always your Nimir-Raj." The contempt in his voice was thick enough to walk on.

"Micah's been called away on pard business."

"You really think he won't be back before morning so you can fuck him? I do."

I stared up at him, still sitting in the face of his burning power and the sheer physical presence of him. Richard was one of those big men who never seemed big unless he was angry. He seemed big now, and I wasn't impressed.

I started petting Nathaniel's hair, and he snuggled in against my legs, letting the tension ease out of his body. "You dumped me, remember?"

"And did you fuck him for the first time before or after you found out I'd dumped you?"

I had to think about that for a second or two. "After," I said.

"You mourned my loss for, what, half a second?"

I felt heat crawl up my face. I was out of moral high ground, and explaining that it was the *ardeur* just wasn't good enough for Richard.

"It took all three of us to get into this mess, don't make it worse."

"Don't you mean four of us, or is it five now?"

I must have looked as blank as I felt. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He grabbed the table and shoved it backwards with a scream of wood on wood. Nathaniel stayed curled around my legs and just looked up at him. I'd never gotten my gun back from the wererats. I had gotten my knives back, but I wasn't really willing to cut Richard up, not yet, not for this. I couldn't arm wrestle Richard, not and win, so really my only option was to sit, look perfectly

calm, and tell him by my facial expression what a fucking asshole he was being.

He shoved the table again, making the wood scream, then he knelt beside Nathaniel and pushed his long hair back. He bared his back and stared at the bite marks.

"Is that all?" he asked, voice fierce, his power so high it was like treading in boiling water, up to my chin, and still rising.

"No," I said.

Richard gripped the back of Nathaniel's shorts and pulled, the movement so violent that Nathaniel's entire body moved with it. I heard the button from the top of the shorts bounce along the floor. Richard jerked down the shorts and stared at the bite marks, where they trailed ever lower.

Richard leaned over Nathaniel, not quite touching, but he was like some huge presence, and I felt Nathaniel cower against me.

Richard hissed into his ear, "Did she suck you off? She's good at that."

"That's enough, Richard."

Nathaniel answered, "No."

"You're so scared of me I can't tell if you're lying or not." He grabbed a handful of Nathaniel's hair and pulled him backwards, peeling him away from me. I had one of the wrist sheath knives in my hand and didn't remember drawing it. The point was pressed against the long line of Richard's throat, and even I was breathless at the speed of it. It must have been a blur of movement. It wasn't human speed.

Everything froze.

Shang-Da and Jamil moved into the room. I pressed the point deeper against Richard's neck. "Don't interfere, boys."

They stopped moving. I met Richard's gaze and found his eyes had gone wolf amber. "Let go of him, Richard." My voice was low, but it seemed to fill the room.

"You wouldn't kill me for this." His voice was low, careful, too.

"Kill, no, but bleed? Oh, yes."

"You need me to help you save Gregory."

I could feel his pulse beating against the tip of my knife. "I won't let you hurt Nathaniel to save Gregory."

His grip actually tightened on Nathaniel's hair, and I pressed the point in enough to draw the first crimson drop. "Would you be this upset if it wasn't Nathaniel?" he said.

"This is the only warning I will ever give you, Richard. Never touch one of my people again."

"Or what? You'll kill me? I don't think you'll do it."

I realized in that moment that if I wasn't willing to kill him, I had no threat. And I really wasn't willing to kill him, not over this, not yet.

I drew the blade back from his neck and watched him relax, the tension easing away from him, his hand still in Nathaniel's hair. I moved without thinking, and I was fast enough that the knife cut across his forearm before he could react. He jerked away, came to his feet, and took a step back, holding his

bleeding arm. The cut was deeper than I'd meant for it to be, because I'd rushed it. Blood dripped from between his fingers. Jamil and Shang-Da moved into the room.

I stood and drew Nathaniel with me, as he pulled up his shorts to cover himself. I put the French doors at our backs. "You are never to lay a hand in anger on my leopards, Richard, you or any of your wolves."

Jamil was helping Richard press a towel to the wound. Shang-Da had gone for Dr. Lillian. "It would serve you right if I just walked out and left you and your leopards to fend for yourselves."

"You'd leave Gregory to be permanently deaf, or dead, because we had a fight? He's in danger because you couldn't control your temper, or your wolves."

"It's my fault, right, all my fault."

I just looked at him, Nathaniel behind me, the bloody knife still in my hand.

Richard gave a laugh that sounded more out of pain than humor. "I've let everyone down tonight." He looked at me, and there was something fierce in his face that wasn't his beast but just sheer emotion. Anger, pain, so deep it was like anguish. "I'll help you save Gregory, because you're right, it is my fault. I'll take this," he raised the wounded arm, while Jamil still held it, "because you're right again, I had no right to touch one of your people. I wouldn't have let you abuse one of my wolves either."

Dr. Lillian came in, took one look and started scolding us for being children who couldn't play well together. "He's going to need stitches. Shame on you both."

Richard stared over her head as she cleaned the wound. I think he wasn't really glaring at me, he was glaring at Nathaniel. He was genuinely jealous. Jealous in a way that he shouldn't have been. What had Jean-Claude told him about the *ardeur* and about Nathaniel, and about what we'd all done together at the Circus? Jean-Claude wouldn't actually lie, but he might make things sound worse if it suited his purposes. But what purpose did it serve to make Richard jealous of Nathaniel? I would have to ask Jean-Claude about that. I had time to call while Richard got stitched up.

Chapter 34

JEAN-CLAUDE ADMITTED ONLY to telling the absolute truth. But, he added, if because of that Monsieur Zeeman was jealous of Nathaniel, this wasn't an altogether bad thing. "He will share you with me, because he must, and he will share you with Micah also, because he must, but we are both

alphas, dominants. To share you with someone like Nathaniel--that is different."

"You changed something about the story to make Nathaniel sound like more of a threat, didn't you?"

"No, *ma petite*, I merely told the truth without leaving anything out. He is not entirely happy with Jason either."

"Jean-Claude, you can't do this to Richard. You'll drive him mad."

"Mad enough, perhaps, to finally acknowledge that he cannot live without you, and that he must come to terms with our triumvirate."

"You Machiavellian shithead, you're playing with him."

"I am trying to maneuver him into doing what must be done if we are to survive. If that be Machiavellian, so be it."

"You are making things worse," I said.

"I don't believe so. I think, *ma petite*, that you still do not understand men. Many men will give up a woman if they are unhappy with her. But let another man try to claim her, and often, they find they still do want her."

"You and Micah aren't competition enough?" I asked.

"As I explained, we are his equals. Nathaniel is lesser, and that will prick his pride more."

"I didn't think Richard had that kind of destructive guy pride."

"I think there are many things you do not know about our Richard."

"And you do?"

"I am, after all, a man, *ma petite*. I believe I understand the male psyche a tiny bit better than you do."

I couldn't argue with that. "Well, give me a heads-up next time you plan to do any maneuvering. You could have gotten one of us killed."

He sighed. "I do keep underestimating the stubbornness of both of you. My apologies for that."

I leaned my forehead against the kitchen wall. "Jean-Claude ..."

"Yes, *ma petite*."

I closed my eyes. "Tell me exactly what you think Richard thinks about Nathaniel and me."

"I told him the absolute truth, *ma petite*, nothing more, and nothing less."

I turned around, put my back to the wall, looked out at the empty kitchen. Richard was in the downstairs bathroom getting stitched up. Nathaniel was with the other leopards. I'd given strict orders that he was not to be left alone. I just wasn't up to Richard and him actually having a fight. It would be too ... ridiculous, or pathetic.

"And what does that mean, that you told the truth, no more, no less?"

"You will not like it."

"I don't like it now, just tell me, Jean-Claude."

"I told him what had happened with the *ardeur*, and added my own belief the reason you so often find Nathaniel around when sex is in the air is that you find him sexually attractive."

"That did not make Richard come over here and start a fight."

"I do remember adding that you might find a less-demanding male refreshing after the two of us. Someone who did not make so many demands on you, someone who merely accepted you as you are."

"You do that," I said.

"So good of you to notice," he said. "But it is not I that has been living in your home for months, and from what I smell on Nathaniel when he comes into work, sharing your bed."

"Any of the wereleopards are welcome in the bedroom when they stay here. It's like a big pile of puppies--it's not sexual."

"If you say so." His voice was soft, mocking.

"Damn you, Jean-Claude, you know I don't see Nathaniel that way."

He sighed, and it was heavy. "I think it is not me that you lie to, *ma petite* but yourself."

"I am not in love with Nathaniel."

"Did I ever say you were?"

"Then what are you talking about?"

He made a small exasperated sound. "*Ma petite*, you still believe that you must love every man that you come to physically. It is not so. You can have very pleasant, even wondrous sex with a friend. It does not have to be love."

I was shaking my head, realized he couldn't see it, and said, "I don't do casual sex, Jean-Claude, you know that."

"Whatever you are doing with Nathaniel, *ma petite*, it is not casual."

"I can't use him as my *pomme de sang*. I can't."

"Your morals have reared their ugly heads, *ma petite*, do not let them make you foolish."

I opened my mouth to protest everything he'd said, but closed it and just thought about what he'd said for a few seconds. Did I find Nathaniel attractive? Well, yeah. But I found a lot of men attractive. That didn't mean I had to be intimate with them.

"*Ma petite*, I can hear you breathing. What are you thinking?"

What he said made me think a new thought. "When we first married the marks I could almost read your mind, unless you concentrated to keep me out. Now it's not like that. Maybe the *ardeur* will be temporary, too."

"Perhaps, we can but hope."

"If I have the *ardeur*, I'll have to have sex. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I would be a fool to deny that your enforced chastity is burdensome, but I would never willingly inflict the *ardeur* on anyone. It is a ... curse, *ma petite*. The blood lust that I feel can be sated. My body can only hold so much. But the *ardeur*, oh, *ma petite*, it is never truly satisfied. There is always that ache, that need. How could I wish that upon you? Though if our Monsieur Zeeman would cooperate, it might be the answer for the two of you to finally reach some permanent arrangement."

"What, move in together?"

"Perhaps." His voice was very careful when he said that one word.

"Richard and I can't be in a room for an hour without arguing, unless we are having sex. Somehow I don't think that makes for domestic bliss."

I felt the first emotion he'd let me feel over the phone--relief. He was relieved. "I want what is best for all of us, *ma petite*, but as things grow more complex, I am no longer certain what 'best' would be."

"Don't tell me your machinations didn't include some backup plan to cover every eventuality. You are the ultimate plotter, don't tell me you missed a trick."

"I watched Belle Morte fill your eyes with her fire. You are acquiring powers as if you were a Master Vampire, or a Master Lycanthrope. How could I have planned for any of this?"

There was a cold knot of fear in the center of my gut. "So you finally admit that you don't know what the hell is going on either."

"*Oui*, does that please you?" I heard the first stirrings of anger in his voice. "Are you happy now, *ma petite*? I am well and truly out of my depth. No one has ever tried to forge an alliance such as we have, an alliance not of master and two slaves, but of three equals. I do not think you appreciate how gentle I am when it comes to hoarding my power. The wolves are my animal to call. Many masters would have forced them to simply be an adjunct to their own vampires."

"Nikolaos's animal to call was rats, not wolves," I said. "By the time you took over as Master of the City, Marcus and Raina's pack was too strong for you to make them an adjunct to your power. Hell, until you replenished the vamps that I killed, they were probably more powerful than you and your vampires."

"Are you implying that the only reason I am not a tyrant is because I didn't have the strength of arms to make it so?"

I thought about that for a second, then said, "I'm not implying it, I'm saying it."

"You think so little of me?"

"I know what you were like two, almost three years ago, and I think then you would have consolidated your power base with very little regard for anyone that got in your way."

"Are you saying I am ruthless?"

"Practical," I said.

It was his turn to be quiet for a second or two, then, "Practical, yes, I am that, as are you, *ma petite*."

"I know what I am, Jean-Claude, it's you I'm not sure of."

"I would never willingly hurt you, *ma petite*."

"I believe you," I said.

"I am not sure the same can be said of you," he said, quietly.

"I don't want to hurt either of you. But Richard cannot harm my leopards, and if you do anything stupid, don't blame me for what happens next."

"I would never underestimate your level of ... practicality, *ma petite*, though I think Richard might."

"He told me I wouldn't kill him just for roughing up Nathaniel."

"How rough was Richard to little Nathaniel?"

"Don't talk about him like he's a child, Jean-Claude, and rough enough that I cut Richard's arm open."

"How badly?"

"The doc's stitching him up, even as we speak."

"Oh, dear," he said, and sighed, and this time the sound eased down my skin. I realized that he'd been behaving himself until now, at least about using his voice.

"No more games, Jean-Claude. I want to put Richard on the phone, and you tell him you did this on purpose."

"But I cannot tell him that I lied about Nathaniel, now can I?"

"You fix this, Jean-Claude, now, tonight. I need Richard to teach me how to call Gregory's beast. I don't have time for him to sulk."

"What am I to tell him, *ma petite*! What surety can I give him that you will not be in Nathaniel's arms tomorrow morning? I believe that I can maneuver Richard into staying the night, having him there at your side when the *ardeur* rises."

"Richard's already made his position clear, Jean-Claude. He doesn't let you, or Asher, or anyone, feed off of him. He doesn't see why the rules change just because it's me and sex, instead of blood."

"He said that?" Jean-Claude gave a questioning lilt to his voice.

"Yeah, he said that, almost word-for-word."

Jean-Claude sighed, and it sounded tired. "What am I to do with the two of you?"

"Don't ask me," I said, "I just work here."

"And what, exactly, does that mean, *ma petite*?"

"It means that we don't have a boss. It's great being equals, if that's what we are, but none of us knows what the hell is going on, and that isn't good, Jean-Claude. We are messing with some very serious stuff here, metaphysically and emotionally and just plain physically. We need some clue as to what we should be doing with all of it."

"And who should we be asking advice of, *ma petite*! If any vampire on the Council were to suspect that I have not given you both the fourth mark, they would destroy us, for fear that with the fourth mark we would become an even greater power."

"I've talked to Marianne and her friends. They're witches, Wiccan."

"So we find, what, a local coven, and ask their guidance?" He sounded patronizing.

"I resent the tone, Jean-Claude, especially since I don't hear you offering any better suggestions. Don't criticize unless you can do better."

"Very true, *ma petite*, and very wise. My deepest and most sincere apologies. You are quite right. I do not have a suggestion for whom we might turn to for advice, or guidance. I will think upon your suggestion to find a friendly witch to speak with."

"I have a friendly one to speak to. She just might need to see the three or us together to see how things work."

"You mean your Marianne?"

"Yeah."

"I thought she was more psychic than witch."

"There's not all that much difference," I said.

"I will take your word on that. I do not have much business with either."

I realized I'd been planning to call Marianne since I woke up sandwiched between Caleb and Micah. Funny how it had slipped my mind.

"Is there anything you can say to Richard that will help smooth things on this end?"

"Do you wish me to lie?"

"Damn it, Jean-Claude ..."

"I can point out to him that if he does not meet the *ardeur's* appetite that someone else must."

"I've already pointed that out to him." I thought about that for a few heartbeats. "He accused me of having ..." I found I couldn't quite say it. "He accused me of doing worse with Nathaniel than I've done, and he was crude about it. I'm not sure I want to have sex with him right now."

"You are angry with him," Jean-Claude said.

"Oh, yeah."

"So angry that if he asked, you would refuse his bed?"

I started to say yes, then stopped myself. I was tired. Tired of all of it, of both of them, if the truth be known. Couldn't live with them, or without them. I wanted Richard's body like an ache in my heart, but when he wanted to be, he could be ugly, and his mood tonight was ugly. I didn't want to have sex with him when he was like this. Hell, I didn't want to be around him when he was like this.

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, that was honest, and does not bode well. If you refuse Richard, and Nathaniel, and your Nimir-Raj does not return tonight, what will you do in the morning, *ma petite*? Please, think carefully on this. I beg you to choose the lesser evil, whatever that may be, rather than wait until the hunger overrides your common sense, or even your need for survival."

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying what I have said before--that to deny the *ardeur* is to worsen it. Deny it long enough and hard enough, and it will begin to erode all that you are, or thought yourself to be. I survived what I did to feed it in those first weeks, but my moral degradation had been accomplished years before I died. I say again, *ma petite*, that you will not take it as well as I did. I believe it will compromise your sense of who you are."

"And fucking Nathaniel isn't going to compromise me?"

He sighed. "Put that way, I do see your point. But how much more compromising would it be to seduce a stranger?"

"I would never do that."

"Is that not exactly what you did with the Nimir-Raj?" His voice was very quiet as he said it, very careful not to be accusatory.

I would have loved to have argued the point, but I hate to lose, and I was going to lose this one. "Alright, you've made your point."

"I hope so, Anita, I do hope so." He never used my name unless something was very wrong. Damn.

"You know, just once it might be nice to have normal problems."

"And what, exactly, is a normal problem, *ma petite*?"

Another point for Jean-Claude. "I don't know anymore."

"You sound tired, *ma petite*."

"It's only a few hours until dawn. I've been up all night, so yeah, I'm tired." Just acknowledging it seemed to bring it on in a rush that left me rubbing my eyes, which smeared the eye shadow I'd put on onto my fingers and probably around my eyelids. I wore makeup so seldomly that I often forgot I was wearing it.

Richard came back into the kitchen with his bodyguards and the wererats in tow. He gave me a look, and it was not a friendly one.

"I've got to go," I said to Jean-Claude.

"Do you wish me to speak to Richard?"

"No, I think you've done enough damage for one night."

"I meant only to help."

"Sure you did."

"*Ma petite*."

"Yes."

"Be careful, and remember what I have said about the *ardeur*. There is no shame in it."

"Even you don't believe that," I said.

"Ah, you have found me out. There is no shame in feeding, if you feed immediately on a person of your own choosing. If you fight, then you will find yourself feeding on someone not of your choosing, in a place not of your choosing. I do not think you would enjoy that, *ma petite*."

He was right about that anyway. "I'll talk to you tomorrow after you get up. I haven't forgotten Damian, you know."

"I did not think that you had, *ma petite*. I will look forward to your call."

I hung up without saying good-bye, mainly because I was angry, and scared. Not only did I have Richard to deal with tonight and Gregory to save, but tomorrow morning when I woke up, the *ardeur* would be there, waiting. There was a chance that it wouldn't be, that the one day was the only time I'd have it, but I couldn't count on that. I had to plan for the worst-case scenario. Worst case was I would wake up tomorrow and need to feed just like I had this morning. The big question was, who would I feed on, and could I live with myself after I'd done it?

Chapter 35

I HATE BEING awake at three in the morning. It is the godforsaken heart of darkness when the body runs slow, and the brain runs slower, and all you want to do is sleep. But I had promises to keep, and miles to go before I could sleep. Or at least a couple of miracles to perform before I could go to bed.

Dr. Lillian had unhooked Gregory's IV, but he was still bundled in the quilts. He sat on the picnic table on the deck, cradled between Zane and Cherry. Dr. Lillian kept touching Gregory, checking his pulse, how clammy his skin was. She was frowning and clearly not happy. Nathaniel stayed by them, keeping the picnic table between him and Richard. Richard hadn't tried to hurt him again; in fact, he'd ignored him studiously. The other cats milled around near the sliding glass doors. The two wererat bodyguards, Claudia and Igor, were standing to one side of me as I leaned on the railing. They started following me around when Richard came out with his bandaged arm and Jamil and Shang-Da at his back.

Richard's power crept on the summer darkness like close thunder, making the hot, sticky night even thicker and making it harder to breathe. I think it was the press of his power, the edge of his anger, that made the wererats start acting like bodyguards. I'd tried telling them that Richard wouldn't hurt me, but Claudia had shrugged, and said, "Rafael told us to keep you safe, and that's what we're going to do."

"Even if I tell you that there is no threat?"

She shrugged again. "I'd say, you're a little too close to this one to make a sound judgment call."

I'd glanced at Igor. "You agree with her?"

"I never argue with a lady, especially one that can beat me at arm wrestling."

Igor's logic was hard to argue with, but it meant that I had acquired two tall, muscular shadows, and it irritated me. But neither of them gave a damn whether I was happy or not. They were following Rafael's orders, and my wishes didn't count.

So Richard and his bodyguards, and me, with mine, stood on the deck, facing Stephen, who had stripped off in preparation for the change. If you made the change with clothes on, you ruined them. Shapeshifters either haunted the thrift shops, looking for old clothes to wear on the night of the full moon, or went nude.

We all stood there in the circle of Richard's power. The energy built around us like invisible lightning lashing around us. The power literally crackled, raising the hair on our arms, raising the hair on our heads, like the hackles on a dog.

Jamil said, "Richard ..." But one glance from Richard stopped him in mid-sentence. The power rose another notch, squeezing around us like some kind of giant hand.

"What's wrong, Richard? What's with the power display?" I asked.

He turned to me, and the anger in his face made me want to step back, but I didn't. I stood my ground, but it took effort.

"Do you want to save your cat?" he asked, voice thick with the emotion that showed on his face, that crackled in his power.

My voice was almost a whisper, "Yes."

"Then watch," he said.

He spread his hands in front of Stephen, keeping them about eight inches away from the smaller man's shoulders. The energy squeezed tight, and tighter until I had to swallow to try and clear my ears, as if there'd been a pressure change. But swallowing didn't help. It wasn't that kind of pressure.

Richard's hands convulsed, as if his fingers were digging into something invisible just in front of Stephen. He staggered towards Richard, one step, and I was close enough to hear a small pained sound come from him. Richard balled his hands into fists, and something shimmered between them like heat caught in the close summer darkness. The bones in my face ached with the building power. The air was almost too thick to breathe, as if it had weight.

Richard made one abrupt movement with his hands and the pressure broke, like a storm finally bursting to life. For a second or two, I thought the heavy, clear liquid that burst around us was rain, but it was hot like blood, and it didn't fall from the sky. It burst from Stephen's body. I'd seen dozens of shape-shifters change, but nothing like this. It was as if Stephen's body blew apart in a rain of hot, thick fluids and small bits of flesh. The beast usually pulls itself from the human body, like a butterfly from a chrysalis, but not this time. Stephen's body folded over on itself, and his man-wolf shape was just suddenly standing there. It collapsed to its knees, panting, shivering.

I was left standing, not even breathing, covered in the rapidly cooling bits and pieces of Stephen's body. When I could breathe again, I gasped. "Jesus Christ."

Stephen's fur was the color of dark, golden honey. He crouched, shivering at Richard's feet. Again, the change may hurt while the person is going through it, but once it's over, they usually stand up and start moving around. Stephen seemed disoriented, almost like he was in pain. What the hell was happening?

He crawled the last few steps to Richard, laying his long, teeth-filled snout against his wolf king's jogging shoes. He was almost in a fetal position, great, muscular arms wrapped around golden fur, lying at his Ulfric's feet. It was extreme submissive behavior, and I didn't know why. Stephen hadn't done anything wrong.

I looked up at Richard. His white shirt was plastered to his body with the thick fluids. He turned his face to look at me, and the faint light of stars glistened in the wetness on his face. A thick piece of something slid down his cheek as he glared at me. The look on his face was defiant, as if he expected me to be angry with him.

I raised a shaking hand and wiped the worst of the gunk off of my face, flinging it onto the deck where it hit with a wet splat. I looked at the bodyguards. They too were splattered with the thick stuff, but not nearly as messy as Richard and I. They hadn't been standing as close. They all stared at Richard, stared at him with a mixture of horror and anger and astonishment on their faces, which let me know that something was very, very wrong.

I had to try twice before I could speak, and even then my voice was breathy. "I've seen a lot of shapeshifters change into their beasts, but I've never seen anything like that. Was it different because you called Stephen's beast instead of him doing it on his own?"

"No," Richard said.

I waited for more, but that was all he said, and it looked like all he intended to say. But no just didn't cover it. I looked at the others. "Okay, someone tell me what just happened here."

Jamil started to speak, then stopped and looked at Richard. "With my Ulfric's permission." The words were polite, but the tone was angry, almost defiant.

Richard looked at him. I couldn't see his face, but whatever look he gave Jamil, it was something that made the other man flinch. Jamil dropped to one knee in the spreading pool of thick liquid. He bowed his head. "I mean no offense, Ulfric."

"That's a lie," Richard said, and his voice was lower than normal, just a tone or two above a growl.

Jamil darted a glance upward, then bowed his head again. "I don't know what you want me to say, Ulfric. Tell me, and I will say it."

Richard turned back to me, leaving Jamil kneeling. "I didn't just call Stephen's beast, I tore it from his body."

I glanced down at Stephen, who was still crouched at Richard's feet. "Why?" I asked.

"It's usually punishment to do it this way."

"What did Stephen do?"

"Nothing." Richard's voice was harsh, almost as harsh as the look on his face.

"Then why punish him?"

"Because I could." His chin lifted when he said it, and that arrogance was back.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Richard?"

He laughed, and the sound was so inappropriate that it made me jump. He laughed, but it was too loud, too harsh. "Didn't this teach you how to call Gregory's beast?"

"I didn't learn a damn thing except that you're in a foul mood and taking it out on other people."

"You want to know what's wrong? You really want to know?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Get out of the way, Stephen," he said, and Stephen didn't even ask why, he just crawled out from between us.

We were left staring at each other, not quite two feet apart. What he'd done to Stephen seemed to have taken the edge off his power, but it was still there like some great slumbering thing pressing against the surface.

"Open the marks, Anita, feel what I'm feeling."

"I opened the marks already. I figured I had to, to learn how to do this."

"So it's just my shielding?" He made it a question.

I nodded. "I can feel your rage, Richard, I just don't know why."

"Just my shields between us and ..." He shook his head, almost smiling, then he dropped his shields. It hit me like a physical force, drove me back a step. Anger so raw it filled my throat with bile; a self-loathing so deep that it drew tears down my cheeks in two hot lines. I stood there for a minute feeling Richard's pain, and it was suffocating.

I stared up at him, the tears still wet on my cheeks. "Richard, oh my God."

"Don't feel sorry for me, don't you *dare* feel pity for me!" He grabbed my arms when he said it, and the moment we touched, our beasts poured up from inside us and spread across our skins in a hot dance of power. His beast crashed through me, invisible, metaphysical claws ripping through my body. It was as if Richard's beast was trying to eat his way through my body. I screamed, and thrust my beast into his, and I felt claws ripping into meat. There was nothing to see with the eye, but I could feel it, feel fur and muscle and meat under claws and teeth. I screamed not just from the pain, but from the sensations of cutting Richard up. He hurt me, and I wanted to hurt him back. There was no more reasoning, no more thinking, just reacting.

Our beasts tore through each other, rolling, clawing, tearing. We collapsed on the deck, screaming. Dimly I could still feel Richard's hands locked on my arms as if he couldn't let go.

There was movement all around us. People hovering, but no one interfered, no one touched us. When we fell, they scattered, as if afraid to touch us. Voices shouting above our screams, "What's wrong? What's happening? Anita, Anita! Richard, control it!"

His beast was suddenly like a weight inside me, but it didn't hurt. The two energies lay quiet, leaning against each other, not mingling, just leaning. I could almost feel the solid push of his beast against something inside of me that had bones and fur, and wasn't me. I couldn't hear anything but the thundering of the blood in my own head. I felt Richard's weight on top of me, before I looked down to find him collapsed over me. His head rested on my chest. I could feel the pulse of the blood in his body, his heart racing against the skin of my stomach. I was covered in the cool slime from Stephen's body. One, I was lying in a pool of it; two, Richard had been covered in it, and he'd slid down my body. I was going to have to shower before I could go to bed, even if it was dawn. And I ached, ached as if I'd been beaten. I knew I'd be stiff when I moved.

Everyone was standing in a ring above us, staring down. I found my voice, hoarse, almost raspy, but clear. "Get off of me."

Richard raised his head, slowly, as if he hurt, too. "I'm sorry."

"You're always sorry, Richard, now get off of me."

He didn't move, in fact he settled heavier, hands curving at the edges of my waist. "Do you still want to help Gregory?"

"That's what this whole show is about, so yeah."

"Then let's try again."

I tensed, and started trying to wriggle out from under him. His hands tightened at my waist. "Easy, Anita, it won't hurt. I don't think."

"Says you. It hurt like a son of a bitch. Let me go, Richard." My voice held the beginnings of anger, and fear. I liked the anger, could have done without the fear.

"You fought me to a standoff. It's over," he said.

I stopped struggling and stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"We're not the same kind of animal, Anita. They had to find out who's ... tougher."

I stared down the line of my body into those brown eyes. "Are you saying this was some kind of dominance display?"

"Not exactly."

Strangely, it was Merle who answered. "When two such different beasts meet, and they are both strong dominants--such as a true Nimir-Ra, and a true Ulfric--the two animals must fight and test each other. I have seen it before. It is a type of taming of one beast by the other."

I looked way up at the tall man. "No one tamed anyone."

Merle knelt beside us. "I think you are right. It is as the Ulfric has said, a standoff. He could have kept fighting until one of you won, or lost, but he chose to let it be."

I remembered someone telling Richard to control it, it being his beast. I looked at Richard. "You stopped, didn't you?"

"I don't care which of us is more dominant, Anita. Those kind of games have never meant anything to me, unless people forced me to play them."

"You said something about helping Gregory. What did you mean?"

He started working his way a little higher up my body, sliding his body along mine. I could feel the slime from his shirt recoating my bare stomach and nearly bare chest. My disgust must have shown on my face, because he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Your shirt is covered in slime, and I'm lying in a pool of it. I didn't just want you to get off me to be off of me, I wanted to get up out of this mess."

He came to his knees, his legs on either side of mine. I could feel our beasts stretched between us like something that should have been visible, as if each of their heads was buried in the other's chest. He offered me a hand. I stared up at him.

"I know you don't need the help, Anita. But our beasts are touching now. It's a close connection and physical contact will help us keep it until we finish Gregory."

I didn't need the earnest look on his face to know he was telling the truth, marks were still open between us. I knew he was telling the truth.

I took his hand and he lifted me to my feet. Standing up hurt, and either he felt it or saw it on my face. "I hurt you," he said softly.

"We hurt each other." I could feel that he was stiff, aching, but he moved like he wasn't, and I still moved human stiff.

He raised the bottom of his shirt, still holding my hand. "Touch me."

I looked up at him, and he laughed. "Just keep physical contact, Anita. I don't mean anything by it. But I need both my hands."

I laid a hand on his side, very tentatively.

He shook his head. "I'm going to take my shirt off."

If you can't touch a person's hands, arms, or much of their upper body, you run out of polite places to touch. I settled for sliding my hand under the wet shirt, touching the smooth firmness of his side. Even his skin was damp from the shirt having molded to it.

Richard drew the shirt over his head, and I was left standing inches from him as he revealed the flat plains of his stomach, the muscular swell of his chest, and arched his back to draw the shirt over his head. The sight of him, the pull of the lust that always came when I saw him without clothes pushed my beast against his. I felt furred sides roll against each other, a tentative roll of power that felt like someone had taken velvet and caressed the most intimate part of me.

Richard gasped.

I concentrated hard to stop the movement, but that I'd done it without thinking brought heat in a wash up my face. I looked at the ground; my hand was still only touching his side, just above his jeans, but the touch felt suddenly intimate. I wanted to take my hand away, and his hand covered mine before I could move. He pressed my hand to him, firm, but not forceful.

He touched my chin, raised my face until I had to look at him. "It's alright, Anita. I love the fact that just seeing me moves you like that."

The blush that had been fading, blazed harder. He laughed, soft, low, with that edge that a man's laugh gets when he's thinking intimate things. "I have missed you, Anita."

I looked up at him. "I missed you, too."

His beast moved through me in a wash of power and sensation that left me gasping. My beast responded to his. I couldn't seem to stop it. Maybe I didn't want to. Those shadow forms rolled in and out of each other, through us, until I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. It was Richard who drew back first, and said, "Dear God, I never thought ..." I felt the effort it cost him to draw back from me, to stop. His face showed a businesslike, no-nonsense look, but I could feel the trembling of other things inside him. His voice came out brisk. "I'll call Jamil's beast, the way it's supposed to be done. Feel what I do, how I use my beast to call his."

My voice was a little breathy. "Then I'll do Gregory."

He nodded. "Or I can call Shang-Da's beast, if you need to see it one more time."

I nodded. "Okay."

He slid a hand around my waist, drawing me against him. It didn't seem as intimate as the roil of our beasts inside us. Jamil stood facing us. He'd stripped off his shirt and shoes, but kept on his pants. It occurred to me for the first time that I'd never seen him nude, except when he'd been injured and near death. Jamil didn't do casual nudity. One of the few modest shapeshifters knew.

"I'm ready, Ulfic."

After what Richard had done to Stephen I thought Jamil was being awful trusting. But then, everyone trusted Richard; he was very trustworthy. No, lack of trust wasn't the problem.

"I don't need to physically touch anyone to do this, but it's easier that way, so I'll touch him, so you can understand better how it works."

I nodded, wrapped in the circle of his arm, the firmness of his body, the velvet roll of our beasts like another arm to hold us against each other.

Richard touched Jamil's bare shoulder, and I felt his power move outward like a warm wind. It caressed Jamil's skin, and Richard's beast flowed with it, pulling mine along for the ride. Richard's power teased along Jamil, coaxing, and the best analogy I could think of was like someone trying to lure a cat down out of a tree. Beckoning, talking sweetly, promising caresses, and treats, if only it would come down. But Jamil's beast didn't come down, it came out. It rolled out of the center of his being like a pale golden fog, an almost shape. I saw his beast like I'd seen Micah's earlier, for an instant, then Jamil collapsed to the deck, and his bare back began to ripple like water under a strong wind. The wolf drew out of his back in a long wet line, and his body dissolved into that dark furred shape, so that his human body became the wolf, like flipping over a coin, heads, tails, but still the same coin. I felt the rightness of it, the harmony of it. Jamil embraced what he was; there was no conflict between him and his beast. I'd never seen him in wolf form, man-wolf, but not this pony-sized black beast. He was like Little Red Riding Hood's worst nightmare.

The wolf shook himself, and I realized that his fur was dry. There was more of that clear goop all over the deck, but very little of it had clung to the wolf itself. Yet another metaphysical mystery: How do werewolves stay dry when shapeshifting is such a mess?

I turned without a word, drawing Richard with me. I went to Gregory, still sitting on the picnic table, only Cherry and Dr. Lillian with him now. Zane had come to see what the matter was when Richard and I started writhing on the deck.

Gregory looked at me, blue eyes silvered in the moonlight. I smiled and touched his cheek, cupped the side of his face against my hand. I reached for his beast, not with my hand, but with that shadowy thing that swirled through Richard and me. I sent it shivering across Gregory's skin, and he sat up, letting the quilt fall away from his bare upper body. Cherry moved away just enough so they wouldn't touch, as if she was afraid to touch him now.

I tried to coax his beast, to call it with sweet caresses and gentle persuasion, but it remained stubbornly just under the surface, trapped by the drugs that still made Gregory's body a prison and the shock that had further dampened everything I needed to call. But I knew that it didn't have to be gentle. I might not have been along for the ride when Richard brought Stephen's beast, but I'd seen it, and I knew enough of power to guess what he'd done.

"I'll try not to hurt you," I said, but I thrust my power into Gregory. I felt it hit his chest and sink into him like a large flesh-and-fur blade.

Gregory gasped, back arching, just a little.

I found his beast like a curled cat, asleep, sluggish, and I grabbed it in my hand, sank claws in it and pulled it screaming into the air. I ripped his beast out of him, and Gregory shifted, as Stephen had shifted in an explosion of blood,

flesh, and fluid. I was covered in it, so thick I had to scoop it out of my eyes to see. To see that yellow and black spotted man-leopard lying hunched on the table. I watched Stephen come to sniff along his brother's shivering body.

"Gregory, Gregory, can you hear me?" I asked, and my voice was softer than I meant it to be.

Gregory blinked leopard eyes at me, but a growling voice came out of that furred throat. "I can hear you."

Stephen threw his head back and bayed. Jamil echoed him, and the leopards' screams of triumph filled the night.

Chapter 36

DAWN WAS SLIDING through the trees in a wash of white, white light that left the trees looking like black paper cutouts against the shining sky when I pulled the curtains and filled the bedroom with twilight dimness. I'd put very heavy curtains in the room when Jean-Claude had been a frequent visitor. The bedside lamp seemed dim after the glow of sunrise. Nathaniel sat on the edge of the bed by the lamp. He was wearing the bottoms of silk pajama shorts. They were a pale lavender silk that echoed his eyes and looked too delicate a color for men's sleepwear. I always suspected the shorts were originally designed for a woman, but shorts were shorts.

The lamplight caught red highlights in his auburn hair, where it gleamed down the side of his body like something warm and alive, almost separate. Strangely, in wereleopard form, he was a black panther, so that auburn hair vanished once he left human form.

Nathaniel was the only one of the wereleopards still in human form. So he was the only one that got to share my bed. If they were kitty-cats, they had to sleep elsewhere, but in human form we tried to be a big pile of puppies. Somehow it was less comfy with only Nathaniel than it would have been with more of them. Maybe it was the fact that his right nipple still had a circle of my teeth marks.

"Shouldn't the bite marks have healed by now?" I asked.

"I don't heal as quickly as some," he said softly. "And marks made by another shapeshifter, or even a vampire, heal more slowly."

"Why is that?"

He shrugged. "Why does silver kill us, and steel not?"

"Point taken," I said. I ran my hand through my still-damp hair. I'd showered and was actually wearing pajamas, not an oversized T-shirt, which was my usual sleep attire. Though *pajamas* may have been too big a word for the emerald green camisole and matching short-shorts. There was a floor-length

robe in the same vibrant green, so everything was covered, but Nathaniel knew I hadn't dressed up for him. Or at least I hoped he did.

He watched me pacing the room with careful eyes. We had crossed a line, he and I, and the mark on his chest just kept reminding me of it. I didn't think that Richard would tolerate Nathaniel and me sharing the bed alone, not that I really expected the three of us to bunk together, either. Oh, hell, I didn't know what I expected. I had expected Richard to come to me after his shower. But he was a no-show, and it was dawn, and I was tired.

There was a firm knock on the door. I said, "Come in," with my heart beating a little too fast. Merle opened the door, and I hoped my disappointment didn't show on my face. His own face registered nothing, so I couldn't judge what he saw on mine.

"The Ulfric is in the kitchen." He did look uncomfortable then. "He is crying."

I felt my eyes widen. "Excuse me?"

Merle looked down, then up, almost defiant. "He has ordered his bodyguard out of the room, and he is crying. I do not know why."

I sighed. Although I was tired, I was excited at the thought of Richard being in the house, of him coming to me, maybe. Instead of sex we were going to have another session of hand-holding, and shoulder-crying. Damn it.

I felt my shoulders slump and forced myself to stand upright again. I didn't have to ask why Merle had told me. Who else would Richard take comfort from? I wasn't even a hundred percent sure he'd take comfort from me.

I went for the door. Merle held it open for me, and I walked under his arm without having to duck. "Thanks for telling me, Merle," I muttered as I went out into the darkened living room.

Shang-Da was leaning against the wall by the open doorway that led into the kitchen. He looked as uncomfortable as I'd ever seen him. He wouldn't meet my eyes. What was going on?

Caleb was settled on the couch with a blanket and an extra pillow. He was sitting up, the blanket bunched in his lap. He was nude from the waist up and probably nude from the waist down if no one had made him wear jammies. I hoped someone had remembered to put a sheet on the couch. He watched me walk across the room, and even in the dim light from the kitchen I didn't like the way his eyes followed me.

"Nice robe," he said.

I ignored him and went for the doorway. Richard sat at the kitchen table, opened all the curtains so that the room was filled with the soft light of dawn. His shoulder-length hair had been blow-dried to a soft, fluffy mass. I could never blow-dry my hair without it turning to something thick and awful-looking. The early morning light made his hair look more golden than normal, less brown. He looked up, and I realized the gold glow was a halo effect of the rising sun. It painted a nimbus of shining gold around him, leaving his hair light brown around his face, making the skin at the center of his body look even darker than it was, almost like it was in shadow.

I had a moment to see the shine of tears on his shadowed face, then he lowered his head and twisted in his chair so I couldn't see. The movement placed more of his body in the burning golden light, but the illusion of halos and shadow was gone.

I walked to the table, stood close enough to touch his bare shoulder, not sure if I should. "Richard, what's wrong?"

He shook his head, still not looking at me.

I reached out, touched the smoothness of his shoulder gently. He didn't tell me to go away, and he didn't pull away. Okay. I touched the tears on the cheek closest to me, smoothed them away with my hand. It reminded me of comforting Nathaniel earlier.

I touched Richard's chin, turned his face to me, and dried the tears on his other cheek with the sleeve of my robe. "Talk to me, Richard, please."

He smiled. Maybe it was the "please." I didn't use that word often. "I've never seen this before." He touched the sleeve very gently.

I wasn't going to be distracted, not even by him noticing what I'd worn with him in mind. "You have to be as tired as I am, Richard. What's keeping you up?"

He looked down, then up, and there was such sorrow in his dark eyes, that I almost said, no, don't, but he needed to talk. "Louisa is in jail, and Guy is dead."

I frowned. "I don't know the names."

"Louisa is one of our newest wolves." He looked down again, not meeting my eyes. "Guy is her fiance ... husband. *Was* her husband." He covered his face with his hands, shaking his head over and over and over.

I held his wrists, lowered his hands so I could see his eyes. "Richard, talk to me."

His hands turned in my grip, holding my hands. We held hands while I watched the pain in his eyes spill out in words. "Louisa killed Guy on their honeymoon, yesterday. I got the call just before I came here."

"I still don't understand. It's awful, tragic, but ..." I said.

"I was her sponsor. I trained her to control her beast, and she lost that control on her honeymoon in the middle of ..." He lowered his head, and raised my hands so that his forehead rested against the back of my hands.

"She lost control in the middle of sex," I finished for him.

He nodded, his face still pressed to my hands. "Losing her virginity," he said, voice muffled, low.

"Did you say virginity?"

He pulled away from me then, dropped his hands in his lap, and I noticed for the first time that he was wearing a towel knotted at his waist. "Yes."

"You mean she'd never tried to control her beast during intercourse?" I asked.

He shook his head. "They'd been engaged for more than two years before Louisa was attacked and became one of us. They both wanted to wait for the wedding night."

"Commendable," I said. "And orgasm, to a certain extent, is orgasm. If she could control herself during nonintercourse orgasm, then she should have been able to control herself during intercourse, too." I touched his shoulder again. "You did all you could for her."

He jerked away as if I'd burned him, coming to his feet so suddenly that the chair crashed back against the kitchen island, then the floor. I sensed rather than saw people in the doorway. I said, "We're alright." I turned to see Shang-Da, Merle, and the two wererats, still hesitating in the doorway. "We're alright, go away." They all pulled back, but I knew now that we had an audience, because they wouldn't go far.

Richard stood in the middle of my kitchen wearing nothing but a towel and the golden first light of dawn. Normally it would have distracted me from anything reasonable, but not this morning. The pain in his face was more important than his body right now. Looking at him, standing there so defiant, so hurt, I had an idea, an awful idea.

"Please tell me you don't mean she wanted to wait for *any* sexual contact until the honeymoon?"

His chin raised, and that arrogance tried to slide over him. But it was a mask, and I saw through it now. Underneath he was scared and guilty. "I taught her to control the beast during anger, sadness, fear, pain, every extreme of emotion, but not sex. I respected her convictions."

I stared at him. It was so something Richard would do. Theoretically, I even approved, but theory and practice aren't the same. In real life it had been a bad idea, and Richard should have known that better than I did.

I felt my face go blank, empty. It was a good cop face. I didn't want anything I was thinking to show for this. "So this Louisa shifted in the middle of sex and killed her husband, and the cops caught her." I didn't add that I was surprised they hadn't shot her on sight. Finding the big bad wolf eating the body of the nice little human would be cause enough for shooting to kill.

"Louisa turned herself in. I think if she didn't think suicide was a sin, she'd have killed herself." He turned my way walking to the sliding glass doors, leaning his forehead against the glass, as if he was tired.

I wished I could have said it wasn't his fault, but it was. He was her sponsor, the one who was supposed to teach her how to be a shapeshifter. I'd learned from dealing with the wereleopards, and Richard, and Verne's pack in Tennessee that orgasm of any kind was one of the true tests of their control. Orgasm was supposed to be a release, but to truly give up all control meant shifting form, and that was the ultimate nightmare when you had a human lover. Richard had lectured me often enough when we were dating that he didn't trust himself the night of the full moon, or even the day before. He didn't fear losing control and killing me, just losing control and scaring me to death. Or more honestly, grossing me out. He had shifted on top of me once, and that had had nothing to do with sex. And that one experience had sent me running to Jean Claude. Well, Richard changing on top of me and seeing him eat someone.

I didn't know what to say. All I knew was that I had to say something, that silence was almost worse than anything.

He spoke without turning around. "Go ahead, Anita, tell me I'm a fool. Tell me I sacrificed both of them on the altar of my ideals." His voice was bitter enough to choke on, just hearing the pain in it.

"Louisa and her husband wanted to hold true to who they were. You wanted to help them do that. It's perfectly, logically you." My voice was empty, but at least it wasn't reproachful. It was the best I could do. Because it was a waste, a waste because Richard and the girl and her fiance had been more worried about appearance than reality. Or maybe I'm just cynical, and tired, oh, so tired.

It was like any really good tragedy--entirely dependent on the personalities of the people involved. If Richard had been more practical and less idealistic; if Louisa and her late husband had been less religious, less pure; hell, if the husband really brought her to orgasm with just intercourse, then if he'd only been less talented. So many things had gone into making all the good intentions go horribly wrong.

"Yes, it was perfectly, logically me, and I was wrong. I should have at least forced her to have her first experience with Guy where the pack could oversee it, save him. But Louisa was so ... delicate about it. I just couldn't insist. I just couldn't make her strip down in front of strangers and have her most intimate moment witnessed. I just couldn't do it."

I didn't know what to say. I did the only thing I could think of to comfort him. I went to him and put my arms around his waist, put my cheek against the smooth firmness of his back, and held him. "I am so sorry, Richard, so very sorry."

His body started to shake, and I realized he was crying again, still soundlessly, but not gently. Great racking sobs shook his body, but the only sound he allowed himself was the harsh shaking of his breath as he gasped, trying to get enough air.

He slid slowly to his knees, his hands making harsh sounds down the glass of the door, as if he were taking skin off as his hand slid down the glass. I stayed standing, leaning over him, cradling his head against my body, my hands on his shoulders and chest, trying to hold him.

He fell backwards, and I was suddenly trying to hold all his weight as he went for the floor. I tripped on the hem of the robe, and we ended in a heap on the floor, with his head and shoulders in my lap and me struggling to sit up. The knot on the towel had loosened, and a long, uninterrupted line of his body showed from his waist down his hip to his foot. The towel was still in place, but it was losing the battle.

His mouth opened in a soundless cry, then suddenly there was sound. He gave one ragged, tear-choked scream, and the sound seemed to free something inside him. Because the sobbing was suddenly loud, full of small, awful, painful sounds. He sobbed, and whimpered, and screamed, and clutched at my arms, enough that I knew I'd be bruised. And all I could do was hold on, touch him, rock him, until he quieted. He finally lay on his side, his upper body as far into my lap as he would fit, the rest of him curled up so that one thigh covered him. The towel formed a heap on the floor underneath him. I didn't even know

when the towel had fallen away. I was sort of proud of that, because usually when I see Richard naked, I lose about forty points of IQ and most of my reasoning ability. But now, his pain was so raw, that that took precedence. It was comfort he needed, not sex.

He finally lay quiet in my arms, his breathing slowed almost to normal. His eyelids had fluttered shut, and for a moment I thought he was asleep. Then he spoke, eyes still closed. "I appointed an Eros and Eranthe for the pack." His voice was still thick with all the crying.

Eros was the Greek god of love, or lust, and Eranthe was the muse of erotic poetry; in werewolf lore they were the names for sexual surrogates. A man and a woman that did what needed doing when a werewolf's sponsor was too squeamish. Verne's pack had them, because Verne's lupa was very jealous of her Ulfric, and sometimes you just needed someone who isn't emotionally involved.

"That's good, Richard. I think it will make things easier."

He opened his eyes, and they were bleak. It made my chest ache to see that look in his eyes. "There are other positions that would make a lot of things easier," he said, voice thick and low.

I tensed up. I couldn't help it, because I knew that there were titles among the lukoi that would make all the problems he'd created in the pack fixable. There were titles that amounted to executioners, torturers. The lukoi have a long history through some very harsh times. Very few packs fill these slots anymore. Most don't see the need, but then most Ulfrics are good little tyrants; they don't need to delegate the rough stuff.

"Do you know what Bolverk means?" Richard asked softly.

"It's one of the names of Odin. It means worker of evil." My voice was almost as soft as his.

"You didn't remember that from a semester of comparative religion back in college."

"No," I said. My pulse had sped up. I couldn't help it. Bolverk was the title for what amounted to someone who did the Ulfric's evil deeds. It could be anything from trickery, to lies, to murder.

"You asked Verne about it, didn't you?"

Yes." I kept my voice low. I was afraid to be loud, afraid he'd stop talking, thought I knew where the conversation was going, and I wanted to get there.

"Jacob is going to challenge Sylvie," Richard said, and his voice was growing stronger, "and he'll kill her. She's good, but I've seen Jacob fight. She can't win."

"I haven't seen him fight, but I think you're right."

"If I made you Bolverk ..." He stopped. I wanted to yell at him to finish, but I didn't dare. All I could do was sit there, very still, and try not to do anything that would change his mind.

He started over. "If I made you Bolverk, what would you do?" That last was soft again, as if he couldn't quite believe he was saying it.

I let out a breath I hadn't even realized I was holding and tried to think. Think before I spoke, because I'd only get one shot at this. I knew Richard and

if what I said didn't meet with his approval, the offer would go away, and he might never be willing to ask for this kind of help again. I'd seldom been so eager to speak and so afraid at the same time. I prayed for wisdom, diplomacy, help.

"First, you'd need to announce my new title to the pack, then I'd choose some helpers. I'm allowed three, Baugi, Suttung, and Guunlod."

Richard said, "The two giants Bolverk tricked to get the mead of poetry, and Guunlod, the giant's daughter, who he seduced for it."

"Yes."

He rolled his upper body over, so he was looking up at me. "You spent almost every weekend of the last six months in Tennessee. I thought you were just studying with Marianne, learning how to use your talents, but you were studying the lukoi, too, weren't you?"

I tried to be very careful, as I said, "Verne's pack runs very smoothly. He's helped me make the wereleopards into a true pard."

"You don't need a Bolverk or a Guunlod to make the leopards into a pard." His gaze was very direct, and I couldn't lie to him.

"I was still your lupa, but not a werewolf, the least I could do was learn about your culture."

He smiled then, and it reached his eyes, just a little--chased that lost look away. "You didn't care about the culture."

That pissed me off. "Yes, I did."

His smile widened, his eyes filling with light, the way the sun filled the sky as it rose above the edge of the world. "Alright, you cared about the culture, but that wasn't why you wanted to know about Bolverk, the evildoer."

I looked down, feeling just a little embarrassed. "Maybe not."

He touched my face lightly, turning me to look down at him again, to meet his gaze. "You said you didn't know about Jacob before you talked with him on the phone."

"I didn't," I said.

"Then why ask Verne about Bolverk?"

I stared down into those true-brown eyes and spoke the truth. "Because you are kind and fair and just, and those are lovely things to have in a king, but the world is not kind, or fair, or just. The reason Verne's pack runs smoothly, the reason my pard runs smoothly, is because Verne and I are ruthless when we need to be. I don't know if you could be ruthless if you had to be. But think it would break you, if you managed to pull it off."

"Having you be ruthless for me is going to break something inside of me, Anita. Something that's important to me."

I stroked his hair, feeling the thick softness of it. "But me doing it won't break as much, or as badly, as you doing it, Richard."

He nodded slowly. "I know, and I hate myself for that."

I leaned over and kissed his forehead, very gently. I spoke with my lips touching his skin. "The only true happiness, Richard, lies in knowing who you are--what you are--and making peace with it." His arm curved up around me,

holding me against him. He spoke with his mouth against the hollow of my throat. "And are you at peace with what you are?"

"I'm working on it," I said.

He kissed my throat, very softly. "Me too."

I drew back enough to see his face, and his hand thrust upward through my hair, pulled my face down to his. We kissed, soft, then harder, his lips, his tongue, his mouth working at mine. I cupped his face in my hands and kissed him--kissed him long and hard. When I drew back, breathless, I found that he'd rolled his lower body over and lay on his back, nude. He laughed at the expression on my face and pulled me down towards him. I lost that forty points of intelligence and all my reasoning skills as he undid my robe and I ran my hands down the long line of his body.

I had just enough self-possession left to say, "Not here. We've got an audience in the living room."

His hand slid under the green satin of the camisole, curving around to my back, pulling me against him. "There's no place in the house that they won't hear us, smell us."

I pulled back from him before he could kiss me. "Gee, Richard, that makes me feel a lot better."

He propped himself up on one arm, staring down at me. "We can go into the bedroom if you want, but we won't be fooling anybody."

I didn't like that, and it must have shown on my face, because Richard drew his hand out from under my top, and said, "Do you want to stop?"

We hadn't really gotten started, but I knew what he meant. I looked into the solid brown of his eyes, traced the edge of his jaw with my gaze, the fullness of his lips, the curve of his throat, the spread of his shoulders, the way his hair fell around him, catching the early morning light, bringing out shades of gold and copper in his hair, the swell of his chest, his nipples already dark and hard, the flat line of his stomach with that thin, dark line of hair that went from his belly button to ... the skin was darker, richer, you could almost smell the blood that pumped him full and hard. He looked ripe, like he was something full to bursting with life. I wanted to touch him, to squeeze, oh so delicately. I lay on the floor with my hands at my sides, my pulse beating in my throat, and said, "No, I don't want to stop." My voice was almost a whisper.

His eyes filled with that dark heat that spills into a man's face when he's almost a hundred percent sure of what's about to happen. His voice was deeper, that low note that most men's voices get when the excitement runs deep. "Here, or the bedroom?"

I tore my gaze away from him to look at the open doorway to the living room. There was no door to close. I needed more privacy than this. Even if they could hear us, even smell us in the bedroom, at least they wouldn't be able to see us. Maybe it was only an illusion of delicacy, but sometimes illusion is all you've got.

I looked back at him. "Bedroom."

"Good choice," he said, and got to his knees, taking my hand, so that when he got to his feet, he half-pulled me to mine. The movement startled me, and I

fell against him. The height difference was enough that it put my hand on his hip and so very close to other things. It embarrassed me how very much I wanted to touch him, hold him. I started to pull away, because I was so close to losing all decorum and groping him right there in the kitchen. I wasn't entirely sure that if I grabbed him we'd make it to the bedroom. I wanted that door between us and everyone else.

He put his arms around my waist and lifted me off my feet, until our faces were even and I didn't know what to do with my legs. If I'd been sure we wouldn't be using the kitchen table I'd have wrapped my legs around his waist, but I didn't trust either of us that far. He put his arms under my butt, so that my head was slightly above his, and I rested in his arms almost like I was in a swing. I could still feel him pressed hard and firm against my body, but it had a certain decorum to it that straddling his waist lacked. He started walking for the door, carrying me, his eyes so intent on my face that he almost tripped on a chair. It made me laugh, until his eyes came back to meet mine, and I saw the need in those dark eyes. That one look robbed me of speech, and all I could do was stare into his eyes as he carried me into the bedroom.

Chapter 37

THE BEDROOM WAS empty when he kicked the door shut behind us. I didn't know if the living room was empty or not. I couldn't remember anything but Richard's eyes from the kitchen to the bedroom. Every room might have been empty, for all I'd seen.

We kissed just inside the door; my hands were full of the rich thickness of his hair, the firm warmth of his neck. I explored his face with my hands, my mouth, tasted, teased, caressed, just his face.

He drew back from my mouth enough to say, "If I don't sit down, I'm going to fall down. My knees are weak."

I laughed, full-throated, and said, "Then put me down."

He half-walked, half-staggered to the bed, laying me on it, going to his knees beside it. He was laughing as he crawled onto the bed beside me. He lay beside me, his knees hanging over the side of the bed, though since he was tall enough for his feet to actually touch the floor when he lay like that, maybe *hanging* wasn't the right word. We lay beside each other on the bed, laughing softly, not touching.

We turned our heads to look at each other at the same moment. His eyes sparkled with the laughter, his whole face almost shining with it. I reached out and traced the lines of laughter around his mouth. The laughter began to fade as soon as I touched him, his eyes filling up with something darker, more serious, but no less precious. He rolled onto his side. The movement put my hand along

the side of his face. He rubbed his face into my hand, eyes closed, lips half parted.

I rolled onto my stomach, and moved towards him, my hand still on his face. He opened his eyes, watching me crawl towards him. I propped myself up on hands and knees and watched his eyes as I leaned in towards his mouth. There was eagerness there, but there was also something else, something fragile. Did my eyes mirror that look, half-eager, half-fearful, wanting, afraid to want, needing, and afraid to need?

My mouth hovered over his, our lips touching, delicate as butterflies blown by a warm summer wind, touching, not touching, sliding along each other, gliding away. His hand grabbed the back of my neck, forced my mouth to press against his, hard, firm. He used his tongue and lips to force my mouth open. I opened to him, and we took turns exploring each other's mouths. He came to his knees, hand still pressed to the back of my neck, our mouths still locked together. He drew back, crawling backwards to the head of the bed, leaving me kneeling alone in the center of the bed. He reached under the covers, drew out pillows, propped himself up, watching me. There was something almost decadent about him naked, propped up, watching me.

I knelt looking back at him, having a little trouble focusing, thinking. I finally managed to say, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, voice deep, lower than normal. It wasn't the growl of his beast, it was a peculiarly male sound. "I want to run my beast through you, Anita."

For a split second, I thought it was a euphemism, then I realized he meant exactly what he'd said. "Richard, I don't know."

"I know you don't like otherworldly stuff during sex, but Anita ..." he settled into the pillows in a strange smoothing motion that somehow reminded me that he wasn't human, "I felt your beast. It rolled through me."

Just hearing it out loud took a little of the glow off for me. I slumped back against the bed, still on my knees, but no longer upright, hands limp in my lap. "Richard, I haven't had time to think this through. I don't know how I feel about it yet."

"It's not all bad, Anita. Some of it can be wondrous."

This from the man who had hated his beast for the entire time I'd known him. But I didn't say that out loud. I just looked at him.

He smiled. "I know how strange that sounds coming from me."

I looked at him harder.

He laughed, settling lower on the pillows until he was sprawled in front of me. One leg bent up so he wouldn't touch me, but close enough that I could have touched him. He lay there unself-consciously nude, which I'd seen before, but it was more than that. He seemed bathed in a comfortableness that was rare for Richard. I'd seen it at the lupanar, that he'd accepted his beast. But it was more than that; he'd accepted himself.

"What do you want from me, Richard?"

This was his cue to get serious, to demand I be less bloodthirsty, or a half dozen other impossible things. He didn't. "I want this," he said, and I felt the

prickling rush of his power a second before it passed through me like a warm ghost.

I shuddered with it. "I don't know, Richard. I don't know if this is a good idea." It would have sounded better if my voice hadn't had a tremble in it.

I expected him to question, or talk, but he didn't. I felt his power like a brush of thunder a second before it smashed into me. I had a second of panic, a moment to wonder if his beast and mine would claw me apart, then his power rubbed through me like a velvet glove. My beast rose as if from a great, warm, wet depth, up, up to meet the warm, burning rush of Richard's energy. He pushed his beast through me, and I could feel it, impossibly huge, the brush of fur so deep inside me that I cried out. I felt his beast as if it had crawled inside me and was caressing things from the inside that his hands would never have touched. My power seemed less certain than his, less solid. But it rose around the hard, muscled fur like velvet mist, swirling through his power, through my own body. Until it felt as if something huge was growing inside me, something I'd never felt before, swelling inside me. It felt larger than my body, as if I couldn't hold it inside myself, like a cup filled to the brim with something hot and scalding, but the liquid kept pouring in, and still I held it, held it, held it, until it burst over me, through me, out of me, in a roar of power that turned the world golden and slow, drew my body to its knees, curved my back, sent my hands clawing at the air trying to hold on to something, anything, while my body spilled apart and remade itself on the bed. For a space of labored heartbeats I thought he'd brought on the change, and I had slipped my skin for real, but it wasn't that. I felt like I was floating and only gradually felt my body again. I lay on my back, my knees folded under me, hands limp at my sides, so relaxed it was like being drugged.

I felt the bed move under me, and a moment later, Richard appeared above me. He was on all fours, looming over me, and I had trouble focusing on his face. He cradled my face, staring into my eyes, while I tried to look at him. "Anita, are you alright?"

I laughed then, slow and lazy. "Help me get my knees straightened out, and I'll be fine."

He helped me straighten my legs, and even then all I wanted to do was just lay there. "What did you do to me?"

He lay down beside me, propped on one elbow. "I brought you, using the beasts."

I blinked at him, licked my lips, and tried to think of an intelligent question, gave up, and settled for what I wanted to know. "Is it always like that between lycanthropes?"

"No," he said and leaned over me, until his face filled my vision. "No, only a true lupa, or a true Nimir-Ra, can respond to my Ulfric the way you just did."

I touched his chest enough to back him up so I could see his face clearly. "You've never done that with anyone before?"

He looked down then, a curtain of his hair sliding over his face, hiding it from me. I pushed his hair back so I could see that nearly perfect profile. "Who?" I asked.

Heat washed up his neck and face. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen him blush before. "It was Raina, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "Yes."

I let his hair fall back in place and lay there for a few seconds thinking about it. Then I was laughing, laughing and couldn't stop.

He was back at my shoulder, peering down at me. "Anita?"

The laughter faded as I looked into his worried eyes. "When you forced Raina to give you up all those years ago, did you know that she was the only one that could do this with you?"

He nodded, face solemn. "Raina pointed out the downside to not being her pet."

I took his hand and slid it down the front of my satin bottoms. His fingertips found the wetness that had soaked through the satin, and I didn't have to guide his hand anymore. He cupped that big hand of his over my groin, and the cloth was soaked through. He traced fingertips across my inner thigh and the skin was wet, wet down to my knees.

"How did you give it up?" My voice came out in a whisper.

His finger slid up the inside of my thigh, in the hollow just below. He leaned in to kiss me as his finger slid slowly, slowly, upward across the moist skin, under the wet satin. His mouth stayed just above mine, so close that a sharp breath would have made us touch. He spoke, his breath warm on my skin, as his finger caressed the edge of me. "No amount of pleasure was worth her price." Two things happened at once; he kissed me, and his finger slid inside of me. I screamed against his mouth, back arching, fingernails digging into his shoulder, as his finger found that small spot and thrust over and over it, until he brought me again. The world had soft, white edges, like seeing through gauze.

I felt the bed move, but couldn't focus, couldn't see, wasn't sure I cared what was happening. Hands fumbled at my shorts. I blinked up to see Richard kneeling over me. He slid my shorts down, spread my legs, and knelt between them. He leaned over me raising the satin camisole, baring my breasts. He ran his hands across them, made me writhe, then moved his hands down the line of my body, his hands gripping my thighs, bringing me in a harsh jerk against his body.

The moment he rubbed against the outside of me, I felt the rubbery latex of the condom. I looked up at his face, and asked, "How did you know?" He moved so that his lower body was lying between my legs, but still pressed against the outside of my body. Most of his weight was supported by his arms like a modified push-up position. "Do you really think Jean-Claude would warn me about the *ardeur* and not warn me that you weren't on birth control?"

"Good point," I said.

"No," he said, "this is." I felt the movement of his hips, seconds before he thrust inside me, in one powerful motion that drove sounds from my mouth somewhere between a scream and a shout.

He lowered his head enough to see my face. I lay gasping under him, but whatever he saw there reassured him, because he arched his back, his face looking somewhere in the distance, and drew himself out of me, slowly, inch by inch, until I made small noises. He drew himself out until he was barely touching inside me. I gazed down the length of my body to see him stretched hard and ready. He'd always been careful of me, because he wasn't small; that one first thrust had been more force than he'd ever before allowed himself. He, like Micah, filled me up, hit that point deep inside that was either pain or pleasure. I saw his back and hips flex a second before he thrust into me. I watched him thrust into me, saw every inch of him plunge into me, until it bowed my back, my neck, and I couldn't watch because I was writhing underneath him, my hands scrambling at the bedspread, digging fingers into the covers.

He drew himself out of me again, and I stopped him with a hand on his stomach. "Wait, wait." I was having trouble breathing.

"It's not hurting you. I can tell by your face, your eyes, your body."

I swallowed, took a shaky breath, and said, "No, it's not hurting me. It feels wonderful, but you've always been so careful, even when I asked you not to be. What's changed?"

He looked down at me, his hair falling around his face like a silken frame. "I was always afraid of hurting you before. But I felt your beast."

"I haven't changed yet, Richard, we don't know for sure."

"Anita," he said softly, and I knew he was chiding me. Maybe it was a case of the lady protesting too much, but still ...

"I'm still human, Richard, I haven't changed yet."

He leaned over me, his hair gliding around my face as he kissed me gently on the cheek. "Even before the first full moon, we can take more damage. The change has already begun, Anita."

I pushed against his chest until he drew back enough for me to see his face. "You've always been holding back, haven't you?"

"Yes," he said.

I searched his face and saw such need in his eyes, and I knew why he'd been so angry at Gregory. He'd said that he almost regretted not making me his lupa in truth, now that he'd seen me be Nimir-Ra, but it was more than that. I looked into his brown eyes in the spill of early morning light and knew that he'd wanted me to be what he was, even though he hated it, that at some level he'd been tempted to make me his lupa for real. Somewhere in the lovemaking where he had to be so careful, he'd thought of it, more than once. It was there in eyes, his face. He started to look away as if he could feel that I saw it all, but he made himself look back, meet my gaze. He was almost defiant.

"How careful have you been of me, Richard?"

He did look away then, using his hair as a shield. I reached through that thick hair to touch his face, to turn him to look at me. "Richard, how careful have you been of me?"

There was something close to pain in his eyes. He whispered, "Very."

I held his face between my hands. "You don't have to be careful anymore."

A look of soft wonderment crossed his face, and he bent his head down, and we kissed, kissed as we had earlier, propping, exploring, taking turns at thrusting into each other. He drew slowly back from the kiss, and I felt the tip of him touch my opening. I stared down the length of our bodies so I could watch as his body flexed above me, and he thrust himself inside me harder this time, quicker. It brought my breath in a soundless scream.

"Anita ..."

I opened my eyes, not realizing I'd closed them. I gazed up at him. "Don't be careful anymore, Richard, don't be careful."

He smiled, gave me a quick kiss, then he was back, arched above me, and this time he didn't stop. He thrust every inch of himself into me as hard and as fast as he could. The sound of flesh into flesh became a constant sound, a wet hammering. I realized it hadn't been just his size that made him careful, but his strength. He could have bench-pressed the bed we lay on, and that strength lay not just in his arms, or back, but in his legs, his thighs, in the body he was pressing inside me, over and over again. For the first time ever, I began to appreciate the full power of him.

I'd felt the strength in his hands, his arms, when he held me, but it was nothing to this. He made of our bodies one body, one pounding, sweating, soaking, drenching piece of flesh. I was vaguely aware that it did hurt, that I was bruising, and I didn't care.

I called out his name as my body tightened around his, squeezing, and I spasmed underneath him, body slamming against the bed, not from Richard's thrusts, but from the power of the orgasm itself; screams spilled from my throat as my body rocked underneath him. It felt good, better than almost anything, but it was almost violence, almost pain, almost frightening. Somewhere in the midst of it all I was aware that he came, too. He screamed my name, but held his place, while I continued to writhe and fight underneath him. It wasn't until I lay quiet that he allowed himself to collapse on top of me, slightly to one side, so my face wouldn't be pressed into his chest.

We lay in a sweating, breathless heap, waiting for our hearts to slow enough to speak. He found his voice first. "Thank you, thank you for trusting me."

I laughed. "You're thanking me." I raised his hand to my mouth and kissed the palm, then rested his hand against my face. "Trust me, Richard, it was my pleasure."

He laughed, that rich throaty sound that is purely male, and purely sexual "We're going to need another shower."

"Whichever of us can walk first can have the first shower," I said.

He laughed and hugged me. I wasn't even sure my legs would work enough to shower at all. Maybe a bath.

Chapter 38

I WOKE JUST enough to feel the weight of someone at my back. I snuggled against that warmth, wrapping sleep back around me. An arm spilled over my shoulder, and I wriggled into the circle of arm and body. It wasn't the warmth, or the feel of him that woke me; the wereleopards had gotten me used to all that. It was the scent of his skin. By the scent alone, I knew it was Richard. I opened my eyes and snuggled deeper against him, curling that dark, muscled arm tighter around my body like drawing a cozy blanket around me. Of course, a blanket didn't have the hard weight of Richard, or the silken glide of his naked skin against mine, or the ability to cuddle back, to use hands to pull my body tighter in against him. He closed the distance, worked until, even with the height difference, his chest, stomach, and hips were curled around me. He gave one last movement, and I could feel him pressed hard and ready against the back of my body. It was morning, he was male, but it wasn't something embarrassing to be ignored. I could pay as much, or as little, attention to it as I wanted, and I wanted.

I started to roll over in the almost tight circle of his body and found I was stiff. My lower body felt bruised, aching, but in a good way. I laughed as he opened his arms enough for me to roll onto my back.

"What's so funny?" Richard asked.

I stared up at him, still laughing, I think to keep from groaning. "I'm stiff." He wiggled his eyebrows at me. "So am I."

I blushed, and he kissed my nose, then my mouth, but still chaste, still not really sexual. It made me laugh. If it had been anyone but me, I'd have said I giggled.

The next kiss wasn't chaste, and the one after that pressed me back against the bed. He slid his leg between my thighs, until his knee touched me, and I winced.

He drew back. "Are you too sore for this?"

"I'm willing to give it the ol' college try," I said, "but honestly, maybe."

He stayed propped above me, fingers moving a lock of my hair from my cheek. "What I did last night would have broken things inside an ordinary human."

I didn't need a mirror to feel my eyes go cool. I'd really been trying not to think about it.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to ruin the mood." He smiled suddenly and looked younger, more relaxed than I'd seen him in a long time. "I'm just glad to be with someone I don't have to worry about hurting."

I had to smile at him. "I'm not hurt, but we might have to try something a little more gentle this morning."

The humor faded, and something else filled his eyes, as he lowered his face for another kiss. He spoke as he moved towards me. "I think we can come up with something." He kissed my lips, then worked one kiss at a time down my neck, my shoulders. He got distracted at my breasts, covering them in

kisses, his tongue licking a quick, wet line across one nipple. He cupped one breast in his hands, holding it in the circle of his warmth, sliding his mouth over the nipple, taking as much of the breast into his mouth as he could. He sucked me into his mouth until he held over half my breast in the wet warmth. And with that touch, the *ardeur* flared up through my body from wherever it had been hiding.

Richard drew back from my breast, hands still cradling it. "What was that?" There were goosebumps on his arms.

"The *ardeur*," I said, voice soft.

He licked his lips, and I saw real fear in his eyes. "Jean-Claude told me about it, even let me feel his own version of it, but I didn't really believe it. I don't think I wanted to believe it."

My beast had awoken with the *ardeur*, as if one hunger fed the other. I felt it uncurl inside me and stretch for all the world, like some great cat waking from a nap. It rolled through me, reaching out to Richard, and his beast woke to it. One hand was on the solid warmth of his chest, but I could feel something else in there, something moving around as if his chest were hollow and there was something caged inside.

He gripped my hand, moved it back from his chest. "What are you doing?"

"The *ardeur* calls to our beasts, Richard." I snuggled down underneath him, my hand sliding down his body, tracing the flatness of his stomach, the curve of his hip. He grabbed my hand just before I could touch him. He had both my hands now, trapped in his larger ones. It didn't bother me, because I knew that I could touch him with things other than my hands, or even my body. I remembered the feel of his beast thrusting through me, and I spilled mine into him in a hot push of energy.

He jumped off of me, rolled out of the bed in a movement that was almost too quick to follow with the eyes. He stood by the bed, breath coming in ragged gasps, as if he'd been running. I could feel his fear like fine champagne. It added to the sex, brought me to my knees, to crawl from the tangle of covers to the edge of the bed. I could smell how warm he was; the scent of his skin came to me on the air, the faint sweetness of the cologne he'd put on the day before. My gaze wandered over the beauty of him. His sleep-tousled hair hung in a heavy mass over one side of his face. He brushed the thickness of it back from his face with one hand and a toss of his head, and that one simple movement made things low in my body tighten. But underneath the sex was the thought of what all that smooth, hard skin would feel like under my teeth. I wanted to mark him as I'd marked Nathaniel. I wanted to sink my teeth into his flesh and bite. I had a flash of what it felt like to taste him like so much meat, to feel his body respond, not just to the sex but to the hunger, and I knew for the first time why shapeshifters spoke of the hunger like it should be in all capital letters. Raina had risen her lascivious head. The *ardeur* overrode or overpowered her, but she was there, supplying images to the things I was feeling. I slid off the bed, and Richard backed up.

I could see his pulse in his neck, beating like a trapped thing. His beast was trapped, too, trapped by his control, his fear. I could feel it, as if it were

literally pacing inside his body, like a wolf in a cage at the zoo; pacing, pacing, never free. It might be a large, roomy cage, but it was still a cage. Raina gave me a visual that drove me to my knees. I saw Richard pinned under my body, chained to a bed, and when he came inside me, he shifted at the same moment. That was release for the shapeshifters; anything else was holding back.

Richard knelt in front of me. "Are you alright?" He touched my arm, and that was a bad thing. My beast roared across our skins, hit his in a blow that I felt physically in my stomach and ribs, like a punch. It staggered Richard, made him fall forward into me, and we clung for a second, arms around each other, our bodies pressed together. The *ardeur* flared over us like invisible flame, and we knelt in the heart of that fire like the wick of a candle. His heart beat against my arms, where they lay pressed to his chest, as if my skin had become a drum and he beat inside me, filled me with the rhythm of his body. My own heartbeat found a home inside Richard's body. We were filled with the rise and fall, the pulse and beat of each other, until I couldn't tell whose heart was in my chest, whose blood rushed through us. For a trembling moment we pressed above one another, as if our skin would give way and we would finally be what the marks had promised--one being, one body, one soul. The power broke apart, as Richard struggled against it, like a drowning man, breaking apart the power like arms shatter water; you can move it, disrupt it, but it flows back around you, swells over you, engulfs you. Richard screamed, and I felt him fall back.

I opened my eyes as his hand pulled away, and my hand tried to hold him. His hand was almost free, only his fingers still caught in mine, when the *ardeur* pressed around us, and I knew his control was fragile enough that I would feed. I felt his confusion, felt him struggling to decide what to hold on to and what to let go. I realized that the shields had come down long ago, because he couldn't hold the marks closed, keep himself in human form, and keep me from feeding, all at the same time. He screamed again, and I felt Richard decide, felt the conscious choice of the lesser evil. He shoved his beast down, down, deep inside himself, and he shut the marks between us like slamming a door. It was so sudden that it felt like the world had lurched. I had a moment of dizziness, was almost sick, then the *ardeur* rode over us, through us, like a thundering thing to trample us both underfoot, until we were just flesh, bone, blood, just meat, just need. I saw Richard's back arch, his head fling back, and through the *ardeur* I felt the growing pressure, tightness in his body, seconds before hot release spilled over him, and I held his hand while his body rocked with the strength of it, and the pleasure of it drew me to my knees, almost as if the power itself lifted me up for a second, held me, rocked me, and I fed, I fed, and fed, and fed, until we were left lying on the floor, sweat-covered, breathing in gasps, our hands still locked together.

Richard pulled away first. He lay there, eyes unfocused, breathing labored, his heart beating too fast, filling his throat. He swallowed hard enough that it sounded like it hurt. I felt weighted, heavy with the feeding, almost like I could sleep again, like a snake after a big meal.

Richard found his voice first. "You had no right to feed off me."

"I thought that was the idea of you staying until morning," I said.

He sat up slowly, as if he were stiff now. "It was."

"You never said *no*." I rolled onto my side, but didn't try and sit up yet.

He nodded. "I know that. I'm not blaming you."

He was, but at least he was trying not to. "You could have stopped me, Richard. All you had to do was either leave the marks open between us or let your beast go. You could have held the *ardeur* out. You made your choice on what to control."

"I know that, too." But he wouldn't look at me.

I propped myself up on my arms, almost sitting. "Then what's wrong?"

He shook his head and got to his feet. He was a little unsteady, but he went for the door. "I'm leaving, Anita."

"You make that sound awfully permanent, Richard."

He turned and looked at me. "No one feeds off me, no one."

He'd closed himself so tight that I couldn't tell what he was feeling, but it was plain on his face. Pain. His eyes held some deep pain, and he'd pulled so far away in his mind, his heart, that I couldn't tell what it was, only that it hurt him.

"So, you won't be here tomorrow morning when the *ardeur* comes again?" My voice sounded almost neutral when I asked.

He shook his head, all that heavy hair sliding around his shoulders. His hand was on the doorknob, his body turned away enough that he hid himself from me as much as he could. "I can't do this again, Anita. For God's sake, you have the same rule. No one feeds on you either."

I sat up, arms wrapping around my knees, holding them tight to my chest. I guess I was covering my nakedness, too. "You've felt the *ardeur* now, Richard. If I can't feed off of you, then who? Who do you want me to share this with?"

"Jean-Claude ..." But his voice dropped off before he could finish.

"It's a little after noon and he's still dead to the world. He won't wake in time to share the *ardeur* with me."

His hand tightened on the doorknob hard enough for me to see the muscles in his arm tense. "The Nimir-Raj, then. I'm told you've already fed on him once anyway."

"I don't know Micah that well, Richard." I took a deep breath and said, "I don't love him, Richard. I love you. I want you."

"You want to feed off me? You want me to be your cow?"

"No," I said, "no."

"I am not food, Anita, not for you or anyone else. I am Ulfric of the Thronnos Rokke Clan, and I am not cattle. I am the thing that eats the cattle."

"If you had shifted, then you could have blocked the *ardeur*, kept me from feeding, why didn't you?"

He leaned his forehead against the door. "I don't know."

"Honesty, Richard, at least with yourself."

He turned then, and his anger flared across my skin like a whip. "You want honesty, fine, we can have honesty. I hate what I am. I want a life, Anita."

I want a real life. I want free of all this shit. I don't want to be Ulfric. I don't want to be a werewolf. I just want a life."

"You have a life, Richard, it's just not the life you thought it would be."

"And I don't want to love someone who is more at home with the monsters than I am."

I just looked at him, hugging my knees to my bare chest, my back pressed up against the bed. I looked at him, because I couldn't think of a damned thing to say.

"I'm sorry, Anita, but I can't ... *won't* do this." He opened the door then. He opened the door, and he walked out, closing it behind him. The door closed with a soft, firm click. I sat there for a few seconds not moving. I don't even think I was breathing, then slowly the tears squeezed out, and my first breath was a ragged gasp that hurt my throat. I rolled slowly to the floor, lying in a tight, tight ball. I lay on the floor and cried until I was cold and shivering.

That's how Nathaniel found me. He pulled the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around me, picked me up, and climbed onto the bed with me in his arms. He held me in the curve of his body, spooned against me, and I couldn't feel him through the thick blanket. He held me and stroked my hair. I felt the bed move and opened my eyes to find Cherry and Zane crawling around me. They touched my face, took my tears with the tips of their fingers, and curled around me on the other side until I was cupped in their warmth.

Gregory and Vivian came next and climbed onto the bed until we all lay in a warm, thick nest of bodies and covers. And I was hot and had to peel the blanket back, and their hands spilled over me, touching, holding. I realized that I was still naked and so were they. No one ever put on clothes unless I made them. But the touching wasn't sexual, it was comfort, the warm pile of puppies and everyone in that pile loved me in their way. Maybe it wasn't the way I wanted to be loved, but love is love and sometimes I think I'd thrown away more love than most people ever get a chance at. I was trying to be more careful lately.

They held me until I fell asleep, exhausted with crying, skin hot. But down in the center of my being was a cold, icy spot that they couldn't touch. It was the place where I loved Richard, had always loved Richard, almost from the first time I'd seen him. But he was right on one thing. We couldn't keep doing this. I wouldn't keep doing this. It was over. It had to be over. He hated what he was, and now he hated what I was. He said he wanted someone that he wouldn't have to worry about hurting, and he did want that, but he also wanted someone human, ordinary. He couldn't have both, but that didn't keep him from wanting both. I couldn't be ordinary, and I wasn't sure I'd ever been human. I couldn't be what Richard wanted me to be, and he couldn't stop wanting it. Richard was a riddle with no answer, and I was tired of playing a game I couldn't win.

Chapter 39

I SLEPT LIKE I was drugged, heavy, with harsh, fragmented dreams, or nothingness. I don't know when I would have woken, but someone was licking my cheek. If they'd shaken me or called my name, I might have been able to ignore it, but someone was licking my cheek in long languorous movements that I couldn't ignore.

I opened my eyes and found Cherry's face so close I couldn't focus on it. She moved back just enough so I wouldn't feel cross-eyed looking at her, then said, "You were having a nightmare. I thought we should wake you."

Her voice was neutral, her face blank, cheerful in an anonymous sort of way. It was her nurse face, cheerful, comforting, telling you nothing. The fact that she was naked, lying on her side, propped up on one elbow so that her body showed in one long line didn't seem to distract from her professionalism. I could never pull that off naked. No matter what else was happening I was always aware that I didn't have clothes on.

"I don't remember what I was dreaming," I said. I raised a hand to smooth the wetness along my cheek.

"You taste salty from all the crying," she said.

The bed moved, and Zane peeked around my other shoulder. "Can I lick the other cheek?"

It made me laugh, and that was almost miracle enough to let him do it, almost. I sat up and instantly regretted it. My whole body felt stiff and abused, aching, as if I'd been beaten. Hell, I'd felt better after some of the beatings I'd taken over the years. I hugged the blanket to me, partially to cover my nakedness, partially because I was cold.

I leaned against the head of the bed, frowning. "You said nightmare. What time is it?"

About five," Cherry said. "I could say daymare, if you like, but either way, you were--" she hesitated--"whimpering in your sleep."

I hugged the blanket tighter. "I don't remember."

She sat up, patting my knee under the blanket. "Are you hungry?"

I shook my head.

She and Zane exchanged one of those looks that say just how worried about you people are. It made me angry.

"Look, I'm okay."

They both looked at me.

I frowned at them. "I'll be okay, alright."

They didn't look convinced.

"I need to get dressed."

They both just lay there staring at me.

"Which means get out and give me some space."

They exchanged another of those looks, which bugged me, but at a nod from Cherry, they both got up off the bed and went for the door. "And put some clothes on," I said.

"If it'll make you feel better," Cherry said.

"It will," I said.

Zane gave a little salute. "Your wish is our command."

That was actually a little too close to the truth, but I let it go. When they were gone, I picked out some clothes, some weapons, and made it to the bathroom without seeing anyone. I wouldn't have put it past Cherry to make sure I had a clear shot to the bathroom. They were managing me, but this morning, make that afternoon, I didn't care enough to complain.

I was as quick in the bathroom as I could be, and for some reason I didn't like looking in the mirror. I was trying not to think, and seeing my eyes staring back at me like those of a shock victim made it hard not to think about why I looked so pale, so shell-shocked.

I put on my usual black undies and matching bra. It was getting to the point where I didn't own a white bra. Jean-Claude's fault. Black jogging socks, black jeans, black polo shirt, shoulder rig, complete with Browning Hi-Power, the Firestar in its interpants holster in front almost lost against the black shirt. I even added the wrist sheaths and the two silver knives. I didn't need this much firepower for walking around the house, especially with so many shapeshifters running around, but I was feeling shaky, as if my world was less solid today than yesterday. I'd always thought that Richard and I would work something out. I wasn't sure what, but something. Now, I didn't believe that. We weren't going to work anything out. We weren't going to be anything, except the bare minimum to each other. I wasn't even sure his invitation to be Bolverk was still on the table. I hoped so. I could lose him as my lover, but I couldn't let him send the pack to rack and ruin. If he didn't cooperate, I wasn't sure how I was going to stop it, but that was a problem for another day. Today my goal was just to survive, just to get through the day. I huddled my weapons around me like comfort objects. If I'd been alone in the house, or if it had just been Nathaniel, I would have carried Sigmund, my stuffed toy penguin, around with me. That was how bad a day it was.

I did have a moment when I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror in my bedroom where I stopped and had to smile. I looked like I was dressed in casual assassin chic. I'd teased some of my friends who were assassins or bounty hunters about assassin chic, but sometimes you gotta go with the stereotypes. Besides, I look great in black. The black-on-black look made my skin look almost translucent, like it should have glowed. My eyes were swimmingly dark. I looked almost ethereal, like a wingless angel on a bad day. Alright, maybe a fallen angel, but the effect was still striking. I'd learned long ago that if you're feeling unloved by the man in your life, the best revenge is to look good. If I'd really wanted to follow the strategy completely, I'd have put on makeup, but screw that. I was still on vacation. I didn't wear makeup on vacation.

There was a crowd in the kitchen. The order for everyone to wear clothes had been taken to heart. Cherry had on cutoff jean shorts and a white men's shirt with the sleeves torn off, so that little bits of thread decorated the arm holes. She'd tied the ends of the shirt so her stomach showed as she moved

around the kitchen. Zane's gaze followed her wherever she moved. I wasn't sure how Cherry felt about him, but Zane was beginning to act like a man in love, or at least very serious lust. He sat at the table wearing the leather pants he'd taken off last night, ignoring his coffee and watching Cherry.

Caleb leaned against the counter in his jeans, with the top button unbuttoned so that his belly-button ring showed. He sipped coffee and watched Zane watch Cherry with an odd look on his face. I couldn't decipher it, but I didn't like it, as if he were trying to think how to cause trouble between them. Caleb struck me as one of those who liked to cause trouble.

Nathaniel was sitting at the table, his long hair in a braid down his back, chest bare, but I knew without checking that he'd have something on. He knew me well enough to know I liked my houseguests clothed.

Igor and Claudia stood when I came into the room. His tattoos were even more striking in the full light of day. They graced his arms, what I could see of his chest through the white tank top, and the sides of his neck, like liquid jewels, brilliant, eye-catching. Even from a distance they were beautiful against his pale skin. I wasn't much into tattoos but I couldn't picture Igor without them--the look just worked for him. He'd put on the shoulder rig, and it still looked like it should chaff with the tank top, but, hey, it wasn't my skin. The Glock sat under his arm, a black spot on all that pretty color, like an imperfection on a Picasso.

Claudia looked positively ordinary beside him--if a woman that was so damn close to seven feet and muscled better than most men could look ordinary. The gun at the small of her back wasn't nearly as noticeable as Igor's. Her black hair was still pulled back in a tight ponytail, leaving her face clean and empty, and that included her eyes. Claudia had cop eyes, or bad-guy eyes, the eyes of someone who doesn't let you see what's inside. I didn't meet many women with eyes like that, outside of the police. If her face had been a little softer, she'd have been beautiful. But there was something in the set of her jaw, the way she held that full mouth that said, back off, no touching. It robbed her of something that would have changed everything about her.

The two of them came to take up posts to either side and a little behind me. I would have protested, but I'd discovered last night that it didn't do much good. They took orders from Rafael, not me. He'd said, "Keep her safe," and that was what they were going to do. I was too ... whatever the hell I was to waste energy on telling them to back off. They could follow me around if it made them feel better. This afternoon I just didn't care.

Merle was standing in the corner of the cabinets, near enough to the coffeemaker that Igor crowded him while I poured my coffee. I didn't know who had made a fresh pot, and I didn't care; just the sight and smell of it made me feel better.

Merle was wearing the cowboy boots, jeans, and jean jacket over bare chest that he'd had on last night. He was sipping coffee out of one of the few plain mugs I owned. The scar on his chest was very white, ragged, pitted in one spot as if that had been the deepest part of the wound. It did look like lightning carved into his chest and stomach. I wanted to ask what had happened, but

there was a look to his eyes as he watched the kitchen that said he probably wouldn't tell me, and he'd definitely see it as intrusive. None of my business anyway.

The only chairs open at the table gave their backs to the bay window and the sliding glass door. I hated sitting with my back to a window or a door--especially a door. Nathaniel touched Zane's arm. He glanced back at me then got up, coffee cup and all, and went around to the chair that backed the door. Cherry sat beside him, though her chair had been Claudia's, and it was turned so that she had the view of both doors. Cherry moved the chair closer to Zane, giving her back to all that glass.

There'd been a time when I wasn't this careful, especially at home, but today was going to be one of my paranoid days. Insecurity had that effect on me, even emotional insecurity.

Claudia sat beside me. Igor leaned against the island behind me, keeping an eye on Merle, I think. They didn't seem to like each other.

I took the first sip of coffee, hot, black, and let the warmth fill me for a few seconds, before I asked, "Where's Gregory?"

"Stephen and Vivian took him back to their apartment," Cherry said.

"But he's alright?" I asked.

She nodded, smiling that smile that made her look years younger than we both were. "He's healed, Anita. You healed him."

"I called his beast, I didn't heal him."

She shrugged. "Same difference."

I shook my head. "No, I couldn't heal him last night."

She frowned, and even that was pretty. She was buzzed today, shining with it. I glanced at Zane, who was still gazing at her. Maybe it was love for both of them. Something had certainly put a twinkle in her eye.

"For heaven's sake, Anita, you saved him, does it really matter how you did it?"

It was my turn to shrug. "I just don't like the fact that Raina's munin seems to be interfering more and more when I try to heal."

The doorbell rang, and I jumped like I'd been shot. Nervous--who me?

"I ordered take-out," Nathaniel said.

I looked at him. "Please tell me it's Chinese."

He nodded, smiling, I think at my pleased expression. We'd discovered that though no Chinese restaurant would ordinarily deliver out this far, that for a sizable tip, and I mean sizable, they'd make an exception for us. Nathaniel got up, but Caleb pushed away from the door. "I'll get it. I don't seem to be much use for anything else." He set his mug on the island and threaded his way between us to vanish into the living room.

"What's his problem today?" I asked.

Igor answered, "He tried to get friendly with Claudia."

"And me," Cherry said.

I looked from Cherry's smiling face to Claudia's frown. "And he's not bleeding or bruised?"

"It wasn't necessary to hurt him," Claudia said, "only to be very, very clear." The tone in her voice and the look in her eyes made my own eyes go cold. I don't know if I'd ever met a woman that had that effect on me. It made me feel sexist to say that it was more unnerving because she was a woman, but it was still true.

Her nostrils flared, and I watched all of them sniff the air. Everyone moved at once, scattering around the room. Claudia stood, grabbed my arm--my gun arm--and pulled me back towards the far side of the kitchen and the wall. She already had her gun out in her right hand. I jerked my gun arm free as Igor moved with her and they stood in front of me, blocking my view. Igor had his gun out, too. I was about to ask what the hell was going on, when I smelled it. The acrid, musty scent of snakes.

I had the Browning out and pointed at the door, sighted two-handed when the first snake man came through the kitchen doorway with Caleb in front of him, a sawed-off shotgun pressed into the angle of his jaw. "Anyone moves, and he dies."

Chapter 40

EVERYONE FROZE, AS if we'd all taken a collective breath and held it. "No one has to die here," the snake man said. He looked at me with a huge copper-colored eye. The strong black stripe that edged the eyes looked like dramatic makeup. There were no scars on this one's face. He was shorter and seemed younger. His scaled face almost managed a smile, but the jaw of a snake is just not made for smiling. His eyes were as empty and alien as the rest of him. "Our boss just wants to talk to Ms. Blake, that's all."

"Have him pick up the damn phone and make an appointment," I said. I was staring down the barrel of the Browning at a point near the center of his chest, far enough up from Caleb's head that I wasn't worried about shooting him, but close enough to the throat that with the ammo I had in the gun it might pretty much decapitate him. If he ever moved the gun barrel out of Caleb's jaw. A sawed-off shotgun, with silver shot at touching range, and Caleb would be gone. I didn't much like him, but I couldn't let the bad guys blow his head off, could I?

"He didn't think you'd come," the snake man said.

"You go away, have him call, and I promise to give it the consideration it deserves." My voice was quiet because I was stilling my breath as much as I could, waiting for that one shot, if it ever came.

The snake man ground the barrel into Caleb's neck, until he forced a small pain sound from him. "This is silver shot, Ms. Blake. At this range it'll take his head."

"The second after he dies, so do you." Claudia said it, her voice as quiet and steady as the arm that held the gun that was pointed at the snake man's head.

He gave a hissing laugh, and it was echoed from behind him. More of the things started to move up in the open doorway. I caught a flash of silver metal, more guns. "No one else comes through that doorway, or I'll blow you away and let Caleb take his chances."

He pushed the barrel of the shotgun into Caleb's jaw until the smaller man had to rise on tiptoe, and I saw the first hints of panic on his face. "I don't think she likes you very much," the snake man hissed.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "I'm not letting you bring more guns into this room."

"You promise not to hurt Anita." It was Merle. I'd almost forgotten him standing to one side and behind us.

"We won't harm a hair on her head."

"We can smell that you're lying," Claudia said.

The snake head turned to one side, birdlike. "Most people can't smell changes in us, can't smell anything but the stink of snake."

Cherry's voice. "Anita."

My eyes flickered to her, and I saw movement outside the sliding glass doors. They were trying to flank us. "We've got movement on this side," Igor said.

For once other people had guns, and they seemed to know what they were doing. How refreshing. My gaze turned back to the snake man in time to see him motion with the barrel of the gun towards the glass. "We have the house surrounded. There is no need for all of you to die."

Claudia fired a second before I did. Her bullet hit him in the face, mine took him high on the chest, low on the neck. His head vanished in a welter of blood and thicker things. My ears rang with the shots in the small space. The snake's body jerked back; the shotgun went off as his hand convulsed. Caleb threw himself to the floor towards us. Two more snake men came through the door shoulder-to-shoulder, both with shotguns. Claudia said, "Left."

I shot the one on the right, and she took the one on the left. Both of us hit what we aimed at, and the two fell to the floor, one shotgun skidding across the floor towards us.

Another shotgun blast exploded to our left. I turned towards the noise, I couldn't help it. The sliding glass door had shattered, and I hadn't heard the sound of falling glass, just the shotgun roaring. Igor was kneeling, using the island as cover, as he put two shots into the chest of a man. The man fell to his knees, abruptly, like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"Incoming," Claudia said, and I turned back to the other door. I could see the barrel of a shiny revolver, something nickel plated. Claudia was standing with her body pressed to the cabinets on the near wall, almost hidden from the door. She fired twice at that shiny barrel, and there was a scream that overrode the ringing in my ears. A screaming that went on and on like the squeal of a baby rabbit when a cat gets it. Dimly, I heard someone yell, "Shut up, Felix!"

Shots showered into the room from the side of the inner door that neither Claudia nor I could see and still stay hidden. Someone touched my arm, and I whirled, smacking into Nathaniel with the barrel of the Browning. He pointed. Igor was on the floor, on his side, with the first hint of crimson trickling across the floor. I saw Zane and Cherry under the table, hugging the ground. I caught a glimpse of Merle farther back, tucked into the corner of the cabinets, probably better hidden than any of us. What do you do in a gunfight if you have no gun, hide? I had a moment of meeting Merle's eyes, before I turned back to the wreckage.

A man stepped through the broken sliding glass door, a pump-action shotgun in his hands. He pumped a round in as he stepped through the door. I shot him three times before his knees collapsed from under him. He should have had the round pumped in before he stepped through the door.

Claudia was putting bullets into the inner door. I don't think she was hitting anything now, but she was keeping them from rushing us. Nothing else moved in the broken door, but I stayed crouched, gun aimed two-handed at the opening.

Bullets rained down from the inner door, and Claudia and I hugged the cabinets. I kept an eye on the far door, but I couldn't keep aimed and take cover at the same time. Another shotgun blast roared through the room from the little window above the sink. It took a big bite out of the island cabinets. I was as low to the ground as I could get, on my butt, pressed to the cabinets, but I kept the Browning on the sliding glass door. The shotgun sent another blast through the little window, and the shots from the living room came one after the other, not aiming, just keeping us where we were. I kept my eyes and my gun on the far door. They were shooting to cover something, and that was the only door left.

Three of them came through the sliding door, and everything slowed down. I was seeing the world through crystal, everything sharp edged. I had all the time in the world to see the two snakes and the lion man Marco come through in a blur of movement that was so fast I knew that none of them was human. I saw the shotguns, long and black, barrels impossibly long; the lion, Marco, had a 9 mil in each hand. I had an impression of blond and golden fur, before my first bullet took him in the side, spun him around. Claudia fired into one of the snakes, dropped him, but the other shotgun roared, and I felt her stagger above me.

I put two shots into the man's chest, and he collapsed on the kitchen table, shotgun falling soundlessly to the floor.

A bullet hit right next to me, and I saw Marco aiming from a prone position. I brought the Browning around to aim at him, but I was going to be too late. I watched him squeezing off the shot and knew he had me. There wasn't time to be scared, just a calm thought, that he was going to shoot me, and I couldn't stop him. Then a black blur was on his back, jerking him backwards, as the shot skidded along the floor in front of me. A wereleopard in man form threw the man out of the door and vanished after him.

I kept my eye on the door, but nothing moved. Something dripped on my face, warm, almost hot. Claudia slumped down the cabinets, to sit, legs sprawled out in front of her, gun still gripped in her hand, but loosely. I gave myself a second to see that her right shoulder and arm was a mass of red, then I turned back to the sliding glass door. I hugged the cabinet beside her. If they came through from the living room, then I could get some of them. If they rushed us from both doors at once, it was over.

I saw movement in the far corner and found Merle on his feet with a shotgun in one hand and a snake in the other. He'd pulled him through the window. It was another pump, and he pumped a round in the chamber with one hand, tearing his fingers through the throat of the snake with the other.

I saw his mouth move more than heard him and knew the lack of sound wasn't just shock, it was too much gunfire in a small room. I thought he said, "I've got this door." I eased around Claudia and tried to cover the living room, having to trust that Merle really could handle the other door. Claudia's eyes rolled as I moved around her. Her mouth moved, but I couldn't hear her. She began to reach her left hand towards her motionless right, as if the right hand couldn't move. I kept an eye on the door, but felt her painfully slow movements as she transferred the gun to her left hand. Since I was pressed just above her body, I hoped that she practiced left-handed. I'd hate to get shot by accident, when I was so much more likely to get shot on purpose.

Nothing happened for what seemed like forever; the silence was utterly still. My hearing came back in stages. I heard Caleb muttering over and over again, "Mother fucking son of a bitch, mother fucking son of a bitch." He was curled against the far cabinets behind me, making as small a target of himself as he could. Nathaniel actually had Igor's dropped handgun and was pointing it at the sliding glass door. I'd taught Nathaniel the basics of guns. I had too many around for him not to know something about them, but watching him lean against the island cabinets above Igor's body, the gun held two-handed, his left arm steadied against the cabinet edge, I knew he'd shoot whoever came through that door. If he was actually going to start picking up guns during fights, I was going to have to take him out to the range with me more.

Of course, that presupposed we would all live to do anything else. The silence stretched, until the wind sighing through the trees outside the broken glass seemed loud.

A voice came from the direction of the deck. "It's me, it's Micah." The voice was a deep, growling bass.

"It doesn't sound like Micah," I called back.

"It sounds like me when I'm not in human form," the voice said.

I said, "Merle?"

"It's Micah," he said.

"Come into the doorway, slowly," I said.

The black wereleopard eased through the broken doorway, claws held in the air. The dark shape seemed to fill the doorway. In leopardman form he was over six feet, broader through the shoulders, bulkier all over, as if he had muscles in this shape that he didn't have in human form. His fur gleamed like

ebony, sunlight caressed his side, bringing out black-on-black rosettes like sable flowers crushed into velvet. Pale skin showed through at his chest, stomach, lower. In the movies the wolfmen are sexless, smooth as a Barbie doll. In real life, they are very much male. Somehow it was easier to see him naked in half-human form and not be the least bit embarrassed. I just didn't see the shapeshifters as sex objects once the fur started to flow.

"Where's the guy you threw out the door?" I asked.

"He got away."

"I don't hear anyone in the living room," Merle said.

"They all went out the front door," Zane said, "or at least the room looks clear." He and Cherry were still crouched under the kitchen table, flat to the ground.

"I'll check the living room," Micah said.

"These bad guys have silver bullets. I wouldn't be so cavalier about it," I said.

He nodded and his head was mostly leopard, very little left of the man he was, except, strangely, those chartreuse eyes. They marked him as alien, other, in human form, but as that furred and muscled body stalked past me, those same eyes marked him as Micah. The color was richer. Encircled with black fur, the eyes were even more striking. He hesitated in the doorway, then crept through, going low, making as small a target of himself as he could. It was rare to see a lycanthrope that took advantage of cover. Most of them seemed to see themselves as invulnerable, which was usually true, but not today. Igor was very still on the floor, and Claudia's shoulder looked like so much meat. She was dumped against the cabinets. Her left hand still gripped the gun, though the hand was motionless on the floor, as if she had no use of the arm.

When I glanced down, the gun was pointed somewhere in the direction of the sliding glass doors. The hand wavered enough that I was nervous crouching over her, but she fought that shaking limb so that she never quite compromised the line of my body. The right side of her body was soaked with blood, and her eyes were having trouble focusing. I think only sheer stubbornness was keeping her conscious.

My gaze flicked to Igor's still form and the bodies piled in the doorways. If Igor was breathing, I couldn't see it. "Check his pulse, Nathaniel."

Nathaniel glanced down at the man, gave me a second of eye contact, then turned back to staring at the broken sliding door. "I'd hear his heart if it was still beating. Hear the blood in his body if it was still moving. It's not." He said all that with his head turned away from me. It made it somehow worse, more unnerving.

Micah appeared in the far doorway. "There's no one left alive in here." He stepped over the pile of bodies in the door, and even that movement was gliding, his balance forward on the feet, which were somewhere between human and leopard. Was I really going to be a leopard when the moon came full this month? Was this dark, graceful shape, this muscular shadow, what I had inside of me?

I pushed the question away; we had other more pressing problems, like the wounded. I'd concentrate on the emergencies and try to let everything else go. It was one of my specialties. I put my fingers against Claudia's neck, trying to check her pulse. She shrugged her shoulders, moving just enough so I couldn't check it. "I'm fine," she said, voice harsh. "I'm fine."

That was so obviously not true, I didn't even argue. Until I checked the house personally, I wouldn't believe we had the all-clear, but my industrial size first-aid kit was in the pantry, and I knew the immediate area was safe. "Cherry crawl out from under the table on this side and get the first-aid kit." I stood up and moved around the cabinets so I'd be able to see both the living room and the sliding glass door, not to mention the bay window over the breakfast nook.

Cherry glanced once at Zane, then crawled out from among the chair legs. She stayed low until she got to the pantry closet. She had to make Caleb move, scooting at him, gently, with her feet. He finally unwound from his tight fetal position and crawled about a foot away so Cherry could get the kit.

Cherry went to Igor first. She was a wereleopard; her hearing was just as good as Nathaniel's, but she went through all the motions, then turned to Claudia. Claudia tried to push her away with her left hand, gun still in it.

"Claudia, let Cherry help you," I said.

"Damn it!"

Cherry took that for a yes and started inspecting the shoulder. Claudia didn't fight her anymore, and I was glad. Shock can make you do and say funny things. I didn't really want to arm wrestle the wererat, wounded or not. Of course, Micah was here and he could probably arm wrestle Claudia and win, at least while she was wounded.

I was still keeping a peripheral sense of the open spaces, but as the time dragged on quietly, there was only the wind in the trees, the noise of summer locusts thrumming through the open living room door and the splintered glass of the back door. I began to relax by inches. That tension in my shoulders that I always get during a fight and never really notice until the adrenaline lets down, let me know that I thought we were safe, for now.

Then I heard something over the summer silence--sirens. Police sirens wailing, getting closer. I didn't have any near neighbors. You heard gunshots in Jefferson County pretty regularly, so who the hell reported the gunshots?

Micah turned that strangely rounded face towards me. "Are they coming here?"

I shrugged. "I don't know for sure, but it seems likely."

We both glanced down at the bodies on the floor, then looked at each other. "We don't have time to hide the bodies," he said.

"No, we don't," I said. I looked at everybody. Merle was still watching the kitchen window, the borrowed shotgun in his big hands. Zane had crawled out from under the table to play nurse for Cherry, handing her things as she asked for them. She had packed Claudia's arm.

Cherry looked up at me. "She could partially heal herself if she shapeshifted, but she'd still need medical attention."

"The police tend to shoot shapeshifters in animal form," I said.

"I'll stay," Claudia said, teeth gritted just a little. "The more wounded we have on our side, the better the police will like it."

She had a point. I looked at Micah. The sirens were very near now, almost in front of the house.

"You better go, Micah."

"Why?"

"The police are about to burst in here, see a lot of bodies, a lot of blood. Anything in animal form stands a good chance of getting shot."

"That's not a problem," he said. The fur began to recede, like water pulling back from the shore. As human skin was revealed, his bones slid out of sight into it, like hard things thrown in wax, covered, melted. I'd never seen anyone change so casually, so easily. It was almost as if he were merely changing clothes, except for the clear fluid that ran down his body like a liquid sheet, the sound of bones popping, reforming, even the sound of flesh boiling over him. Only his eyes remained the same, unchanging, like two jewels fixed in the center of the universe. Then he was suddenly human again, body covered in that thick, watery fluid. I'd never seen so much of the liquid before from only one change. I was standing in a pool of it and hadn't noticed.

He slumped suddenly, trying to catch himself on the cabinet, but I was in the way and had to grab him around the waist to keep him from falling to the floor. "Rapid change comes with a price."

"I've never seen anyone change back that quickly," Cherry said.

"And he won't fall into a coma-sleep either," Merle said. "Give him a few minutes and he'll be fine, messy, but fine." There was admiration in the big man's voice, and something else--almost jealousy.

The sirens wailed to a stop outside the house, then silence. "Everybody put the guns down. Don't want to get shot by accident," I said.

Nathaniel did as I asked, instantly. I had to press Micah closer into my body, one-handed, so I could put my own gun back on the cabinet. Micah's body shuddered against me. I looked at him, about to ask if he was alright, but the look in his eyes stopped me. It wasn't pain I saw in his eyes. I slid my other hand around his waist so that I held him more securely against me. His skin was slick under my hands. He managed to put a hand on the cabinet behind us. I stared into his eyes from inches away, and there were worlds to drown in, in those eyes, needs and hopes, everything.

A man's voice yelled, "Police!"

I yelled back, "Don't shoot, the bad guys are gone. We've got wounded." I moved Micah so he could prop himself against the cabinet, then put my hands on my head and moved carefully into the doorway. I had to step over the bodies in the kitchen door to come into the line of sight of the two officers crouched in the doorway. If I'd been a large imposing man, they might still have fired not on purpose exactly, but you don't see three bodies in a doorway in Jefferson County, Missouri, every day. But I was small, female, and looked fairly benign, unarmed. But I kept talking as I moved anyway. Things like, "They attacked us. We've got wounded. We need an ambulance. Thank God you guys came when you did. The sirens scared them away." I kept babbling until I was sure that

they weren't going to shoot me, then the really hard part started. How do you explain five bodies in your kitchen, some of which even in death didn't look very human? Beats the hell out of me.

Chapter 41

TWO HOURS LATER I was sitting on my couch, talking to Zerbrowski. He looked, as he usually did, like he'd dressed in a hurry, in the dark, so that nothing quite matched, and he'd grabbed the tie with the stain on it, instead of the one that he probably meant to wear. His wife, Katie, was a neat, orderly sort of person, and I'd never figured out why she allowed Zerbrowski to leave the house dressed like a walking disaster. Of course, maybe it wasn't a matter of allowing him to do anything; maybe it was just one of those battles you just gave up on after a few years.

Caleb sat on the far end of the couch huddled in a blanket we'd gotten off the bed. The paramedics that had taken Claudia away had said she was in shock. I was betting that this was the first time he'd been on the wrong end of a shotgun. Only the top of his curls and a thin slit of brown eyes showed above the blanket. He looked about ten years old, huddled like that. I would have offered comfort but Zerbrowski wouldn't let me talk to him or anyone else. Merle stood against the wall at the end of the couch, watching everything with unreadable eyes. The cops kept giving him little eye flicks as they moved around the room. He made most of them uncomfortable for the same reason he made me uncomfortable; he wore the potential for violence like an expensive cologne.

Zerbrowski pushed his glasses more firmly on his nose, shoved his hands in his pants pockets, and looked down at me. He was standing, I was sitting, the looking down part was easy. "So let me get this straight, these guys just burst in here, and you don't have the first idea why."

"That's right," I said.

He stared at me. I stared back. If he thought I was going to break under the pressure of his steely gaze, he was wrong. It helped that I really didn't have the faintest idea what was going on. I sat. He stood. We stared at each other. Caleb shuddered on his end of the couch. Merle watched all the people scurrying back and forth.

There were a lot of people. They moved around the house behind Zerbrowski, going in and out of the kitchen, like huge, ambitious ants. There's always too many people at a crime scene, not gawkers either. You always have too many cops around, way more than you need. But you never know which pair of eyes or hands will find that vital clue. Frankly, I thought more evidence

was probably lost with all the traffic than found with the extra help, but that was me. I'm just not the social type.

We stood in our own little well of silence. The bedroom door opened behind us. I glanced back to see Micah come out of the room. He was wearing a pair of my sweatpants. Since they were men's sweats anyway and we were the same height, they fit perfectly. I'd never had a boyfriend that I could trade clothes with before. You just didn't find that many grown men my size.

The police hadn't let him shower, so his long hair had dried in messy clumps to his shoulders. The drying liquid was beginning to flake off in patches. His chartreuse eyes flicked towards me, but they stayed neutral. Dolph came right behind him, looming over Micah the way he loomed over me. Dolph's eyes weren't neutral; they were angry. He'd been angry since he stepped through the door. He'd separated us all into different rooms. Nathaniel was being questioned by his friend from the police station, Detective Jessica Arnet. They were in the guest room upstairs. Detective Perry had questioned Caleb and was still questioning Zane. Dolph had done Merle and Micah. Zerbrowski hadn't so much questioned me as simply stood there and made sure I didn't talk to any of the others. Call it a hunch, but I was betting Dolph planned on questioning me personally.

We did have five bodies on the ground, three of which even in death hadn't changed back to human form. The three snake things had stayed snakey. Shapeshifters always change back to their original form in death. Always. Which raised the question, if they weren't shapeshifters, what the hell were they?

"Anita," Dolph said. One word, but I knew what he meant. I got up and went for the bedroom. Micah brushed his fingertips across my hand as I passed him. Dolph's eyes tightened, and I knew he'd noticed.

He held the door for me, and I walked past him into my bedroom. I resented them using my house, my bedroom, to question me, but it beat the hell out of going downtown. So I kept my complaints to myself. Dolph had every reason to take us all downtown. We had dead bodies, and I wasn't even denying I had killed them. Oh, I might have tried to deny it if I thought I could get away with it, but I couldn't, so I didn't.

He motioned me to the kitchen chair that had been moved into the bedroom. He stayed standing, all six-feet-eight of him. "Tell me," he said.

I told him exactly what had happened. I told the truth, all of it. Of course I didn't know enough to need to lie. They'd carted Igor's body away, all those bright tattoos still vibrant, more alive than the rest of him. We had one dead and one wounded. It was my house. It was obviously a case of self-defense. The only difference from the other two times I'd had to kill people in my house was the number of bodies and that some of them were so not-human. Other than that, I'd walked on much more questionable occasions. So why was Dolph treating this one more seriously? I didn't have a clue.

Dolph stared down at me. He has a much better steely gaze than Zerbrowski, but I gave him calm, blank eyes. I could look innocent this time, because I was.

"And you don't know why they wanted to take you?"

Actually, I had a thought on that one, but I didn't share it, couldn't. They might have come hunting me because I nearly killed their leader. One of the problems with withholding evidence from the police is that later you can't always explain yourself without confessing that you've withheld evidence. This was one of those moments. I hadn't told Dolph about the half-men half-snakes taking Nathaniel and the fight afterwards. I could have told him now, but ... but there were too many things that I'd have had to tell him, like that maybe I was going to be a wereleopard. Dolph hated the monsters. I wasn't ready to share that with him.

I gave him an innocent face and said, "Nope."

"They wanted you pretty damn bad, Anita, to come in here with this kind of firepower."

I shrugged. "I guess so."

The anger filled his eyes, thinned his lips to a tight line. "You are lying to me."

I widened my eyes. "Would I do that?"

He whirled and slammed his hand into the top of my dresser, hard enough that the mirror thudded against the wall. The glass shattered, and for a second I thought it might shatter. It didn't, but the door opened and Zerbrowski stuck his head in the door. "Everything alright in here?"

Dolph glared at him, but Zerbrowski didn't flinch. "Maybe I should finish questioning Anita."

Dolph shook his head. "Get out, Zerbrowski."

Brave man that he was, he looked at me. "You okay with that, Anita?"

I nodded, but Dolph was already yelling, "Get the fuck out!"

Zerbrowski gave us both a last look and closed the door, saying, "Yell if you need anything." The door closed, and in the sudden silence I could hear Dolph's breathing, heavy, labored. I could smell the sweat on his skin, faint, not unpleasant, but a sure sign that he was in distress. What was going on?

"Dolph?" I made his name a question.

He spoke without turning around. "I am taking a lot of heat for you, Anita."

"Not on this you're not," I said. "Everybody that you took out of this house won't be human. The laws may cover shapeshifters as human, but I know how it works. What's one more dead monster?"

He turned then, leaning his big body against the dresser, arms crossed. "I thought that shapeshifters changed back to human form when they died."

"They do," I said.

"The snake things didn't."

"No, they didn't."

We looked at each other. "You're saying they weren't shapeshifters?"

"No, I'm saying I don't know what the hell they are. There are snake men in a lot of different mythologies. Hindu, vaudun. They could be something that was never human to begin with."

"You mean like the naga you pulled out of the river two years ago?" he said.

"The naga was truly immortal. These things, whatever they are, couldn't stand up to silver bullets."

He closed his eyes for a second, and when he looked at me again, I saw how tired he was. Not a physical tiredness, but a tiredness of the heart, as if he'd been carrying some emotional burden around a little too long.

"What's wrong, Dolph? What's got you so ... riled up?"

He gave a small smile. "Riled up." He shook his head and pushed away from the dresser. He sat on the edge of the bed, and I turned in the chair, so I was straddling the back of it and could see him better.

"You asked what woman in my life was sleeping with the undead."

"I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "No, I was being a bastard." His eyes were fierce again. "I don't understand how you can let that ... thing touch you." His revulsion was so strong that I could almost feel it against my skin.

"We've had this discussion before. You're not my father."

"But I am Darrin's father."

I gave him wide eyes. "Your oldest, the lawyer?" I asked.

He nodded.

I watched his face, tried to catch a clue, afraid to say anything. Afraid I'd misunderstood him. "What about Darrin?"

"He's engaged."

I watched the terrible seriousness of his face. "Why do I get the idea that congratulations aren't in order?"

"She's a vampire, Anita, a fucking vampire."

I blinked at him. I didn't know what to say.

Those angry eyes glared at me. "Say something."

"I don't know what you want me to say, Dolph. Darrin's older than I am. He's a big boy. He has the right to be with whoever he wants to be with."

"She's a corpse, Anita. She is a walking corpse."

I nodded. "Yeah."

He stood, pacing the room in long angry strides. "She's dead, Anita, she's fucking dead, and you can't get grandchildren from a corpse."

I almost laughed at that, but my sense of self-preservation is stronger than that. I finally said, "I'm sorry, Dolph, I ... it's true that, as far as I know, female vamps can't carry a baby to term. But your youngest, Paul, the engineer, he's married."

Dolph shook his head. "They can't have kids."

I watched him pace the room, back and forth, back and forth. "I didn't know, I'm sorry."

He sat back down on the bed, broad shoulders slumping suddenly. "No grandchildren, Anita."

I didn't know what to say, again. I couldn't remember Dolph ever sharing this much of his personal life with me, or anyone for that matter. I was both flattered and almost panicked. I am not a natural caregiver, and I just didn't

know what to do. If he had been Nathaniel or one of the leopards, or even one of the wolves, I'd have hugged him, petted him, but he was Dolph, and I just wasn't sure he was a petting kind of guy.

He just sat there staring blindly at the floor, his big hands limp in his lap. He looked so lost. I got up from the chair and went to stand beside him. He never moved. I touched his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Dolph."

He nodded. "Lucille cried herself to sleep after Darrin made his little announcement."

"Is it the vampire issue or the no-grandchildren issue?" I asked.

"She says she's too young to be a grandmother, but ..." He looked up suddenly, and what I saw in his eyes was so raw, I wanted to look away. I had to force myself to meet that pained gaze, to hold it and take in everything that he was offering. Dolph was letting me see further inside him than ever before, and I had to honor that. I had to look at him, let him see that I saw it all. If he had been a girlfriend, I'd have hugged him. If he had been most any of my male friends, I'd have hugged him, but he was Dolph, and I just wasn't sure.

He turned his face away, and only then, when he'd given me all the pain in his eyes, did I try to hug him. He didn't let me do it. He stood up, moving away from me. But I'd tried, and that was the best I could do.

When he turned back towards me, his eyes were blank, his face set in that mask he usually wore, his cop face. "If you are holding out on me, Anita, I will bust your ass."

I nodded, my own face falling back into a mask as empty as his. The moment of sharing was over, and he was uncomfortable with it, so we'd go back to familiar ground. Fine with me. I hadn't known what to say anyway. But I'd remember he let me see inside. I'd remember, though I wasn't sure what good it would do either of us.

"A group of shapeshifters, or whatever, attacks me in my own home, kills one of my guests, wounds another, and you'll bust *me*. What the hell for?"

He shook his head. "You are holding out on me, Anita. Sometimes I think you do it out of habit, sometimes just to be a pain in the ass, but you don't tell me everything anymore."

I shrugged again. "I'm not saying I'm holding out anything about today, but I tell you what I can, Dolph, when I can."

"How about the new boyfriend with the cat eyes?"

I blinked at him. "I don't know what you mean."

"Micah Callahan. I saw him touch you."

"He brushed my hand, Dolph."

He shook his head. "It was the way he touched you, the way your face softened when he did it."

It was my turn to look down. I didn't look up until I was sure I could keep an empty face. "I'm not sure I'd call Micah my boyfriend."

"What would you call him?"

"I appreciate you sharing your personal life with me, Dolph, I really do, but I don't have to return the favor."

His eyes hardened. "What is it with you and the monsters, Anita? Us poor humans not good enough for you?"

"It's none of your business who I date, Dolph."

"I don't mind the dating, but I still don't know how you can stand for them to touch you."

"If it's none of your business who I date, it sure as hell isn't any of your business who I have sex with."

"You fucking Micah Callahan?" he asked.

I met his angry eyes with my own, and said, "Yeah, yeah I am."

He stood trembling in front of me, big hands in fists at his side, and for just a second, I thought he might do something, something violent, something we'd both regret. Then he turned his back on me. "Get out, Anita, just get out."

I started to reach out, to touch him, then let my hand drop. I wanted to apologize, but that would have made it worse. I was uncomfortable with the fact that I had sex with Micah, and that made me touchy. Dolph deserved better. I did the best I could to make up for it. "The heart wants what the heart wants, Dolph. You don't plan on making your life complicated, it just happens, and you don't do it on purpose, and you don't do it to hurt the people who love you. It just turns out that way sometimes."

He nodded, still turned away from me. "Lucille wants to call you and talk about vampires sometime--wants to understand them better."

"I'd be happy to answer any questions she has."

He nodded again, but wouldn't look at me. "I'll tell her to call."

"I'll look for the call."

We both stood there, him still not looking at me. The silence stretched between us, and it wasn't companionable, it was strained. "I don't have any more questions, Anita. Go on out."

I stopped at the door, looked back at him. He was still carefully turned away, and I wondered if he was crying. I might have been able to sniff the air and use my newfound leopard senses to answer the question, but I didn't. He'd turned away so I wouldn't see, wouldn't know. I respected that. I opened the door and closed it quietly behind me, leaving him alone with his grief and his anger. Whether Dolph cried or not was his business, not mine.

Chapter 42

WHEN THE LAST policeman had wandered away, the last emergency vehicle driven off, the summer silence settled over the house. The kitchen was a mess--broken glass ground into the floor, blood drying to black-red puddles on the polished wood. I'd never get all the blood out from the crevices in the wood. It

would be there forever, a reminder that superior fire power had prevailed but not without cost.

I was going to have to call Rafael and tell him I'd gotten his man killed and his woman wounded. I had to admit that it had been a damn good thing I'd had them. The two extra guns had made the difference. If I'd been the only one armed, things might have gone differently. Okay, I might be dead.

A noise behind me whirled me around. Nathaniel stood in the doorway with a broom, a dustpan, and a small bucket. "I thought I'd clean up the glass."

I nodded, my heart in my throat too much to talk. I hadn't heard him come up behind me. He was only in the doorway, not so close, but close enough if he'd been a bad guy with a gun.

I had been utterly calm through everything. I hadn't fallen apart when the police were here, but suddenly I was shaking, a faint trembling. A nice delayed reaction, damn.

Nathaniel set the dustpan and the bucket on the table, propped the broom against a chair, and walked slowly to me. He peered into my face, lilac eyes concerned. "Are you alright?"

I started to open my mouth and lie, but a small sound came out when my lips parted, almost a whimper. I closed my mouth tight to hold the sounds in, but the shaking got worse. If you're too damn stubborn to let yourself cry, then your body finds other ways to let it out.

Nathaniel touched my shoulder, tentatively, as if not sure he was welcome. For some reason that made my eyes burn, my chest tighten. I clutched my arms tight around myself, as if by holding tight I could keep the tears squeezed inside. He started to move in, started to hug me. I pulled away, because I knew that if he held me I'd cry. I'd already cried once today; that was all I was allowed. Hell, if I cried every time someone tried to kill me, I'd have drowned in my tears by now.

Nathaniel sighed. "If you found me like this, you'd hold me, make me feel better. Let me do the same for you."

My voice came out squeezed tight. "I fell apart once today. Once is enough."

He grabbed my arm. Almost anyone else I'd have been watching for it, but not Nathaniel. I thought of him as safe. His fingers squeezed my arm, not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to let me know he was serious. I stopped shaking, like a switch had been thrown. I was focused, not even close to tears.

He shook me by the arm, hard enough to have me glare at him. "You wouldn't take a hug. I knew that this," he squeezed the arm a little harder, "would help."

"Let go of me, Nathaniel, now." My voice was low and careful, purring with anger. Nathaniel had never laid hands on me before in any way that was close to violent. Underneath the anger was sadness. He was supposed to be safe, and now he wasn't. He was becoming a person, not just a submissive mess, and it hadn't occurred to me until just this moment that I might not like everything that Nathaniel would grow into.

I felt movement, as if the very air had changed current, just before Micah stepped through the doorway of the kitchen. His hair was still wet from the shower, slicked back from his face, giving me the first real glimpse I'd ever had of that face without the curls to distract the eyes.

His face was as delicate as the rest of him. I'd assumed the long curls only made him seem more delicate, but it was bone structure, just him. If you could ignore the broadening of his shoulders, going down into that slender waist, the straight line of his hips, you might almost say, *girl*. He wasn't really anymore feminine looking than Jean-Claude, but he was more delicately boned, slighter. It was just easier to pull off being masculine when you were an inch away from six feet than when you were an inch away from five-feet-five. Only one thing ruined the delicacy of his face. His nose wasn't quite perfectly straight; it had been badly broken once upon a time and not healed quite right. It should have ruined the near-perfection of his face, but it didn't. It, like his eyes, seemed to add to Micah, make him more interesting, not less attractive. Maybe I'd just had my fill of perfect men.

He'd added an oversized T-shirt to the sweatpants. The shirt hit him at mid-thigh, which hid more of his body than it showed, but even covered, I was aware of him. Aware of him in a way that I was aware of Richard and Jean-Claude. I'd always assumed it was love mixed with lust, but I didn't know Micah well enough to love him. Either pure lust felt pretty much like love, or there was more than one kind of love. It was too confusing for me.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Nathaniel went back to his broom, bucket, and dustpan. He picked them up and began to sweep the glass up, ignoring us.

"Nothing, what's up?"

He frowned at me. "You're both upset."

I shrugged. "We'll get over it."

He closed the distance between us, but the movement was too sudden after Nathaniel's grab, and I backed up.

Micah stopped, looked at me, clearly puzzled. "What happened? You didn't look this spooked when the guns were out."

I glanced at Nathaniel, who was kneeling, sweeping glass into the dustpan. He was studiously avoiding looking at me, at us. "We had a disagreement."

Nathaniel stiffened then, his whole body reacting to what I'd said. He turned slowly around until he looked up at me with those flower-colored eyes. "That wasn't fair, Anita. I've never disagreed with you in anything."

I sighed, not because he was right, but because of the hurt in his eyes. I went to him, balanced on my heels, because I didn't dare try to kneel in the glass. I touched his bare shoulder, the side of his face. "I'm sorry, Nathaniel you just caught me off guard."

"Why won't you let me in, Anita, why? I know you want to."

I touched his back where the bite marks had almost healed, dim reddish circles. "I don't let anyone in without a fight, Nathaniel. You should know that by now."

"Not everything has to be a fight," he said. His eyes were very wide, glittering.

"For me it does."

He shook his head, closing his eyes, and tears trailed down his cheeks. I helped him stand, because I was still worried about the glass. When we were standing, I eased my arms around him until my face touched his bare skin, my mouth pressed into the hollow of his shoulder where the collarbone spoons inward. His arms wrapped around me, held me close. His skin was so soft, so warm. I took a deep shaking breath. He smelled of vanilla, like always. I was never sure whether it was soap, shampoo, cologne, or just him. But underneath was a ranker scent--one that no perfume-maker in the world would bottle. Something feral and far too real, the scent of leopard, of pard.

I felt Micah at my back. I knew the feel of his body, like a line of heat before he pressed himself against me. But his arms didn't encircle me, they touched Nathaniel. Micah's body spooned against mine as we stood, but his hands, his arms traced mine, holding Nathaniel to us, embracing him.

Nathaniel let out a trembling breath. A deep, rumbling sound came out of Micah's throat, and it took me a second to realize he was purring, a deep rhythm of contentment. The purr vibrated against my back. Nathaniel started to cry, and I heard myself say, "We're here, Nathaniel, we're here." We're here. Pressed into the rich vanilla of Nathaniel's skin, Micah's purr thrumming against my body, the feel of both their bodies so solid, so real, and I did cry. I held Nathaniel, Micah held both of us, we cried, and it was okay.

Chapter 43

SOMEONE CLEARED THEIR throat loudly from the doorway. I blinked through the soft tears and found Zane standing there. "Sorry to interrupt, but we've got a crowd out here."

"What do you mean?" Micah asked.

"The swan king, his swanmanes, and pretty much at least one representative from every other wereanimal in the city, as far as I can tell."

Nathaniel and Micah pulled away from me. We all rubbed at our faces; even Micah had been crying. I wasn't sure why; maybe he was just an emotional kind of guy. "What do they want?" I asked.

"To see you, Anita."

"Why?"

Zane shrugged. "The swan king won't talk to us flunkies. He insists that he talk to Anita, and her Nimir-Raj, if she pleases."

Micah and I exchanged glances. We both looked as puzzled as I felt. "Tell Reece that I need a bit more info before I grant an interview. I'm a little preoccupied."

Zane grinned wide enough to flash his upper and lower cat fangs. "We deny him entrance to the house until he tells us peons what he wants. I like it, but he won't."

I sighed. "I don't want to start a fight just because he shows up without calling. Shit." I started to walk out, but Micah caught my hand as I went by. I turned back to look at him.

"May your Nimir-Raj accompany you?"

I smiled, partly because he'd asked, rather than assumed, and partly because looking at him made me smile. I squeezed his hand, and his hand closed around mine, pressing back. What I wanted to say was, "I'd love the company," what came out was, "Sure."

He smiled, and for the first time it wasn't mixed, it was just a smile. He raised my hand to his lips and pressed his mouth against my knuckles. The gesture reminded me of Jean-Claude. How was it going to be to have Micah and Jean-Claude in the same room at the same time with me?

Micah frowned. "You don't look happy now. Did I do something wrong?"

I shook my head, squeezed his hand, and led him towards the living room. He pulled me back towards him. "No, you thought of something that bothered you. What was it?"

I sighed. "Truth?"

He nodded. "Truth."

"Just wondering how awkward it's going to be when you and I are in the same room with Jean-Claude."

He pulled on my hand, drawing me against him. I put a hand up to keep our bodies from touching completely, and found his heartbeat under the palm of my hand. Even through the cotton shirt, I could feel the thud of his body, as if his heart were naked in my hand. I had to raise my head just a little to meet the green gold depths of his eyes.

His voice came out a little breathy. "I told you, I want to be your Nimir-Raj, whatever that means, whatever it takes."

My own voice wasn't doing much better than his. "Even if that means sharing me with someone else?"

"I knew that coming in."

I felt a frown forming between my eyes. "You know what they say about things that are too good to be true, don't you?"

He touched his fingertips to my face and bent towards me, speaking softly as he moved. "Am I too good to be true, Anita?" He whispered my name against my lips, and we kissed. Gentle, soft, wet. His heart was beating so fast under my hand, my pulse was in my throat, and I think I'd forgotten to breathe.

He drew back first. I was breathless and a little disoriented. There was a look on his face--delight, I think--with the effect the kiss had had on me.

It took me two tries to find my voice. "Too good to be true, oh, yeah definitely."

He laughed then, and I wasn't sure I'd ever heard him laugh before. It was a good sound. "I can't tell you how much it means to see that look in your eyes."

"What look?"

He smiled, and he was suddenly all male, pride, pleased with himself, and something else--almost embarrassed. He touched my face. "I love the way you look at me."

It made me lower my eyes, and I blushed, even though I wasn't thinking a damn thing that was sexual.

He laughed again, a surprised burst of sound that held so much joy. He laughed the way children laugh before they learn to hide how they feel. He picked me up around the waist and swung me around the kitchen.

I would have told him to put me down, but I was laughing too hard.

"I hate to interrupt," Donovan Reece, the swan king, said from the doorway, "but I told them you'd help us." He frowned at us, his pale, pale skin, showing almost no lines, as if his skin was like the water that his alter form swam upon. He had obviously decided not to wait outside.

I asked, still held above the ground in Micah's arms, "Help you do what?"

He shrugged. "Nothing important, just find some missing alphas and try to convince the Kadru of the werecobras that her Kashyapa, her mate, isn't dead, just missing with the rest. Trouble is," Reece said, "I think she's right. I think he's dead."

Micah let me slide back to the ground. I wondered if my face looked as grim as his. Marianne tells me that the universe/deity loves me and wants me to be happy. So why is it that every time I get a little happy all hell breaks loose? The message seems clear, and it's not about love.

Chapter 44

DONOVAN REECE HAD curled up on the far end of my white couch. He was dressed in blue jeans so faded they were almost white. His pale pink shirt brought out the natural pink and blue undertones of his near translucent skin. He was beautiful, but not in the way a man or woman is beautiful, in the way a statue or a painting is beautiful, as if he wasn't quite real. Maybe it was because I knew that he had baby swan feathers on his chest, but of all the people in the room he seemed the most surrealistic.

A tall woman with hair almost as white as his sat on the arm of the couch by him. Her pants were black leather, her loose-fitting blouse a pink that matched his shirt, almost. I'm not sure I would have remembered the woman if the other two hadn't been kneeling on the floor at their feet. The second blond's hair was pale yellow and matched her long summer dress. The brunette's hair

fell like a curtain around a navy blue dress with tiny white daisies all over it. The swanmanes that we'd saved from the club were all looking at me with large, almost fearful eyes.

I only recognized one person other than the swan king and his entourage. I'd met Christine for the first time at the Lunatic Cafe back when Raina still owned it, and Marcus, her Ulfric, was still trying to control all the other wereanimals in town and make himself high supreme commander, whether everyone else agreed or not. Christine's hair was still blond, short, professional. She was dressed in a navy business suit. Her powder blue shirt was partially unbuttoned, as if she'd removed a tie, though I don't think she had. She was perched on the other end of the couch from Donovan, her sensible navy pumps still on. Almost everyone else had gotten casual. There were a pile of shoes near my front door.

"Hi, Christine, it's been a while," I said.

She looked up at me, and it wasn't a friendly look. "I'm impressed you remembered my name."

"I tend to remember people I meet under stressful situations."

I got the tiniest smile out of her. "Well, we do seem to meet under less than pleasant circumstances," she said.

Donovan took over then, introducing me to the man and woman sitting between them. They were both dark-complected. Their bone structure was pure middle America, nothing special, but their eyes were too big, too dark, the hair truly black. There was something exotic about them that straight European just doesn't give you. They also looked amazingly alike, like male and female versions of each other. They were Ethan and Olivia MacNair, respectively.

The man in my white chair was bulky, not muscled, or fat, just big. He had the fullest beard I'd ever seen. The thick hair covered most of his face and neck. He was introduced as Boone, and the moment he turned small dark eyes to me, I knew he was something that would eat me if it could. Not wolf, not cat, but something with teeth.

His voice was a rumbling bass, so low it almost hurt to hear it. "Ms. Blake."

I nodded. "Mr. Boone."

He shook his head, the dark beard rubbing back and forth over his white shirt. "Just Boone, no mister."

"Boone," I said.

Nathaniel, Zane, and Cherry were bringing in kitchen chairs so the last four people could sit down. Two women, two men, were left. One man was slender with golden red hair, and strangely up-tilted green eyes. He sat on the floor huddled against the side of the couch as if he were hiding.

"That's Gilbert," Donovan said.

"Gil," he said, voice almost too soft to hear.

The woman was tall, nearly six feet, broad-shouldered, strong-looking. Her hair was brown, streaked with gray, pulled back from her face in a loose ponytail. Her face was bare of makeup. She offered me a hand, and gave me one of the best handshakes I've ever had from another woman. Her brown eyes

were deep with worry, as she said, "I'm Janet Talbot. It's good of you to see us all on such short notice."

"I didn't come here to make small talk." This from a woman who was standing on the far side of the room, near the big picture window. She was looking out through the closed sheers, hands gripping her elbows, nervous tension singing along her straight spine, as she turned to face the room. I could see where Ethan and Olivia had gotten the dark skin and their exotic look. Nilisha MacNair was about my size but even more delicately put together, so that she seemed smaller. A man might think words like *birdlike*, *kittenish*, until he looked in her eyes. Once you looked into those dark, dark eyes, you knew better. The eyes gave the lie to the packaging. She was hell on wheels and used to getting her own way.

A man stood near her, but not too near. He was as tall, as blond, as pale, as she was small, black-haired, and dark. He was also muscled in a way that nature does not do. His shoulders were broad, waist narrow, hands large enough to palm her entire head, yet he was clearly afraid of her. Oh, it was bodyguard deferential, but there was real fear there, too.

Merle was leaning casually near the big blond man. I didn't know where Caleb was, and didn't care.

"I am the Kadra, and the Kashyapa, who is dead, is my husband." Nilisha MacNair let out a sudden breath that shook, then she regained control like a mountain squeezing downward. "*Was* my husband."

"Father is not dead," Olivia said. "I won't let you make him dead by giving up."

Her brother, Ethan, touched her arm, as if trying to soothe her or tell her to shut up. She ignored him.

But the damage was done; the fight was on. "How dare you? How dare you say that I would make him dead? I am merely facing the truth."

Olivia stood up, shaking off her brother's hand. "You just can't stand the fact that he was with another woman when it happened."

The fight went downhill from there. Apparently Henry MacNair, patriarch of the clan, had been leaving his mistress and fellow werecobra's house, when someone had taken him. No body was found, but a lot of blood was left behind. There had been signs of a struggle, a car on its side, a good-sized tree torn up. When wereanimals struggle, they struggle.

I actually learned quite a bit from the fight, but when it was reduced to the two women screaming at each other from less than a foot away, some of it not even in English, I'd had enough.

I looked across the room at Donovan. He had brought them to my house, after all. He shrugged. Basically, he didn't know what to do either.

I had visions of dumping water over their heads, but decided that it might just work better to leave the room. I motioned the others into the kitchen, and they all trooped out. It was as the last of them were leaving the room that the shouting began to die down. Then Nilisha's voice. "Where are you all going?"

Janet Talbot spoke for all of us. "Some place quieter."

I couldn't see the women's faces, but I could almost smell the embarrassment on the air. Not wereanimal ability, just a good guess.

"Please," Olivia said, "please, I do apologize. Please come back."

Everyone started trickling back into the room. Nilisha actually took a chair with the blond bodyguard behind her. "We are all very worried about my husband."

"Worried about him, Mama?" Olivia said.

The woman nodded, smiled. "Yes, worried."

"He's not dead," the girl said.

"If you can have hope, so can I."

They smiled at each other like bright mirrors, so alike in that one moment. Ethan looked relieved, but he didn't smile.

"Alright, besides Henry MacNair, who else is missing?"

"My son, Andy," Janet Talbot said. She handed me a snapshot of a young man with her brown hair, cut short, but his features were softer than hers. He was handsome, bordering on pretty. "He looks like his father." She said it, as if strangers had remarked on the lack of resemblance before. I wouldn't have said a damn thing.

"Our Ursa," Boone said, "I didn't think to bring a picture."

"Ursa, bear, your queen?" I made it a question.

He nodded that massive, bearded head, and I wondered how I'd missed it. "She went out to pick up a few things at the store and never came back. No signs of a struggle, just gone."

I looked at Gil of the green eyes. "Who'd you misplace?"

He shook his head. "No one, I'm just scared."

I looked at Christine. "How 'bout you?"

"I'm here as a representative for the weres that only have one or two members. Those of us who have chosen St. Louis because there were no others like us. I'm the only weretiger in town, so I haven't lost anybody, but we've lost one werelion."

"I don't suppose the missing lion is named Marco?"

Christine shook her head. "No, Joseph, why?"

Donovan answered, "The lion man was named Marco."

"Oh" she said.

"And," Donovan added, "Joseph isn't able to change that close to human. No one I know of can change that close to human and hold it without changing."

Christine continued as if I hadn't spoken. Focused, Christine was always focused. "Joseph's mate is pregnant. Amber would be here but she's under complete bed rest until the baby is born."

"Until she loses it, you mean," Cherry said.

I glanced at her. "You say that like she's lost some before."

"This is her third try," Cherry said.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Losing her ... mate must not be helping her stress levels."

"That is an understatement," Christine said.

"She's a fool to keep trying," Cherry said. "We can't carry a baby to term, and that's that."

I looked at her again. "Pass that by me again, slowly."

"The change is too violent, it causes miscarriage." Cherry said it matter of factly, then I watched her understand what she'd just said, and she whispered, "Anita, I didn't ... you shouldn't have had to find out this way. I'm sorry."

I shrugged, then shook my head. "But the MacNairs have two children. I'm looking at them. Janet has a son."

"My type of shapeshifting is inherited," Janet said. "It's not tied to the moon. I avoided shapeshifting until after Andy was born."

I looked at Nilisha. "I am a werecobra. I can choose to try and carry a baby like a mammal or like a snake."

"You laid eggs?" I made that one a big question.

She nodded. "I couldn't have carried them in my body. The change is too hard. But I had other options."

The unspoken, *but you don't*, hung on the air. It was too hard to think about. It wasn't like I'd ever considered having children. I mean, get real, with my life? Out loud, I said, "One problem at a time. So who disappeared first?"

Henry MacNair was the first victim, and had had the most struggle. Then, the werelion, Joseph; Andy Talbot, weredog, as it turned out; and last the Ursa of the bears, Rebecca Morton.

The last time we'd had this many wereanimals missing, it had been the old swan king who was delivering them over to be hunted by illegal thrill seekers.

I looked at Donovan Reece. He either read my mind or anticipated it. "Interesting coincidence that I come into town about the same time everyone goes missing, isn't it."

"Gee, Donovan, you read my mind."

"I swear to you that I know nothing of this."

Nilisha said, "I know all about the betrayal of the last swan king. But I am betting my husband's life that Donovan is innocent of all this."

I shrugged. "We'll see."

"You do not trust my judgment," she said.

"I don't trust much of anyone's judgment but mine. Nothing personal."

Olivia touched her arm. "Mother."

Nilisha took a deep breath and calmed down. The day was looking up.

"The first thing I'm going to suggest is that we call in the police."

Nobody liked that idea. "Look, they have resources that I don't, computer searches, forensics."

"No," Nilisha said, "no, we must handle this among ourselves."

"I know the rule is that we don't bring in the human authorities, but guys, we have four missing, and they made a run at the swans and the leopards already."

"You think the snake people and their pet lion are behind this?" Donovan asked.

"It would be too big a coincidence if they weren't," I said.

"I agree," Micah said. He'd been very quiet through everything, carefully not standing or sitting too close, as if he didn't want to confuse things. He was letting me be in charge without hovering.

"Okay, then who are these guys, and what the hell would they want with a variety of shapeshifters?"

We talked for a couple of hours but didn't come up with anything brilliant. The snakemen were behind it. But why? Why would any wereanimals give a shit about other wereanimals that weren't their kind? If it had just been the werecobras targeted, then maybe it could be a reptile turf war, though frankly, it was unusual to have a fight even between two different kinds of snakes. The town was big enough for everybody as long as they weren't the same species.

I thought Nilisha MacNair was right and her husband was dead. If people kidnap someone and don't want money, they want worse things, usually things that include blood, pain, and, eventually, death. They were probably all dead, and if they weren't, we needed the police in on it to keep them alive.

It turned out that everyone had reported their people missing, neglecting to mention the part about being wereanimals. "But don't you see, the police have a twenty-one-year-old college senior missing, a forty-five-year-old husband, a thirty-something single woman, and a thirty-something married man. Other than the fact that they're all Caucasian, there is no common denominator to link up these cases. But if I can tell the police they are all wereanimals, then that's the link. You guys live all over the city. You have different police units working on each case. They'll never make the connection, unless we tell them what the connection is."

Janet Talbot nodded first. "Andy's almost got his pre-med degree. If they find out what he is, he'll never be a doctor, but I want him safe more than I want anything right now. So I agree, go to the police."

"I can't speak for Amber," Christine said, "but I'm pretty sure she'd agree."

"I should ask the others first, but the hell with it, find Rebecca for us, even if that means bringing in the cops," Boone said.

We all turned to Nilisha MacNair. "No, if they find out, we are all ruined."

Olivia took her hand. Ethan knelt in front of her. "Mother, without father what does it matter?"

I wasn't sure she'd agree since he'd been cheating on her, but she nodded and she agreed. Love is a funny thing sometimes. But whatever the motive, it meant I could talk to Dolph, and I wouldn't even have to lie.

Chapter 45

DOLPH ANSWERED ON the second ring. "Dolph." He never said, Regional Preternatural Investigation Team, or even police, just his name, not even his

last name, not even his full first name, just "Dolph," or "Dolph, here." Did anyone ever complain? Somehow I doubted it.

He sounded as close to surprised as he ever gets. "Anita, I didn't expect to hear from you until we'd at least finished the paperwork on the last batch of bodies." I heard a man's voice, but couldn't tell what was said. Dolph came back on. "Zerbrowski says that if you killed someone else just hide the body, he's not starting over on the paperwork."

"I know enough about procedure to know that he'd have to start a new report anyway. Separate crime, separate report, right?"

"Do you really have a fresh body out there?" He sounded tired, but not surprised.

"No," I said.

"Then how do we rate a call?"

"I have information pertaining to several crimes and the permission of those involved to tell you the truth, the whole truth. Now, isn't that refreshing?"

I could almost feel him sitting up over the phone. "I'm a cop, truth is always refreshing, so dazzle me."

I told him. As I'd suspected, the MacNair case was already on the roster for Dolph and the gang, but it was the first he'd heard of the others.

"I interviewed the wife personally. She kept saying she had no idea why some monster would attack her husband. It might have helped us find him if we'd known."

"Dolph, they run a restaurant. If it gets out that they're shapeshifters, they may lose it."

"Board of Health can't shut them down for this."

"No, but word will get out, and the customers will start to worry. You know it, and I know it."

"No one will find out from my people. You have my word on it."

"Yeah, but how many other departments are involved? How many nonpolice are at every crime scene, not to mention clerical workers? It'll come out, Dolph, eventually it'll come out."

"I'll keep a lid on it, Anita, but I can only guarantee my people."

"I know, Dolph, but Andy Talbot wants to be a doctor. He'll never get into med school once this comes out. Rebecca Morton is a chiropractor. If they find out what she is, they'll yank her license."

"Why is it that most of these people go in for professions where this is a problem?"

I shrugged, knew he couldn't see it. "Just lucky, I guess."

"I think it's stubbornness," Dolph said.

"What do you mean?"

"Tell anyone that they can't do something, and they'll want to do it."

He had a good point. "Makes sense."

"How do these disappearances tie in to the attack on your house?"

Damn, the whole truth, I'd said. There was my chance to prove it. I took a deep breath and told him almost all of the truth. I told him that Gregory had called for help, leaving out why he'd call me. Dolph never questioned that I'd

be a good choice when calling for rescue from the monsters. He did say, "He could have called the police."

"It hasn't been that long since the police killed wereanimals on sight, Dolph. You can't really blame them for being leery of you guys."

"Why didn't you tell me all this when you were in for questioning?"

"You were mad at me," I said, as if that explained it. And it sort of did, though it made me sound childish.

"What are you leaving out?" he asked.

"I tell you the truth, and you still doubt me. That really hurts, Dolph,"

"Not as much as it's going to if I find out you withheld evidence on this."

"It's not like you to make threats, Dolph."

"I'm tired," he said.

I was quiet for a second. "You should get some rest, Dolph."

"Yeah, if you can keep from killing anyone else, maybe I'll catch up on the paperwork."

"I'll do my best," I said.

"You do that." I heard him take a deep breath. "Is this all the information you're going to give me on this?"

"Yep."

"I'll go back and interview the families again. Do you know how much extra work this is going to be, just because they fucking lied the first time?"

"They didn't mean to make your job hard, Dolph, they were just scared."

"Yeah, so isn't everyone?" With that, he hung up.

I stared at the buzzing phone. The man was not in a good mood. I knew why, now, and I was probably one of the few outside his family that did know why. I wondered how much grouchier he was going to get, and if it would start affecting his job, if it hadn't already. If his hatred of the monsters took away his objectivity, then he was going to be useless as the head of the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. Shit. It was a problem for another day. I could add it to the list of things I'd worry about later. At the rate the list was growing, I'd never have time to worry about everything on it. Maybe I could throw a dart and make what it stuck in the problem of the day. Or maybe I could just ignore the list. Yeah, ignoring sounded good.

Chapter 46

THE MACNAIRS, PLUS bodyguard, promised to drive straight to RPIT's headquarters and give statements. Janet Talbot went with them. Christine didn't really know anything about the werelion's disappearance, so she just went home, promising to be careful. I offered to let her stay at my place until the bad guy, or guys, was caught, but she turned me down flat.

Donovan Reece said, "She is an independent creature."

I could admire that. "I hope her independence doesn't get her hurt."

He shrugged, getting to his feet. I noticed a lump under the front of his pink shirt. "You're armed," I said.

He glanced down at the place where his gun was trying and failing to hide. "I won't let my girls be taken again."

"People, call them people," I said.

He gave me a smile. "They are all girls."

"Humor me," I said.

He gave a small bow of his head. "My people, fine, but I won't let them be taken again."

"Or you either, Donovan. Remember everyone that's vanished has been a leader, not a follower. They chained Nathaniel up because they thought he was you; your people being taken was just incidental."

He met my eyes, suddenly very serious. "You're right. How did you know I was armed?"

"If you're going to tuck a gun into the front of your pants, wear a darker-colored shirt, and maybe one that's a size bigger."

He nodded. "I've never carried a gun before."

"Do you know how to use it?"

"I know how to shoot. I just don't usually carry concealed."

"Do you have a license to carry?"

He blinked at me.

"I take that as a no."

"No," he said.

"Then if you use it and kill someone, it's going to be a headache in court. Carrying concealed without a license will make it an illegal weapon. Depending on the judge, you might see jail time."

"How long does it take to get a license?"

"Longer than you'll want to wait. But check your county and start the process. Or don't start the process, and when you get arrested you can try and claim ignorance of the law. It's not a legal excuse, but it might sway a judge. I don't know. I'd apply for a license and hope it goes through."

"What do I have to do to apply?"

"It differs from county to county. Check with your local police. They'll know who you have to see."

He nodded again. "I'll do that." He looked at me, gray eyes so serious. "Thank you, Anita."

I shrugged. "Just doing my job."

He shook his head. "This isn't your job. You're no one's alpha here. You could have just refused to help us."

"And what good would that have done?" I asked.

"Most of the wereanimals won't help each other."

"You know of all the furry--and feathered--politics, that's the one I understand the least. Just like now, what happens to one group can affect the others. If you guys had been talking to each other, then you'd have known that

Henry MacNair went missing, violently missing. It might have put all of you on guard."

"You think it would have prevented the other disappearances?"

"I don't know, but it might have helped. People would have been more cautious, maybe not gone out alone. We might have at least had witnesses."

"It was after my girls--people--got taken and you helped us that Christine came to me. She knew about the bears' Ursa having gone missing. It was Ethan MacNair, not his mother, that told us about his father."

"I bet he paid for going outside his mother's orders," I said.

"Probably," Donovan said, "but you're right, if we'd just bloody talk to each other, we could help each other more."

"Not just in emergencies either," I said.

His eyes narrowed. "You mean a coalition of wereanimals?"

I shrugged. "I hadn't thought that far ahead, but why not? Something where we share information. We've got a lion working with a bunch of snakes. Why should the bad guys get along better than we do?"

"Every time one of the animals talks about joining forces they always mean that they'll be top ... dog. You want to be everybody's Nimir-Ra, Anita?"

"I'm not talking sharing authority. That'll never work without a war. I'm just saying share information, help each other more. When one of the leopards or wolves gets hurt, he, or she, has a place to stay until they're well. That kind of thing."

"Someone would need to be in charge of it."

I felt like grabbing him by the front of the shirt and shaking him. "Why, Donovan, why does anyone have to be in charge? Something happens to one of your swans, you pick up the phone and call me, or Ethan, or Christine. We call someone else. We try to help each other. We don't need a hierarchy, just a willingness to cooperate."

He looked unhappy, almost suspicious. "You don't want to be in charge."

I shook my head. "Donovan, I don't even want to be in charge of what I'm in charge of now. I sure as hell don't want to add to it."

It was Micah, who had been leaning against the wall, so still, so calm that: you forgot he was there, who said, "She's offering you friendship, Donovan "

"Friendship?" He made it sound like a foreign concept.

Micah nodded, pushing away from the wall to stand beside me. "If something goes wrong and you need help, you call your friends."

Donovan frowned hard enough that he formed lines in that flawless skin. "Wereanimals aren't even friends with each other, let alone across species lines."

"That's not true," I said. "Richard," I paused after I'd said his name, as if it hurt, or I was waiting for it to hurt. Micah touched my shoulder, and I put my hand over his, held on. I tried again. "Richard's best friend is one of Rafael's rats. My leopard Vivian is living with, and in love with, Stephen, one of Richard's wolves."

"That's different."

"Why?"

"Because the wolves and rats have a treaty, and through you the leopards and the wolves are joined."

I shook my head. "You're quibbling, Donovan, or deliberately missing the point. Let's just agree to try and help each other, that's all. I don't have any ulterior motives. I'm just trying to keep the damage to a minimum."

"It's true you didn't have to save my girls. It nearly cost you your life."

"And you didn't have to go to the lupanar with me. But you did. That's how it works, cooperation."

He thought for a moment, then nodded. "Agreed. I'll try to get the others to agree also. You're right, you are right. If we'd just talk to each other, we could prevent a lot of bad things from happening."

"Great," I said, and let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. I wanted this. I wanted them to talk to each other, to help each other.

Someone cleared their throat, softly. It made us all look at Gil. He was still huddled beside the couch, where he'd been the entire time. "You have something to say?" Donovan asked.

"How far does this new spirit of cooperation go?" he asked. His upturned green eyes were almost round with anxiety. He gripped his knees so hard his hands were mottled. He was scared; you could smell it on him, that and a neck-ruffling scent that I didn't recognize.

"What do you mean?" Donovan asked.

"I'm actually talking to Anita," Gil said.

I glanced at Micah then back to the man huddled on the floor. "What do you want to know?" I asked.

"I'm the only werefox in town. I don't have an alpha, or any family." He stopped there and licked his lips nervously.

"And?" I said.

"How much help are you willing to give?"

"How much do you need?"

"Can I stay with you until this thing, or whatever, is caught?"

I felt my eyes go wide. I opened my mouth, closed it, exchanged a look with Micah. He shrugged. "It has to be your call. It's your house."

Point. I turned back to Gil. "I don't know you at all. If you are a bad person, and you do bad things to my people, I will kill you, but if you really just want someplace to hide for a few days, you can stay."

He seemed to get smaller, more huddled. "I won't hurt anybody. I just want to feel safe again, that's all."

I looked at Donovan. "Do you know anything about him?"

"He's scared of his own shadow. I wouldn't trust him to help in an emergency. I think he'd save himself first."

Gil didn't argue with Donovan's estimation of him, he just huddled, trembling. "If we only help the strong ones, then we're not helping ourselves," I said.

"You'll take him in, knowing he can't help you in a fight, and would probably run to save his own skin?" Donovan asked.

I looked at those wide, terror-filled eyes and saw something besides fear, a pleading. They said, "Please, please help me."

"You can stay, and we'll protect you, but if there is an emergency I expect you to do your best. You don't have to fight, but don't be a hindrance."

"What's that mean?" he asked.

"It means if the guns come out, hide under something, get low to the ground. Don't make yourself a target. If my people get hurt and you have a chance to drag them to safety but leave them to die instead, you'll be next."

"I'm not brave, Anita, I'm not even a little bit brave."

"Don't be brave, Gil, just do what you're told, do your best whatever that is, but understand the rules. Keep yourself out of the line of fire because we won't have time to worry about you when the fighting starts. Help if you can, stay out of the way if you can't. Simple."

He nodded, rubbing his chin between his knees, over and over. "Simple," he whispered, "I wish life were simple."

"Life isn't simple, Gil, but a fight is." I knelt in front of him, and I hated the weakness that radiated from him. Dear God, the last thing I needed was another emotional cripple following me around. But I couldn't kick him out. Anita the bleeding heart, who'd have thought it? I stared at him, until his frightened eyes met mine. "A fight is simple, Gil. You protect yourself, your people, and you kill the bad guys. You do whatever it takes to get yourself and your people out alive."

"How do you know who the bad guys are?" he asked, voice almost a whisper.

"Anyone in the room that isn't us," I said.

"And you kill them, just like that?"

I nodded. "Exactly," I said.

"I don't think I could kill anyone."

"Then hide."

He did that chin-rubbing nod thing again, like he was scent marking his own knees. "I can hide, I know how to do that."

I touched his face very gently. He flinched, then relaxed a little. All the animals liked to be touched. "I'm not very good at hiding, maybe you can teach me."

"Why would you need to know how to hide?" he asked.

"Because there's always someone, or something, bigger and badder than you are."

"I can teach you how to hide, but I don't know if I can learn how to kill."

Where had I heard that before? Oh, I knew--Richard. But even he had learned how, in the end. "You'd be surprised what you can learn, Gil, if you have to."

He hugged himself again. "I don't think I want to learn how to kill people."

"Now that," I said, "is a different problem altogether."

"I don't want to," he said.

I stared down at him. "Then don't, but don't let your squeamishness get any of my people killed."

"It's more likely to kill me."

"True, but that's your choice--get yourself killed if you want, but don't bring harm to me or mine because of some moral high ground."

"Would you really kill me for it?"

I knelt back in front of him. "You can stay with me and I'll keep you safe, or die trying, but if you fuck up and cause the death of one of my leopards, or my friends, I will kill you. I don't want you to be crying later and saying you didn't understand. Because if you've earned it, I will shoot you while you beg me not to."

"But who decides whether I deserve it?" he asked.

"I do."

He stared up at me as if he weren't sure if he was safer with me or without me. I watched him think it through and felt nothing, no pity. Because Gil the werefox was a liability. In a combat situation he was a fucking casualty waiting to happen. I was civilized enough to give him protection when he asked, but not civilized enough to pay in the blood of those I held dear. In that moment I knew I wasn't a sociopath, because if I had been, I'd have kicked his ass out the door. Oh, hell, I'd have shot him and put him out of everyone's misery. Instead I offered him a hand, and pulled him to his feet.

"Do you understand the rules?" I asked.

"I understand," he whispered.

"You willing to live by them?"

He gave one small nod.

"You willing to die by them?"

He took a shaky breath, then gave another nod.

I smiled and knew it never reached my eyes. "Then welcome to the club, and keep your head down. There's some business we have to take care of tonight. You can come along." Even I wasn't sure if that was an invitation or a threat.

Chapter 47

THERE WAS STILL a thread of light in the sky, like a slender golden ribbon, glowing against the push of dark, dark clouds when we parked in the back of the Circus of the Damned. The back parking lot was for employees. It was dark, bare, not the least bit entertaining, unlike the front, which was like a carnival. I'd driven past the bright lights and dramatic posters without a second glance.

"Did the clowns up front have fangs?" Caleb asked.

It wasn't until he asked that that I realized that none of them had ever been to the Circus. I undid my seat belt and leaned around so I could see him in the

middle section of seats. He was sitting pressed against the door with Merle's broad shoulders crowding him. Nathaniel was on the other side of Merle. Cherry and Zane were in the back seats with Gil. Micah was sitting up front with me. Until we knew my house wasn't a free-fire zone we'd keep everybody together. Rafael had sent two new bodyguards over, but they'd arrived just as we were leaving, and I wouldn't make anyone in the Jeep move. They followed us, not happy, but taking orders, which was good.

I answered Caleb's question. "Yeah, the big spinning clowns on top of the sign have fangs."

"I saw a poster for zombie raisings. Do you do that?" Merle asked.

I shook my head. "I don't believe in using God-given gifts for entertainment purposes."

"I didn't mean to insult you," he said.

I shrugged. "Sorry, I'm a little touchy about shit like that. I don't approve of a lot of things some of my fellow animators do for money."

"You raise the dead for money," Caleb said.

I nodded. "Yeah, but I've turned down more money than I've taken."

"Turned down, why?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Local money who wanted to have his Halloween party in a cemetery so I could raise zombies at midnight. Or the guy that had offered a million if I could raise Marilyn Monroe and guarantee that she'd do anything he asked for a night." I shuddered. "I told that one if I even heard a rumor that he'd gotten someone to do the job, I'd see his ass in prison."

Caleb's eyes were a little wide. I think I'd shocked him. Good to know that I could. "You're deeply moral," Merle said, a tone in his voice like he was surprised.

"My own version of it, yeah."

"You hold to your own rules no matter what?" Merle made it a question.

I nodded. "Most of the time."

"What will make you break your own moral code?"

"Harm to my people, survival, the usual."

Merle's eyes flicked to Micah, sitting beside me. It was a small movement. If I hadn't been looking directly at him, I'd have missed it.

"What?" I asked, glancing from one to the other.

Merle answered, "You sound like Micah."

"You make that sound like a bad thing," I said.

He shook his head. "Not a bad thing, Anita, not a bad thing at all, just unexpected."

"You still don't sound entirely happy about it," I said.

"Merle worries too much," Micah said.

I glanced at him, but he was watching the big man. Micah had tied his hair back while it was still wet, so that it lay flat to his head, utterly straight until it spilled out into the long ponytail, where the curls spilled like froth along his spine. His hair lay like brown velvet against the charcoal gray of his shirt.

"What does Merle worry about?" I asked.

"Taking care of me, mostly, and now, I think, you."

I looked at the big man. "Is that what you're worrying about?"

"Something like that," Merle said. He'd put a clean white T-shirt underneath his jean jacket, but other than that, he was wearing an identical outfit to the first one I'd ever seen him in. If he'd been wearing more leather, he'd have looked like an aging biker.

Micah turned towards me. His shirt made that rich, slithery sound that silk makes against leather seats. The dark gray shirt was short-sleeved, button-up, dressy. The color brought out the gold-green of his eyes, made his skin look even darker. He'd matched the shirt with black jeans, black belt, silver buckle, soft black tie-up shoes. It occurred to me for the first time that he looked like he'd dressed for a date. Had he dressed to impress me or Jean-Claude? It was a semiformal occasion for any alpha to meet the Master of the City. But especially one that was fucking the Master's human servant. I just wasn't sure how to handle the whole situation. Jean-Claude had taken Micah in stride in theory, but how would he react to seeing him in the flesh? How would Micah react to seeing Jean-Claude?

Damn it, I had enough to worry about without having to juggle male egos.

"You're frowning again," Micah said.

I shook my head. "It's nothing. Let's get this over with."

"Why do you sound less than thrilled?"

I had my door open and turned back around to say, "We're here to rescue Damian. I don't know what shape he's going to be in. Why would I be thrilled?"

"I know you're worried about your friend, but are you sure that that's really what's bothering you?"

I frowned at him. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm nervous about meeting the Master of the City, too."

It was almost like he'd read my mind. We didn't know each other well enough for him to really read me, but ... he was either telepathic, which I didn't believe, or he *could* read me that well. I wasn't sure which thought bothered me more.

I let out a breath and half slumped in the seat. "Yeah, I'm a little nervous about introducing you to Jean-Claude. He was cool about you in the abstract, even knowing that we've been together, but seeing you in the flesh ..." I tried to think how to word it. "I don't know how he'll feel about that."

"Will it make you feel any better if I promise to behave myself."

"Maybe, if you can pull it off."

"I can pull it off," he said, giving me very serious eye contact. He certainly vibrated sincerity.

"Don't take this wrong, Micah, but I've been disappointed pretty badly recently by the men in my life. It's a little hard to trust that anyone can pull it off."

He reached out to touch me, then let his hand fall back, as if something in my face hadn't been friendly. "I'll do my best tonight, Anita, that I can promise."

I sighed. "I believe you."

"But," he said.

I had to smile. "Your intentions are good, my intentions are good, Jean-Claude's intentions are probably good." I shrugged. "You know what they say about good intentions."

"My best is all I can offer," he said.

"And it's all I can ask, but let's say I'm not exactly sure how to handle this. I'd barely gotten to where I could deal with Richard and Jean-Claude at the same time, and now here *you* are. I just don't know."

"I can go back to your house," he said.

"No, Jean-Claude asked to meet you."

Micah looked at me. "And that makes you nervous."

I half-laughed. "Oh, yeah."

"Why?"

"If Jean-Claude were having sex with someone else, I wouldn't want to meet them."

Micah shrugged. "Do you think he means me harm?"

"No," I said, "no, nothing like that." I tried to put it into words and couldn't. Maybe it was just my lack of sophistication. How do you introduce boyfriend C to boyfriend A, after boyfriend A has been such a good sport, of late, about boyfriend B, who is no longer in the picture? Or maybe it was the way Jean-Claude had asked for him. "Bring your Nimir-Raj, *ma petite*, I would like to meet him."

"Why?" I'd asked.

"Am I not entitled to meet the other man in your bed?"

It had made me blush. But here Micah was, and here we were outside the Circus. Jean-Claude was inside, waiting. I was actually more scared about introducing the two of them than I was worried about Damian. If Jean-Claude didn't try and kill Micah, *then* I'd worry about Damian. I was ninety-nine percent sure that Jean-Claude wouldn't start a fight. It was the last one percent that clenched my gut into a tight knot as we moved out into the darkness.

The two new bodyguards came up to flank me as I walked towards the back door. They were both over six feet, male, and radiated bodyguard badass. Other than that they were almost opposites. Cris (no h, it's short for Cristiano) was mid-twenty-something, skin tanned a soft gold, eyes a pale shade of gray blue. His hair was that shade of pale brown that some people call blond. Bobby Lee was over forty, very short hair, gone white gray, eyebrows still black above startling blue eyes, like bits of water-blue sapphires. He had a neatly trimmed mustache and beard that were also black, with the first streaks of white and gray running through them.

Cris had no accent whatsoever, but Bobby Lee's voice was thick as hominy, and twice as Southern.

Nathaniel tried to stand next to me, and Cris moved to keep him away. "He's with me," I said.

"We were ordered to keep you safe. I don't know him."

"Look, both of you, we don't have time for major introductions here. He's one of my wereleopards, so are the two blonds. Micah's the one with the ponytail, the two men with him his leopards."

"Who's the redhead?" Bobby Lee asked.

"Gil, he's a werefox, and he's under my protection, too."

"They're like walking cannon fodder," Cris said.

I frowned up at him. "Most of this cannon fodder are friends, or more, to me. If the shit hits the fan and you save me at the expense of their lives, you will follow them."

"Our orders are to keep you safe, ma'am, no one else," Bobby Lee said.

I shook my head and drew Nathaniel into the crook of my arm. "What would Rafael do if you protected him but got his people slaughtered?"

They glanced at each other. Bobby Lee finally spoke. "It would depend on the situation."

"Yeah, maybe, but I'm armed, and can take care of myself most of the time. I need backup, not interference."

"We weren't told to be backup," Bobby Lee said.

"I know, but tonight there may be a certain amount of grandstanding. Jean-Claude won't let me get hurt, but he might play with some of the others, even me. Don't overreact, okay."

"You're making it so we can't do our job," Cris said.

I shrugged, hugging Nathaniel to me. "I appreciate you being here. I appreciate the help. I might be dead right now if Igor and Claudia hadn't been with me. But there are people who I would risk my life to keep safe, and some of them are with me tonight. All I'm saying is keep cool, don't overreact, don't jump the gun."

Again they looked at each other. I sighed. Bobby Lee was wearing a sleeveless jean jacket over his T-shirt. Cris wore a short-sleeved dress shirt and oversized black tank top untucked, sloppy over his khaki pants. It was too hot to wear a coat. But I was wearing a black silk shirt, open over a black tank top myself. I had my shirt tucked in, and the Firestar 9mm in a front draw across the front of all that black. Most people wouldn't see it, black on black. But the long-sleeved shirt was hiding guns and knives. I was betting that Bobby Lee had at least one gun under his jacket, probably at the small of his back, because there was no bulge, no matter how slight, under either arm. It was hard to see the bulge under Cris's left arm. He'd chosen a shirt with a lot of print on it, bright patterns to distract the eye, but a hot wind blew his shirt back, and I caught a glimpse of his shoulder holster. I couldn't be sure what was under the untucked tank top, but I was betting at least one more gun, in front for a cross-draw, just like mine.

"You cannot shoot anyone tonight unless I say so, how's that for clear?"

"We have our orders," Bobby Lee said, "and they aren't from you."

"Then you can go back to Rafael and tell him I refused your help."

Cris's eyes widened a touch. Bobby Lee's expression never changed. Those pretty blue eyes were as empty as glass, no one home. "Why are you so afraid of taking us inside?" he asked.

I sighed again and tried to put it into words they'd understand and I was willing to share. I couldn't come up with anything, so I tried the truth. "I am about to introduce my Nimir-Raj to the Master of the City for the first time."

"You fucking both of them?" Bobby Lee asked, and the phrase seemed wrong with that Scarlett O'Hara accent.

I started to protest, or bitch, but let it go. "Yeah, I am, and I'm a little worried about how the introduction's going to go."

"You think the Master will try and kill your Nimir-Raj?" Cris asked.

"No, but he may want to play with him, and a vampire's idea of fun and games can get a little odd."

Bobby Lee laughed. "Odd, she says, odd." He laughed again, and it sounded warm and deep and rumbly. The laughter filled his eyes, made them more real. "What she is trying to say, Cris, is that we are about to be entertained just like when the rats meet the hyenas. A show of force with no danger, but maybe a little discomfort."

"Yeah, what he just said."

Cris nodded. "So tonight isn't real."

"It's real," I said, "but it's just not dangerous in any way you can protect me from."

"We're supposed to protect you, period," Cris said.

Bobby Lee clamped him on the shoulder. "We can't protect her from her own love life, Cris. We're supposed to keep her body intact, not her heart."

"Oh," Cris said, and he looked suddenly much younger--early twenties, at best.

Bobby Lee turned to me. "We'll hang back tonight, unless you're in real physical danger."

"I'm glad we understand each other."

His eyes went empty again, the smile still curving his lips. "Oh, we don't understand each other at all, ma'am, I can almost guarantee that, but we'll do what we're told, until we decide not to."

I didn't exactly like the sound of that, but, looking into his empty blue eyes, I knew it was the best I was going to get.

Chapter 48

THE STEPS LEADING down into the bowels of the Circus are wide enough for three small people to walk abreast, but the steps themselves are oddly spaced, as if whatever the steps were originally built for wasn't two-legged, or at least wasn't human sized.

We were following Ernie down the steps. The first time I'd met him he'd had one of those long hair cuts with the sides shaved. The sides had grown out, and he'd cut the rest, so he had a fairly standard short haircut, with a little more on top, so he could gel it into soft spikes, sort of executive punk. The short hair also left his neck bare so you could see two fang marks on the right side.

He wasn't feeding Jean-Claude. I don't think the Master of the City fed off humans anymore, not when he could have lycanthrope. But there were other vampires under the Circus, and they had to eat, too.

Micah walked beside me. Merle, Bobby Lee, and Cris had a disagreement about exactly where they were going to walk. They finally settled on Cris walking with Ernie ahead of us and Merle and Bobby Lee walking just behind us. Everyone else sort of trailed behind, including Caleb. None of the bodyguards seemed to give a shit if the others lived or died. I was pretty sure that the bodyguard thing was going to get on my nerves soon, like tonight.

The huge metal door at the end of the stairs was open, waiting. It was usually kept locked for security purposes. My stomach clenched so tight that it hurt. I just didn't know how to handle this. Did I kiss Jean-Claude hello? Did I touch Micah in front of him? Oh, hell.

"Did you say something?" Micah asked.

"Not on purpose," I said.

He looked a question at me, and that did it. I would behave like I always did. I would do exactly what I'd do if the other one wasn't there. To do anything else was going to have us all walking on pins and needles. Besides, I'd been careful with Richard and Jean-Claude, and look where that ended up. I didn't want the same mistakes again. Maybe we could make new ones.

Chapter 49

THERE WERE SILVER drapes just inside the door. That was new. Ernie parted the drapes and led us into Jean-Claude's living room. Once upon a time it had been black and white drapes, and a smaller area, but now it was white, silver, and gold. White drapes, silk and sheer, hung like a hallway that led into something that looked like a huge fairytale tent. The stone walls and ceiling that I knew were there, were hidden by yards and yards of gold and silver cloth. It was like standing in the middle of a jewel box. The coffee table had been painted gold and white and made to look antique, or maybe it was the real deal. A crystal bowl sat in the center of the table with a spill of white carnations and baby's breath.

A huge white couch sat against the far drapes, so covered in silver and gold pillows that some of the pillows had fallen to the white carpeted floor. Two overstuffed chairs were in opposite corners, one gold, one silver, with white pillows on each.

The fireplace looked real, but I knew it wasn't because it had been added later, but it was everything a fireplace should have been, except it was painted white. There was even a new marble mantel that was white with veins of silver and gold, ordered to match.

The only thing that hadn't changed was the portrait above the fireplace. The first thing you saw was Julianna, sitting, dressed in silver and white, half-laughing, brown hair done in careful ringlets. Asher stood behind her in gold and white, his face still perfect, his gold hair in ringlets longer than hers, his mustache and Vandyke beard a blond so dark it was almost brown. Jean-Claude sat behind Julianna, the only one of the three not smiling, solemn, dressed in black and silver. He'd designed the room around the painting--silver and gold and white.

"Wow." Caleb said it for us all.

I'd seen Jean-Claude's sense of style before, but every once in a while he'd amaze even me. Then I felt him coming towards us. I felt him coming and that wasn't a good thing. I'd expected anger, jealousy, but what was moving towards me was simply lust, need. He could shield better than this. Was this my punishment, to be drowned in his lust? If so, he'd misjudged me, because it was just going to piss me off.

He pushed through white and silver drapes, and for a moment I couldn't see where his clothes began and the cloth ended. He was wearing a silver frock coat with white edging, white buttons. His shirt was a spill of white froth, the pants, what I could see of them, were white, but the white leather boots covered almost all of his long legs. The leather looked soft, pettable, held in place with small silver buckles going from just above his ankles to his very upper thigh.

I stared because I couldn't do anything else. Even if he hadn't been projecting sex inside my head, he'd have made me think of it. His hair fell in loose curls nearly to his waist, a black glory on all that silver and white.

Bobby Lee said, "Well, aren't you just pretty as a picture."

Jean-Claude didn't even look at him. He looked at me, and I was walking towards him across the so-soft carpet without a thought, except that I had to touch him.

He closed his eyes, held out his hand. "No, *ma petite*, do not come closer."

I hesitated for a second, then started walking again. I could already smell his cologne, sweet, spicy. I wanted to run my hands through his hair, wrap the scent of him on my hands.

He stumbled back, half-tripping in the drapes. There was something like panic on his face. "*Ma petite*, I thought I could shield you from the *ardeur*, but I cannot."

That did stop me. I had to frown at him. I couldn't seem to think. That kept me where I was, almost close enough to touch him, but not quite. "What's happening, Jean-Claude?"

"I have fed this night, but I have not fed the *ardeur*."

"That's what I'm feeling," I said, "the *ardeur*."

"*Oui*, I am shielding as hard as I can, yet you are picking up on it. That has never happened before."

"Is it because I've got my own *ardeur*?"

"That is all that has changed, so yes, I believe so."

"You're not going to be in any shape to help with Damian, are you?"

He sighed and looked down. "I need to feed all my hungers, *ma petite*. I have not had this much difficulty with the *ardeur* in centuries. Something about sharing it with you has affected me. I did not know until I felt you enter the building that it had changed."

"You mean your control is better farther away from me?"

He nodded.

"What the hell is this 'ardoo-whatever'?" Bobby Lee asked.

I glanced back at him. "When we want to share, I'll let you know."

Bobby Lee raised his eyebrows at that, then made a small pushing motion. "You're the boss, ma'am ... for now."

I let that slide and turned back to Jean-Claude. "What do we do?"

Nathaniel offered a suggestion. "Feed him."

I looked back at him, and the look must have been enough, because he put his hands out empty, and went to stand by the fireplace. Everyone else had taken a seat, except for Gil, who was huddled beside one of the chairs on the floor, clutching a pillow.

I turned to Jean-Claude, and it was Micah's voice that turned me back again. "I've seen Anita in the--" he changed whatever he was going to say-- "grip of the *ardeur*, and this doesn't look like it. She's way too calm."

Jean-Claude looked past me at him, seeing him, I think, for the first time, at least in person. His gaze traveled up and down his body, an assessing look, like he was thinking of buying or was trying to be deliberately insulting.

Micah either didn't catch the insult or was proof against it, because he started walking towards us. He moved in a well of his own power, as if even here, surrounded by Jean-Claude's things, he was supremely confident, totally at ease. He moved like a dancer, compact, graceful, strong. The sight of him tightened things low in my body. Jean-Claude made a small sound. I started to turn towards him, but it was too late, his shields shattered and the *ardeur* roared over me. My skin ran with heat, my breath stopped, my vision was gone in streamers of color. Jean-Claude's need marched over me, through me, inside me. It screamed in my head, danced down my nerves, flowed through my veins. In that instant if he had asked anything, anything at all, I would have said *yes*.

My vision cleared and I found Jean-Claude on the floor, half-caught in a spill of draperies that he'd pulled from their hangers, so that he sat in a nest of white and silver. His face was almost slack with need, his eyes already a spill of blind blue fire.

I was on my knees, too, and didn't remember falling. Micah was there, taking my arm, I think to help me stand, but the moment he touched me the *ardeur* leaped, and he fell to the floor beside me, like someone had struck him with a hammer; his legs just stopped holding him. He whispered, "Oh, my God."

The bodyguards moved in then, and I had to scream, "No!" There must have been something in my voice, because all three of them froze in mid-motion. "No one touches us, no one." My voice was high, frantic. There was a

very real chance that the *ardeur* could spread through the whole room, one touch at a time. We had enough problems without that.

Micah had released my arm, his hands nerveless in his lap, but the tie had been made, and the act of touching, or not, didn't change it.

Jean-Claude crawled from the bed of glittering cloth, slowly, every move something graceful and dangerous. He'd never looked more predatory than he did at that moment.

"Jean-Claude," I whispered, "don't." But I couldn't move. I watched him like a tiny bird fascinated as the serpent glides closer, caught between terror and the sheer beauty of him.

Asher was suddenly there in the space between the cloth. Jean-Claude froze, but it wasn't that stillness that the old vampires could fall into, there was a thrumming energy to him, more like a big cat about to pounce than something cold and reptilian.

"Jean-Claude, you must control the *ardeur* better than this." He was hugging his arms as if he felt at least a brush of it himself. He'd noticed the new faces and used a practiced shake of his head to spill his golden hair across the scars, only revealing the perfect half.

Jean-Claude's voice came low and harsh. "I cannot."

I'd been afraid; now it was sheer terror. I looked up at Asher and saw him through a film of all the times we'd touched him, all that beauty, all the beauty that I still saw. I whispered, "Help us!"

Asher was shaking his head. "If I am dragged in as well, it will help no one "

"Asher, please!"

"Once he feeds, all will be well, simply let him feed."

I shook my head. "Not here, not like this."

Micah said, "If it will help, why not let him feed?"

I looked at him, and just turning to him made my mouth part, my breath catch. It was almost like the *ardeur* remembered him, like a succulent food that it wanted to taste again.

It took two tries to say, "You don't understand."

Zane said, "Anita doesn't let Jean-Claude feed off of her." He and Cherry were sitting on the far edge of the couch, watching with wide eyes, not coming near us.

"I thought she was his human servant," Micah said.

"She is." Jean-Claude whispered it.

Something in those two words made me look at him, made me stare into those glittering blue eyes. He couldn't trap me with his gaze anymore, because I was his human servant, but tonight there was a pull to those eyes. I wanted to cradle his face in my hands, wanted to taste those half-parted lips.

"Anita!" Asher's voice jerked me around, made me look at him.

"Help me."

"He can feed on me." Micah said it, voice soft. We all turned and stared at him.

He looked a little less sure. I think something he saw on our faces made him hesitate, but he said it again. "If a little blood will cure this, then I'm willing."

"He has fed on blood tonight already," Asher said. "It is not blood he needs but ... *voir les anges*."

"English, Asher, even I didn't understand that one," I said.

He waved his hands as if erasing what he'd said. "He needs release, a ..." He said several things in rapid French, and I couldn't follow it. Asher was in great distress if his English had abandoned him.

I was careful not to look at Micah when I tried to explain. "It's the *ardeur* that Jean-Claude needs fed."

"He needs sex, not blood," Nathaniel said. His voice was soft, but a glance showed him standing as far across the room as he could get. I didn't blame him a bit.

"The first time you fed on me it wasn't intercourse, just contact," he said.

I nodded, still trying not to look at any of the men. "I remember."

"Contact is okay," Micah said.

I had to look at him, and the surprise was great enough that for just a second I almost fought free of the *ardeur*, I could almost think. "What kind of contact?"

"Sexual contact." His face was very serious, eyes solemn, as if he, too, could think again. "I said I would do anything to be your Nimir-Raj, Anita. What do I have to do to convince you I mean it?"

"What are you offering, Micah?"

"Whatever you need." He looked past me to Jean-Claude. "Whatever you both need."

I felt Jean-Claude's attention sharpen, almost like a physical force, and the *ardeur* was back, thick enough to drown in. My breath froze in my throat, my pulse was too fast to swallow. Jean-Claude's voice came, I think in my head, because his lips never moved. "Be careful what you offer, *mon ami*, my control is poor tonight."

Micah answered, as if he'd heard Jean-Claude too. "You were a *menage a trois* with the Ulfric. He's gone. I'm here, and I'm staying. I will be Anita's Nimir-Raj, whatever that means."

I managed to say, "Who said that we were a *menage a trois*?"

"Everyone," he said.

I wondered who everyone was, because I knew it *wasn't* everyone.

Jean-Claude was moving forward again, painfully slow, every movement so full of energy, so full of potential violence and grace, that it almost hurt to watch. It made my pulse race, my breath hard to take--made my body run moist. Oh, shit, oh, shit, oh, shit.

"Jean-Claude, no," but my voice was a whisper.

His mouth hovered over mine, then his face turned for a second to Micah. I watched the two of them gaze at each other from inches away and felt the power pulsing in the air between. Jean-Claude moved so slowly to close the distance between them that it was like watching slow motion. Micah sat there,

waiting. He didn't move in to him, but he didn't move away either. I thought at first they'd kissed, then some trick of the light let me see a thin line of space between their mouths. Not touching, not yet. I watched their lips so tremblingly close, and part of me wanted them to touch, but Jean-Claude held his place, held his place until Micah closed his eyes, as if he couldn't stand to meet those glowing orbs, like looking away from the sun, too brilliant to bear.

And still Jean-Claude did not close that small distance. It was the distance of a breath, the flick of a tongue and still he held himself almost touching, almost there, but not quite. The tension grew, grew, grew, until I wanted to scream. I didn't realize that I'd moved in towards them, until they both turned at once and looked at me from inches away. My eyes flicked from one to the other. Eyes like blue fire; eyes like yellow-green clouds. Micah's eyes grew more green as I watched, until they were pale, pale green, like spring leaves. He focused on me. I couldn't explain it, but I knew that this was the look he hunted with, that sharp focus, the pupil nearly lost in the color of his eyes.

I realized that I'd pushed the *ardeur* back. I was attracted to both, but I could think again, feel something besides the burn. You practice one kind of metaphysical control, and I guess it gives you an edge on all of them. The relief made me feel weak, as if I could have curled on the floor and slept. We weren't going to fall on each other like ravening lust-monsters. Yippee.

I eased away, started to crawl backwards. Jean-Claude's gaze followed me, but he made no move to touch me. There was something about the way he stayed on all fours that let me know the *ardeur* was still riding him. But if I could keep from touching him, we'd be alright. He watched me, like a starving man, who was watching his first meal in days crawl away. But he played fair, he stayed where he was, he let me crawl away. He knew the rules. Micah didn't.

He reached for me, and I threw myself back to the floor in a blur of speed that I'd never had before, but Micah wasn't human either. He followed me in a movement that was too fast for my eyes to follow, so that he was above me before my mind could see that he'd moved. It was magical.

He was frozen just above me, his body balanced on hands and feet, almost like he was doing a push-up. I reached out, around him, trying not to touch him. I had time to say, "No, don't," then two things happened at once. Micah dropped his body on top of mine, and Jean-Claude took my outreached hand. Maybe he thought I was reaching for him, I don't know. But the moment we touched the heat ran over us, through us, and there was nothing but the need.

Chapter 50

WE KISSED, AND it was like melting from the mouth down. My hands slid over the silk of Micah's shirt, and it wasn't enough. I ripped at it, tore it from

his body until my hands spilled over the solid smoothness of his chest, his skin like warm satin under my fingers. Micah was suddenly grinding me into the floor, so heavy. I opened my eyes and found Jean-Claude above us, over Micah, pressing us both into the floor. I had a moment of meeting his eyes, a moment to see the rage in that blind blue fire, then his arms were around Micah, and he was jerking the smaller man backwards.

I sat up, watching them roll across the floor, fighting. Anger, frustration, and just sheer tiredness welled up inside me until there was no room for the *ardeur*. I was tired of fighting, so tired of it.

I smelled blood like a hot spike through the center of my body; the smell was almost sexual. That was enough. I drew the Browning and sighted around the room. For a split second, I had the two of them at the end of the barrel. For a split second it occurred to me. Then I moved the gun around the room, registering for the first time that there was no one left in the room but us. Good to know we didn't have an audience. I pointed the gun at the overstuffed white couch and fired. One of the small gold and silver pillows jumped upward with the impact. The noise was thunderous in the stone room, as if the heavy drapes caught the sound, held it around us.

They froze. Micah's hands were claws, shredding across Jean-Claude's back, because that was all he could reach. Jean-Claude's face was buried in Micah's neck, his body wrapped around him, so that everything vital was hidden while he tried to tear Micah's throat out.

I sighted on them. "Stop it, stop it, both of you, or the next one goes in one of you. I swear, by God, that I will shoot you."

Jean-Claude raised up, blood in a crimson wash across his mouth, chin, down his neck. There was so much blood, it made me afraid to look at Micah's neck. Micah's claws stayed in Jean-Claude's back. I could see the tension as if every muscle were poised to drive the claws farther in.

"The Nimir-Raj holds me in place, *ma petite*. I cannot move."

"Micah, let him up."

Micah didn't move, and I guess I couldn't blame him, but ... I aimed the gun at his head because that was the only clear shot I had. I had a small spurt of panic that I might have to pull the trigger, then a calmness welled over me, and I stood in that well of silence, that buzzing white noise that I went to when I killed. There was no feeling here, there was almost nothing here.

"I ... will ... kill you, Micah." My voice sounded as empty as I felt.

Micah turned his head slowly to look at me. Blood flowed from the left side of his neck down his shoulder, his chest. He was drenched in his own blood. I could see more of it welling up, sliding down, but not constant; the blood pumped out with his pulse. Shit.

"Let him up, Micah, he's pierced your carotid." I lowered the gun and started to close the distance between them.

Micah looked up at the vampire, still poised with his claws in Jean-Claude's flesh. "If I die, I want him to go with me."

"It should be simple enough for a Nimir-Raj of your power to heal such a small wound," Jean-Claude said, still pressed around the other man's body, intimate.

Micah withdrew the claws from Jean-Claude's back. Jean-Claude moved enough to prop himself up on his hands. I saw Micah tense a second before his arm swung in that unbelievable speed, so fast, so fast. Jean-Claude's throat hadn't even started to bleed when Micah's hand was back at his side. Then blood spilled in a fountain from Jean-Claude's throat.

"Heal *that*," Micah said.

I was left standing there, watching them both bleed to death. Mother fucking son of a bitch.

Chapter 51

JEAN-CLAUDE HALF FELL, half moved off of Micah. Blood sprayed in a red rain as he knelt on all fours, coughing, as if he were trying to clear his throat. It made the blood pump faster.

I screamed, at first wordless, then I thought of something better. I screamed, "Asher!"

Micah was already rolling in black fur, bones sliding in and out, muscles rolling in glimpses of pinkish flesh. He'd shapeshift and heal himself, but Jean-Claude couldn't shapeshift.

I grabbed Jean-Claude's arm, and the moment I touched him the marks flared between us. I was choking on my own blood, drowning in it. Strong hands were digging into my arms, fingers like cold stone. I blinked and found Jean-Claude's face glowing like carved alabaster with white light inside it. His skin glowed behind the coating of blood on his lower face, like rubies spread across diamonds. His eyes were pools of molten sapphire flame, if fire could be cold, achingly cold. A wind sprang from his body, from our bodies, and it was the cold of the grave that danced around us, fluttered our hair around our faces. We reached that cold power out, out, to find Richard, and as before the answer came against our skin. Jason was kneeling beside us. I didn't have time to marvel that he was healed. He touched us and the mark that was Richard flared through his body, a warmth to dance with our coldness. And I knew Micah was kneeling behind me, furred and clawed. I felt him at my back the way I felt Jason, as if he were tied to us.

Micah fell back, screaming, "Nooo!" The tie was cut and for a second I swayed, as if part of my support was gone, then Nathaniel was there, and the world was solid again.

We knelt, bound by flesh, magic, and blood. I watched the flesh in Jean-Claude's throat reknit, reform, remake, reshape itself until the flesh was perfect

and white, surrounded by a coating of wet blood. He'd healed so fast that the blood hadn't had time to dry.

I smelled roses, not the faint perfume of potpourri, but thick, melt-on-your-tongue, old-fashioned garden roses, as if I were drowning in the cloying sweetness of them. It was like being dipped in honey that you knew had poison in it.

Honey, honey brown eyes. I remembered the pale honey brown of Belle Morte's eyes. "Do you smell the roses?" I asked.

Jean-Claude turned drowning blue eyes to me. "Roses? I smell nothing but the scent of your perfume, and skin." He scented the air, "And blood."

Nathaniel and Jason were lost in the wonder of the power rush, but no one smelled roses but me. Once upon a time I'd smelled perfume when a certain Master Vampire had been using her magic. My friend and fellow animator, Larry Kirkland, had smelled the perfume, too, but no one else around us had been able to scent it.

I looked into Jean-Claude's eyes, not with my sight, but with my magic, and found something, something that wasn't him. It was subtle. What she'd done with me earlier had been like a sledgehammer between the eyes; this was a stiletto in the dark.

I found the thread of her power coiled in him, and the moment my magic, my necromancy, hit it, the power uncoiled, opened, and it was like a window thrown wide. I saw her sitting in her room by fire and candlelight, as if electricity hadn't been invented. She was dressed in a white lace dressing gown, all that black hair falling around her, and a bowl of pink roses next to her pale hand. She turned those huge pale brown eyes to me, and I saw the surprise on her face, the shock. She saw me kneeling with the men, as I saw her before her dressing table with her roses.

I cut her off, cast her out of Jean-Claude, as I'd cast her out of me earlier. It was easier, because she hadn't tried to possess him, only to tamper with him, to be that dark voice in his ear that pushed him a little over the edge.

Jean-Claude slumped suddenly, as if dizzy. He raised eyes to me that were as normal as they ever got, his usual midnight blue. There was fear on his face, no hiding it. "I thought I saw Belle, sitting before her mirror."

I nodded. "You did."

He looked at me, and I think that only all our hands on him kept him from falling to the floor. "She weakened my control of the *ardeur*."

"And your control of your temper," I said.

"What has happened?" Asher asked.

I looked up to find that everyone was back in the room. "Any of this blood yours, ma'am?" Bobby Lee asked.

I shook my head. "Not a scratch on me."

"Then I guess we won't get blacklisted from the bodyguard union for leaving you alone with a shapeshifter and a vampire, so they could fight over you." He was shaking his head. "The next time you ask us to leave you alone because it's your love life, we aren't going to listen to you."

I shook my head, again. "We'll talk about it later."

"No, ma'am," he said, "we won't."

I let the argument go. There was always time to fight later. Besides, he was too close to right. If I'd gotten between them at the wrong moment, who knew what accident might have happened?

Jean-Claude spoke softly, voice urgent, to Asher. They were speaking French and I still didn't know enough to catch more than a word here and there. I heard Belle, clearly, several times.

In English Asher said, "Do you remember Marcel?"

"*Oui*. He went mad one night and slew his entire household."

"Including his human servant," Asher said, "which is what killed him."

The two vampires stared at each other. "No one ever understood what had caused it," Jean-Claude said.

"So fortuitous," Asher said, "only two nights before he would have fought Belle for her Council seat."

Jean-Claude took Asher's offered hand and let him help him to his feet. Asher had to steady Jean-Claude with a hand on his elbow. "So fortuitous that many tried to prove she had poisoned him, or some such," Asher said.

Jean-Claude nodded, passing a hand over his face, as if he were still dizzy. I felt nothing, as if my necromancy protected me from whatever Belle had done to him. "The Council themselves tried to prove her at fault and failed," Jean-Claude said.

"Did they hire a witch to look into the magic angle?" I asked. I stood on my own, just fine. Nathaniel and Jason got to their feet, again with no ill-effects, except for Jason's stupid grin, which he often wore after a power rush

The vampires looked at me. "*Non*," Asher said, "no one thought of it."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because, *ma petite*, she should not be able to do what she did to a Master of the City, even one of her own bloodline. That she could do this to a Master of the City that was not her bloodline would be unthinkable."

"Impossible," Asher added.

"I think it's like real possible," I said. "I caught her in the act."

"Who's Belle?" Micah asked in his growling leopard voice.

I turned to him, slowly, and something must have shown on my face, because Merle moved in front of him, and suddenly the two wererats were alert, starting to move up beside me. I don't know what I was about to say, probably something really angry, because Micah beat me to it.

"He pierced my jugular vein, Anita. I'm allowed to defend myself when someone tries to eat my throat out."

"Remember I'm his human servant. He dies, so might I."

He stalked around Merle, gliding on bent legs and kitty-cat feet. "So I'm just supposed to let him kill me?"

"No," I said, "no, but your wound wasn't life-threatening. You proved that already. There's not a scratch on you now."

"I healed it, yes, but not every shapeshifter could have healed it. A vampire wound is a lot like silver, it can kill, and most of us heal from those wounds like we were human." He was standing very close to me, those green-

gold eyes sparkling with anger. "He meant to kill me, Anita, don't think he didn't."

"He is right, *ma petite*, if he had not held me off more, I would have torn his throat out."

I turned back to Jean-Claude. "What are you saying?"

"I saw him on top of you, and I was drowning in jealousy. I meant him harm, *ma petite*. He defended himself."

"He didn't have to do that last blow. The fight had stopped."

Jean-Claude looked past me at Micah, and there was something on his face-- respect, I think. "If he had done to me what I did to him, then I would have had no choice but to make my point," he seemed to consider several words and settled for, "strongly."

"Strongly? He damn near slit your throat."

"After I had tried to do the same to him."

I was shaking my head. "No, no, I don't ..."

"What, *ma petite*, are you truly saying that if someone had torn your throat out, tried for your life that you wouldn't have shot them?"

I opened my mouth to argue, closed it, tried again, and stopped. I looked at him, then back at Micah, then back to Jean-Claude. "Well, damn."

"The Nimir-Raj has made his point, *ma petite*. He is willing to be accommodating up to a point--beyond that point there is no compromise."

Micah nodded, and the movement looked awkward in his furred body. "Yes."

"You have the same rule, *ma petite*, as do I. The three of us merely have different places where the line is drawn. But the line is there for all of us."

"How can you both be so reasonable about this? You both nearly just killed each other?"

They looked at each other, around me, again, and there was something in that look. It was something masculine and arcane, as if the fact that I was a girl meant I wouldn't get it, and they couldn't explain it to me. Which did explain it to me.

"Oh, great, great, you guys nearly kill each other, and that makes you buddies."

Jean-Claude gave that wonderful Gallic shrug, his face still covered in Micah's blood. "Let us say we have an understanding."

Micah agreed.

"Jesus, only men could get a friendship out of something like this."

"You are friends with Monsieur Edward. Did you not both begin by trying to kill each other?" Jean-Claude asked.

"That's different," I said.

"How?"

I tried to argue, but stopped because I would have looked silly. "Fine, fine, so what, the two of you kiss and make up?"

They looked at each other, and again there was weight to the gaze, but it was a different weight. "Shit," I said.

"I think we begin by apologizing," Jean-Claude said. "I am truly sorry for my lack of control."

"Me, too," Micah said, then added, "and I'm sorry that I had to try and kill you." It was interesting phrasing, not I'm sorry I nearly killed you, but sorry I had to try and kill you. I was seeing Micah's ruthless streak. It wasn't really any bigger than my own, but it bothered me anyway. Wasn't sure why, but it did.

I didn't know what to do, so I decided to move on, we had other business. "Are you well enough to help get Damian out of his coffin?"

"I have used up all my reserves, *ma petite*. I will need to feed again." He raised a hand. "But not the *ardeur*, merely blood."

Merely, he says.

"I offered to let you feed on me earlier. The offer still stands," Micah said.

"No, Micah," Merle said.

Micah touched the taller man's arm. "It's alright."

"Are you not afraid I will try and tear your throat out again? I would listen to your bodyguard."

"You said we had an understanding."

"That is true."

They were watching each other, and I could almost feel the testosterone rise.

Micah smiled, or tried to. In the half-leopard form it was a snarl of white fangs in black fur. "Besides, the next time you bite me like that, it better be foreplay, or I will kill you."

"If it pleases you, my pleasure," Jean-Claude said. He laughed then, that touchable sound that caressed my skin, made me shiver. Micah reacted to it eyes wide. He'd never heard Jean-Claude's laugh before. If he thought the laugh was something special, well, the best truly was yet to come.

"I thank you for your most generous offer," Jean-Claude said, "but I prefer my food without fur."

"No problem," Micah said. Micah released Merle's arm, and did that magically quick change. His tanned skin seemed to absorb the fur like rocks sinking into water. He stood naked and perfect, no mark of the fight on that smooth skin. Neither his clothing nor the tie in his hair had survived the change. But strangely the hair fell straight around his face, as if it were affected by the fact that he'd pulled it back tight while it was still wet. The hair was still thick, but it framed his face better, was less overwhelming, so that you could still see the delicate bone structure, those wondrous eyes.

I heard someone catch their breath, and it wasn't me. I don't think it was Jean-Claude, but I wasn't sure. Didn't matter, didn't want to know.

"You are not even dizzy, are you?" Jean-Claude asked.

Micah shook his head.

Jean-Claude raised his eyebrows, lowered his eyes, fought to control his face, until he could give a perfect blank expression, but it took him a few seconds. "I will clean this," he made a vague motion at his gore-soaked clothes, "before taking such a bounty, if that is alright?"

Micah gave a small nod.

"You are not taking a bath," I said.

"I will be quick, *ma petite*."

"You have never taken a quick bath in your entire life."

Asher laughed, then tried to smother it, but was only partially successful. He spread his hands. "*Mon cheri*, she is right."

"Would I touch that for the first time covered in this?"

Asher's face sobered instantly, like someone had thrown a switch. He turned that serious, blank face to stare at Micah, who stared back. If he was uncomfortable under the scrutiny, it didn't show.

Asher sighed. "I suppose not."

"And what are we supposed to do for the hour that it takes you to soak in the tub?" I asked.

"I will be quick, *ma petite*, my word on it."

I crossed my arms over my stomach. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"*Ma petite*, I have given my word."

"On important stuff, your word is great, but when it comes to primping; you have no sense of time."

"I thought that was the man's line," Bobby Lee said.

I glanced at him then back to the vampire. "Couldn't prove it by me."

Bobby Lee laughed, but no one else did.

Chapter 52

I SAT ON the white couch with its brand-new bullet hole. Micah sat down beside me, and since he was naked, that was ... interesting. Uncomfortable, and sort of titillating all at the same time. He kept insisting on trying to talk to me, and I found it hard to keep eye contact, and that was embarrassing.

Bobby Lee and Cris stayed near me, hovering behind and to one side, because I made them move from right behind me. I just don't like armed people at my back, not unless I know them really well. The wererats were there to protect me. I believed they'd do the job, because Rafael told them to, but I still didn't want them standing armed at my back. Merle lounged near the fireplace, keeping an eye on Micah and the other bodyguards. Gil was actually hiding in the corner, or nearly--not a stable guy--the others milled around the room. Except for Asher.

He sat in the chair opposite the couch and watched us. He had shaken that glorious hair over his face so that only the perfect side was visible, and only one pale blue eye looked at us. His face showed nothing, but I could still feel the weight of his gaze, like a hand pushing. His face may have shown nothing, but he was giving us way too much attention.

I might have asked why, but Jean-Claude walked back through the gap in the drapes. I had to check my watch. Only twenty minutes had passed. I'd dated him off and on for nearly three years; a twenty-minute cleanup was nothing short of miraculous. Of course, his black hair was still wet and heavy; he hadn't taken time to blow-dry it. He was wearing one of my favorite robes, the black one with the black furred edging. The fur outlined a wonderful expanse of pale perfect chest. The robe was open enough that the cross-shaped burn scar showed, and as he glided into the room you caught glimpses of his upper stomach through the fur. The robe was very loosely tied, not at all the way he usually wore it.

He had that smile on his face that said he knew he looked wonderful, and he knew just what effect he had on me, then his gaze slid to Micah. I was close enough to see Micah's pulse speed up, jumping under the skin of his neck. He tried to meet Jean-Claude's eyes, but finally had to look down, and he blushed.

His reaction made *my* pulse speed up. I looked back at Jean-Claude gliding towards us, catching a glimpse of his pale feet under the black robe, against the white carpet. The look on his face was all for Micah. It made me go up on one knee, my butt against the arm of the couch. I felt oddly possessive, almost jealous, as if I should be defending Micah's honor. I'd never felt like this with Richard and Jean-Claude, but then, Jean-Claude had never looked at Richard in quite that way. Because Richard would have hurt him.

Micah had nearly killed Jean-Claude over an insult that Richard would not have fought back over, yet here he sat blushing, uncomfortable, but not angry.

Jean-Claude was standing in front of us, so close that the furred hem of the robe brushed Micah's bare leg. "Have you changed your mind, *mon minet*?"

Micah shook his head, then raised his face up to look at the vampire. There was both vulnerability and warning in that look. "I haven't changed my mind."

"*Bon.*" Jean-Claude went to his knees in front of him. "You are powerful in your own right, and you are not my animal to call. I may not be able to cloud your mind and make this tasting a pleasure. You may be able to keep me out of your mind."

Micah nodded, thick hair falling around his face. "I understand."

"Do you have a preference on where the blood is taken from?"

"The neck hurts less," Micah said.

Jean-Claude raised an eyebrow. "You've done this before?"

Micah gave a smile that managed not to be happy. "I've done a lot of things before."

Jean-Claude raised both eyebrows at that and looked at me. I shrugged.

"Very well, *mon minet.*" He stood in one graceful movement, swinging the robe around him like a dress, giving the slightest glimpse of bare legs as he stalked behind the couch. He stopped just behind Micah, putting a hand on either of his shoulders. He didn't caress, or squeeze, just rested his hands on that smooth, warm flesh for a moment.

"Get on with it," Merle said.

Micah turned his head to look at the other wereleopard. "Merle." One word, but it made the big man lean back harder on the fireplace, arms crossed over his chest, face sullen, a very unhappy bodyguard. But he did what he was told.

Jean-Claude slid one arm around the front of Micah's shoulders, across his very upper chest. He used his free hand to smooth Micah's hair back, exposing the side of his face and the long clean line of his throat. Micah moved his head a little to the side, giving Jean-Claude a better angle. The small movement was like a woman coming to her tiptoes for a kiss, a helpful movement.

"Maybe we could have a little privacy," I said, and it made both men look at me.

"As you like, *ma petite*." Everyone left except Merle, Bobby Lee, and Asher. They were the minimum that might be needed to keep us from killing each other. After what had just happened, I really couldn't work up a good argument for leaving us completely alone. When everyone had settled down, Jean-Claude turned back to Micah.

Jean-Claude's fingers stroked Micah's hair so that it fell behind his ear, exposing the entire side of his face, the shape of his ear. He pressed the back of Micah's head gently against his chest, drawing the exposed neck in an even longer line. Micah was utterly passive, eyes closed, face peaceful; only the pulse in his neck beating like a trapped thing gave lie to all that calmness.

Jean-Claude bent over him, mouth open, lips going back, but even this close I got only the barest glimpse of teeth. He bit down, sharp, sudden. Micah gasped, breath catching in his throat. Jean-Claude's grip tightened at Micah's head, his shoulders, pressing him in against his body. I could see the muscles in Jean-Claude's jaws working, his throat swallowing convulsively. One of them was making small noises low in his throat, and I wasn't sure who it was.

Jean-Claude reared back, bringing Micah with him, drawing him half over the couch. Micah cried out, his hands going to Jean-Claude's arm, holding on, as the vampire rocked his body backwards. Jean-Claude moved his hand from Micah's face to his waist, as if he knew the other man wouldn't move away now. He held Micah, arms across his chest and waist, Micah's hands on Jean-Claude's arm. He stretched Micah's body backwards as he'd lengthened the man's neck earlier, so that Micah's body showed in a long, clean line, back curved against Jean-Claude's body, so that both of them were bowed backwards.

I was left kneeling on the couch, staring up the line of Micah's nude body, seeing without doubt that what was happening was making his body happy. His face was slack with need, pleasure. His hands convulsed over Jean-Claude's arm, and he half-screamed, half-shouted, "God!"

Jean-Claude's body began to straighten up, slowly. He eased Micah back over the couch. He raised his mouth from Micah's neck; his eyes were drowning blue, sightless, inhuman. His lips were full, red, but not with spilled blood, red like someone who's been kissing too much. He released Micah slowly, letting his body slide against the back of the couch, until the wereleopard half-collapsed on his side. His head spilled into my lap, and I

jumped. Micah raised his head, slowly, heavy. He propped himself up on one arm and turned unfocused eyes to me. His pupils were enormous, drowning black in the circle of his green-yellow eyes. I watched his pupils spiral downward to small dots so that the color almost overwhelmed them, like a vampire's eyes. I could feel him staring at me, the weight of his gaze like something pushing against me. He leaned in towards me, slowly, lips half-parted.

I stayed where I was, frozen, unsure what to do. It wasn't that he was any less lovely than he had been. It was just ... oh, hell, I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know what I wanted to do.

"Didn't you need to get Damian out of his coffin?" Asher's voice came dry, making me draw back from Micah.

Jean-Claude snarled at him, looking more inhuman than the entire time he was feeding.

Asher stood in one smooth motion, like a puppet pulled up by strings. "Fine, but if you are going to have sex, then I don't have to watch."

I stood, Micah's hands sliding down my body as I moved away from the couch. I faced Asher. "Look, I am so far over my comfort zone right now that I can't think, but I'll tell you one thing. I am not going to salve your male ego while the little voice in my brain is still screaming, run away, run away. So, put the attitude on ice, Asher, I can't deal with it right now."

He was suddenly vibrating with anger, his eyes like icy blue pools. "So sorry that my discomfort annoys you."

"Fuck you, Asher."

He was suddenly moving forward in a blur of speed. I backed up so fast that I fell against the couch. Micah caught me, or I'd have fallen to the floor. I had time to draw a gun, or a knife, but I didn't even try. Asher wasn't trying to hurt my body, just my feelings. He bent at the waist, looming over me and Micah, though I think that part was accidental. He put a hand on either side of us and leaned into my face, so close that I had to pull back to focus on those chilling blue eyes. "Don't offer things you're not willing to do, *ma cherie*, because that is annoying."

He stood up abruptly and stalked from the room.

Micah's voice was soft. "What was all that about?" His hands were still on my arms, half-holding me, protective.

I shook my head. "Ask Jean-Claude." I pushed to my feet. "I'm going to go get Damian."

"I will accompany you, *ma petite*."

"Fine." I started walking. I could feel them following me, feel them both behind me. I almost turned around to see if they were holding hands, but if they were, I wasn't ready to see it.

Bobby Lee trailed behind without a word. Smart man.

Chapter 53

THE ROOM WAS bare stone walls. There was no pretense of comfort. It was the vampire's version of prison, and it looked like one. There were half a dozen coffins sitting on bare, raised platforms with silver chains around them, waiting to be raised and locked in place with crosses. The only crosses in the room were on the two closed coffins. Two? Two chained coffins. Damian was in one. Who the hell was in the other?

"Which one is your boy?" Bobby Lee asked.

I shook my head. "Don't know."

"I thought you were supposed to be this boy's master."

"That's the theory."

"Then shouldn't you be able to tell which box is which?"

I glanced at him, gave a small nod. "Point." I looked back at the door but it was still empty, just us. I didn't know where everyone had gone to, and I was so trying not to speculate on what might have distracted Micah and Jean-Claude.

I tried to concentrate on who was in the coffins, but I couldn't. Once upon a time I could sense Damian even before he woke in his coffin, but I got nothing from either coffin, except that there were vampires in them. I went to the closest coffin. The wood was pale and smooth. Not the most expensive, but not cheap either, heavy, well made. I passed my hands across the smooth wood, fingers caressing the coolness of the chains. Something banged against the lid of the coffin. I jumped.

Bobby Lee laughed.

I frowned at him, then turned back to the coffin, but I wasn't touching it anymore. I knew it wasn't possible with a blessed cross attached to the lid, but I'd had this sudden image of an arm tearing through the wood and grabbing me. Damian was supposed to be homicidally crazy. Better cautious than dead.

I put my hands just above the coffin, not quite touching. I drew my necromancy, like drawing a breath, and breathed it out through my body, not exactly through my hands, but everywhere. The necromancy was part of *what* I was, not just who I was. I started to push my power into the coffin, but it was pulled in, like water pouring into a hole. The water falls down because gravity pulls it down, and there is no stopping it; it's natural, automatic. My necromancy spilled into that coffin, and into Damian. I felt him lying in the dark, his body pressed against the thin satin. I saw his eyes stare up into mine, felt something flare inside him, something that recognized my power, but I couldn't feel him. There was no personality there, no Damian. I knew it was him, but there was no thought in him, nothing but that tiny spark of recognition, and barely that. I tried to reconcile the thing I felt to what I knew Damian had been, and it was like he had become something else. I said a quick prayer, and I didn't even feel odd praying to God about a vampire. I'd had to give up my narrow ideas of God a long time ago, or give up church and everything I held dear about my religion. The deal was, if God was okay with what I was doing, then I had to be, too.

"Where is everybody?" I asked it aloud, so Bobby Lee answered.

"I don't know, but if you come with me, we'll go look."

I shook my head staring at the other coffin. Who was in there locked in the dark? I had to know, and if I could, I'd get them out. I didn't approve of torture, and being locked in a coffin where you would never starve to death, but always go hungry, never die of thirst, but burn with the need for liquid, be trapped in a space so small you couldn't even turn onto your side, were all good definitions of torture in my book. I liked most of Jean-Claude's vamps, and I wouldn't leave them like this, not if I could persuade him that they'd been punished enough. I was pretty stubborn about things like that, and Jean-Claude was wanting to please me right now; I could probably get whoever it was out. I'd do my best. But who was it? Admittedly, there were vampires that I'd make more of an effort to save, just like people.

I went to stand beside the other coffin and pushed my magic into it. I had to push this time; it wasn't like Damian. Whatever was in this box didn't welcome me in. It wasn't anyone I had a connection with. I felt something, and I knew it was a kind of undead, but it didn't feel like a vampire. It felt emptier than that. It was fully dark outside; there should have been movement, life, of a sort, but there was nothing. I pushed farther into the thing, and found the faintest answering pulse. It was as if whatever was in there was a lot more dead than alive, yet not truly dead.

A sound turned me towards the door. Jean-Claude glided into the room, his robe tied tight now, like a signal that he was ready to get down to business. He was alone.

"Where's Micah?" I asked.

"Jason has taken him to get some clothing. They should be able to find something that will fit him."

"Who is in this coffin?" I'd almost said, *what*, but I was betting it was a vampire, just not like one I'd ever sensed before.

His face was already careful, neutral. "I would think, *ma petite*, that you have enough to be concerned over with Damian?"

"You know and I know that I am not moving until I know who's in here."

He sighed. "Yes, I know." He actually looked down at the floor, as if he were tired, and because his face showed nothing, the gesture looked half-finished, like bad acting. But I knew that for him to be working so hard at keeping anything off his face, only to let his body betray him meant he was very unhappy. Which meant that I was really not going to like the answer.

"Who, Jean-Claude?"

"Gretchen," he said, finally meeting my eyes. His face told me nothing, the one word empty.

Once upon a time Gretchen had tried to kill me because she wanted Jean-Claude for herself. "When did she get back in town?"

"Back?" He gave it that little lilt that made it a question.

"Don't be coy, Jean-Claude. She came back to town still out for my blood, and you put her in here, so when?"

His face became like a sculpture, except with less movement in it. He was hiding as much of himself as he could, and the shields were like armor. "I say again, *ma petite*, she had gone nowhere."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He looked at me with that perfect face, so unreadable. "It means that from the moment you watched me put her in the coffin in my office at Guilty Pleasures, she has always been here."

I blinked, frowned, opened my mouth, closed it, tried again, failed. I must have looked like a landed fish, because I couldn't think of a damn thing to say. He just stood there, not helping.

I found my voice, and it was breathy. "You're saying that Gretchen has been in a coffin for two, no three years?"

He just looked at me. He'd stopped breathing. There was no sense of movement to him at all, as if, if I looked away I'd never find him again; he'd be invisible.

"Answer me, damn it! Has she been in a coffin for three years?"

He gave the smallest of nods.

"Jesus, Jesus." I paced the room, because if I didn't do something physical, I was going to hit him or start screaming. I finally ended up standing in front of him, hands in fists at my sides. "You bastard." My voice was a hoarse whisper, squeezed out of my throat because to do anything else would have had me ranting at him.

"She tried to kill my human servant, who I also loved. Most masters would have simply killed her."

"That would have been better than this," I said, voice still a hissing whisper.

"I doubt Gretchen would agree."

"Let's open the coffin and see," I said.

He shook his head. "Not tonight, *ma petite*. I knew you would feel this way, and we can try and release her, though I have poor hope for it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She was not the most stable of women when she went in. This will not have strengthened her grasp of reality."

"How could you have done this to her?"

"I told you before, *ma petite*, she earned her punishment."

"Not three years," I said. My voice was beginning to sound normal again. I wasn't going to hit him, great.

"Three years for nearly killing you. I could leave her in for three more years, and it would not be punishment enough."

"I'm not going to argue whether the punishment was justified or excessive, or anything. All I can say is that I want her out of there. I won't let her stay in there another night. There's barely anything left now."

He glanced at the coffin. "You have not opened it, how do you know what is inside?"

"I wanted to know how Damian was. I used a little magic to explore what was inside both coffins."

"And what did you discover?" he asked.

"That my necromancy recognizes Damian. That Damian isn't there. It's like his personality is missing. Whatever made him, him, is missing."

Jean-Claude nodded. "With the vampires that are not master strength and never will be, it is often the Master of the City, or their creator, that enables them to exist as strong presences. Cut off from that, they often fade."

Fade, he called it, like he was talking about curtains that had been in sunlight too long, instead of a living being. Well, a sort-of-living being.

"Well, Gretchen is way past faded. There's almost nothing left. We leave her in even one more night and she may not be there."

"She cannot die."

"Maybe not, but the damage ..." I shook my head. "We have to get her out now, tonight, or we might as well put a bullet in her."

"Leave Damian in for one more night, and I will agree to release Gretchen."

"No," I said. "Damian is like one of those feral vamps. The longer he's like this, the greater the likelihood that he'll never be anything else."

"Do you really believe that one more night will damage him irreparably?" Jean-Claude asked.

"I don't know, but I know that if I wait until tomorrow night to get him out and the damage is permanent, I'll always wonder if that one extra night made the difference."

"Then we have a problem, *ma petite*. A hot bath is being run now in preparation for one released vampire. We only have one place suitable here at the Circus for such a recovery."

"Why a bath?" I asked.

"They must be brought back to life, to warmth. The process must be done carefully, or the risk is one of true death."

"Wait a minute. A vamp can be in the coffin locked away forever and never die, but getting them out can kill them? That doesn't make sense."

"They have adjusted to the coffin, *ma petite*. To bring them out after a length of time is a shock to their system. I have seen vampires die of it."

I knew he wouldn't lie; he was too unhappy about having to say it. "So we throw them both in the same tub, no big."

"But it is a big, *ma petite*. The attention and power needed to bring one back must not be divided between them. It will take all that I have to bring one at a time back. I cannot divide my efforts without risking them both."

"I know that you made Gretchen, but you didn't make Damian. His ties to you as Master of the City broke when he became mine, so you aren't his master in any way. I am."

"Yes," he said.

"Then isn't it my job to bring Damian back--my mystical connection with him, not yours?"

"If you were truly his master, another vampire, I would agree. But you are, for all your talents, still human. There are things you cannot do for him, and there are many things you will not know to do for him."

"Like what?"

He shook his head. "It is a complex process, requiring specialized skills."

"And you have those skills," I said.

"Do not sound so skeptical, *ma petite*. I was part of our mistress's emergency ... crew," he said. "She would punish others and we would be left to deal with the aftermath. It was often her way."

"We?" I asked.

"Asher and myself."

"So Asher knows how to do this," I said.

"*Oui*, but he is not Damian's master either."

"No, but I am. If Damian still has one, I'm it. So you take care of Gretchen, you loan me Asher, and he tells me what to do for Damian."

"After his little display in the other room, you would trust him?"

"I'd trust him with my life, and so would you."

"But not our hearts," Jean-Claude said.

"Why did it bother him so much to see you with Micah?" I asked. "He's seen almost as bad with Richard, and me."

"I believe that you as my human servant and Richard as my wolf to call were possessions, mine by right, and you were already in place when Asher arrived in St. Louis. Micah is not my animal to call. He has no ties directly to me. He is your Nimir-Raj, but nothing to me."

"And?" I asked.

"Asher was willing to share me with you and Richard because you were mine, but this Nimir-Raj is simply another man that has my favor when Asher does not."

"Micah doesn't have your favor, exactly, yet."

Jean-Claude gave a small smile. "True, but Asher does not see it that way."

"If it weren't for my ... social qualms would you be doing Asher right now?"

He laughed, an abrupt sound that didn't dance along my body; it just filled his face with glee. The closest I'd ever seen to real laughter from him. "Social qualms--ah, *ma petite*, that is precious."

I frowned at him. "Just answer the question."

The laughter faded, almost like a person, instead of that abrupt change he usually did. "Asher and I would likely have come to an understanding if it would not have cost me you, *ma petite*."

"An understanding. Now who's being coy?" I said.

He gave that Gallic shrug that meant everything and nothing. "You would not be comfortable with brutal honesty, *ma petite*."

"Fine, if I could have stomached it, would you have taken Asher back as your lover by now?"

He thought about it, then finally, "I do not know, *ma petite*."

"I know you love him."

"*Oui*, but that does not mean we could be lovers again. When he and I were happiest, it was with Julianna. You might be able to stand us as lovers out

of your sight, as long as we did not act like lovers in front of you. I do not think you would like watching Asher and me hold hands in front of you."

Put that way, he was right. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying that Asher deserves better than a hidden relationship where we could never show public affection for fear of hurting you. I would rather give him up completely to someone else, male or female, than force him to play second--or lower--to you forever."

I opened my mouth to say that I liked Asher, even loved him in a way, but I didn't, because I didn't want to raise the possibility of a true *menage a trois*. What I'd seen with Micah and Jean-Claude had already bugged me a lot. I just couldn't deal with two men and me. Yeah, yeah, it was the Midwestern, middle-class value system, but it was the way I looked at the world. I couldn't change that, could I? And if I could, did I want to?

I didn't know. I just didn't know. The fact that the thought didn't make me run screaming into the night bothered me, but not as much as I thought it should have.

Chapter 54

JEAN-CLAUDE GAVE JASON the keys to the locks on the silver chains. He'd spent the last hour explaining everyone's job. Jason would be the appetizer, oh sorry, Gretchen's first feeding. It couldn't be someone human because the first feeding after being in the box could be quite ... traumatic. Jean-Claude's choice of words, not mine. So basically Jason got to be point man and take the first damage. Then it was Jean-Claude's turn to donate blood. The vamp's master gave a feeding and rebound the vamp to the blood oaths that connected them either to the Master of the City, their bloodline, their maker, or, in Jean-Claude's case, all three. All three was better; the stronger the original connection, the greater chance the vampire had of healing the damage.

That last part made me worry for Damian. I wasn't his maker, I wasn't his bloodline, or his Master of the City. I wasn't sure exactly what I was to him. To that question, Jean-Claude had said, "You are his master, *ma petite*. Whatever that means for a necromancer, that is what you are to him. If taking blood from you doesn't reconnect him, then Asher will try. Failing that, they will fetch me from Gretchen. Damian must rebind his ties to one of us, or he is lost."

"Define lost," I said.

"The madness may be permanent."

"Shit."

"*Oui*."

But first Gretchen, so that I could see it done, understand the process better.

Jason unlocked the chains. They fell off the coffin and clunked against the wood, a dull, harsh sound. It made me jump. Gretchen had tried to kill me when she only thought I was dating Jean-Claude. She might rise from the coffin bent on killing me. I'd been her advocate, demanding Jean-Claude let her out. Now as Jason undid the locks on the lid itself, my chest was tight, and I had to fight to keep my hand away from my gun. It would be stupid--not to mention ironic--if I had to kill her the moment she rose. I could just hear Jean-Claude's dry, *And this is an improvement, ma petite!* I said a quick prayer that it wouldn't come to that. I didn't want to kill her, I wanted to save her. Wanting to do the last didn't mean I wouldn't do the first, but it did mean I would try to avoid it.

Jason raised the lid, slowly. Not because it was heavy, but because, I think, he was scared, too. The idea of being Gretchen's first meal had made him laugh, that anticipatory sound that is half grown-up male, and half little boy. The sound that men reserve for things that combine sex and usually sports, cars, technology, or danger--depends on your man. I'm sure there are men out there that would give that purring, excited laugh at the thought of gardening, of poetry, but I haven't met them. Might be an interesting change, though.

The lid went back in that halfway position that coffin lids do. Nothing moved. There was just Jason standing there in his cutoff jean shorts, bare back to the room. Gretchen didn't come bounding out and eat anybody, and I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding.

Jason stayed there, gazing down, unmoving, hands frozen on the lid. He finally turned towards the rest of us, and there was a look on his face that I'd never seen. It was a mixture of horror and pity. His spring blue eyes were wide, and there was a glitter of tears, I thought. Jason and Gretchen hadn't been close. The reaction couldn't be personal. What was in that coffin to put that look on Jason's face?

I was moving forward without realizing it. "*Ma petite*, do not go closer."

I looked at him. "What's the matter with her? Why does Jason look so ... stricken?"

Jason answered, "I've never seen anything like this."

I had to see now, I had to. I kept walking towards the coffin. Jean-Claude met me, blocked my path. "Please, *ma petite*, do not go closer."

"I'm supposed to watch the process, right? I'm going to have to see what she looks like sooner or later, Jean-Claude. Might as well be sooner."

He studied my face, as if he'd memorize it. "I did not anticipate that she would be so ..." He shook his head. "You will not be happy with me after you see her."

"You don't know what she looks like either," I said.

"No, but Jason's reaction tells me many things I do not wish to know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He just stepped aside. "Gaze upon her, *ma petite*, and when you have forgiven me, come back to me."

Forgiven him? I did not like the phrasing. I'd been scared of Gretchen pouncing out and trying to kill me; now I was more frightened of looking at her, of what horror awaited me inside that coffin. My pulse was trying to climb

out my throat, and I couldn't breathe past it. Jason's face, Jean-Claude's sorrow, and the utter stillness from the coffin had left me so scared my mouth was dry.

Jason moved to one side, turning away from the coffin, leaning his butt against it, arms hugging his sides. He looked pale and ill. I wondered if he'd changed his mind about letting Gretchen touch him.

I stood just far enough back that I couldn't see into the coffin. I didn't want to see something so horrible that it made Jason pale. I didn't want to see it, but I had to.

I stepped up to the coffin, like stepping up to the plate, knowing that the ball coming at you is going a hundred-plus miles an hour and you have no chance to swing. My eyes couldn't make sense of what I saw at first. My mind simply refused to understand. It's a safety feature that we all have. If something is too horrendous, sometimes our brain just says, nope, not going to see this, not going to record this, nope, it would break us. But if you stare long enough, the mind says, well damn, we're not turning away, and finally, finally, you'll see it, and once you see it, you'll never be able to unsee it.

It lay against white satin so that the dry, brown color was very stark, painfully outlined. It looked like a wizened mummy, one of those bodies they find every once in a while in the desert, where the dryness makes natural mummies. The brown skin had molded to the bones, there was no muscle under it, just bones and skin. The mouth was open wide, as if the jaw hinge had broken. The fangs were dry, but white like a skull. The entire head had dried down to just the skull covered by a light coating of brown skin. Patches of bright blond hair clung to that skull, and the bright color made it worse, more obscene somehow. The eyes opened. I jumped, but the eyes that stared back at me were filled with something brown and dried, like big raisins. They blinked once, slowly, and a sound like wind sighing came out of the mouth.

I fell back from the coffin, fell to my knees. Jason grabbed my arm, drew me to my feet. I shook his hand off and went for Jean-Claude. He stood there, face patient, empty. I hit him without ever breaking stride. Maybe he expected me to stop, take a stance, but I hit him in the face, closed fist, like it was a continuation of the movement of my body. I twisted my fist--my whole body--into it, and he was suddenly on the floor, looking up at me, with blood on his face.

Chapter 55

"YOU BASTARD, YOU fed off her energy while she was in there." I had to stalk away from him to keep from kicking him. Some things you did not do; some lines you did not cross.

He touched the back of his hand to his mouth. "What if I had nothing to do with it?"

"What if?" I came to stand over him. "What if? Are you really going to try and tell me that you didn't feed off of her?" I pointed back towards the coffin and must have glanced back, because the next thing I knew he had my legs, and I was suddenly falling towards the ground. I slapped the hard stones with my arms like I'd been taught in Judo. That took some of the impact, kept my head from hitting the stone floor, but it took concentration. By the time my body hit the ground, Jean-Claude was on top of me, pinning my arms to the floor with his forearms, the rest of his body trapping the rest of mine.

"Get off of me."

"*Non, ma petite*, not until you hear me out."

I tried to raise my arms, not because I thought I could outmuscle him, but because I had to try. I've never been able not to struggle even when I know it's a lost cause.

I was able to raise my arms a little--not enough to get away, but enough to make him bear down, enough to widen his eyes, enough to make him tense. Good to know the marks were helping me gain useful things like strength and not just crap.

Blood was a bright surprise against that pale skin. The blood dripped from an open cut on his mouth. "How do you know that this is not what all vampires would be reduced to after years?"

I glared up at him because I couldn't do much else. "Liar."

"How are you so certain?" He pressed himself harder against me for emphasis I think because he wasn't happy to be there; his body was all about anger not sex. "How do you know, Anita?"

He'd used my real name. "I'm a necromancer, remember?"

His face clearly said he didn't believe the answer was that simple, and he was right. I was remembering my visit to New Mexico and what I'd learned there. A monster rising above the bar in a club in Albuquerque. It rose above the bar in a thin line of pale flesh, like the rising of a crescent moon, then a face came into view. It was a woman's face with one eye gone stiff and dry like some kind of mummy. Face after face rose brown and withered, like a string of monstrous beads strung together with pieces of body, arms, legs, and thick black thread like gigantic stitches holding it all together, holding the magic inside. It rose up and up until it towered against the ceiling, curving like a giant snake to stare down at me. I estimated forty heads, more, before I lost count, or lost the heart to count anymore.

There had been another club in that town, and it had been worse in some ways, because the torture was part of the entertainment ... Lines had appeared on the man's skin. The muscles under his skin began to shrink, as though he had a wasting disease, but what should have taken months was happening in seconds. No matter how willing the sacrifice, it can still hurt. The man started screaming as fast as he could draw breath. His lungs were working better than the first man's, and he drew breath so fast, it was like one continuous shriek. His skin darkened as it drew in and in, like something was sucking him dry. It

was like watching a balloon shrivel. Except there was muscle, and when the muscle vanished, there was bone, and finally there was nothing but dried skin over bones. And still he screamed.

The last insult, or gift, or horror, had been the Master of the City of Albuquerque's power. Her power had beat against me like frantic wings, birds crying that they've been shut out in the dark and they want inside to the light and the warmth. How could I leave them crying in the dark, when all I had to do was open and they would be safe? I'd fought it, but in the end the wings erupted into a torrent of birds. My body seemed to open, though I knew it didn't. And the winged things--only half-glimpsed--spilled into that opening. The power flowed into me, through me, and out again. I was part of some great circuit, and I felt the connection with every vampire she'd touched. It was as if I flowed through them, and they through me, like water coming together to form something larger. Then I was floating in the soothing dark, and there were stars, distant and glittering.

Images then, and they had force to them like things slamming into my body. I saw the Master of the City standing on the top of a pyramid temple surrounded by trees, jungle. I could smell the rich greenness of it and hear the night call of a monkey, the scream of a jaguar. Her human servant knelt and fed from the bloody wound on her chest. He became her servant, and he gained power, many powers. And one of them was this--how to take the life force of something, someone, and feed upon it, without killing it. And I understood how he'd taken the man's essence, during that terrible entertainment. More than that, I understood how it was done, and how it was undone. I knew how to unmake the creature in the bar, though what had been done, being sewn together into a Frankenstein nightmare, might mean that to bring them back to flesh would kill them. I didn't need the necromancer who had trapped them to undo the spell; I could do it myself.

The memories were so vivid, it was like reliving them. I came back to the present almost with a jolt, staring up into Jean-Claude's eyes, still trapped under his body, still in the punishment room thousands of miles away from Obsidian Butterfly and her small army. But it was the look on Jean-Claude's face that caught my breath in my throat.

His eyes were wide, and I knew in that moment that he'd seen my memories, that he'd shared them the way I sometimes shared his. Fuck.

His voice had a shakiness to it that I rarely heard. "*Ma petite*, you were a busy girl while you were away from us."

"You saw what I saw, and you know how I feel about what you did to Gretchen."

His hands tightened on my arms, fingers digging into my skin just a little. "I know how you feel, *ma petite*. But I will not take this blame gently. I am the Master of the City, my vampires live through me. Unless they are masters themselves, their life force comes through the line that bred them, until they take blood oath to a Master of the City. Then that master makes their hearts beat. If I run short of power, then some will simply not wake in the night, or they will become revenants, animals to be destroyed as Damian has become.'

I moved under him. "I don't ..."

"Shhh, *ma petite*, I will not be condemned without a hearing, not this time. Perhaps you can save Damian, but he is over a thousand years old. Even though not a master, that is a long time, long enough to accumulate power enough to survive. But vampires like Willie and Hannah who are not masters and not that old, they would fade or go mad, and there would be no saving them." He shook me, digging into my arms, raising his elbows so that I could have gone for a weapon if I'd wanted, but I just watched him and listened.

"Is that what you want, Anita? Which of them would you sacrifice to save Gretchen? Gretchen whom you hate. I took power from her because you denied it to me."

"Don't blame this on me," I said.

He moved suddenly, sitting up on his knees, his body straddling my legs. He lifted me into a sitting position, fingers brushing against my arms. "The system of master and servant has worked well for thousands of years, but you keep fighting it, and you keep forcing me to do things I do not wish to do." He raised me up close to his face, and I watched his eyes bleed to burning blue from inches away. He shook me more violently this time, almost hard enough to scare me.

"If I could have fed the *ardeur* as it was meant to be fed, then this would not have been necessary. If I could have fed through my human servant, this would not have been necessary. If I could have fed through my animal to call, this would not have been necessary. But you and Richard bind me 'round with rules, you cripple me with your morality, and you force me to do such as I swore I would never do. I have been in the box and been food for my master, and it was the worst thing I have ever endured. And now because you and he had your moral high ground to keep you pure, you have forced me to be more practical than I have ever wanted to be."

He released me so suddenly I fell back against the floor, slamming an elbow into the stones. He stood over me, as angry as I'd ever seen him, and I had no anger to give back. I finally said, "I didn't know."

"That is becoming a poor excuse, *ma petite*." He went to the coffin and gazed down at what lay inside. "I gave her my protection once, and this is not protection." He turned and glared at me. "I do what I must, *ma petite*, but I take no pleasure from it, and I tire of the necessity of it. If you would but meet me even halfway, we could avoid so much pain."

I sat up, fighting the urge to rub my elbow. "Do you want me to say I'm sorry? I am. Do you want permission to feed off of me, is that it?"

"The *ardeur*, yes," he said. "But in truth, if you are in the mood for it, simply having the marks open and married gains me much."

He held his hand out to Jason, and for one of only a few times, I saw Jason hesitate before taking Jean-Claude's hand. Jean-Claude didn't even look at him, as if his obedience was simply a fact, like gravity. "If she were stronger it would be a more dangerous feeding, but she is very weak, so it will not be so very bad." The words were comforting, but he never looked at Jason as he lowered the younger man's wrist towards what lay in that coffin.

I got to my feet, watching Jason's face. He was pale, eyes wide, breath coming too short, too fast. He didn't normally have a problem letting vamps feed on him, but I understood. What lay in that coffin was something out of a nightmare. Most of the time if you saw a vamp looking like something made of dried sticks, it was well and truly dead.

Jason pulled on his arm, keeping himself just out of reach, I think. Jean-Claude turned to him, but there was no anger. He kept the one hand on Jason's arm, and the other he touched to his face, gently. "Would you have me take your mind, before she strikes?"

Jason nodded, wordlessly.

Jean-Claude cradled his hand against Jason's face. They stared into each other's eyes, one of those long, lingering stares, like lovers, except I felt the moment that Jason slipped away. I felt his mind release, his will evaporate. His face went slack, his mouth half-parted, eyes fluttering. Jean-Claude kept his hand on the other man's face, as he guided the wrist into the coffin.

Jason's body tensed, and I knew that Gretchen had bitten him. But his eyes stayed closed, his face pleasant. I found myself beside the coffin without meaning to be. The dried stick hands raised as I watched, clutching at Jason's arm holding him against the mouth. Jean-Claude moved his hand back, as the thing in the coffin pressed Jason's wrist to its mouth. Blood flowed over that brown skin, soaked the white satin pillow, and still that lipless mouth fed.

The room was suddenly too warm, almost hot. I turned away and found Micah watching me. I couldn't read his expression, wasn't sure I wanted to. I looked away from whatever was in his eyes. I didn't want to meet anyone's eyes right now. I'd fought so long and so hard not to be what I was. Not to be Jean-Claude's human servant, not to be Richard's lupa, not to be anything to anyone. Everyone seemed to be paying the price for that. I hated having other people pay the price for my problems. It was against the rules somehow.

Jean-Claude's voice drew me back to the coffin. "Drink, Gretchen, drink of my blood. I gave you life once, let it be so again." Jason was sitting slumped beside the coffin, cradling his bloody wrist with a beatific expression on his face. The dried thing was sitting up with Jean-Claude's arm behind its shoulders. It looked ... better, but still not alive, not even quite real. He offered the pale flesh of his wrist to that lipless mouth, still red with Jason's blood, and it bit down. I heard Jean-Claude sigh, but that was the only sign that it might hurt.

"Blood to blood, flesh to flesh." Jean-Claude spoke the words, and with each word, with each suck of blood, I felt the power grow, felt it curl in my stomach, shorten my breath. Gretchen's body began to stretch and fill. The pieces of hair thickened and began to flow around her. The dried things in her eye sockets filled and began to have a hint of blue to them. When Jean-Claude moved his wrist from her mouth, they were full-pouting lips. She had blue eyes and a wealth of yellow hair. She was thin, her bones showing under the near translucent paleness of her skin. Her eyes were filled with fire, nothing human. Her hands were still painfully thin, her body fragile, but she looked almost like the vampire that had tried to kill me years ago.

He picked her up in his arms; her body didn't fill out the clothes that hung from her frame. "Breath to breath," he said and leaned in towards her. They kissed, and I felt the power pass between them. I knew that that kiss could have drained her life away again, but it didn't. When he raised back from her, her face was full and rounded, human looking. It was like Prince Charming waking Sleeping Beauty, except that this beauty's eyes found me, and the hatred in them was a burning thing.

I sighed. Some people never learn. I met that hateful gaze and said, "Gretchen, I promise you two things, you'll never have to go back in that box, and if you try to hurt me or mine again, I'll kill you. And that would be a damn shame since I'm the one who persuaded Jean-Claude to let you out in the first place."

She just looked at me the way that tigers behind bars watch the visitors, biding their time. Jean-Claude hugged her to him. "If you try and harm my human servant again, I will see you destroyed, Gretal." *Gretal* had been her original name, so I'd been told.

"I hear you, Jean-Claude." Her voice sounded rough, as if the time in the coffin had damaged it.

"Come, Jason, we need to warm this one." Jason got to his feet like an obedient puppy, still bleeding, still happy.

Jean-Claude paused in the doorway looking, not at me, but at Asher. "I must take this one to the bath, or all the work will be undone. But Damian is a revenant now."

Asher raised a hand, which had been hidden along his body. He had a gun, a .10-millimeter Browning, the big brother of my own gun. "I will do what needs doing."

"We are not going to kill Damian," I said.

Jean-Claude looked at me, then at Micah, and Nathaniel, and Gil, and the other wereleopards, and even the bodyguards. His gaze seemed to take everyone in, then he looked at me again. "I ask again, *ma petite*, who will you sacrifice for your high ideals?"

"You think he can't be saved, don't you?"

"I know that once the madness takes a vampire, even the master who bore him cannot always bring him back to his senses."

"Is there anything I can do that might bring him back to himself?"

"Let him feed, try to see he does not kill that which he eats, and hope when he tastes your blood, he regains his senses. If your blood does not sate him, then Asher will try to feed him. If that fails ..." He gave that shrug that meant everything and nothing; even holding Gretchen it looked graceful.

"I don't want him to die because of me."

"If he dies, *ma petite*, it will be because he tried to kill someone in this room." With that he walked out, Jason trailing behind.

I think, perhaps, I'd used up Jean-Claude's patience with me, or maybe seeing what he'd done to Gretchen had bothered him that much. Whatever the cause, he left me in the room with everyone looking to me as to how to

proceed. And I didn't have a clue. Who was I willing to put next to the coffin? Who was I willing to risk?

Chapter 56

THE ANSWER, OF course, was no one, but we finally decided who got to be the first victim. I was pretty useless for the discussion, because I would have put myself first in line. Never ask of anyone what you're not willing to do yourself. But Asher pointed out that I couldn't be the first feed if I had any chance of being Damian's master. So they decided among themselves, and it was Zane left standing next to the coffin.

Everybody but me that had a gun had it out with a round chambered. I needed my hands free to offer up a body part to get gnawed on. Come to think of it, I didn't much like that job description either. But it wasn't watching Zane's pale back as he unfastened the chain that bothered me, it was watching Cherry's face as she watched him do it. That much fear for someone's safety, that much importance attached to one other being meant that it was love for her, too. They loved each other, and he was about to cry, cry for help, and loose the carrion birds to feed, and feed, and feed.

The lid of the coffin was only half raised when Zane jerked forward and pale hands showed around him, holding him. Blood sprayed the white satin of the coffin, spattered over Zane's shoulders, and the only thing we could see of Damian was pale hands and arms latched around Zane's back. There was no shot to take.

Someone was screaming. I think it was Cherry. I had my gun out, but there was no way to fire without killing Zane first. Micah and Merle were at the coffin, trying to pry Zane free. Zane fell back, his throat a gaping wound, and something that was all bloody fangs and wild red hair grabbed Merle and folded around him, tearing at the big man's throat. The wererats and Asher were standing back, waiting for a clear shot, but there wasn't going to be one, not before someone else died.

I pushed forward, trying to shove Micah out of the way while I pressed the gun to Damian's face, but Micah was trying to pry the vampire off of Merle, and in the struggle I couldn't get my gun steady. The barrel slipped in the blood against Damian's skin, and suddenly green eyes turned to me, and there was nothing in them but hunger. Damian was already dead. I just hadn't pulled the trigger yet.

Then he was on me, faster than anything I'd ever seen. I was pressed back against the satin of the coffin, my hips and legs sticking out. He didn't go for my neck; he buried his fangs in my upper chest. I screamed past the pain and

pressed the barrel of the Browning against his temple. Asher was yelling, "Don't fire, you'll hit Anita!"

I screamed again and had to adjust the angle of the gun, because if I'd pulled the trigger, the bullet would have gone through his head into my chest. I moved the gun a fraction while he savaged me. My finger curled on the trigger when he raised his green eyes to me. I watched his eyes fill up with knowledge, intelligence--with him. He raised his mouth back from my chest. He looked scared. "Anita, what's happening?" He seemed to see my bloody chest for the first time, and his eyes went wide. "What's happening to me?"

The moment he spoke, the moment there was something in him besides monster, I felt the connection between us click into place, like a perfectly tuned string on a harp. The power flowed between us like warm water, filling him up, filling me up, and I drew him down to me, my blood still on his lips.

I heard Asher saying, "Stay back, it's alright, let her finish."

I whispered as I drew Damian down to me, "Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh, breath to breath, my heart to yours."

And just before our lips met and his fate was sealed, he whispered, "Yes, oh, yes."

Chapter 57

I WAS SHOULDER-DEEP in water so hot it made my skin pink. I was so hot I was almost ill, because I was still fully dressed, including all my guns. Damian leaned up against the front of my body, my arms wrapped around him, holding him close. His body folded in against mine, his arms holding mine across his bare chest.

How did I end up being guardian of the bathtub for Damian once we reached my house? He'd gone into convulsions, and only my touch had calmed him. We'd gotten him to my house with Nathaniel riding in the back, cradling Damian. They'd filled the bathtub with hot, hot water, and I'd left Asher in charge of Damian's care. I'd done my part, I'd brought him back to himself. I had a bandage over my left breast to prove that I'd donated my piece of flesh and blood for the night. Zane and Merle were on their way to the lycanthrope hospital, with Micah and Cherry to oversee them. Everyone else had trooped back to my house, and everything had seemed fine, until screams from the bathroom brought me running.

Damian had been beating himself against the floor, convulsing like he'd tear himself apart, vomiting blood on the tile. Asher and Nathaniel had been fighting to hold him down, to keep him from hurting himself, but they couldn't hold him. I knelt to help, and the moment I touched him, he quieted. I'd withdrawn my hand, and his body had bucked again, hands scrambling at the

slick tile. I'd touched his shoulder, and he calmed. We'd tried letting him take blood from Caleb, but the moment I stopped touching him, his body rejected the blood, and everything else. The last time I'd stopped touching him, Damian had simply gone quiet, and I had felt him beginning to fade, to die.

We'd dragged Damian into the steaming bath water, and I'd held him. He had recovered, but only with me holding him while my clothes stuck to my body.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked.

Asher had answered, "I've only seen this reaction between master and servant."

"I'm Damian's master, so what? It shouldn't cause this, should it?"

"No, *ma cherie*, not merely master, but master vampire and human servant."

"Damian is not my master," I said.

"Damian is no one's master," Asher said quietly, gazing down at us from the edge of the tub. He was sitting in a pool of the blood that had poured out of Damian.

"What are you saying, Asher?"

"You have made him your servant."

"He can't be a human servant, he's a vampire," I said.

"I did not say human servant, *ma cherie*."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"A ... vampire servant for a master necromancer, I think."

"You think?" I made it a question.

"We are dealing with things of legend, *ma cherie*, things that should not be possible. I am having to ... guess at this."

"Guess?" I said.

He sighed. "If I said that I knew for certain what has happened, it would be a lie. I would never lie to you on purpose."

I had protested, demanded, but nothing I could do or say made it untrue. I had a vampire servant, and that was impossible. But impossible or not, Damian lay against my body, clinging to me, like I was the last hope he had.

Asher glided back into the bathroom, wearing a beach towel wrapped around him. The towel was big enough to cover him from armpits to mid-calf, effectively hiding his body. Hiding the scars. "My clothes are covered in blood. I hope you do not mind."

I hated wearing bloody clothes myself, so, "Fine, glad you found a towel you liked."

He glanced down at the colorful towel. "I do not fit in your robe."

I was sorry Asher felt like he had to hide himself away, but I had other things to worry about. "I think if I don't get cooler soon I'm either going to throw up or pass out."

He knelt by the tub, smoothing the long towel under his knees in a gesture that you don't see much in men. He touched my face lightly. "You are flushed." He touched Damian. "His skin is still cooler than it should be." He frowned.

"You need to take off some of your clothing, especially the jeans, I would think."

Normally, I go to great lengths not to be unclothed in front of all the boys, but tonight I was willing to strip down a little. "How do I undress and still hold him?"

"I believe that one of us could hold him against you while you disrobed."

"You really think that he'll go into convulsions again?"

"You could release him, and we could find out," Asher said, voice soft.

I shook my head. "I'm tired of cleaning up blood. Just help me hold him."

Asher's eyes went a little wide. "I will call Nathaniel."

The heat had gone to my head in a pounding headache. "Just jump in, Asher, I promise not to peek."

He curled beside the tub, tucking every piece of him he could underneath the towel. "If I dropped this towel to the floor, would you really not look?"

His question stopped me. I opened my mouth, closed it, and tried to think through the heat, the headache, the growing nausea, and finally just said the truth. "I wouldn't mean to look, but no, you're right. If you're naked I'm going to look. I don't think I could stop myself."

"Like a car accident, you cannot turn away," he said.

I looked up then and found he'd turned away, hiding his face with that fall of golden hair. Damn it, I didn't have time to hold everybody's hand. "Asher, please, I didn't mean that."

He wouldn't look at me. I extracted one arm from Damian, who moved around the remaining arm like a child settling in his sleep around his favorite Teddy bear. I grabbed Asher's arm through the towel. "Yes, I'd look just for sheer curiosity's sake, how could I help it? You've teased and taunted about how bad your injuries are. You've set it up so that I'll have to look, have to see."

He was looking at me now, those pale eyes, empty, hidden from me.

I dug my fingers into his arm, trying to grip him through the towel, and finding mostly cloth. "But if you don't know by now that I just want to see you nude, then you haven't been paying attention."

His face told me nothing, that blank politeness that both he and Jean-Claude could pull off when they wanted to. "Now help me get some of these clothes off before I melt."

He gave a low chuckling laugh that danced over my skin and brought my pulse to my throat. I was too hot to have goosebumps. "You offering to disrobe without any magic to push you, I believe that is a first."

I had to laugh, because he was right. But the laugh forced me to close my eyes, because it felt like the pulsing of the headache was going to shove my eyeballs out of their sockets. I let go of his arm and pressed my hand to my forehead to try and keep my head from falling into pieces. "Please, Asher, I am going to be sick."

I heard the water splashing, felt it push against me as someone climbed into the tub. I opened my eyes slowly, trying to hold the headache inside and found Nathaniel kneeling in the water. His hair was still bound in a loose braid that trailed behind him, curling through the water like something separate and

alive. The swirling braid brought my gaze low on his body, and I had a peripheral sense that Nathaniel wasn't getting any clothes wet whatsoever, but I didn't care. The headache had reached a point where I was afraid I was going to start throwing up if I didn't get cooler.

He answered my question without me asking it. "Asher wants Damian to try to take blood again, see if it will stay down."

Asher was still perched on the edge of the tub wrapped in the towel. "Damian must be able to keep down blood, or he will perish. I believe that if you stay in constant contact with him that he will be able to keep a feeding down."

"If I have to stay in constant contact then I have to get cooler first."

"Nathaniel will help you," he said.

I glanced up at Asher, and even in the dim glow of a night light, it hurt my head. "Fine."

Damian made small protesting movements as Nathaniel tried to take some of his weight off of me. We finally leaned him up against the edge of the tub with Asher supporting some of his weight, but letting him keep my arm pressed to his chest. Nathaniel undid my belt and helped me slip the shoulder holster off one arm, but I needed the other arm free to slip it out of the other strap. Damian fought us, slowly, stubbornly, as if he were sleepwalking. But he was a vampire; he could have torn his way through the wall of my bathroom with his bare hands. If he didn't want to let go of my arm, we couldn't make him, not unless we were willing to break his fingers one at a time, and we weren't willing to do that.

"What do we do?" Nathaniel asked.

"I have to get out of this heat," I said. "Can we like run cold water in the tub, or something?"

"No," Asher said, "we must keep him as warm as possible, until after he has retained some of the blood. We don't dare allow him to be chilled."

"Then get these clothes off me."

I felt rather than saw the two of them exchange glances. "How do you want me to do it?" Nathaniel asked.

I leaned my head forward, resting against the top of Damian's wet hair. His skin was the coldest thing in the tub. I was so hot I was about to be sick, yet Damian's skin was still cool to the touch. The headache overwhelmed me and spilled out my mouth. I did my best to crawl out on the edge of the tub before I vomited. Damian had managed to miss the water every time he threw up; at least I could do the same. But he clung to me, and only Asher's hand on my arm kept me high enough from the water to keep it clean.

My head was screaming, the pain so strong that it impacted my vision in explosions of color. Asher got me a cool cloth and wiped my mouth. He laid another cool cloth across my forehead. Then Nathaniel gripped the back of my shirt and ripped. He tore it off of me in pieces. Asher draped a wet towel over my shoulders that was so cold it made me whisper, "Shit."

Asher and Nathaniel took my weight and Damian's and moved us back to the far edge of the tub, as Gil came in and started cleaning up the mess. Gil had

cleaned up a lot of messes tonight, and he'd never bitched, not once. He did a double take at the pieces of my shirt floating in the water, but never commented aloud. He made a good flunkie. Did what he was told and didn't ask questions.

Nathaniel tried to tear my jeans off the way he'd done the shirt. He managed to rip the top, but Damian's weight kept pushing me under the water, and he couldn't get the leverage he needed. Asher fastened the towel as securely as he could and climbed gingerly into the water. He knelt and slid his arms around Damian and me and lifted, standing, holding us both upright. I was still touching bottom, but he was still holding both our weights, because my legs still weren't working quite right. He held us both effortlessly.

Nathaniel put a hand on either side of the rip he'd made in my jeans and pulled. The heavy wet cloth came apart under his hands with a sound like tearing flesh, but heavier--a wet, harsh sound. The force of it jerked my body, and only Asher's strength kept me standing.

I felt the air on my bare skin and realized that in ripping away the jeans he'd taken my undies with them, but I didn't care. The air on my skin was still suffocatingly hot. I couldn't breathe. The last thing I remember thinking was, I'm going to pass out, then nothing.

Chapter 58

I WOKE LYING on the edge of the tub with only one arm in the water with Damian. Cold towels covered me from head to foot. The one on my face lifted, and I saw that Nathaniel was in the water, holding Damian upright. I blinked up through a strand of wet hair and found Asher spreading a fresh cold towel against my face. He left enough of my face uncovered so I could look at him, sideways.

"How are you feeling?"

I had to think about that. "Better." He replaced the towels down the length of my body, and I realized I was completely nude. I shivered with the cold cloth and didn't care about anything except that I was finally cool. "How long was I out?"

"Not long," Asher said, smoothing the towel so that it molded to my legs.

I looked at Nathaniel, kneeling in the tub, pinning Damian to the edge, so the vampire could hold on to me. "I've never seen a shapeshifter pass out from heat exhaustion before," he said.

"A first time for everything," I said.

Damian turned his head slowly to look at me. His eyes were clear, bright, alive again. His eyes were the color of emeralds, and it wasn't caused by vampire powers, it was his natural eye color, as if his mother had fooled around with a cat to get him here. People just didn't have that color of eyes.

I smiled at him. "You look better."

"I fed."

I glanced at Nathaniel. He turned his head so I could see the neat bite marks in the side of his throat.

"I think I can support myself," Damian said.

Nathaniel looked a question at Asher, who must have nodded, because Nathaniel backed off. Damian settled against me, still holding my arm across his chest, but lightly now. One hand gently on my wrist, the other hand stroked my arm.

"I hear you're my master."

I looked into those calm eyes. "You don't seem upset."

He rubbed his chin and cheek against my arm. It was catlike, and intimate, a lover's gesture. I studied his face, tried to read past those peaceful emerald eyes. Then I realized I didn't have to read his face. The barest thought and I knew that the peacefulness in his eyes went all the way through. He was filled with a great calmness, a sense of rightness. Calm and peace had never been my reaction to Jean-Claude binding *me* closer to him.

I could feel what Damian was feeling, knew his heart almost better than my own, but I didn't understand him. In that moment staring into those beautiful, peaceful eyes, I simply had no clue. I would have run for the hills, fought, screamed, hated. I would not have gone quietly into any kind of servitude, no matter how potentially beneficent the ruler. Truthfully, I wasn't a hundred percent sure I was a beneficent ruler. I mean I was easy to get along with as long as everything went my way, but cross me, and I wasn't easy. I was close to being the hardest person I knew, and I know some hard people. I was trying to be softer lately, but trying to be softer and actually being softer, aren't the same. I looked into Damian's eyes and knew that if it were me, tied to me as master, I'd be scared.

Damian turned in the water, kneeling at the tub edge. He leaned in and laid a gentle kiss on my forehead. "You saved me, again."

He was right, but as his lips touched my skin, I wondered how long he'd be grateful and when he'd finally realize how screwed we both were.

Chapter 59

ASHER TOOK DAMIAN down to the basement for the day, settling them both in just before dawn. Micah had called, saying that both Merle and Zane would survive. Cherry was going to stay there with Zane, and he had to go check on the rest of his wereleopards. I invited him to bring his leopards over to my house, and he said he'd ask. We didn't say "I love you" at the end of the conversation, which was unnerving. I wasn't used to sleeping with someone

that I didn't love or didn't say I love you to. But I was too tired to think that hard, so I pushed it down where all the other things I don't want to think about live. The place is getting damned crowded. Nathaniel helped me dress in the coolest jammies I had--a silky spaghetti strap nightshirt that would have been too revealing if I hadn't been so damn short. Then Nathaniel cuddled in beside me in a pair of jogging shorts. Gil slept in the guest room. The two wererat bodyguards divided the night up between the couch and sleeping on the floor in front of the door of my bedroom, which meant if I had to go to the bathroom after we bedded down I'd have to step over them. Bobby Lee said, "It'll wake us up, make sure you don't go wandering around alone."

I couldn't persuade Bobby Lee or Cris that I didn't need that much watching, but truthfully I was too tired to do much arguing. So we all settled down for a long summer's nap. Nathaniel had closed the heavy curtains so that the room lay in a heavy gray twilight.

I settled down in the air-conditioned hush of the bedroom with Nathaniel curled up against my side and fell almost immediately into a deep, dreamless sleep. When the bedside phone shrilled, I knew what it was, but it took me several seconds to wake up enough to move. Nathaniel had actually reached across me and answered, "Blake residence," before I opened my eyes.

He was quiet, face very serious, then he cupped his hand over the receiver and said, "It's Ulysses, Narcissus's bodyguard. He wants to speak with you."

I took the phone, still lying flat on my back. "This is Anita, what do you want?"

"My Oba wishes to meet with you."

I moved my head enough to see the clock and groaned. I'd barely had two hours of sleep. I could manage an hour nap and feel okay, or go without sleep, but somewhere between two and three hours just felt worse. "I work the night shift, Ulysses, whatever Narcissus wants can wait until later in the day."

"The word went out yesterday that any information about the missing lycanthropes was to go through you."

That woke me up a little. I blinked and tried to be more awake than I felt. "What information?"

"He will only talk directly to you."

"Then put him on the phone, I'm all ears."

"He insists that you come down to his club, now."

"I have had less than two hours of sleep, Ulysses. I am not dragging my ass over to the Illinois side of the river at the crack of dawn. If he has information that can help us save shapeshifters' lives, just give it to me, and I'll see that the info gets to where it needs to go."

"My Oba insists that if you do not come down to the club now, he will not share the information at all."

I sat up, leaning against the headboard, closing my eyes. "Why now?"

"It is not my way to question my orders."

"Maybe you should work on that," I said.

There was silence on the other end of the phone. I didn't know if he was puzzled and didn't get my comment, or if it had struck too close to home. He

finally said in a quiet voice, "Right now the lions' Rex is alive. That may not be the case in a few hours."

I sat up, eyes wide, completely awake at last. "How do you know that?"

"My Oba knows many things."

"Narcissus would really let the lions' Rex die, just because I won't come down to the club at the ass crack of dawn?"

"My master is very insistent."

"Shit," I said softly and with feeling. "Tell him I'll be down, but tell him this, too. The next time he's in trouble, maybe no one will help him either."

"This is more help than he has ever been to any other animal clan."

There was something in Ulysses's voice now, something. He was lying. I could hear it in his voice. I didn't know if it was vampire powers or werewolf or wereleopard, and I didn't care. The question was, why lie about the fact that the werehyenas had helped no other shapeshifter group more than this? Why was that worth a lie at all?

"Narcissus helps out more than he wants people to know, doesn't he?" I said.

"What makes you say that?" There was a thread of fear, almost panic, in Ulysses's voice.

"What would it hurt if the lycanthrope community knew that the werehyenas were helping other animals out?" I asked.

His breath came out in a long sigh. "Narcissus would never want anyone to think that about the werehyenas. It would ..." he hesitated, "be bad for business."

"If Narcissus is so concerned about Joseph the lion, then why not give me the info over the phone?"

Ulysses laughed, abrupt, amused. "Narcissus has never given anything away for nothing. There's always a price with him."

"So my dragging down to his club on no sleep is the price?"

"Something like that."

"Can I bring my people?"

"My master would love to see any of your people you care to bring."

I didn't like the phrasing on that. "How big of him."

"When will you be here?" Ulysses asked.

"How do you know I'm coming?"

"Because you know that he's enough of an egotist that if you don't come now he may not share the information at all. You know he'd let the lions' Rex die just because he's not the same animal we are, and you not coming down now would be an insult."

"This clannish shit has got to stop, Ulysses. We need to start helping each other more."

"Not my place to change the system, Anita. I'm just trying to survive in it."

He sounded sad. "I don't mean to yell at the messenger, Ulysses, I'm just tired of the system."

He laughed again, but not like he was happy. "*You're* tired of the system. Jesus, you have no idea. When can I tell him to expect you?"

"An hour. Less, if I can manage it. I want Joseph alive to see his baby."

"His mate will probably lose it like all the others."

"I thought you hyenas didn't talk to the lions or anyone else. How do you know about Joseph's baby woes?"

"Narcissus keeps track of things like that."

"Why would he care?"

"He wants a baby."

That made me raise my eyebrows. "I've never pictured Narcissus as the paternal type."

"Try maternal."

"What?"

"We'll be waiting for you, Anita. Don't keep him waiting. He doesn't like to be kept waiting." I heard sorrow in his voice, sorrow bordering on grief. I almost asked what was wrong, but he'd already hung up. What had Narcissus done to him to put that tone in his voice? Did I really want to know? Probably not. Not unless there was something I could do about it, and there wasn't. If I started a war with every harsh lycanthrope master in town, I'd have to kill them all, or almost. The only one who wasn't harsh was Richard, and that was going to get him killed. I complained about Narcissus being too harsh and Richard being too soft. I guess I was just never satisfied.

I hung up the phone and told Nathaniel what was happening while I picked out clothes. Nathaniel threw a tank top over the jogging shorts he'd slept in, added jogging shoes, no socks. He knew better than to try and dress, because he'd insist on unbraiding his hair and combing it out, which would take all the time the rest of us would need to get dressed. I was wrong. Nathaniel wasn't even close to done with his hair when the rest of us were dressed and ready to go. Bobby Lee and Cris just threw on their shirts and shoes, ran fingers through their short hair, put the holsters back on, and they were ready to go. Gil came down in jeans, jogging shoes, and an untucked men's dress shirt. The shirt looked new, but he didn't keep us waiting. Caleb came down in jeans and nothing else. I didn't bother to tell him to throw a shirt on, or shoes. Somehow I didn't think that Narcissus would deny us service because Caleb was under-dressed.

I actually took the longest getting dressed: black jeans, red polo shirt, black Nikes, every blade I had, including the new back sheath I'd had made for the largest knife that ran along my spine. The first sheath had gotten cut to pieces by emergency room personnel, while they were trying to save my life. I also brought my two handguns, though I wasn't sure that any of us would be allowed to bring guns into the club. But just in case I brought them, and I warned Cris and Bobby Lee about the no-guns rule. They flashed their own set of wicked-looking blades--about three apiece--and we were ready to go.

I thought about calling Christine the weretiger, but figured since it wasn't quite seven that I'd let somebody sleep in today. Besides, I didn't know shit yet. When I knew something worth sharing, I'd share.

I was halfway to the club when I realized that the *ardeur* hadn't set in. It was morning. I was awake. There wasn't a stir from the *ardeur*. Hope flared

through me in a warm, fuzzy wash. Maybe the *ardeur* was going to be temporary. Dear God, I hoped so. I said a brief prayer of thanks and kept monitoring myself for the first hints of unbridled lust.

We arrived at Narcissus in Chains with me grumpy, but not the least bit lustful. It was a good day.

Chapter 60

I WAS ABLE to park right in front of Narcissus in Chains. Not only was there no line at 8:00 A.M., there were no other people in front of the club. The wide sidewalk stretched empty, almost golden, in the early morning light. If I'd had time for coffee, I might even have said it was pretty, but I hadn't had time for coffee, so the sunlight was just bright. I had finally broken down and bought sunglasses a few weeks ago. I huddled behind them, wishing I was still in bed. I was so tired, I felt fuzzy-headed. I'm usually pretty good at going without sleep. The only thing I could blame the fuzziness on was the heat exhaustion from the night before. Maybe I needed more than three hours to recover from it. It made me wonder how bad off I'd have been if I hadn't had all my preternatural powers. A person can die of heatstroke.

Nathaniel was at my side, Bobby Lee and Cris, a step behind and to either side. Gil and Caleb brought up the rear. The door opened before we could knock. Ulysses ushered us into the darkened club. He was still wearing his leather and metal harness. The smell of it made me wonder if it was the exact same outfit he'd been wearing, was it five or six days ago? The tall, dark, and handsome man that I'd met looked hollow-eyed. His strong hands gripped his elbows, hugging his body. When he moved a hand to motion us inside, it shook. What the hell had been going on?

Half a dozen other muscular men of varying races and heights stood in the shadows waiting for Ulysses to tell them what to do. The tension in the room was so thick you could have choked on it.

Cris made a hissing sound at my back, and I couldn't blame him. I decided then and there that unless we got some really good explanations, we were keeping the guns. There was an air of desperation about all the werhyenas, as if something really bad had happened.

The door was shut behind us, but we were close to it, and no one was between us and it. I wanted to save the lion Joseph, but not enough to risk myself and my people. If it was a choice, I knew who I'd choose. Cold, maybe, but I'd never met Joseph the werelion. He wasn't real to me yet, and everyone with me was.

Ulysses must have seen, or smelled, something on us, because he explained. "Our master has seen fit to punish us."

"What for?" I asked.

He shook his head. "That is personal."

"Fine, let's talk to Narcissus, and you guys can get back to punishing yourselves."

"We are not punishing ourselves," Ulysses said.

I shrugged. "Look, I don't believe in letting anyone push me around to this degree, but it's not my deal, it's yours. So let's share information and let us get out of here."

Something crossed Ulysses's face, some emotion that I couldn't read. "No guns in the club, that's the rule."

"I think we'll keep our guns," Bobby Lee said.

I glanced at him, and the look was enough. He shut up but smiled at me. "Actually, I agree with him. We're not giving up our guns today."

Ulysses shook his head. "I can't fail my master in this, Anita. You have no idea what he'll do to us if we let you inside with guns."

I glanced at the men standing around in the shadowed room. Fear rolled off of them in waves; their bodies were tight with tension. I'd never seen so many men so thoroughly whipped before. They would do exactly what they were told to do, because they were terrified to do anything else. I'd been told that a good dominant was a caring partner. Maybe Narcissus wasn't a good dom, maybe he was a bad one.

"I'm sorry, Ulysses, really, I don't want to cause you pain, but if Narcissus has gone crazy enough to make all of you this scared, then we keep the guns."

"Please, Anita, please." He must have seen something on my face that let him know I wasn't going to give in, because he dropped to his knees in front of me. The sound of his knees hitting the floor was sharp, made me wince. He'd kept his hands wrapped on his arms, so that he just dropped without catching himself at all. "Please, Anita."

I shook my head, staring into those haunted eyes.

Tears glimmered down his cheeks. "Please, Anita, please, you don't know what he'll do to our lovers if we fail him."

"Lovers?" I made it a question.

It took him two tries to say, "Ajax is my ... lover. We've been together four years. Please, Anita. I don't have any right to ask this, but please give up your guns."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Ulysses, really I am, but the more you talk the more I want to keep my guns."

He moved so suddenly that I didn't have time to react, and Cris and Bobby Lee both cleared their guns, but Ulysses wasn't trying to hurt me. He wrapped his arms around me, buried his face in my chest, and wept and begged. He stank of fear and blood and worse things.

"Put up the guns, boys, he's not trying to hurt me."

They put their guns up, but they didn't look happy. But then, neither, I suppose, did I. I touched Ulysses's head, but he just kept saying, "Please, please, please."

"You guys can all come with us, just walk out with us."

Bobby Lee whispered, "This is not a good idea."

"I don't care. Nobody deserves to be treated like this."

"What'cha gonna do, Anita, offer them all sanctuary? We didn't bring that many guns," he said.

"If the other werehyenas object, we leave them. I didn't bring us out here to get killed, but if we can, we take them with us."

Bobby Lee shook his head. "You make your life hard, Anita, you make your life very hard."

"So I've been told."

Ulysses just clung to me, crying, begging. I had to grab his face and make him look at me, and even then his eyes didn't focus. It took almost a full minute for him to see me. "You can come with us, Ulysses, all of you, just walk out."

He shook his head. "They have our lovers. You don't know what they'll do, you can't know."

"They?"

A rifle shot exploded from somewhere in the room. I had the Browning halfway out of its holster when Cris staggered backwards. Blood sprayed out his back onto Caleb and Gil. Gil started screaming. I had to turn away before Cris hit the floor.

Bobby Lee said, "Three on the catwalk with rifles. Fuck, girl, we've walked into it."

I looked where he was looking and could barely make out the shapes. If I was supposed to be the kitty-cat, why did the rat have better night vision?

Ulysses was whispering over and over, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

I put the barrel against his forehead. "Whatever else happens, Ulysses, you die next."

A man's voice came out of the darkness. He was speaking over a sound system, that much I could tell. "If you pull the trigger, we will kill your other bodyguard. Rifles with silver shot, Ms. Blake, and I assure you that my people are dead shots. Now, put your guns down, and we'll talk."

I kept my gun and told Ulysses, "Get away from me, now!" He crawled away, still crying.

I picked out the shadowy form on my side of the catwalk. Bobby Lee was aimed to the other side, which left one man in the middle without a gun on him. But from this distance, with them above us, we had to make each shot count, which meant that we had to kill what we could, then hope we could do something with the last one. "Who the hell are you?" I asked.

"Drop your guns, Ms. Blake, and I'll tell you."

"We keep our guns, girl," Bobby Lee said. "He's going to kill us either way."

I agreed.

"We don't want you dead, Ms. Blake, but we don't give a shit about your friends. We can just keep picking them off until you change your mind."

I moved to stand in front of everyone, so that the middle shot was harder. From the above angle, I couldn't block them completely, but it was the best I could do. "Everybody get down." Only Bobby Lee hesitated. "They don't want

me dead, and I need your gun." He glanced at me, then dropped to one knee, using me to shield himself from the middle gunman. He'd grasped my plan. Everyone else was hugging the floor. There was no cover, and the door was close but not close enough, what with three rifles on us.

"What are you doing, Ms. Blake?" the voice asked.

"Just testing a theory," I said.

"Don't be stupid, Ms. Blake."

"Bobby Lee," I said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"How good are you?"

"Give the word, we'll find out."

I felt my body go very, very still, so that the world narrowed down to the end of my gun and that shape crouched on the catwalk. It was about ten yards. I'd hit targets farther away than that. But that was target shooting. I'd never tried to drop a man with a handgun from this distance. I let out the last of my breath so that I was just stillness, just the gun, just the point of the gun, just the aim of the gun, and with the last, barest touch of my voice, I whispered, "Word."

Our guns went off almost simultaneously. I didn't shoot just once, I fired as fast as I could pull the trigger. My figure jerked, the target came out of his crouch, then fell slowly off the catwalk. I turned my gun before the body hit the ground and found the man in the middle standing up. I saw the shadow of his rifle. I heard the voice shouting over the explosion of gunshots, "Don't hit her, don't you dare."

The rifle plowed up floor inches from me--two shots--trying to get me to move and give him a shot at Bobby Lee, but I stood my ground and fired back. Bobby was firing with me, and the shadow form jerked, staggered, then slumped forward, his rifle falling to land on the floor with the other two bodies of the now-dead riflemen.

The voice said, "Boys, do not disappoint me."

The werehyenas rushed us. Bobby Lee and I started shooting. We divided the six werehyenas up between us, smooth, no cross fires, no taking the other's hit--my side of the room, his side of the room. I took two, I think he took one, and we both clicked empty. I drew the Firestar left-handed, which made it about two seconds slower than it needed to be, but it was probably faster than popping the clip on the Browning and reloading. If I survived, I'd have to time which one was faster.

It was Ulysses who was almost upon me like a dark shape of doom. A gun exploded at my back, and Ulysses fell backwards onto the floor. I whirled to find Nathaniel with a gun. His eyes were wide, his lips parted, a look of astonishment on his face. He'd picked up Cris's dropped weapon. Movement turned me back to the fight. Metal flashed as Bobby Lee waded into the last two werehyenas. The fight was too intense. I couldn't get a clear shot.

The far doors opened, and men poured out. I rushed the fight around Bobby Lee and fired almost point blank into someone's back. The man shuddered and dropped, putting me face-to-face with Bobby Lee. It had startled

him, and I had to fire across his body into the last of the fightees. I pointed the Firestar at the werehyenas pouring towards us. I emptied the gun into them, as we all started backing for the door. I wasn't as good left-handed. I don't think I killed anyone, but I wounded someone with every shot, and it slowed them, made them hesitate.

Gil, Caleb, and Nathaniel were already at the doors. Daylight spilled in, and I was dazzled for a second, because my sunglasses were still tucked across the front of my shirt. I dropped the Firestar, popped the empty clip from the Browning and had the second clip pounded home before we made the sidewalk. I still couldn't hear the noise of the clips hitting home, but I saw Bobby Lee making the same movement with his gun that I'd made with mine. I knew he was locked and loaded.

I yelled, "Nathaniel! Jeep, get it running!" I knew he knew where the extra set of keys were. I remembered Narcissus saying that there were over five hundred werehyenas. We had to get out of there before they decided to pick up more guns or just overwhelm us with numbers. Shooting them would slow them down, but whoever that voice had been, he had them terrified. I could kill them, but I couldn't terrorize them. Whether they poured out of that door in a wave would depend on whether they feared death or terror more.

I glanced back to find Nathaniel in the Jeep, with Caleb and Gil in the back. The engine roared to life. Bobby Lee and I started for the Jeep, and the werehyenas rolled out into the sunlight, too many to count, almost too many to aim at. I fired into the mass of bodies, and I yelled, "Run!"

Bobby Lee and I were running for the Jeep, which meant our aim wasn't what it should have been, but the men were packed so tight that we kept hitting them anyway. They'd fall, then there'd be screams, sounds, a chattering laughter that raised the hair at the back of my neck, and the wounded rose as hyenamens, muscled, pale-furred, spotted, with a muzzle full of fangs and claws like black knives. We weren't whittling them down, we were giving them better weapons to use against us.

Nathaniel yelled, "Get in!"

I glanced back to find the doors open front and middle. I slid into the rear seat, Bobby Lee slid in front. The doors were shut, locked, and Nathaniel was pulling away from the curb when they poured over us. They swarmed the car, covering the windows. Nathaniel hit the gas and the Jeep roared forward. An arm smashed through the window beside me. The sound of breaking glass was everywhere. They were trying to hold on and get inside. I fired through my window into the man beyond, and he fell away. Bobby Lee was firing into the hyenaman that was trying to crawl through the windshield.

But there were at least three others smashing at the glass, trying to crawl through. I fired the Browning into the one on the opposite window from mine. It took four shots before he fell away. The Browning had to be close to empty, but I'd lost count. The last two werehyenas were halfway through the windows; one of them spilled into the back of the Jeep. He launched himself at me, and I fired two more bullets almost point blank into him. The gun clicked empty. The man fell, apparently dead at my knees, because I was kneeling in the back of

the Jeep, which meant that I'd crawled over the seat to meet his charge. I didn't remember doing it.

The last one was in half-man form. He was having trouble tearing his way through the window. I think he'd caught something painful on the glass. I drew the blade that I wore down my back. My right knee was down, leg flat to the floorboard, my left, raised on the ball of my foot. It was a swordsman's stance for when you couldn't stand--balanced. I struck in a blur of speed, feeling the strength in my body like nothing I'd ever felt before. He looked up at the last second just before the blade bit into the side of his face and split his head open. Blood splattered on my arms, across my face. The body slumped forward, most of its lower parts still dangling out the window. The upper part of his head from just above the jaw was gone, spilling out onto the carpet, soaking into the leg of my jeans. I had a heartbeat to think, holy shit, then I heard the sounds on the roof.

Bobby Lee said, "Persistent bastards."

I didn't answer, just knelt by the wheel well opposite the bodies. Edward, assassin to the undead, and the only person I knew of with a higher kill count for monsters than me, had talked me into letting a friend of his remodel my Jeep. The wheel well held a secret compartment. Inside there was an extra Browning Hi-Power, two extra clips, and a mini-Uzi with a mushroom clip. The clip barely fit inside the compartment, but it nearly tripled the round capacity, so it was worth the tight fit.

Claws ripped through the roof of the Jeep and started peeling it back, like opening a tin can. I threw myself onto my back and fired up into the roof. Animal howls, one body fell past the windows, but the other one stayed on the roof, the half-animal arm shoved through the metal. I went to my knees, firing just in back of the arm. The hyenaman rolled off the back of the Jeep and bounced in the road. The arm stayed in the hole in the roof, caught on the metal.

When the ringing in my ears toned down enough for me to hear something besides the pounding of my own blood, I could hear Caleb saying, "Fuck, fuck, fuck," over and over. Gil was huddled beside him on the floorboard, screaming, a high piteous sound, his hands over his ears, eyes closed. I leaned on the seat, but didn't try to climb back over. My back was covered in blood and worse things from rolling around on the floor.

I yelled, "Gil, Gil!"

He just kept screaming. I tapped the top of his head with the gun barrel. That made him open his eyes. I pointed the gun at the ceiling while he stared at me. "Stop screaming."

He nodded, hands lowering slowly. He kept nodding over and over again. Caleb had stopped cursing under his breath. He was breathing so hard I thought he might hyperventilate, but I had other things to worry about.

"What kind of clip ya got on that Uzi?" Bobby Lee asked.

"It's called a mushroom clip. It about triples the ammo capacity."

He shook his head. "Damn, girl, where have you been living that you need that kind of firepower?"

"Welcome to my life," I said. I looked down at Gil. "Next time I tell you to stay home, stay home."

"Yes, ma'am," he whispered.

"Slow it down, boy," Bobby Lee said, "we don't want to get picked up by the cops with bodies in the car."

"The damage may be a tip-off," I said.

The arm dangling from the ceiling had changed back to human shape. It flopped bonelessly as Nathaniel turned a corner. I looked away from it and found the now-human with his head bisected. His brains had leaked out in pieces. I was suddenly hot, dizzy. I couldn't remember what I'd done with the big blade. I must have dropped it, but I didn't remember doing it. I wedged myself into a corner, the Uzi raised to the ceiling, my body held on three sides by metal and the seat back. It was as close to being held as I could manage. I closed my eyes, so I couldn't see what I'd done. But the smell was still there: fresh blood, butchered meat, and that outhouse smell that let you know someone's bowels had let loose. I started to choke, and the Jeep pulled off the road. That made me look up, gave me something else to concentrate on.

Nathaniel was pulling onto a gravel road in the middle of nowhere. There were trees, a floodplain, green grass, and beyond that, the shine of the river. It was a peaceful spot. He drove until we weren't easily visible from the road, then stopped.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Bobby Lee answered, "I think if we drive around in traffic with legs sticking out, someone will notify the police."

I nodded. It was a good point. "I should have thought of it," I said.

"No, you've done your work for the day. Let me do the thinking 'til your head clears."

"My head's clear," I said.

He climbed out of the car and spoke through one of the broken windows as he moved towards the legs. "I know pangs of conscience when I see them, girl."

"Stop calling me 'girl'."

He grinned at me. "Yes, ma'am." He grabbed the legs and shoved the body through the glass. It landed with a thick sound on top of the first body. A sound came out of the body on the bottom. It might have just been air escaping--it happened sometimes--but then again ...

I was on my knees, Uzi pointed at the bodies. Bobby Lee said, "Don't hit the gas tank, ma'am, we don't want to blow ourselves up." He had his gun back out.

I shifted my angle so that I'd shoot through the dark head that lay at the bottom of the pile. Did two bodies constitute a pile? Did it matter? Something brushed my hair and I jerked the gun up, only to find that I'd brushed the fingers on the arm hanging from the ceiling. It was coming loose, sliding lower on its own. Great.

I pressed the barrel of the Uzi against the top of the head. "If you're alive, don't move, if you're dead, don't worry about it."

Bobby Lee opened the back of the Jeep, his gun angled down for a shot at the "body."

"If I fire into the top of his head, the bullets may cut your legs out from under you."

He moved off to one side, gun steady. "My deepest apologies, ma'am, I know better than that."

I pressed the gun barrel more securely into the top of the head and began to reach slowly towards the neck that was just visible under the very dead top body.

"I'm alive." The voice made me jump and nearly made me squeeze the trigger.

"Shit," I said.

"Why don't you finish it?" the man asked. His voice was pain-filled, but not thick. I'd missed heart and lungs. Careless of me.

"Because that wasn't Narcissus's voice over the speaker system, and Ulysses said they had your lovers. That we didn't know what they'd do to your lovers if you guys failed them. Who is the guy over the speaker? Who is 'they'? Where the fuck is Narcissus? Why would the werehyenas let anyone take them over like this?"

"You're not going to kill me?" He made it a question.

"You answer our questions, and I give you my word that we won't kill you."

"May I move?"

"If you can."

He moved slowly, painfully onto his side. His hair was curly, dark, cut very short, skin pale. He turned until he could see my eyes, and the effort left him shaking, his lips blue, which made me think maybe we didn't have much time to ask our questions, that maybe we'd already killed him, just not fast enough.

His eyes were a strange shade of gold. "I'm Bacchus," he said in that pain-filled voice.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Anita, that's Bobby Lee, now start talking."

"Ask me anything."

I started asking. Bacchus started answering. He didn't die. By the time we crossed the bridge into Missouri, his lips were pink and healthy and the dazed look had left his eyes. I was really going to have to start packing better ammo.

Chapter 61

BACCHUS ACTUALLY DIDN'T know all that much. Narcissus had introduced his new gentleman fair, Chimera, and they'd seemed to be having a

wonderful time together. If not true love, then the rough trade they both wanted. Then Narcissus had gone into one of the rooms and not come back out. For twenty-four hours the werehyenas had thought it was just sex, but after that, they stopped believing Chimera's assurances that Narcissus was alright. Ajax had managed to get inside, and that's when it went bad.

"Ajax told us Narcissus was being tortured, really tortured."

"Why didn't you rescue him?" I asked.

"Chimera came with his own bodyguards. They took ..." Bacchus had to stop and fight to take a deep breath, as if something inside him was hurting. "You don't know what they've done to our people. You don't know what they've threatened to do to them if we fail them."

"Tell us, then we'll know," I said.

"Have you met Ajax?" he asked.

I nodded.

"They cut his arms and legs off and burned the ends of the wounds so he couldn't heal the damage. Chimera said they'd put him in a metal box and just get him out on special occasions." Bacchus choked, and I wasn't sure if it was from injuries or horror.

Bobby Lee said, "He's upset enough that I can't tell if he's lying or not, but I think he's telling the truth." His voice was a little hoarse, as if he were seeing the images in his head that I was trying very hard not to imagine. I'd gotten better lately at simply refusing to let my imagination run away with me. Maybe it had something to do with being a sociopath; if so, let's hear it for dementia. I sat there in the Jeep, my mind carefully blank, no visuals. Bobby Lee looked ill.

"How many bodyguards does this Chimera have?" I asked.

"About twenty-five, before you started killing them."

"I thought there were like five hundred of you guys. How could twenty-five men keep you down?"

Bacchus looked at me with stricken eyes. "If someone had your Ulfric, Richard, and was cutting pieces off of him, crippling him, wouldn't you do anything to save him?"

I stayed quiet and thought about that one. I gave the only truthful answer that I could. "I don't know. It would depend on what 'anything' covered. I see your point, but why didn't you just rush them?"

Bacchus propped himself up against the side of the Jeep. Nathaniel took a corner a little fast, and Bacchus tried to grab something so he wouldn't slide. I gave him my hand, caught him, and he looked both grateful and uncertain. He kept hold of my hand and gave really good eye contact. "We didn't have an alpha. Ajax and Ulysses were the next in command, and once they started cutting up Ajax, Ulysses told us to do what they said." He squeezed my hand, not too tight. "The rest of us aren't leaders, Anita. Our alphas were all telling us to cooperate with Chimera. We're followers, that's it, that's all. We need an alpha with a plan."

My eyes widened. "What are you saying, Bacchus?"

He drew me close to him with our clasped hands. "There are still almost one hundred and fifty able-bodied hyenas. God knows what they'll do to the prisoners now that we've failed them."

"Why do they want Ms. Blake?" Bobby Lee asked.

"Chimera wants Anita for his mate."

That raised my eyebrows. "What are you talking about?"

"He's got a real hard-on where you're concerned. I don't know why."

I tried to draw my hand out of Bacchus's grip, but he kept me close. "He's tried to kill me at least twice. That doesn't sound so friendly."

"He wanted you dead, now he doesn't, I don't know why. Chimera's crazy, he doesn't need a reason to change his mind." He gazed up at me, still holding my hand. "Please help us."

"Can you guarantee that the other hyenas will follow Ms. Blake?" Bobby Lee asked.

Bacchus looked down, his grip loosened, then it tightened, and he looked up again. "I know that if we'd had any alphas that would have stood up for us all, we'd have taken these guys out by now. But Ulysses loves Ajax, really loves him. He didn't know what to do."

"What about Narcissus? He's not still all mushy about Chimera, right?" I said.

"No, but the only time we've been allowed to see Narcissus, he was gagged."

"Narcissus has a reputation," Bobby Lee said, "of being a tough bastard. I don't think he would have rolled over for them."

Bacchus shrugged, and I finally freed my hand. "I don't know," the werhyena said, "but he couldn't tell us to attack them. For all I know Chimera may have taken his tongue. He did that to Dionysus, my ... lover." He hugged himself, head down, eyes closed. "He gave me the tongue in a box wrapped with a ribbon."

I'd been given a box once with pieces of people I cared about in it. I'd killed the ones who'd hurt them, killed them all. But the damage done to my friends had been permanent. Nothing I could do would fix it, because they'd been human; they didn't grow back lost body parts.

Bacchus kept his eyes closed, his face very still, as if he were holding himself tight, afraid to lose control. I didn't know what to say in the face of his pain. How did I go from trying to kill him to feeling bad for him? Maybe it was a girl thing, or maybe I'd been oversocialized as a child. Whatever the reason, I found myself wanting to help him, but not wanting to risk any of my own people. Cris was dead on the floor of Narcissus in Chains. I hadn't known Cris long; his loss wasn't that great to me, it just wasn't. But if I went in there in force, I'd be risking people I would miss.

Still ... "Can you draw a plan, a layout of the club, mark where everybody is being held?"

He opened his eyes, his expression surprised, the tears he'd been holding back trailing down his cheeks, forgotten. "You'll help us?"

I shrugged, uncomfortable at the frantic relief in his eyes. "I'm not sure yet, but it doesn't hurt to find out what we'd be up against."

Bacchus took my hand again, pressed it to his cheek. I thought at first it was going to be some kind of hyena greeting, but he laid a soft kiss on my hand and let me go. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, Bacchus, don't thank me yet." I didn't say out loud that if the club looked too hard to take, like it would cost too many lives, I wouldn't do it. I kept it to myself, because he might lie, make it seem easier. The person he loved was being tortured. People will do a lot of things for the person they love, even stupid things.

Chapter 62

BOBBY LEE INSISTED on calling Rafael first thing. Nathaniel and Caleb helped me get Bacchus settled in the kitchen. He was still walking like things hurt. Gil had sat down at the end of the couch first thing, huddling. He'd been withdrawn since I told him to stop screaming. Normally, I'd have asked what was wrong, but screw it, I didn't have time to baby-sit him right now.

The kitchen was dim and depressing with all the windows and the sliding glass door boarded over. We had to turn on all the lights. My sunny kitchen had been turned into a cave.

An hour later we had a fair map of the inside of the club. Bacchus knew the guard schedule for the hyenas but not for Chimera's men. He did the best he could but said, "Chimera changes his routine, sometimes every day, at least every three days. One day he kept changing his orders every hour or so. It was weird, weirder even than normal for Chimera."

"How unstable is he?" Bobby Lee asked.

Bacchus actually seemed to think about that for a second or two. I'd thought it was a rhetorical question; maybe I was wrong. "Sometimes he seems fine. Sometimes he's so crazy it scares me. I think it even scares his own people. Bacchus frowned then said, "I heard them say things, like he literally was getting crazier and they were afraid of him, too."

The doorbell rang. It made me jump. Nathaniel jumped off the kitchen counter, where he'd been sitting. "I'll get it."

"Check and see who it is first," I said.

He looked back over his shoulder, the look on his face clearly saying that I was telling him something he already knew. After months of sharing room and board with me, he knew to check the door before he opened it.

"You used to just open the door," I said.

"I know better now," he said and vanished into the living room.

He came back almost immediately. "It's the werewolf that was at Narcissus in Chains, the one called Zeke." Nathaniel looked a little pale.

Bobby Lee and I both had guns in our hands. I didn't really remember drawing mine. I was looking at the boarded-up windows. The wood was a little more protection than the glass had been, but we couldn't see through the wood either. The bad guys could sneak up on us better. "Is he alone?" I asked.

"He's the only one standing on the porch," Nathaniel said, "but that doesn't mean he's alone." His eyes were a touch wide when he said, "I don't smell snakes or lions." I could see the pulse in his neck jumping under his skin.

"It's going to be alright, Nathaniel," I said.

He nodded, but the look on his face told me he wasn't convinced. Gil joined us in the kitchen. "What's happening?"

"Bad guys," I said.

"More of them?" he said, voice plaintive.

"You might have been safer on your own, Gil," I said.

He nodded. "I'm beginning to see that." His eyes were so wide it looked painful.

I had brought the mini-Uzi in from the car and had reloaded it from the gun safe upstairs. I took it off the kitchen cabinet and debated between it and the Browning. The doorbell rang again. I didn't jump this time. I hung the Uzi over my shoulder by its strap and settled the Browning more comfortably in my hand. The Uzi was really an emergency weapon. The fact that I'd even thought about answering my door with it on my person was probably a bad sign. If I needed more than a 9mm to answer my own front door, I should just leave town.

I peered out at the living room, but there was nothing to see but the closed front door. I was going to have to look out the side window to see what was waiting on the porch. I approached the door with the Browning in a two-handed grip, staying to one side of the door. I was ready in case they started shooting through the door. Of course, last time they'd shot through the windows, too, but the drapes were drawn, and it was the best I was going to be able to do, as far as safety went.

I knelt by the window, because most people shoot for the chest or head, and on my knees I'm a lot shorter. I eased the drape to one side, and something slapped against the glass. I jumped back, bringing the gun up, but nothing else happened. I had an image in my head of what it had been, and it hadn't been a gun. I thought it had been a picture. I eased the drape back and found myself staring at a Polaroid of a man chained to a wall. He was nude, covered in bloody scratches, blood covering most of his body so it was hard to see at first exactly who it was. Then gradually my eyes made sense of it, and I realized it was Micah. I sat back abruptly on the floor, almost like I'd fallen. My hand dragged at the drape, keeping it open. The gun wasn't where it was supposed to be, but hovered in the air, half-forgotten. A gag cut across that wide mouth, the delicate face covered in blood and swollen flesh. The long hair was mounded to one side, as if it were so sticky with blood that it no longer moved freely. His eyes were closed, and I wondered for a second that lasted forever if he was

dead. But there was something about the way he hung in the chains that said alive. Even in a picture there is a stillness to death that the live cannot mimic. Or maybe I'd just seen enough bodies to know.

Bobby Lee was beside me. "What is it, what's wrong?" Then he saw the picture, and I heard his breath go in sharp. "That's your Nimir-Raj, isn't it?"

I nodded, because I still wasn't breathing, which made it hard to talk. I closed my eyes for a moment, took a deep cleansing breath, and let it out slowly. It shook as it left my body. I cursed silently. "Get a handle on it, Anita, you can do better than this."

"What?" Bobby Lee asked.

I realized I'd said the last aloud and shook my head, letting the drape fall back into place. I got to my feet. "Let him in, let's see what he's got to say."

Bobby Lee was giving me a funny look. "You can't shoot him until after we know what's happening."

I nodded. "I know."

He touched my shoulder, turned me to look at him. "There is a look on your face, girl, that is as bleak as a winter's dawn. People kill other people while they're wearing that look. I don't want you to let your emotions get in the way of business."

Something that was almost a smile touched my lips. "Don't worry, Bobby Lee, I won't let anything interfere with business."

His hand dropped away slowly. "Girl, the look in your eyes now scares me."

"Then don't look," I said, "and *don't* call me 'girl'."

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Now open the damn door, and let's get this done."

He didn't argue again. He just went for the door and let the big, bad wolf inside.

Chapter 63

WHEN WE OPENED the door, Zeke had a picture of Cherry in front of his chest. His first words were, "Shoot me and they both are worse than dead."

So he took a seat on my white couch, still breathing, though if he said the wrong thing, I was hoping to change that.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I was sent to fetch you for my master."

"Define 'fetch'," I said. I was sitting on the low wood coffee table in front of him. Bobby Lee was standing in back of him with a gun pressed to his spine. At that range with silver ammo there wasn't an alpha in the world that would survive, or at least none that I'd met, and I'd met a few.

"He wants you to be his mate."

I shook my head. "I heard that, but didn't he try, twice, to have you guys kill me?"

Zeke nodded. "Yes."

"And he suddenly wants me to be his honey bun,"

Zeke nodded again. The gesture looked odd in the wolfman form, kind of like a golden retriever that was nodding sagely.

"Why the change of heart?" I asked. The fact that I was asking calm questions while the Polaroids of Cherry and Micah sat beside me on the coffee table was a testament to both my patience and my lack of sanity. If I'd really been sane I couldn't have been calm, but I'd hit that switch in my head that let me think when awful things were happening. The same switch that let me kill without much remorse. Being able to divorce myself from my emotions kept me from shooting pieces off Zeke's body until he told me where Micah and Cherry were. Besides, there was always the very real possibility that we could do it later. Talk reasonably first, torture only if you had to, conservation of energy.

"Chimera was told that you would be a panwere like himself."

I raised eyebrows at that. "Panwere, what the hell is that?"

"A lycanthrope that can take more than one form," Zeke said.

"Not possible," I said.

Bacchus spoke from the kitchen doorway. He'd stayed as far away from Zeke as he could and remain in the room. "Chimera can take more than one form, I've seen it."

I looked back at Zeke. "Okay, fine, he's a panwere. Why would someone tell him that I was one, too?"

"Before I answer that question, I have someone waiting in a nearby car. I would like her to come in and speak with you."

"Who?" For a wild moment I thought he might mean Cherry, but he didn't.

"Gina."

"Micah's Gina?" I asked.

Zeke nodded.

I looked behind him at Bobby Lee. "Do we trust him to go back out and come back in without reinforcements?"

Bobby Lee shook his head.

I shook my head, too. "Sorry, Zeke, but we don't trust you."

"Send Caleb then." He looked at the wereleopard, who had been very quiet throughout everything. Caleb was sitting in the far corner of the room, keeping away from Zeke, a lot like Bacchus, come to think of it. But then Gil was huddled in a different corner. I'd assumed I was surrounded by scaredy-cats, hyenas, and foxes, but now ...

"How did you know his name?" I asked.

"I know a lot of things about Caleb."

"Explain," I said.

The doorbell rang again. I didn't jump this time. I was in that far away place where I didn't get nerves, though the Browning was pointed at the door. Did that count as nerves?

I went to the door, and Bobby Lee stayed with his gun pressed to Zeke's back. "Y'all better hope that that is someone friendly," Bobby Lee drawled.

Zeke's wide nose flared, scenting the wind. "It's Gina."

Call me paranoid, but I didn't trust him. I peeked out the window. This time there were no nasty surprises, just Gina standing on the small porch, a thick gray shawl hugged around her upper body. It was nearly ninety outside, what the hell was the shawl for? I let out a deep breath. The shawl was thick enough to hide all sorts of unpleasant surprises. Damn.

"What's she got under the shawl?" I asked Zeke.

"You might say a message from Chimera."

I glanced back at him. "Talk like that isn't going to get the door opened."

Zeke moved his shoulders, and Bobby Lee must have pressed the gun barrel deeper into his back, because he stopped moving abruptly. "She's been tortured. Chimera sent her with me to show what will happen to your leopard if you don't come with me."

"Why the shawl?" I asked again.

Zeke closed his eyes, as if he wanted to look away but was afraid Bobby Lee would take it wrong. "It's to cover her, Anita, just to cover up her nakedness." He sounded weary, not just tired, but weary. "Please, let her inside, she's in a great deal of pain."

"He smells like he's telling the truth," Bobby Lee said.

I sighed. That was probably as good an assurance as we were going to get. I opened the door, gun at the ready, staying out of the sight of anyone who might be watching from the yard. Because I was hiding behind the door, I didn't see Gina until she was well into the room. I closed the door behind her, and she jumped, then gasped, as if the sudden movement had hurt her badly. When she looked at me, it was all I could do to keep from gasping. I thought at first she had two black eyes, then realized it was just hollows under her eyes so deep they looked like bruises. Her skin was so pale with an undertone of gray, and I understood for the first time what they meant by ashen. She was ashen, as if her body was covered by something thinner, more delicate, than skin. Her tall body was hunched in on itself, as if standing upright would hurt. Her lips were nearly bloodless, but it was her eyes that hurt me the most. They were filled with horror as if she were still seeing whatever had been done to her, as if she might always see that awful thing over and over again.

She spoke in a voice that was hollow, hopeless. "I got worried."

I didn't need to see what was under the shawl to believe that she'd been tortured. I didn't need to see anything but her face.

"Can she sit down before she falls down?" Zeke asked.

I nodded a little too rapidly, realizing that I had been staring. "Please, sit down."

Gina looked at Bobby Lee, standing behind Zeke. "Have you told them?"

"I wanted you here to back up my story," Zeke said.

She nodded once, then moved to sit beside him on the couch. She sat close to him, almost touching. If he'd had anything to do with what had happened to her, I don't think she'd have been so cozy.

In fact she was so cozy that I was almost certain she knew Zeke. Knew him not just for Chimera's fun and games, but knew him before. How did one of Micah's cats end up friendly with Chimera's top goon?

I asked. "You two seem to know each other." Alright, maybe that wasn't a question, but it would do.

They exchanged a look, then Zeke turned to me. I wished that he was in human form. Even after years of dealing with lycanthropes, I still had trouble reading their expressions when they were in animal form. The fact that his eyes were human helped some, but you never realize how much of the expression isn't really the eyes but the facial movements around the eyes, until you don't have them as clues.

"Let me start by saying that Chimera wants you alive and well and in his care in less than two hours or he will start doing permanent damage to Micah and your leopard."

I felt my eyes go a little dead. "We have a deadline then," I said. "Talk faster."

"Shortest version that I know is this. Chimera has always been a harsh master, but never sadistic, until the last few weeks. He's unstable, and I believe he's going mad and will kill us all if he remains in charge."

"This is the short version?" Bobby Lee asked.

"I agree," I said, "speed it up."

"I want you to help me stage a palace revolt, Ms. Blake. Is that quick enough for you?"

"Maybe that was a little too quick," I said. "Why do you want to revolt, and why do you want my help?"

"I told you, I fear that Chimera will destroy us all. The only way to prevent that is to kill him."

Well, that was blunt. "So, why my help?"

"You have a certain reputation for deadly force."

"You talk like an English professor," I said, "or an expensive lawyer. Why not just kill him yourself?"

"The others that follow him, fear him, they would not trust that I alone could guarantee his death,"

"And I can?"

"You and your people, yes."

"My leopards are not going inside."

Nathaniel said, "Anita ..."

I shook my head. "No, I won't endanger the rest of you to save one of you."

"What kind of pard would we be if we allowed our Nimir-Ra to go into danger alone?"

"A pard that obeyed orders," I said.

He leaned back against the wall, but there was an unusually stubborn set to his face that said maybe, just maybe, he'd been picking up more than just weapons skill from hanging around with me. Was stubbornness catching?

"Not your leopards, but the wolves, and the rats."

"The rats aren't mine." *And I'm not the wolves' lupa anymore.*

"Rafael is already on his way here with some of our people," Bobby Lee said.

I frowned at him. "Well, nice you mentioned that."

He shrugged. If he was getting tired of pressing the gun into Zeke's back, it didn't show. "Rafael is my alpha, not you, ma'am."

"I understand that, but if we're going to get along, you still need to keep me informed. I've had enough surprises for one day."

"Amen to that," he said.

"Where are Micah and Cherry being held?" I asked.

Zeke shook his great wolfish head. "No, not until you agree to help us."

"Chimera wanted to blackmail me into being his sweetie, you want to blackmail me into helping you kill him. I don't see much difference."

"The only way to stop Chimera and those still loyal to him is their death. I propose that we pool our resources and accomplish that."

"You talk awful pretty for a goon."

"I am his goon because when he conquered my small pack of wolves, he forced me into this form and kept me in it. When he allowed me to try and change back, this was the best I could do."

I looked into those human eyes. "Only your eyes," I said.

"Only my eyes."

The eyes were usually one of the first things to go animal if you stayed in beast form too long at a time. His eyes being the only thing human was odd. But I didn't ask him to explain, because we were eating up our time and I wanted Micah and Cherry back.

"In this form," Zeke said, "I can be nothing else but a goon, an enforcer. I cannot be human."

I didn't try to argue that he was human. I let it go. "Let's cut to the chase. Bobby Lee, will Rafael help on this?"

"I think so. He's coming with enough soldiers to make a good show."

I looked at Bacchus. "Will the werehyenas join forces with their, what, oppressors? Will you guys help Zeke and his people?"

"Zeke always tried to save us pain. He always spoke for moderation."

Bacchus nodded. "I think the others will agree to work with him, but whether they'll agree to let everyone live afterwards, that I can't promise."

"If we help you destroy him," Zeke said, "then you turn around and slaughter us, we have gained nothing."

In looking between Bacchus and Zeke I'd glanced back over the photos. I'd spent the last few minutes not thinking about them. I'd managed to concentrate on other things, but it was as if that one glance had torn through all the barriers that usually kept me from doing stupid shit. I stood up, abruptly enough that everyone looked at me.

"Would you kill Zeke?" I asked.

"No, but Marco, he has to die," Bacchus said.

"Why?" I asked.

"He and the snake men have to die," Bacchus said.

"Agreed," Zeke said. Then he looked up at me. "And I think I know a way to have the wolves involved."

"I'm listening."

"Chimera is wolf, hyena, leopard, lion, bear, and snake."

"He's behind the disappearances of the other alphas," I said.

Zeke nodded.

"Are they alive?"

"The lion and the dog are. Chimera hasn't been able to force them to change form yet. He never kills anyone unless he can break them first."

"Is Narcissus alive?" This from Bacchus.

"Yes," Zeke said. "Chimera has not been able to break him either."

"How will any of this interest the wolves?" I asked. I'd gone to stand on the other side of the kitchen doorway, opposite Bacchus. I couldn't see the pictures from there.

"Chimera's never been able to find a dominant animal group that was weak enough to be taken over by outsiders before, until he heard of your wolf pack."

I stood up straighter, pushing away from the wall. "What do you mean?"

"Jacob, Paris, and a few others are what's left of my pack. Chimera couldn't send me because my condition would raise questions."

"Are you saying that as soon as Jacob becomes Ulfric, he turns the pack over to Chimera?"

"That was the plan," Zeke said.

"And now?" I asked.

"Now either Jacob and the others agree to leave your pack where it is, or they die."

"You'd kill what's left of your own pack, just like that?" I said.

"They stopped being my pack a long time ago."

"So let me get this straight," Bobby Lee said, "you want the rats, the wolves, and the leopards to join forces with the hyenas and whatever people of yours will join you and destroy the rest."

"Yes," Zeke said.

"And if we don't?" Bobby Lee asked.

"You talk as if you have many choices here," Zeke said. "You do not. Chimera will do worse than kill your leopards. What he has allowed done to the hyenas is beyond any civilized tolerance. His sanity is slipping away, and there are those among his people that will do terrible things without a master to tell them no."

"It takes time to arrange an offensive like this," Bobby Lee said.

Zeke said, "I do not see a clock but time is running out. Anita must be in Chimera's presence before two hours is over, or it will go badly for Micah and the leopard."

"You keep saying Micah and the leopard," I said, "like you know Micah." I had an awful thought, and I'd been slow not to think of it before. "Jacob was supposed to get the wolves for Chimera, and Micah was supposed to get the leopards." I said it in an empty voice. My body felt empty, as if I were falling away inside myself, drowning in that great white static that allowed me to kill and not to think.

"We thought their alpha was dead and it would be easy enough." He looked at me. "We didn't know about you, or rather didn't understand what you were."

Gina spoke. "Once Micah met you, he knew it wouldn't work. He tried to get Chimera to leave you and yours alone, but when you went up against Jacob, you became too big a threat. Chimera ordered you killed. Micah didn't find out about the order until after everyone had left to come after you. He saved you."

I just looked at her. My mind was still trying to process the thought that Micah had lied to me the entire time I'd known him.

"Micah told Chimera that you were going to be a panwere like him, and he might never find another one like himself. That's why you can control the leopards and the wolves both."

I blinked at her. "I guess that's one theory." My voice sounded distant even to me.

"Don't you understand, Anita? I don't think Micah believed it, but it was all he could think of to keep you alive and him alive, and not to get the rest of us tortured." She stood up, and pain tore across her face. Zeke steadied her, then she stood straight and she let the shawl fall away.

Burns traced her pale shoulders. The rest of her chest was bare and lovely and unharmed, but as she turned to show her back, Gil gasped. Her back was patterned with burns, no, not burns, brands. Someone had branded her over and over again. The burns were fresh, some of them bloody raw, some with crisp blackened skin, as if the pressure hadn't been even every time. Some of the marks were smeared around the edges, as if she'd moved, struggled.

She turned back to face me, tears glittering in her eyes. "Every time Chimera sent Micah out he had Violet or me with him. If Micah didn't do what he was told to do, then he'd hurt us." She started walking towards me, hands holding her arms, as if to hold herself steady, but every step hurt, and it showed in the flinching of her eyes. "What would you do to keep this from happening to Nathaniel?"

I met her eyes, but it took effort. "I'd do a lot, but I wouldn't betray anyone."

The tears started slowly down her face, as if she were fighting not to cry.

"He tortured Micah because Micah refused to help lure you into the ambush. Chimera is going to kill him, because he says that Micah is no longer his cat, but yours, that the wiles of a woman have won his loyalty." She sobbed, and the movement must have hurt, because she bent forward, body spasming. I caught her by the arms to keep her from falling.

"Oh, God," she whispered, "it hurts."

My throat was tight. I held her elbows until she could stand again.

"I'm Chimera's message to you, Anita. He says he'll do this to your leopard if you don't come back with us."

"You're not going back there," I said.

"He still has Cherry and Micah. If I don't go back he'll do this to her. I don't think she'd survive it." I understood what Gina meant. Not Cherry's body, but her mind.

She began to collapse towards the floor, slowly, me supporting her as gently as I could. "Micah knew what would happen to him when he refused to help trap you, but he still did it." She was on her knees now, her hands gripping my arms tight, tight enough to hurt. "I would have lied and agreed to do anything to keep this from happening to me." She sobbed again, and I held her arms to keep her from falling backwards onto her back on the floor. I held her while she shook in pain, and when she quieted, she said, in a voice more tears than noise, "I would have betrayed anyone to stop him from hurting me. But he didn't want anything from me. Nothing I could say, or do, would stop it. Chimera promised Micah that only he would suffer for refusing, then once he was chained up and couldn't get away they brought me in and made him watch." She looked at me, eyes wide, full of awful things. "Chimera would have made Cherry or me take animal form. He said he'd never had a female beast before."

"That's what he calls those of us trapped between forms," Zeke said.

Gina's fingers dug into my arm, just a little. "Micah took our place. He's alpha enough to have kept human form. He risked his human form for us. Merle was our Nimir-Raj but he wouldn't risk his humanity for us. Micah took his place, our place. He's our Nimir-Raj because he loves us, all of us. Micah offered to betray you to stop them from hurting me, but Chimera said he could smell that Micah was lying and that he would just get away and warn you. So he sent me with Zeke, because he trusts Zeke."

I looked at Zeke over her slowly collapsing form, trying to cradle her as she slid down, and not hurt her, but everything seemed to hurt. She was making small mewling sounds by the time I helped her lower herself to the floor. There was something in Zeke's human eyes that didn't need facial expressions to interpret.

"Chimera must be stopped," Zeke said, softly. "He must be stopped."

"Yes," I said, still holding one of Gina's hands, "yes, he must be stopped."

"Stopped, hell," Bobby Lee said, "we need to kill his ass."

I nodded. "That, too."

Chapter 64

WE MADE IT back to the club with a little time to spare. The wererats had arrived in force at my house, and I'd left Rafael in charge of the rescue, because that's what it would be. I was letting Zeke take me into the bad guy's lair unarmed. Zeke would be carrying my weapons, and theoretically he'd give them back to me if I needed them, theoretically. But theory and practice aren't always the same thing. Zeke had tried to kill me once; now I was supposed to trust him with my life. It seemed a bad idea, but I was still going to do it. With enough time maybe we could have come up with a better plan, but we didn't have the time. Not if we hoped to save Cherry and Micah.

It seemed like I'd spent most of the last four years arriving too late. Too late to save people, too late to keep the monsters away. I was cleanup crew, someone that came after the bodies were scattered around and mopped up the mess. I killed the monsters, but only after they'd done terrible things. Even now, Chimera had already butchered and tortured, but I could confess to myself, if to no one else, that part of me didn't give a damn about the others. I mean, I was sorry for Gina's pain and Bacchus's lover, and Ajax getting chopped up, but they were abstract to me. Cherry and Micah were real. How very quickly Micah had become that real to me frightened me, but if I didn't look too closely at it, I could keep moving forward, could keep thinking clearly, could keep breathing normally. Thinking too much tended to make my thoughts jump around, my breath come a little too fast.

The main part of the club had been dark and empty. The party, as they say, was upstairs. It was the room at the end of the big white hallway that we'd gone down to rescue Nathaniel and Gregory days ago. Chimera waited outside the door in his black hood, and his eye slits were unzipped so I could see pale gray eyes. He wore a rather ordinary looking suit, complete with tightly knotted tie and white shirt that met oddly with the black leather of the hood. He had his hands behind him, leaning against his arms. He was trying for casual and failing. He was nervous, and I didn't need any lycanthrope powers to notice.

Gina had needed help from two of the werehyenas to make the steps. Zeke and I could have helped her, but he was pretending to guard me, and Gina had a note under her shawl to slip the hyenas. The note was from Bacchus, asking one of them to let him in the secret entrance. Apparently Chimera had never asked if there was a secret entrance to the club, so no one had told him.

Chimera's eyes looked past me to her. "Gina ..." He shook his head. "Take her away, get her some medical care."

The two hyenas didn't argue, just turned and went back down the hallway. The snake man that had been with them stayed where he was, his black-and-green striped eyes never leaving Chimera's face. I would have said he stood at attention like a good soldier, but it was more than that. There was something on his face that went beyond that, as if standing there waiting for Chimera's orders was the most wonderful thing in the world. That look of patient adoration was creepy all on its own, and I knew why Bacchus had said the snakes had to die. Not because of what they'd done to the hyenas, not revenge, but because people who worship their kings as gods don't participate in palace revolts.

"I wasn't sure you'd come, Ms. Blake."

The voice was familiar, but I couldn't quite place from where. "You didn't give me much choice."

"And for that I am sorry."

"Sorry enough to let me take my leopards and go home?"

He almost smiled, but shook his head. "Micah is not your leopard, he's mine, Ms. Blake."

Again, the voice rang familiar, but I couldn't place it. I shrugged. "You got me down here with the understanding that both Cherry and Micah would be set free, unhurt. Sounds like they're both mine."

He shook his head again. "To give up Micah I would have to give up all my leopards, and I am not willing to do that."

"Then you lied to get me down here."

"No, Ms. Blake." He took his hands out from behind his back. He wore black leather gloves. "Join your pard to ours, strengthen us."

I shook my head. "I came down here to free my people, not to join your club."

He looked at Zeke. "Didn't you explain to her what I wanted?"

Zeke shifted beside me. "You told me that if she came down here unarmed you would free Micah and the other wereleopard. That is all you told me."

Chimera frowned; even through the hood I could see it. He rubbed at his face behind the leather as if something hurt. "I know I told you that I wanted her to join us."

"You have said many things over the last few weeks," Zeke said, voice very careful.

"How long have you been the leopard's Nimir-Ra?" he asked. The voice was normal, ordinary, though his hands kept rubbing at his face.

"About a year."

"Then you must see as I do that there needs to be a joining together of all the different forms. The only thing that has allowed us to move in to every city and take over the smaller groups is the fact that the larger groups won't help them. They're like city neighbors who only call the police if it's their own apartment being robbed. They let anyone who isn't like them go to hell."

"I agree that the lycanthrope community could use a little togetherness, but I'm not sure torture and blackmail is the way to get it done."

He clamped his hands over his eyes, back bowing, as if he were in pain. The snake man touched him with small dark hands. Chimera shuddered, then raised up, the snake man still touching him, comforting him, I think.

Chimera looked at me, eyes very direct. He grasped the leather hood and pulled it over his head. His dark hair stood on end, sweaty, needing to be combed. The touch of gray at the temples wasn't distinguished anymore. It looked more like mad-scientist hair, as if he'd done something awful and it had changed colors over night. I could see the scars at the side of his neck now. Orlando King, alias Chimera, looked down at me.

I just gaped at him. I was too surprised for anything else.

"I see that you didn't recognize me, Ms. Blake."

I shook my head, and tried twice before I could say, "I didn't expect to see you here." That sounded lame even to me, but what I meant was Orlando King, bounty hunter extraordinaire, should not have been the leader of a group of rogue shapeshifters. It wasn't doable somehow.

"That's why you knew about all the shapeshifters in town, because they came to you for help."

He nodded. "I have been known, since my accident, to hunt down rogue lycanthropes and not inform the authorities. A few bad apples don't have to spoil the entire barrel."

I looked at him and tried to think. "People thought your near-death experience had mellowed you, but you contracted lycanthropy, that's why you stopped being a bounty hunter."

"It seemed wrong to hunt other unfortunates," he said. "People who had less to do with the accident that made them what they were than I did. At least I was hunting the werewolf that almost killed me. I was trying to hurt it. Most people who survive an attack are just innocents."

"I know that," I said, voice soft, because knowing Chimera was Orlando King didn't help solve the mystery for me; it deepened it. I was more confused than when I walked in the damn building.

"But my change of heart, as you put it, came later. Wolf lycanthropy showed up in my bloodstream within forty-eight hours of my attack. I decided I would take out as many monsters as I could and let them take me out before the first full moon." He stared past me, eyes distant with remembering. "I took the most dangerous jobs I could find, until I ended up trying to kill an entire tribe of weresnakes in the depths of the Amazon basin." He looked at the small dark man still at his side. "I decided that dozens of any animal would surely kill me, and if not, then at the first full moon I would be in an area devoid of any human except the people I'd come to kill."

"Logical, I guess," I said, because it seemed appropriate to say something.

His gaze flicked to me. "I had planned my death, Ms. Blake, but every animal I tried to kill just wasn't up to killing me. By the time I had my first full moon I'd been infected by a great many forms of predatory lycanthropy. And on that first moon, I changed into what Abuta and his people are, then a wolf, then a bear, then a leopard, then a lion, so forth, and so on." He was looking at Abuta, and his face held some of the religious fervor that the smaller man seemed to emanate. "They thought I was a god because I could take so many forms. They worshipped me, and they sent half their tribe to accompany me back to civilization." He laughed then. It was abrupt and unpleasant. Something about that laugh raised the hairs on my arms.

"You've killed all but three of them, Anita. I may call you Anita, mightn't I?"

I nodded, almost afraid to speak, because emotions were chasing across King's face, emotions that didn't match his calm words, as if he were feeling things that he wasn't aware of. It was like watching a badly dubbed film, except it was body actions that were out of step, not the words.

A prickling rush of energy came off him like heat, and his eyes turned. One pale greenish leopard, one wolf amber. It wasn't just the colors of the irises that didn't match, it was the shape of the pupils; the entire set of each eye socket was slightly different from the other. I hadn't noticed the bone structure shifting; it had been that fast.

A smile curled his lips. The entire expression of face, body, everything changed, and it wasn't shapeshifting; it was as if another person just settled into King's skin. Chimera's voice was slightly southern, thick and round-voweled. It was the voice I'd heard over the loudspeaker when they tried to ambush us in the club. "Poor Orlando, he just can't cope anymore. He hates what he's become."

I think I stopped breathing for a few heartbeats, which made my next breath harsh. I'd dealt with sociopaths, psychopaths, serial killers, crazies of all ilk, but this was my first multiple personality.

Chimera jerked at the tight tie, tore it off, unbuttoned the collar, rotated his neck, and smiled. "There, that's much better, don't you agree?"

My voice came out breathy. "Always good to be comfortable."

He stepped closer to me, and I backed up, bumping into Zeke. Chimera stepped in very close, almost touching and sniffed just above the skin of my face. This close his power rode over me like thousands of ants biting along my skin.

"You smell of fear, Anita. I didn't think a little eye shift would spook you."

I licked my lips, staring into those mismatched eyes from inches away. "The eyes don't bother me."

"Then what does?" he asked, still hovering over me.

I licked my lips again and didn't know what to say. Or rather, couldn't think of a safe thing to say. I thought of several smart Alec remarks, but you should humor crazy people when you're at their mercy; it's a rule. Of course, I also had a rule never to put myself at the mercy of sadistic serial killers suffering from multiple personality disorder. I hoped we all lived to regret my breaking that rule. Truly insane people are often unpredictable and hard to negotiate with.

"I'm waiting for an answer," he said in a sing-song voice.

I just couldn't think of a good lie, so I tried mild truth. "The fact that I was talking to Orlando King and now I'm not, but it's the same body talking at me."

He laughed and stepped back. Then he went very still, as if he were listening to things I couldn't hear. Was it the rescue, this soon? It couldn't be. He looked down at me, smiling that unpleasant smile and ran his hands down his own body. "I make better use of the body than Orlando does."

Okeydokey, things were not improving. I looked up at Zeke and tried to tell him with my eyes that he should have told me that Chimera was this crazy.

Chimera grabbed my wrist, jerked me close. I'd been so busy trying to get eye contact with Zeke that I hadn't even seen it coming. "I was always inside Orlando. I was that part of him that allowed him to slaughter other human beings and feel nothing but hatred. He rarely took a shifter in animal form. It

was safer in human form, and Orlando was a very big believer in safety, at least for himself." He drew me against his body using my wrist like a handle. He wasn't hurting me, but the strength in his grip was like a promise, a threat. He could have crushed my wrist and we both knew it.

"King had a reputation for getting the job done," I said.

"The job was to kill other people, women as well as men. Then he'd cut off their heads, burn the bodies, make sure they weren't coming back. I was the part of him that enjoyed the work, and when he became what he hated most in the world, I protected him from himself."

"How?" I asked, softly.

"By doing the things he was too weak to do himself, but still wanted done."

"Like what?" I asked. Rescue was coming; it was just a matter of stalling until help arrived. It had been the original plan, and the fact that Chimera was Orlando King and crazier than a June beetle on crack didn't really change the plan. Just keep him talking. All men love to talk about themselves, even the ones who are completely buggers. Being insane doesn't change that, or at least it never had before. It was just the multiple personality stuff that was freaking me out. If I treated Chimera like any other homicidal maniac, we'd be fine. At least that's what I kept telling myself. My pulse stayed too fast, my chest stayed tight, the fear stayed high; I don't think I believed myself.

"You want to know how I helped Orlando?" he asked.

I nodded "Yeah."

"You really want to know what I've done for him?"

I nodded again, but I was beginning not to like the way he kept phrasing things.

He smiled, and just the smile promised painful, unpleasant things. "You know what they say. Talk is cheap. Let me show you, Anita, let me show you what I've done." With that he reached behind him to the doorknob, turned it, and pulled me into the room beyond.

Chapter 65

THE ROOM WAS black, utterly black, like being flung into blindness, nothingness, like a cave. Chimera released my arm. It was like being cut adrift, lost in the blackness. I stumbled in the darkness. I reached out blindly to catch myself and touched something. I grabbed at it, trying to hold on to something, anything. Then the flesh gave under my hand, and I realized it was human and not where it should have been. It was too high up to be someone's calf. I jerked back, and something else brushed my back. I let out a little squeal, hands out, stumbling in the dark, and smacked into something else that swung as I hit it. I

realized whatever it was, was hanging from the ceiling. I moved away from it and ran face first into the next surprise. The solid smack of flesh on flesh let me know it was a body. The scream let me know it was still alive. I'd hit hard enough that the man swung into me again, and I tried to back away and bumped into another one. That one didn't make any noise. I kept my hands out in front of me and fought to get free of them, but my hand kept touching bodies and body parts--hips, thighs, groins, buttocks. I moved faster, trying to force my way out of the forest of hanging bodies, but moving fast made them start to swing and crash into me. Screams came out of the dark, as if I'd started them all bumping into each other. Men screaming in the dark; by the sound of the voices I knew there were no women. One body hit me hard enough that I fell, and dangling feet brushed against me. I tried to crawl away from them, but they were everywhere, touching me, brushing me, some struggling against my back. I lay down on the floor trying to get away, to get clear, swatting at them with my hands, frantic not to be touched. I crawled on my back, using my feet and hands to try and get under them, but their heights were all different, and I couldn't get free of them.

I felt a scream building in my gut and knew if I screamed once I'd just keep on. My hand landed in a pool of something warm and liquid, and it stopped me. Even in the dark I knew what blood felt like. This was probably the point where most people would have definitely started screaming, but somehow the feel of the blood calmed me. I knew about blood and letting it out of a man until he died. I pressed my hand into that still-warm pool and it steadied me.

I lay back on the floor with my hand in blood and my head resting in God knows what and relearned how to breathe. If I lay very still and didn't try and move, the feet didn't touch me, nothing touched me. So I lay in the dark and closed my eyes and tried to use my other senses, because my eyes were useless. I've got pretty good night vision, but even a cat needs some light, and there was nothing, nothing but the darkness.

The chains creaked as the bodies still swung heavily above me. There were tiny air currents. A warm drop hit my cheek. All the movement had started fresh bleeding from someone. I kept my eyes closed and forced myself to take steady, even breaths. One man was screaming, "God, God, God!" over and over again, as fast as he could draw breath. He'd lost it, and I didn't blame him. I'd come damn close myself, and I wasn't hanging nude from the ceiling, bleeding.

Chimera's voice came out of the darkness. "Shut up, shut the fuck up!"

The man stopped screaming almost instantly, but his breath came in whimpers, as if he had to make some sound.

"Anita," Chimera said. "Anita, where are you?"

Even he couldn't see in the pitch blackness, and the smell of blood, sweat, and flesh masked my odor apparently. Great, he didn't know where I was. I wished I could think of something good to do with that information. But I just lay in the dark on the foul floor, my hand in the pool of cooling blood, another drop of fresh, warm blood hitting my cheek, and did nothing. All I had to do

was stall until the cavalry arrived. I'd tried talking to Chimera and that hadn't worked so well. I'd try silence.

"Anita, Anita, answer me."

I didn't answer. If he wanted to find me he could damn well turn on the light. I thought I wanted some light. But then I thought maybe I didn't really want to see what hung above me in this room. Maybe it would be one of those sights that blasts the mind, one you never really recover from. But I badly wanted to see something, almost anything. I lay in the dark, the way I used to huddle under the sheets as a child, afraid of the dark, afraid of what I could not see.

"Answer me, Anita!" He screamed it this time, voice harsh.

A male voice from above me. "Answer him if you can, you don't want him angry with you."

Another man gave a sound like a choking laugh. It sounded thick, as if there were blood in his mouth and throat.

The dark was suddenly full of voices saying, "Answer him, answer him." It was like the wind had found a voice and was giving me instructions in the dark.

Another drop of blood fell on my cheek and began to slide slowly down my skin. I didn't wipe it off. I didn't move. I was afraid any movement would let Chimera know where I was, and I didn't want that.

"Shut up!" Chimera yelled, and I heard him move farther into the room. The voices above me fell silent. But I could still feel them hanging there like weight above me, like a rock ceiling pressing down on me. I took a deep breath, let it out slowly. My claustrophobia was trying to scream in my head that I couldn't breathe, but it was a lie. The dark did not have weight to it; that was the fear talking. If Chimera wanted to let me lie in the dark for the next hour until help arrived, I'd let him. I would not panic. It wouldn't help anything for me to start crawling frantically across the floor with feet brushing my back. If I did that, I would start screaming, and I wouldn't stop for a long, long time.

The blood oozed along my neck into my hair, and I kept my eyes closed and concentrated on breathing shallow, quiet.

"Answer me, Anita, or I will start cutting on the men hanging above you," Chimera said. His voice was closer, but not too close. He was still outside the forest of hanging bodies.

I still didn't answer.

"You don't believe me? Let me prove it to you."

A man screamed, high, piteous, hopeless.

"Don't," I said.

"Don't what?"

"Don't hurt them."

"They're nothing to you, not your animal, not your friend. Why do you care?"

"Orlando King knows the answer to your question."

"I'm asking you," Chimera said.

"You already know the answer," I said.

"No, no! Orlando knows the answer. I don't. I don't understand. Why do you care about strangers?" The other man screamed again.

"Stop it, Chimera."

"Or what?" he asked. "What will you do if I don't stop? What will you do if I stand here in the dark and cut pieces off this man? How will you stop me?"

The man was shrieking, "No, don't, not that, nooo!" The scream fell off, which meant the man was either dead, or he'd fainted. I hoped he'd fainted, but either way I couldn't do much about it.

"Can you taste the fear, Anita? Roll it on your tongue like the strong spice it is."

Right then my mouth was so dry I couldn't have tasted a damn thing. But I could sense their fear, smell it on them. All of them were afraid now, fresh terror, pouring out of their skin. "It's easy to scare people in the dark, Chimera. Everybody's afraid of the dark."

"Even you?"

I avoided the question. "I was told if I came down here that you'd let Cherry and Micah go."

"I did tell Zeke that."

And in that moment I knew he had no intention of letting them go. It shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. Had I really expected fair dealings from him? Maybe. It offended some part of me to know that he wasn't going to do what he'd said. It meant all deals were off. I'd gone from having something to bargain with, to nothing. Just on a whim, he could kill Cherry and Micah before help arrived. My pulse was speeding up again, and I fought to keep my breathing steady. I took my hand out of the cooling pool of blood. I might as well move. He'd locate me soon through my voice.

I laid my hands on my stomach and tried to think of what I could do, unarmed, against a man who outweighed me by more than a hundred pounds and was strong enough to break through brick walls. Nothing useful came to mind. Maybe violence wasn't the way to stall. What did that leave? Sex? Sweet reason? Witty repartee? Dear God, a little help here.

"You don't feel the need to talk, do you?" he asked, voice calmer than it had been, more "normal."

"Not unless I have something to say."

"That's unusual in a woman. Most of them can't stand the thought of silence. They talk and talk and talk." He was sounding calmer. In fact, he sounded like we should have been sitting across a table in some nice restaurant on a blind date. Since we were in a pitch-black torture room with blood on the floor, the matter-of-fact voice was more frightening than the ranting had been. He was supposed to rant and rave, but calm small talk, that was really crazy.

His voice got calmer, but it never sounded exactly like Orlando King's. It was as if there was another voice coming out of him, another personality, maybe. I didn't know, and I didn't care. If it kept him from cutting people up, then yea.

"Would you like to see your leopard now?" the calm voice asked.

"Yes."

The lights exploded across my vision, and I was as blind with the brilliance as I had been with the dark. I put a hand over my eyes to shield them, then slowly lowered it as my spotty vision cleared.

I was staring up at a pair of feet, legs. My gaze went up the line of the man's body to find fresh claw marks on his buttocks and thighs. Another drop of blood trailed from his bare foot to land on my hand. My gaze went slowly to the next pair of legs, and the next, and the next ... Dozens of men hung like obscene ornaments. For the first time I let myself wonder, was Micah hanging somewhere in the forest of bodies?

"Do you want to stand up or are you enjoying the view from there?" The calm voice spoke from only about two feet away from me. It made me jump badly. I rolled my head back to see Chimera standing two hanging men away from me.

"I'll stand, if you don't mind."

"Allow me to help you." He pushed one of the hanging men to the side like you'd move a drape, like the pale blue eyes weren't open, staring, like the man didn't shudder as Chimera touched him.

I was on my feet, carefully avoiding the body nearest me, before Chimera could push aside another one and help me stand. I really didn't want him to touch me.

Chimera's eyes had bled back to human gray. His face was blank, ordinary. That nearly diabolical smile was gone, but I wasn't looking at Orlando King either. It was somebody else. The question was, was the new personality going to be more helpful or more dangerous?

He pushed back the bodies like holding open a door so I could walk out. I let him do it, but I kept my attention on him, as if I expected him to try and grab me. I guess I did. When I stepped out into a clear space a breath went out of me that I hadn't even known I was holding.

Chimera stepped beside me, and I moved just a little away from him. Movement caught my attention but it was only the hanging men swinging slowly from where Chimera had moved them. All of them bore marks of some kind; claws, blades, burns. One of them was missing his legs below the knees. I turned back to the man in front of me, and I knew I looked pale. I couldn't help that. I hadn't screamed. I hadn't panicked, much. I couldn't control the involuntary stuff. I was having enough trouble with the voluntary.

"Where are my leopards?" I asked, and my voice sounded almost normal. I got a zillion brownie points for that.

"Your leopard is here," he said and moved to a heavy white curtain that took up almost all of the near wall. He pulled on a cord and the curtain parted. Behind it was an alcove, and Cherry was chained by her wrists and ankles to the stone wall. A leather ball gag filled her mouth. Her pale eyes were wide. Tears stained the dried blood on her face. Her face looked untouched, but the blood had come from somewhere.

"She's healed everything we did to her," Chimera said. Abuta the snake appeared at Chimera's side, as if he'd been summoned. The bigger man stroked

the snake man's head, like you'd pet a dog that you liked a lot. "Abuta has shown quite a talent for this sort of thing."

I swallowed hard and tried not to get angry. Anger wouldn't help anyone. Help was coming. I just had to stall until it got here. I glanced around the room. There were men chained to the wall all the way around. I didn't recognize any of them. There was a certain uniformity to them--youngish, or at least not old, well built, some slender, some muscular, all races, all physical types, all attractive. I wondered how long it had taken Narcissus to find this many good-looking men?

Micah wasn't along the wall. The room in the Polaroid had looked more like the alcove that Cherry was in. I glanced at the still unopened part of the curtain. Was he behind there?

I had moved closer to Cherry without realizing it, because she made a small movement in her chains, and I startled. I turned back to find her looking at Chimera, not me. He hadn't moved as far as I could see, but something he'd done had frightened her, and I finally realized what. His eyes had gone animal again, and that eerie smile was back. It was Chimera again, and call it a hunch, but I was betting he did most of the pain work for the other two personalities.

"Unchain her," I said, like I was positive he'd do what I asked. I so wasn't sure.

He reached out a hand towards her face, and I grabbed his wrist. "Unchain her."

He smiled that unpleasant smile at me. "I'd hate to lose one of the only women we've got up here. Narcissus may go both ways, but he keeps the women out of his pack. Real spotted hyenas are matriarchal. He's afraid if he brings women in that instinct will take over and he'll lose his pack, because he's not woman enough to keep it."

"I always enjoy learning new zoological facts," I said, "but let's unchain Cherry and get her out of here."

"But what of your lover? What of Micah?"

I met those mismatched animal eyes and fought to keep the fear out of my face. "I figured you were saving him for last, a sort of finale." My voice had gone from calm to jaded. From the tone, you'd have thought that it didn't matter to me one way or another, but I couldn't stop my pulse from jumping in my neck.

His smile deepened, and I watched a human expression fill those animal eyes. Anticipation, anticipation of my pain, I think.

He opened the curtain slowly, revealing Micah chained by his wrists and ankles to the wall, just like Cherry. But unlike her, his wounds hadn't healed. The right side of his face had been beaten badly. His eye was swollen completely shut, encrusted with dried blood. That delicate curve of jaw was so swollen it didn't look real. The swelling had twisted his lip to one side. It was so swollen that I could see the pink inside of his mouth and glimpse teeth where his mouth no longer closed completely.

I heard a small sound, and it was me. It was close to a sob, and I couldn't afford that. If Chimera knew how much this cut me up, he'd just hurt Micah

more. I couldn't stop myself from touching him. I had to touch him, because only then would he be real to me. Seeing was never quite believing with me.

I touched my fingertips to the whole side of his face. His good eye fluttered open. There was a moment of relief, then I think he saw Chimera, and his eye widened. He tried to speak but couldn't open his mouth. He made small hurt noises.

Chimera touched his bruises, lightly, but Micah winced anyway. I grabbed his wrist, as I had for Cherry, and moved my body in between the two men. "Unchain him."

"I broke his jaw personally for lying to me."

"He didn't lie to you," I said.

"He told me you were going to be a panwere like me, but you're not." He leaned into me sniffing. "I'd smell it if you were. You're something, and it's not human. It smells of leopard and wolf." He took a deep breath just above the skin of my face. "But it also smells like vampire. You aren't what I am, Anita." He looked at Micah. "He was just trying to keep me from hurting him or his cats after he saved you from my people, when they came to your house."

"So I'm not a panwere. Does that mean you don't want me for your mate?"

He laughed then. "Oh, I don't know, I enjoy rape, adds spice." I think he said it just to shock me, but I wasn't sure. Had he raped Cherry? Had he touched her? I tried to keep the thought off my face, because with the thought came a white, hot wash of anger.

"Oh, you don't like that idea, do you?" He tried to touch my hair, and I stepped away from him out of the alcove so I'd have room to maneuver. Help was on its way, but a glance at my watch showed another twenty minutes of the hour still left. Maybe the troops would come sooner, maybe they wouldn't. I couldn't afford to count on it.

He didn't try and follow me, just let me inch away. "I could rape you in front of Micah. I don't think either of you would like that. Though truthfully I might prefer it the other way around. Orlando is homophobic. I wonder why that would be?"

I spoke as I inched down the curtain, drawing him away from Cherry and Micah. "We dislike most in others what we hate most in ourselves," I said.

"Bravo," Chimera said. "Yes, I keep a lot of Orlando safe from Orlando."

"That must be hard," I said.

"What?" he asked.

"Keeping secrets when you share the same body."

He followed me slowly around the edge of the wall. "At first he didn't want to know what we did, but lately he's become ... unhappy with us. I think he'd have done himself harm if I hadn't stopped him." Chimera motioned towards the hanging men. "He woke up in the dark in the middle of them. He screamed like a girl." Chimera put his fingers to his lips and said, "Oops, excuse me, you didn't scream at all. He screamed like a baby until I came and rescued him, but he didn't seem all that grateful. Like he blamed me." Chimera looked puzzled, and again I had that impression that he was listening to things I couldn't hear.

He stared at me. "Do you hear that?"

I widened my eyes at him and shrugged. "What?"

He looked off past the hanging men, and I looked around for a weapon. All this damage and cutting people up, there had to be a blade around here somewhere. But the room stretched white and empty, except for the chained men. Weren't there supposed to be pokers, maces, fucking weapons? What kind of dungeon was this, victims but no instruments of torture?

I heard it then, screams, fighting. The battle was on. Though it was still distant. The good news was that help was on its way, the bad news was that Chimera knew what was happening and I was alone with him. Alright, not alone, but nobody chained to the stone was going to be able to help me.

He turned a face so full of rage to me that it was almost bestial, without any shifting of form.

"Why did you take all the alphas?" I asked. I was still going to try and keep him talking; it was all I had.

"So I could rule their groups." His words came out low and growling through clenched teeth.

"Your snakes are anacondas. The alpha you took was a cobra. You can't rule over a type of snake you're not."

"Why not?" he asked, and he started to stalk towards me, still in human form, but with that tense grace that is more animal than human.

I didn't have a good answer for that one. "Are the alphas alive?"

He shook his head. "I hear fighting, Anita. What have you done?"

"I haven't done anything."

"You're lying. I can smell it."

Okay. Maybe truth would help. "The sounds you hear are the cavalry riding to the rescue."

"Who?" he asked, voice almost pure growl. He was still stalking towards me, and I was still backing up.

"Rafael and his wererats, probably the werewolves by now."

"There are hundreds of werehyenas in this building. Your cavalry cannot get through them in time to save you."

I shrugged, afraid to tell the truth, afraid he'd take it out on the werehyenas' lovers. And I didn't dare try to lie; he'd smell it. So I just kept backing up. We were almost to the door. If I could get it open, maybe he'd chase me. Maybe I could lead him into an ambush of my own.

Abuta moved in front of the door. I'd forgotten him, and that was careless. Not fatal, not yet, but careless.

I pressed my back to the wall so I could keep an eye on both of them. Abuta stayed by the door, the message clear that if I kept away from the door he'd keep away from me. Chimera, on the other hand, kept stalking closer. I was between a panwere and a snake--not actually a rock and a hard place, but close.

Chimera flowed into his other form. I've seen shapeshifters change for years, and it was always violent, or messy. But this, this was almost ... breathtaking. Scales flowed over him as if they were water. There was no clear

fluid, no blood, nothing but the change, as if he stepped from one form into another, like Clark Kent changes into Superman. It was so quick it was almost instantaneous. He didn't even miss a step. His clothes folded away like the petals of a flower falling to the earth, and he stepped out in the snake form of Coronus. The big snake man stopped moving. He froze in that stillness that reptiles love. I froze when he did. He finally turned his head so he could look at me with a copper eye. It must have played hell with his depth-perception having to do that.

"I remember you. Chimera told us to kill you." He looked around at the dark room and said slowly, "Where are we?"

Then he bent over as if in pain, and the next form was human but not Orlando's body. He was Boone and before Boone's eyes had lost their confused look, he was a lion man. For a second I thought it would be Marco, but of course he couldn't be both Marco and Coronus; not even Chimera could pull that one off.

He was golden, tawny, muscled, masculine, with a mane around his half-human face that was almost black. The claws on his hands were like black daggers.

"This form is truly mine," he growled. "The snake and the bear are like Orlando, they still believe in themselves. But I am all there is, and there is nothing but Chimera." He reached for me, and I bolted. I ran towards the hanging men, because I knew they'd slow him down, then turned at the last second, so fast I fell on the ground and skittered away on hands and feet like a monkey. They would slow him down, but he'd cut them up to get at me. I couldn't let that happen.

He cornered me on the far side of the room--farthest away from the door and Micah. I think he could have caught me sooner but he wasn't rushing. I don't know why. The sounds of fighting were closer, but not close enough.

Chimera came at me like grace contained in violence, a mountain of tawny muscle and fur that gleamed in the lights. He opened his mouth and roared, a sound I'd never heard outside of a zoo before. That coughing roar made me stand a little straighter. Zeke and Bacchus had promised to come get us out of here before the rest of the fighting started. They'd failed, or lied, but I wasn't going down without a fight, and I wasn't going down screaming. I watched him come towards me, like a slow-motion nightmare, beautiful and terrible, like some kind of bestial angel.

Suddenly, the *ardeur* rose inside me like a warm wave, spilling along my skin, drawing a gasp from my throat. The last time it had risen because of Richard's nearness. This time ... maybe it was just time to feed again. The moment I thought *feed* I knew Jean-Claude had awakened, and with his rising, down in the depths of the Circus, the *ardeur* had risen inside me.

Chimera stopped where he was, shaking his great maned head. "What is that?" he growled.

My voice came breathy. "The *ardeur*."

"The what?"

"The *ardeur*, the fire, the need," I said. With each word the *ardeur* grew like a weight, and that weight brushed against my beast. It spilled upward from that tight curled place inside me, and the two separate heats rose up inside, spilling along my body, drawing me forward towards Chimera. I wasn't afraid of him anymore, because I could smell his fear. You never had to be afraid of anything that was afraid of you. Part of me knew that wasn't true, that a scared man with a gun is more likely to shoot you than a brave one, but the parts of me that were able to think were sliding away, leaving behind only instinct. What was left liked the smell of fear. It reminded me of food and sex.

Chimera backed away, and we began a slow walk back the way we'd come, this time with me advancing slowly on him. I stalked him as he'd stalked me, and part of me noticed that I was placing my feet one atop the other, almost stepping in my own footsteps, like a cat. The walk was oddly graceful, swaying my hips. My spine was very straight, shoulders back, arms almost motionless at my sides, but there was a tension running through my upper body, an anticipation of action, of violence. Always before the *ardeur* had overridden the beast's hunger, but as I stalked Chimera, watched that huge muscular form back away from me, it was meat I was thinking of. Teeth and claws, flesh to rend, to bite, to tear. I could almost taste his blood--hot, almost scalding in my mouth, down my throat. It wasn't just my beast's hunger, but Jean-Claude's blood thirst and Richard's craving for flesh. It was all that and the *ardeur* running through all of it, so that one hunger fed into the next in an endless chain, a snake eating its own tail, an Ouroboros of desires.

Chimera stopped running, pressing himself up against the white curtain. We were almost back to Cherry and Micah. There was solid wall behind Chimera, behind the curtain. "What are you?" he asked in a voice that was strangled, full of the fear that rose off of him in waves. He scented the air, nostrils flaring. "You don't even smell the same."

"What do I smell like?" I touched his chest with just my fingertips, not sure what he'd do. But he didn't pull away. I pressed my palm over his heart and felt that thick, heavy beat rise against my hand, as if I could have caressed it, like running your hand over the head of a drum. I knew in that moment what he wanted most of all. He wanted to die. Whoever was at the core, whatever was left of who Orlando King had been, he wanted to end it. He'd been trying to kill himself since the moment he learned he was going to be a werewolf. He'd never changed his mind. He just couldn't bring himself to commit suicide, not directly anyway.

I leaned in close to him, pressing our bodies together, lightly, both hands on his chest. "I'll help you," I whispered.

"Help me, how?" But his voice was fearful, as if he already knew.

Pain lanced through my chest. My knees collapsed and Chimera caught me, carefully, in those clawed hands. I think it was an automatic gesture. I saw through Richard's eyes for a moment, saw a werehyena snarling in his face, felt the claws ripping through his chest. The pain was sharp, bones breaking, then numbness, and Richard didn't fight it. He let the numbness roll over him. I knew in that instant that Richard wanted to die, or rather he didn't want to live

as he was. The pain had made him reach out for me, but his hands were slow, slow to defend himself. He would never admit he'd let himself die, but he wanted it, and it made him slow. Slow enough to have the hyena man carve his chest open like cracking a melon.

Shang-Da was there pulling the hyena off of him, then I was back in my own body, airborne, thrown into the curtain and the alcove beyond. The curtain cushioned some of the fall, and the last remnants of Richard's numbness made my body limp, so it didn't really hurt. I lay for a second in a spill of curtain. My hand brushed outward and hit metal. I raised the edge of the curtain and found that this alcove was full of weapons. I'd found the blades. Chimera had thrown me into them, and the shock of Richard's injury had squelched the *ardeur*. My hand closed on a knife that was longer than my forearm. I raised it to the light and knew silver when I saw it. The *ardeur* was gone without my feeding it, and I was armed. Life was good.

Then I heard the sound of claws, or blades, in flesh; a thick, tearing sound of something sharp going through meat. You hear the sound often enough, you know what it is.

I could see the hanging men from here, and they were untouched. My stomach clenched tight and cold, because I knew where Chimera was. I just didn't know which of them he was cutting up.

I pushed the curtain away from me, started to stand, and Abuta was in front of me. I kept one hand balled in the curtain and flung it at him. He did what anyone would do. He flinched, and I drove the silver blade through the middle of his body, angling up, hunting for the heart.

Abuta screamed, hand reaching back towards where Chimera was cutting up my people. He said something in a language I didn't understand. As his body collapsed, I kept twisting the blade trying to find his damn heart, but the blade was stuck on his ribs and wider than my usual knives. It wouldn't move where I wanted it to go. I got a glimpse of a golden-colored blur moments before Chimera smashed a hand into me and sent me flying back into the hanging men. I hit solid, and they cried out, then I was on the ground trying to relearn how to breathe. His arm had taken me across one shoulder, and it was numb from the impact.

Chimera knelt over the snake man, cradling him in his arms. Movement turned my gaze towards Micah and Cherry. The front of Cherry's body was bloody ribbons, as if he'd racked claws down either side of her as deep as he could go, as much damage as he could do in as little time as possible. Her ruined chest rose and fell frantically; she was alive.

Micah's body was spilled open like something ripe that had been thrown against a wall. His intestines glittered like something separate and alive. I could see things inside his body that were never meant to see the light of day. He convulsed, jerking against the chains.

I screamed, and something about my panic opened me to Richard again. He was lying on the floor downstairs, and he was dying, and more than that I felt that his giving up had hurt the wolves. He was their Ulfric, their heart and their head, and his will was weak, and it made them weak. The hyenas and the

halfmen that fought for Chimera were fighting for what they believed in, or fighting for the ones they loved. The wolves had nothing but Richard's willingness to die.

And I knew in that moment that if he died like that it wouldn't just be Jean-Claude and me who would join him, it would be all the wolves. Something had gone terribly wrong with Bacchus and Zeke's plan. The hyenas and the halfmen would slaughter our pack. All of them, all of them would die.

I screamed again, and Chimera was in front of me, one hand balled in my shirt, his claws ripping shallow wounds in my upper chest. He drew the other hand back, and time seemed to slow. I had all the time in the world to decide what to do, and yet, I had no time left. I felt Richard's breath rattling in his chest, felt him begin to die. Micah's body gave one last shudder, then he went very still.

I screamed, wordless, reaching for something, anything to save them. My power came, my power, and the one thing I could do to save us all. It was one of the worst things I'd ever seen done and I didn't hesitate.

I didn't call my power--there was no time. I *became* my power. It flowed up, through me, instantly, spilled into my hands. I touched one hand to the furred arm that held me, then blocked his other arm as it swept down towards me in a blur of motion. Blocked the blow and swept my free hand up over Chimera's arm, so that both my hands touched his arms. The moment enough of me touched enough of him, I called the power I'd learned in New Mexico. When I raised a zombie I put energy into the corpse, helped what lay in the grave to be solid and real. This was the reverse of that. I took energy out, sucked it away, made the lion man less real, less alive.

The fur flowed under my hands until I touched human skin. It was Orlando King's body that collapsed to its knees in front of me. Orlando's eyes that raised horrified gray to search my face, to beseech me, maybe. But he never asked me to stop, and truthfully I wasn't sure I knew how to stop.

He started to scream just before his skin began to run with fine lines, like watching decades catch up with him in one fell swoop. I fed on him, fed on his essence, fed on what he was. It rushed through my body, thrilling along my skin, singing through my bones, cascading in a rush of joy through every fiber of my being, and beyond. I felt the energy flow outward to Micah, down that link that made me want to touch him every time we were close. The power found Richard and made him breathe. It spilled outward to all the wolves, and they were no longer dependent on Richard's broken will, they had mine, and I wanted to live. I wanted us all to live. We would live. We would live, and our enemies would die. I willed it so. I made it so. I used Orlando King's life to fill my leopards, my wolves, and distantly, my vampires, with will. Will to live, to fight, to survive.

And through all of it, Orlando King shrieked. He screamed as his body drained away into my hands. His skin was like dirty tissue paper on skeleton sticks when I finally let him go. He collapsed on his side, that large body turned to something light as air, but still he screamed. One ragged horror of a sound

after another, and I felt no pity. I felt only the rush of power like a flight of bird wings inside my head.

Micah was beside me in black, furred leopard man form. The center of his body was whole, healed, only partially due to his shifting. A huge spotted leopard the size of a pony stalked around us, hissing at what was left of Orlando. Cherry was whole in her furred coat, not even bloody.

I must have stood there longer than I knew, draining Orlando King's life away. Long enough for them to tear the chains off, long enough for them to shapeshift and heal. The hanging men were changing form, too. And with the change, they broke their chains, healed most of the damage that had been done to them, and dropped to the ground in spotted fur and claws. They sniffed around what was left of Orlando. They gave strange barking sounds as the thing continued to scream.

Micah's voice came furry, rough with his new shape. "Your eyes are like a night-filled sky with stars in it."

I didn't need to see a mirror to know what he meant. My eyes were black, swimming and dark with the distant glow of stars in that darkness. Obsidian Butterfly's eyes had been like that, and my eyes had mirrored hers after she touched me with her power.

The far door opened and the wolves poured in. Shang-Da and Jamil were holding Richard between them. He was still in human form, still refusing to shift and help the power heal him.

The wolves, some in human form, some not, came to touch me, lick me, abase themselves before me. They growled and snapped at the dried thing that still screamed on the floor.

Jamil and Shang-Da helped Richard around the room until he stood facing me and Micah. It was only when he was that close that I realized his eyes were black with the play of cold stars in them, too. I wondered if Jean-Claude's eyes looked the same, and a thought let me know that it was so. Jean-Claude was basking in the rush of power. Richard stared at me like I'd run over his mother. The pain on his face had nothing to do with the healing wounds. I'd taken just a little bit more of his humanity, or so he felt.

He gazed down at the screaming thing on the floor with those black star-filled eyes and said, "How could you do it?"

"I did what I had to do," I said.

He was shaking his head. "I didn't want to live this badly."

"I did," Micah said.

The two men looked at each other; yellow-green eyes to black. Something seemed to pass between them, then Richard looked back at me. "Is he dying?"

"Not exactly."

He closed his eyes, and I got a glimpse inside him before he threw up his shields. It wasn't the horror that made him blanch, it was the fact that the power rush had felt better than almost anything else he'd ever experienced. Then the shields tightened, but his eyes stayed a swimming blackness.

"Get me out of here," he said.

"Change shape, Richard, heal yourself," I said.

He just shook his head. "No."

"Damn it, Richard."

He just said, "No," then Jamil and Shang-Da helped him towards the door. I watched him go but didn't try and call him back. I did my best to ignore him as I knelt by the skeletal thing that I'd made out of Orlando King. I knew how to give him back his energy, and that too would have been a rush in it's own way, but Orlando wanted to die, and Chimera was too dangerous to be kept alive. I did what Orlando wanted, and I passed judgment on Chimera. I called my magic one more time and spilled it into that struggling, screaming thing, and I released the soul. It fluttered past me like an invisible bird, and the body gave that long harsh breath that is often the very last sound. Orlando King died unrecognizable, unless you had dental records.

Micah helped me to my feet. He was back in human form. Before I'd seen Chimera, I would have said that Micah's change was smoother than anyone's I'd ever seen. He pulled me into the circle of his arms, and I pressed my face against the bare skin of his neck, caught the scent of his skin, and the *ardeur* welled up inside me, as if it had been waiting. Goosebumps ran up his bare arms, and he gave a nervous laugh. "I don't know if I'm up to it. I've had a hard day."

I wrapped my arms around his back, pressed my face against his chest, to hear the beating of his heart strong and steady. And for no reason that I could figure out, I started to cry, and the *ardeur* flowed away on a wash of tears, and hands. Hands not just Micah's, but hands of wolves, hyenas, and the leopards that had disobeyed me and come for the fight. And finally Zeke and the halfmen who had joined him. They all touched me, marked me with their scent, their tears, their laughter. We laughed and cried, howled and roared, made every noise you could make. Richard missed a hell of a victory party.

Chapter EPILOGUE

RICHARD DID MAKE me his Bolverk. But I was no longer his girlfriend. I'm not even sure I'm upset about that. He's free to find another lupa, though I'm not sure the pack will agree with him; they seem to like me just fine. As Bolverk of the Thronnos Rokke Clan, my first order of business was to execute Jacob. Paris is still alive at Richard's insistence. I think it's a mistake, but he is Ulfric. Oh, well.

I did not turn furry with the full moon. Apparently, Jean-Claude was right about the leopards being my animal to call, just as Damian is my vampire servant. I'm gaining powers like a master vampire. Go figure.

The snake men and Marco died during the fighting. The remainder of Chimera's people have joined their appropriate animal groups. We have a

shape-shifter coalition to promote better understanding among the groups. I'm chairman, though I tried not to be. Micah and his pard stayed in town.

Micah and I are still dating, if you can call sharing a bed and my house dating. But I haven't left Jean-Claude. I'm dating them both. I am Jean-Claude's human servant, and I can't hide from that anymore. Jean-Claude wasn't horrified by what I did to Orlando King, either. He was pleased. Pleased we won, pleased we all survived. He and Micah seem to be getting along, so far. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop and all hell to break loose between them, but so far, so good.

We rescued Joseph, the lions' Rex, and his wife is still pregnant, four months and counting--a record. Narcissus turned out to be a hermaphrodite, and he's pregnant, too. I'm not sure Narcissus should be breeding, especially knowing who the father is, but it's not my choice.

The cobras' king and son were both dead. Killed after Chimera had broken them.

I wake up pressed between Micah and Nathaniel. You can't feed the *ardeur* off of the same person every day, not even a lycanthrope. That's why they used to say that succubi and incubuses killed their victims. You can literally love someone to death. So, I feed on Micah and Nathaniel. Micah as my Nimir-Raj, and Nathaniel as my *pomme de sang*. No, I'm not having intercourse with Nathaniel. Both of them seem peaceful with the arrangement, though I'm still a little weirded out by it. I'm still hoping the *ardeur* is temporary.

Belle Morte's people contacted Jean-Claude. They're negotiating for Musette, one of Belle's lieutenants, to come for a visit. The mention of Musette's name made Asher and Jean-Claude go pale.

Ronnie is horrified that I came so close to getting killed, but it hasn't made her any more reasonable on the subject of my love life. We're back to not seeing a whole lot of each other. Maybe Micah can be my new workout partner, no pun intended.

I still love Richard, but it doesn't matter. It won't work. He can't accept what he is, or what I am. Neither of us can change our nature, and I don't even want to anymore. Micah accepts me for what I am, all of me. He loves me, from my toy penguin collection to my cold-blooded practicality. He doesn't mind bodies on the ground, and neither does Jean-Claude. I hope Richard makes peace with himself someday, but it's not really my problem anymore. I'll keep the pack safe with or without him.

As for the rest, if I wake up to silk sheets I know I'm at Jean-Claude's place. If I wake up on pure cotton sheets, I'm at home. But wherever I am, Micah is beside me. I go to sleep against the smooth warmth of him, breathing in the honeyed sweetness of his skin. Sometimes the sheets smell of Jean-Claude's cologne, sometimes they don't. Sometimes Micah's body bears two neat fang marks, and I feel Jean-Claude in his coffin, settling down for the day, content and well-fed, full of my sex and Micah's blood. Life really is good, even if you are dead.
